

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

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CRUEL

CROWN

Includes a first look at book 2 in the RED QUEEN series, GLASS SWORD



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 blessedly 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 Nortia 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. Nortia 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 splattered 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.

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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 Nortá, 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 Nortia. “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.

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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.

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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.



**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 Nortan 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 sharp-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, Nortan 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 Nortan 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 Nortia. 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 Nortá 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 Nortia 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 Nortia 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 stonewall 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 stonewall 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 sings 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.

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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