

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of RED QUEEN

VICTORIA AVEYARD

A crown-shaped splash of water, with the crown's points and arches mirrored in the water below. The water is clear and glistening against a dark background.

QUEEN
SONG

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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 tinkering 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 Nortia 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 blissfully 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 Jacobs 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 Nortá, 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 Queenstrial 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 acrobat-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 Nortia, 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 crowed 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 Nort, 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.

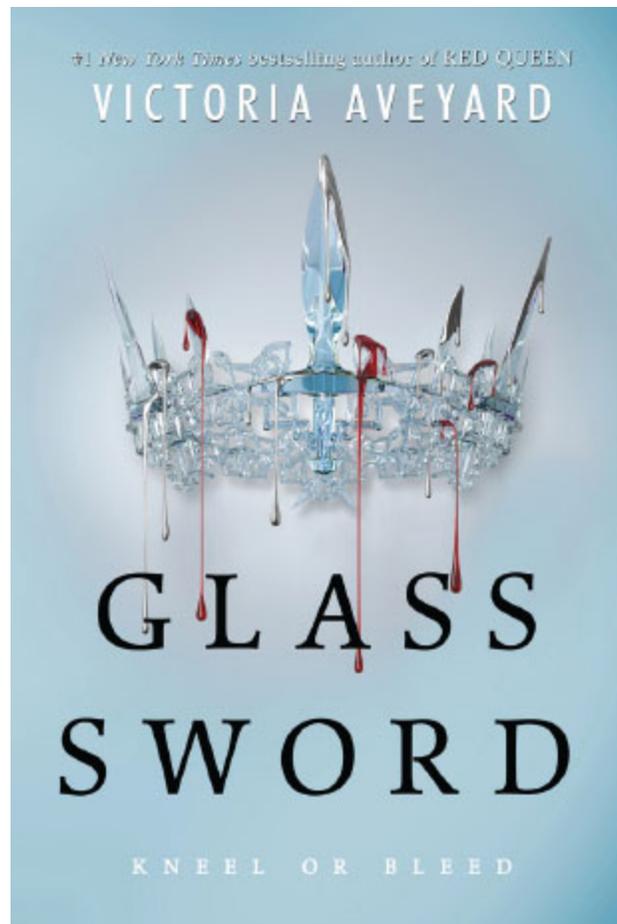
She destroyed the book like she destroyed Coriane.

And she dreamed of nothing.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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, and stayed there despite the lack of seasons. She is currently an author and screenwriter, using 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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