

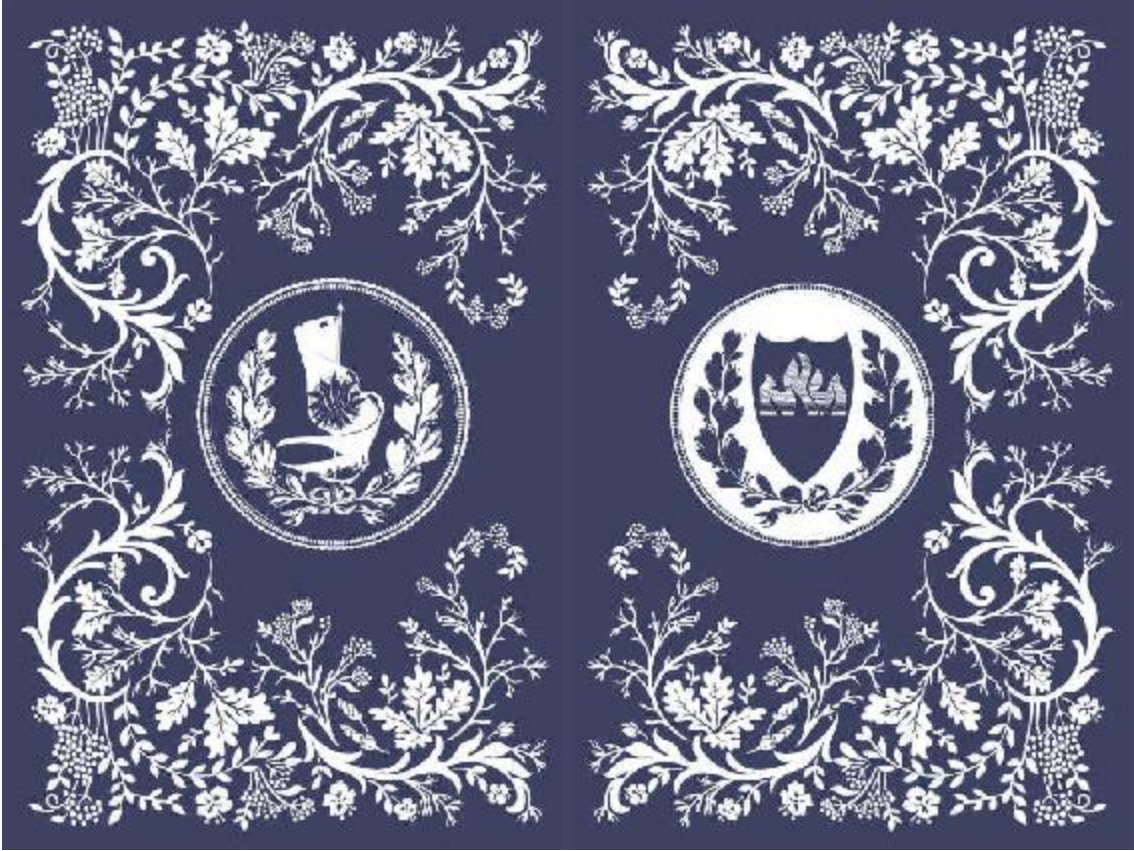
The final book in the #1 *New York Times* bestselling RED QUEEN series

VICTORIA AVEYARD



WAR
STORM

RISE WITH THE DAWN



WAR STORM

VICTORIA AVEYARD

HARPER TEEN
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DEDICATION

to my parents, to my friends, to me, and to you



[MAP](#)

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

[Twenty-Five](#)

[Twenty-Six](#)

[Twenty-Seven](#)

[Twenty-Eight](#)

[Twenty-Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty-One](#)

[Thirty-Two](#)

[Thirty-Three](#)

[Thirty-Four](#)

[Thirty-Five](#)

[Thirty-Six](#)

[Thirty-Seven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

[*Books by Victoria Aveyard*](#)

[*Back Ads*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[*About the Publisher*](#)



ONE

Mare

We drown in silence for a long moment.

Corvium yawns around us, full of people, but it feels empty.

Divide and conquer.

The implications are clear, the lines sharply drawn. Farley and Davidson regard me with equal intensity, and I stare back at them.

I suppose Cal has no idea, no inkling, that the Scarlet Guard and Montfort have absolutely no intention of letting him keep whatever throne he wins. I suppose he cares more about the crown than about whatever any Red thinks. And I suppose I shouldn't call him Cal anymore.

Tiberias Calore. King Tiberias. Tiberias the Seventh.

It's the name he was born with, the name he wore when I met him.

Thief, he called me then. That was my name.

I wish I could forget the last hour. Fall backward just a little bit. Falter.

Stumble. Enjoy one more second of that strangely blissful place where the only thing I felt was the ache of tired muscles and repaired bones. The

emptiness after battle's adrenaline. The certainty of his love and support.

And even through the heartbreak, I can't find it in myself to hate him for his choice. The rage will come later.

Concern crosses Farley's face. It seems strange on her. I'm more accustomed to cold determination or red anger from Diana Farley. She notes my stare with a twitch of her scarred mouth.

"I'll relay Cal's decision to the rest of Command," she says, breaking the silent tension. Her words are low and measured. "*Just* Command. Ada will carry the message."

The Montfort premier ducks his chin in agreement. "Good. I think Generals Drummer and Swan may have an idea of these developments already. They've been keeping tabs on the Lerolan queen since she came into play."

"Anabel Lerolan was in Maven's court long enough, at least a few weeks," I reply. Somehow, my voice doesn't tremble. The words come out evenly, full of force. I have to look strong, even if I don't feel it right now. It's a lie, but a good lie. "She probably has more information than I ever gave you."

"Probably," Davidson says with a thoughtful bob of the head. He narrows his eyes on the ground. Not searching, but focusing. A plan spirals

out in front of him. The road ahead won't be easy. A child would know that. "Which is why I have to get back up there," he adds, almost in apology. As if I could be angry with him for doing what he must. "Ears and eyes open, yeah?"

"Ears and eyes open," Farley and I respond in unison, surprising each other.

He steps away from us, backing out of the alleyway. The sun flashes in his glossy gray hair. He was careful to clean up after the battle, washing away the sweat and ash, replacing his bloodstained uniform with a fresh one. All to present his usual calm, collected, and strangely ordinary demeanor. A wise decision. Silvers devote so much energy to their appearance, to the false pride of visible strength and power. And none so much as the Samos king and his family in the tower above us. Next to Volo, Evangeline, Ptolemus, and the hissing Viper queen, Davidson barely registers. He could blend into the walls if he wanted to. *They won't see him coming. They won't see us coming.*

I take a shaky breath and swallow, forcing the next thought. *And Cal won't either.*

Tiberias, I snap at myself. One fist clenches, digging nails into flesh with a satisfying sting. *Call him Tiberias.*

The black walls of Corvium feel strangely silent and bare without the siege. I turn away from Davidson's retreating form to eye the parapets ringing the inner ward of the fortress city. The shiver attacking snowstorm is long gone, the darkness lifted, and everything here seems smaller now. Less imposing. Red soldiers used to be herded through this city, most on the march to inevitable death in a trench. Now Reds patrol the walls, the streets, the gates. Reds sit alongside Silver kings and speak of war. A few soldiers with crimson scarves walk back and forth, their eyes darting, well-used guns ready in hand. The Scarlet Guard will not be caught unawares, though they have little reason to be so on edge. For now, anyway. Maven's armies have retreated. And not even Volo Samos is bold enough to attempt an attack from the inside of Corvium. Not when he needs the Guard, needs Montfort, needs us. And especially not with Cal— *Tiberias, you fool*—and all his empty talk of equality. Like us, Volo needs him. Needs his name, needs his crown, and needs his damn hand in that damn marriage to his damn daughter.

My face burns hot. I feel embarrassed by the plume of jealousy rising up inside me. Losing him should be the least of my worries. Losing him shouldn't hurt as much as the possibility of dying, of losing our war, of letting everything we've worked for be in vain. But it does. All I can do is

try to bear it.

Why didn't I say yes?

I walked away from his offer. From him. I was torn apart by another betrayal—Cal's betrayal, but also mine. *I love you* is a promise we both made, and we both broke. It should mean *I choose you above all else. I want you more. I need you always. I cannot live without you. I will do anything to keep our lives from parting.*

But he wouldn't. And I won't.

I am less than his crown, and he is less than my cause.

And less, far less, than my fear of another cage. *Consort*, he said, offering me an impossible crown. He would make me a queen, if Evangeline could be pushed aside *again*. I already know what the world looks like from a king's right hand. I don't care to live that life again. Even though Cal is not Maven, the throne is still the same. It changes people, corrupts them.

What a strange fate that would have been. Cal with his crown and his Samos queen and me. In spite of myself, a small part of me wishes I'd said yes. It would have been easy. A chance to let go, step back, *win*—and enjoy a world I never could have dreamed of. Give my family the best life possible. Keep us all safe. And stay with him. Stand at Cal's side, a Red girl

with a Silver king on her arm. With the power to change the world. To kill Maven. To sleep without nightmares, and live without fear.

I bite my lip sharply to drive away the want. It seduces, and I almost understand his choice. Even ripped apart, we suit each other.

Farley shifts loudly, drawing my attention. She sighs as she puts her back to the alley wall, arms folded across her chest. Unlike Davidson, she hasn't bothered to change out of her bloody uniform. Hers isn't as disgusting as mine, free of mud and muck. There's silver blood on her, of course, now dried black. It's only been a few months since Clara was born, and she wears the lingering weight around her hips proudly. Whatever sympathy she had disappears, replaced by a rage sparking in her blue eyes. Not directed at me, though. She looks skyward, at the tower above us.

Where the strange council of Silvers and Reds now tries to decide our fates. "That was him in there." She doesn't wait for me to ask who. "Silver hair, thick neck, ridiculous armor. And somehow still breathing, even though he put a blade through Shade's heart."

My nails dig deeper at the thought of Ptolemus Samos. Prince of the Rift. My brother's killer. Like Farley, I feel a sudden rage too. And an equal burst of shame.

"Yes."

“Because you made a bargain with his sister. Your freedom for his life.”

“For my vengeance,” I mumble in admission. “And yes, I gave Evangeline my word.”

Farley bares her teeth, her disgust evident. “You gave a Silver your word. That promise is less than ash.”

“But a promise still.”

She makes a guttural sound deep in her throat, like a growl. Her broad shoulders square and she turns her body to face the tower fully. I wonder how much restraint it’s taking to stop her from marching back up there to rip Ptolemus’s eyes out of his skull. I wouldn’t stop her if she could. In fact, I’d pull up a chair and watch.

I let my fist open a bit, putting away the slice of pain. Quietly, I take a step forward, closing the space between us. After a split second of hesitation, I put a hand on her arm. “A promise *I* made. Not you. Not anyone else.”

Farley stills a bit, and her snarl becomes a smirk. She turns to look at me head-on, her eyes brightly blue as they catch a shaft of sunlight. “I think you might be better suited to politics than war, Mare Barrow.”

I offer a pained smile. “They’re the same thing.” A hard lesson I think I’ve finally learned. “Do you think you can do it? Kill him?”

Once, I would have expected her to scoff and boldly sneer at the implication she couldn't. Farley is a hard woman with a harder shell. She's what she needs to be. But something—Shade probably, Clara definitely, the bond we now share—affords me a glimpse past the general's stony and sure exterior. She falters, her smirk fading a little.

"I don't know," she murmurs. "But I'll never be able to look at myself, look at Clara, if I don't try."

"And neither will I, if I let you die in the attempt." My grip tightens on her arm. "Please, don't be stupid about this."

Like the flip of a switch, her smirk returns in full force. She even winks.

"Since when am I stupid, Mare Barrow?"

Looking up at her sends a twinge through the scars at the back of my neck, scars I almost forgot about. The pain of them seems small compared to everything else. "I just wonder where it will end," I murmur, hoping to make her understand.

She shakes her head. "I can't respond to a question with too many answers."

"I mean . . . with Shade. Ptolemus. You kill him, and then what?

Evangeline kills you? Kills Clara? I kill Evangeline? On and on, with no end?" I'm no stranger to death, but this feels oddly different. Calculated

endings. It feels like something Maven would do, not us. Even though Farley marked Ptolemus for death long before, when I masqueraded as Mareena Titanos, that was for the Guard. For a cause, for something other than blind and bloody revenge.

Her eyes widen, vibrant and impossible. “You want me to let him live?” “Of course not,” I almost snap. “I don’t know what I want. I don’t know what I’m talking about.” The words tumble over one another. “But I can still wonder, Farley. I know what vengeance and rage can do to a person, to the people around you. And of course I don’t want Clara to grow up without her mother.”

She turns away sharply, hiding her face. But not quickly enough to hide a sudden surge of tears. They never fall. With a jerk of her shoulder, she shrugs me away.

I push on. I have to. She needs to hear this. “She already lost Shade, and if given the choice between revenge for her father and a living mother—I know what she would choose.”

“Speaking of choices,” she grinds out, still not looking at me. “I’m proud of the one you made.”

“Farley, don’t change the subject—”

“Did you hear me, lightning girl?” She sniffs and forces a smile, turning

back around to reveal a now very red and splotchy face. “I said I’m proud of you. Write that down. Commit it to memory. You probably won’t hear it again.”

In spite of myself, I chuckle darkly. “Fine. Proud of what exactly?”

“Well, besides your fashion sense”—she dusts off my shoulder, brushing away a bit of bloody dirt—“and of course your kind and calm disposition . . .”

Another chuckle.

“. . . I’m proud of you because I know what it’s like to lose the person you love.” This time she takes me by the arm, probably so I can’t run away from a conversation I don’t think I’m equipped to have.

Mare, choose me. The words are only an hour old. They haunt me so easily.

“It felt like a betrayal,” I whisper.

I focus on Farley’s chin so I don’t have to look into her eyes. The scar at the left corner of her mouth is deep, pulling her lips to the side a little. A clean drag. Knife work. She didn’t have it when I first met her, by the light of a blue candle in Will Whistle’s old wagon.

“From him? Of course—”

“No. Not from him.” A cloud crosses the sky overhead, sending shifting

shadows across us both. The summer breeze blows oddly cold. I shiver against it. As if on instinct, I wish for Cal and his warm presence. He never let me get cold. My stomach lurches at the thought, sick to think of what we both walked away from. “He made promises to me,” I continue, “but I made promises to him too. I broke them. And he has other promises to keep. To himself, to his dead father. He loved the crown before he loved me, whether he knows it or not. And in the end, he thinks he’s doing the right thing for us, for *everyone*. How can I really fault him for that?”

With a will, I meet Farley’s eyes and search. She doesn’t have an answer for me, at least not one I would like. Her teeth worry at her lip, biting back whatever she wants to say. It doesn’t work.

She scoffs, trying to be her version of gentle. As prickly as ever. “Don’t apologize for him and what he is.”

“I’m not.”

“It certainly sounds like it,” she sighs, exasperated. “A different king is *still* a king. He might be a brick, but he knows that much.”

“Maybe it could have been the right thing for me too. For Reds. Who knows what a Red queen could have done?”

“Very little, Mare. If anything at all,” she says with cold surety. “Any change that might come from putting a crown on your head would be too

slow, too small.” Her voice softens. “And too easily undone. It wouldn’t last. Whatever we accomplished would die with you. Don’t take this the wrong way, but the world we want to build has to outlive us.”

For the ones who come after.

Farley’s eyes bore into me, intense with her almost inhuman focus.

Clara has Shade’s eyes, not Farley’s. Honey, not ocean. I wonder which pieces of her will one day belong to Farley or to Shade.

The breeze rustles Farley’s freshly shorn hair, dark gold in the shadow of the clouds. Beneath the scars, she’s still young, just another child of war and ruin. She’s seen worse than me, done more than I ever have. Sacrificed and suffered more too. Her mother, her sister, my brother and his love.

Whoever she dreamed of being when she was a little girl. All gone. If she can keep pushing forward, still believing in what we’re doing, so can I. For as much as we butt heads, I trust Farley. And her words are an unfamiliar but needed comfort. I’ve already spent so much time in my own head, arguing with myself, that I’m beginning to get sick of it.

“You’re right.” Something inside me lets go, allowing the strange dream of Cal’s offer to spiral into darkness. Never to return.

I will not be a Red queen.

Farley gives my shoulder an almost painful squeeze. Despite the

healers, I'm still sore, and she still has a wickedly strong grip. "Besides," she adds, "it wouldn't be you on the throne. The Lerolan queen and the king of the Rift were very clear. It would be her, the Samos girl."

I snort at the notion. Evangeline Samos made her intentions obvious enough back in the council chamber. I'm surprised Farley didn't notice.

"Not if she can help it."

"Hmm?" Her gaze sharpens and I shrug.

"You saw what she did in there, how she provoked you." The fresh memory flashes. Evangeline calling upon a Red servant in front of everyone, smashing a goblet, forcing the poor maid to clean it up, simply for the sport of it. To anger every red-blooded person in the room. It's not hard to understand why she did it, or what she hoped to accomplish. "She wants no part of this alliance, not when it means she has to marry . . . Tiberias."

For once, Farley seems caught off guard. She blinks, perplexed. Albeit intrigued. "But she's back where she started. I thought—I mean, I don't pretend to understand Silver behavior at all, but still—"

"Evangeline is a princess in her own right now, with everything she ever wanted. I don't think she wants to go back to being someone else's. That's all their betrothal ever was to her. And him," I add, with a pang of

heartache. “An arrangement for power. Power she already has now, or”—my words falter a little—“power she doesn’t want anymore.” I think back on Evangeline, on my time spent with her in Whitefire. She was relieved when Maven married Iris Cygnet instead of her. And not just because he was a monster. I think because . . . there was someone else she cared about more. More than herself or Maven’s crown.

Elane Haven. After her house rebelled against him, I remember Maven called her Evangeline’s whore. I didn’t notice Elane at the council, but much of House Haven stands behind House Samos, allied to them. Shadows all, able to disappear at will. I suppose Elane could have been there the whole time and I wouldn’t even know it.

“You think she would try to *undo* her father’s work? If she could?”

Farley looks very much like a cat that just caught a particularly fat mouse for supper. “If someone . . . *helped* her?”

Cal didn’t deny the crown for love. But would Evangeline?

Something tells me she might. All her maneuvering, the quiet resistance, walking a razor’s edge.

“It’s possible.” The words take on new meaning to both of us. New weight. “She has motivations of her own. And I think that gives us a bit of an advantage.”

Farley's lips curve, taking on the shadow of a true smile. In spite of all I've learned, I feel a sudden burst of hope. She thumps me on the arm, her grin spreading.

"Well, Barrow, write it down again. I'm damn proud of you."

"I do prove useful from time to time."

She barks a laugh and steps away, gesturing for me to follow. The avenue outside the alley beckons, its flagstones gleaming as the last of the snow melts beneath the summer sun. I hesitate, reluctant to leave this corner of dark safety. The world beyond this narrow space still seems too big. The inner ward of Corvium looms, and the core tower stands at the center of it all. With a shaky breath, I force myself to move. The first step aches. So does the second.

"You don't have to go back up," Farley mutters, falling in at my side.

She glares at the tower. "I'll let you know how it shakes out. Davidson and I can handle it."

The thought of going back to the council chamber, sitting there in silence as Tiberias throws everything we've ever done in my face—I don't know if I can bear it. But I have to. I notice things the others can't. Know things others don't. I have to go back. For the cause.

And for *him*.

I can't deny how much I want to go back for him.

"I want to know everything you know," I whisper to Farley. "Everything Davidson has planned. I'm not going into anything else blind."

She agrees quickly. Almost too quickly. "Of course."

"I'm yours to use. In any way. On one condition."

"Name it."

My steps slow, and she matches my pace. "He lives. At the end of all this."

Like a confused dog, she tips her head.

"Break his crown, break his throne, rip his monarchy apart." I stare up at her with as much strength as I can muster. The lightning in my blood responds with fervor, begging to crack loose. "But Tiberias lives."

Farley sucks in a searing breath, drawing herself up to her full, formidable height. It feels like she can see right through me. To my imperfect heart. I hold my ground. I've earned the right.

Her voice wavers. "I can't make that promise. But I'll try. I'll certainly try, Mare."

At least she doesn't lie to me.

I feel cut in two, torn in different directions. An obvious question hangs in my mind. Another choice that I might need to make. *His life or our*

victory? I don't know which side I might choose, if I ever have to. Which side I might betray. The knife of that knowledge cuts deep, and I bleed where no one else can see.

I suppose this is what the seer was talking about. Jon spoke very little, but everything he said had calculated meaning. As much as I don't want to, I suppose I have to accept the fate he foretold.

To rise.

And rise alone.

The flagstones roll beneath me, passing with each step. The breeze kicks up again, blowing in from the west this time. It carries with it the unmistakable tang of blood. I fight the urge to retch as it all comes rushing back. The siege. The bodies. The blood in both colors. My wrist snapping clean in a stoneskin's grasp. Necks broken, chests obliterated in bursts of flesh, glistening organs, and spiked bone. In the battle, it was easy to detach from such horror. Necessary, even. The fear would only get me killed. Not anymore. My heartbeat triples in speed and cold sweat breaks across my body. Even though we survived and *won*, the terror of loss ripped open canyons inside me.

I can still feel them. The nerves, the electric paths my lightning traced in every person I killed. Like thin, glowing branches, each one different but

also the same. Too many to count. In red and blue uniforms, Nortan and Lakelander. All Silvers.

I hope.

The possibility hits me like a punch in the gut. Maven has used Reds for cannon fodder before, or as human shields. I didn't even think about it. None of us did—or maybe the others didn't care. Davidson, Cal, maybe even Farley, if she thought the outcome was worth the cost.

“Hey,” she murmurs, taking my wrist. Her skin on mine makes me jump, her fingers circling like a manacle. I break her grip forcefully, twisting away with what sounds like a snarl. I flush, embarrassed that I still react this way.

She pulls back, palms up, eyes wide. But no fear, no judgment. Not even pity. Is that *understanding* I see in her? “I'm sorry,” she says quickly.

“I forgot about the wrists.”

I barely bob my head, shoving my hands into my pockets to hide the purple sparks at my fingertips. “It's fine. That's not even—”

“I know, Mare. It happens when we slow down. The body starts to process more again. Sometimes it's too much, and there's no shame in it.”

Farley tips her head, gesturing away from the tower. “There's no shame in getting some rack time either. The barracks are—”

“Were there Reds out there?” I gesture blankly, toward the battlefield and the now-broken walls of Corvium. “Did Maven and the Lakelanders send Red soldiers with the rest?”

Farley blinks, truly taken aback. “Not to my knowledge,” she finally replies, and I hear the unease in her. She doesn’t know either. She doesn’t *want* to know, and neither do I. I can’t bear it.

I spin on my heel, forcing her to keep up with my pace for once. Silence falls again, this one brimming with anger and shame in equal measure. I lean into it, torturing myself. To remember this disgust and pain. More battles will come. More people will die, no matter the color of blood. That’s war. That’s revolution. And others will be caught in the crossfire. To forget is to doom them again, and doom others to come.

As we ascend the steps of the tower, I keep my hands firmly fisted in my pockets. The prick of an earring stings my flesh, the red stone warm against my hand. I should throw it out a window. If there’s one thing I should forget, it’s him.

But the earring remains.

Side by side, we enter the council chamber again. The edges of my vision blur, and I try to fall into a familiar place. Observe. Memorize. Look for cracks in the words spoken, find secrets and lies in what they leave

unsaid. It's a goal as much as a distraction. And I realize why I was so keen on coming back here, even when I had every right to run away.

Not because this is important. Not because I can be of use.

But because I am selfish, weak, and afraid. I can't be alone with myself, not now, not yet.

So I sit, and I listen, and I watch.

And through it all, I feel his eyes.



TWO

Evangeline

It would be easy to kill her.

Spindles of rose gold weave between the red, black, and orange jewels at Anabel Lerolan's neck. One twitch and I could slice the oblivion's jugular. Bleed out her body and her scheme. End her life and her betrothal in front of everyone in the room. My mother, my father, Cal—not to mention the Red criminals and foreign freaks we find ourselves tied to. Not Barrow, though. She hasn't returned yet. Probably still wailing over her lost prince.

It would mean another war, of course, shattering an alliance already spiderwebbed with cracks. Could I do such a thing—trade my loyalties for happiness? It feels shameful just to ask the question, even in the safety of my own head.

The old woman must feel my gaze. Her eyes flick to me for a second, the smirk on her lips unmistakable as she settles back into her chair, resplendent in red, black, and orange.

Those are Calore colors, not just Lerolan. Her allegiances are abrasively clear.

Shivering, I drop my gaze and focus on my hands instead. One of my nails is horribly cracked. Broken in battle. With a breath, I mold one of my titanium rings into a claw, drawing it over my finger into a talon. I click it against the arm of my throne, if only to annoy Mother. She glances at me out of the corner of her eye, the only evidence of her disdain.

I fantasize about killing Anabel a little too long, losing track of the council as they scheme in their wretched circles. Our numbers have dwindled, leaving only the collected leaders of our hastily united factions. Generals, lords, captains, and royalty. The Montfort leader speaks, then Father, then Anabel, and over again. All in restrained tones, forcing false smiles and empty promises.

I wish Elane were here. I should have brought her. She asked to come. In truth, she begged. Elane has always wanted to keep close, even in the face of lethal danger. I try not to think of our last moments together, her body in my arms. She's thinner than I am, but softer. Ptolemus waited outside my door, making sure we weren't disturbed.

"Let me go with you," she whispered in my ear, a dozen times, a hundred times. But her father and mine forbade it.

Enough, Evangeline.

I curse at myself now. They would have never known in the middle of the chaos. Elane's a shadow, after all, and an invisible girl is easy to smuggle. Tolly would have helped. He wouldn't stop his wife from coming along, not if I asked for his aid. But I couldn't. There was a battle to be won first, a battle I didn't know if we could win. And I wasn't about to take that risk with her. She's talented, but Elane Haven is no warrior. And in the thick of it, she would only be a distraction and a worry for me. I could afford neither then. But now . . .

Stop it.

My fingers curl against the arms of my throne, begging to carve the iron into ragged pieces. At home, the many metal galleries of Ridge House made for easy therapy. I could destroy in peace. Channel any fresh rage into

constantly changing statues, without having to worry about what anyone else might think. I wonder if I might find some privacy here in Corvium to do just that. The promise of such release keeps me sane. I scratch the clawed ring on my chair, metal on metal. Soft enough that only Mother hears. She can't scold me for it, not in front of the rest of our strange council. If I have to be on display, I might as well enjoy the few advantages. Finally, I wrench my thoughts away from Anabel's vulnerable neck and Elane's absence. If I'm going to figure a way out of my father's plan, I have to at least pay attention.

"Their army is on the retreat. King Maven's forces cannot be allowed the time to regroup," Father says coolly. Behind him, the tall windows of the tower show the sun beginning its descent into the clouds lingering on the western horizon. The obliterated landscape still smokes. "He's licking his wounds."

"The boy is already into the Choke," Queen Anabel is quick to reply. *The boy*. She refers to Maven like he isn't her grandson. I suppose she won't acknowledge that anymore. Not after he helped kill her son, King Tiberias. Maven isn't her blood, but Elara's and Elara's alone.

Anabel leans forward on her elbows, clasping her wrinkled hands together. Her old wedding ring, battered but gleaming, winks on one finger.

When she took us all by surprise at Ridge House, announcing her intention to back her grandson, she wore no metal to speak of. To hide from our magnetron senses. Now she wears it openly, daring us to use her crown or her jewelry against her. Every part of her is a calculated choice. And she is not without weapons of her own. Anabel was a warrior before she was a queen, an officer at the Lakelander front. She is an oblivion, and her touch is deadly, able to obliterate and explode something—or *someone*.

If I didn't hate what she's forcing me into, I would respect her dedication at the very least.

“And at this hour, most of his forces will be beyond Maiden Falls and over the border,” she adds. “They're in the Lakelands now.”

“The Lakelander army is wounded too, just as vulnerable. We should strike while we can, even just to pick off the stragglers.” My father looks from Anabel to one of our Silver lords. “The Laris fleet can be ready inside the hour, can't they?”

Lord General Laris sharpens under my father's gaze. His flask is empty now, leaving him to enjoy the drunken haze of victory. He coughs, clearing his throat. I can smell the alcohol on his breath from across the chamber. “It can, Your Majesty. You need only give the command.”

A low voice cuts him off. “I'll oppose it if you do.”

Cal's first words since returning from his spat with Mare Barrow are certainly not wasted. Like his grandmother, he wears black trimmed with red, having long ago discarded the borrowed uniform he wore in battle. He shifts in his seat next to Anabel, taking his assigned position as her cause and king. His uncle, Julian of House Jacos, holds his left while the Lerolan queen has his right. Flanked by both of them, Silvers of noble and powerful blood, he presents a united front. A worthy king for us to champion.

I hate him for it.

Cal could have ended my misery, broken our betrothal, refused Father's offer of my hand. But for the crown, he threw Mare away. For the crown, he trapped me.

"What?" is all Father says. He is a man of few words, and even fewer questions. Just to hear him ask is unsettling, and I tense in spite of myself.

Cal draws back his shoulders, quietly spreading his broad frame. He rests his chin on his knuckles, brows knitted together in thought. He seems larger, older, smarter. On the same playing field as the king of the Rift.

"I said I would oppose an order to dispatch the Air Fleet, or any detachment of our coalition, to give chase into hostile territory," Cal replies steadily. I have to admit, even without a crown, he has a royal way about him. An air that commands attention, if not respect. Not surprising, since he

was trained for this, and Cal is nothing if not a very obedient student. His grandmother purses her lips into a tight but genuine smile. She's proud of him. "The Choke is still a literal minefield, and we have very little intelligence to guide us on the other side of the falls. It could be a trap. I won't risk soldiers on it."

"Every piece of this war is risk," I hear Ptolemus say from the other side of my father. He flexes as Cal did, drawing himself up to his full height in his throne. The setting sun gives Tolly's hair a reddish tint, making his oiled silver locks glow beneath his prince's crown. The same light bathes Cal in his house colors, red in his eyes while black shadows lengthen behind him. The pair hold each other's gaze in the strange way men do. *Everything's a competition*, I scoff to myself.

"Such insight, Prince Ptolemus," Anabel says, her tone dry. "But His Majesty, the king of Norta, is well aware of what war is. And I agree with his assessment."

Already she calls him king. I'm not the only one to notice her choice of words.

Cal lowers his eyes, stunned. He recovers quickly, jaw clenched in resolution. His choice is already made. *No going back now, Calore.*

The Montfort premier, Davidson, nods from his seat at his own table.

Without the Scarlet Guard commander and Mare Barrow, he's easy to ignore. I almost forgot about him entirely.

"I concur," he says. Even his voice is bland, without inflection or accent. "Our armies need time to recover as well, and this *coalition* needs time to find . . ." He stops, thinking. I still can't read his expression, and it annoys me to no end. I wonder if even a whisper could slip past his mental shields. "Balance."

Mother is not as stoic as my father, and she fixes on the newblood leader with her smoldering black stare. Her snake mimics her action, blinking at the premier. "So is there no intelligence, are there no spies across the border? Forgive me, sir, but I was under the impression that the Scarlet Guard"—she almost spits it out—"had an intricate spy network in both Nortia and the Lakelands. Certainly they can be of use, unless the Reds misrepresent themselves and their *strength*." Disgust drips from her words like poison from fangs.

"Our operatives are in order, Your Majesty."

The Red general, the blond woman with the permanent sneer, pushes into the room with Mare on her heels. Both stalk from the doorway at the edge of the chamber, crossing the council room to sit with Davidson. They move quickly and silently, as if they could somehow avoid being watched

by the entire room.

While she settles into her chair, Mare keeps her eyes forward, locked on me, of all people. To my surprise, I feel a strange emotion beneath her gaze. *Could this be shame? No, not possible.* Even so, heat rises in my cheeks. I hope I'm not blushing, either in anger or embarrassment. Both churn inside me, and for good reason. I look away, turning on Cal, if only to distract myself with the one person more wretched than I feel.

He certainly *tries* to look unaffected by her presence, but Cal isn't his brother. Unlike Maven, Cal has little skill in masking his emotions. A silver blush blooms beneath his skin, coloring his cheeks, neck, and even the tops of his ears. The temperature in the room rises a little, rippling with whatever emotion he's fighting. *What a fool,* I sneer in my head. *You made your choice, Calore. You doomed us both. You can at least pretend to keep it together. If anyone is going to lose their mind to heartbreak, it should be me.*

I almost expect him to start mewling like a lost kitten. Instead he blinks furiously, ripping his eyes away from the lightning girl. One fist clenches on the arm of his chair, and the flamemaker bracelet on his wrist glows red with the dying sun. He keeps himself in check. It doesn't ignite, and neither does he.

Mare is a stone compared to Cal. Rigid, unyielding, unfeeling. Not even a spark. She just keeps staring at me. It's unnerving, but not a challenge. Her eyes are strangely devoid of her usual anger. They certainly aren't kind, of course, but they aren't brimming with disgust either. I guess the lightning girl has little reason to hate me right now. My chest tightens—does she know this wasn't my choice? *She must.*

“Good of you to return, Miss Barrow,” I tell her, and I mean it. She's always a guaranteed distraction for Calore princes.

She doesn't respond, only folding her arms.

Her companion, the Scarlet Guard general, is not so inclined to silence.

Unfortunately. She scowls at my mother, tempting fate. “Our operatives are currently in relay, tracking King Maven's army as they retreat. We've received word that his troops are on a hard march to Detraon, moving with speed. Maven himself, and a few of his generals, boarded ships on Lake Eris. Supposedly bound for Detraon as well. There's talk of a funeral for the Lakelander king. And they have far more healers than we do. Whoever survived the battle will be back to fighting shape quicker than we will.”

Anabel scowls, cutting a glare at Father. “Yes, House Skonos still remains split between our factions, with the majority remaining loyal to the usurper.” *As if that's our fault. We did what we could, convinced who we*

could. “Not to mention the Lakelands have skin-healer houses of their own.”

With a sweeping hand and a tight smile, Davidson inclines his head. Wrinkles form at the corner of his eyes, marking his age. I suspect he’s forty or so, but it’s difficult to tell for sure.

He touches his fingers to his brow in some kind of strange salute or promise. “Montfort will provide. I plan to petition for more healers, both Silver and Ardent.”

“Petition?” Father sneers. The other Silvers match his confusion, and I find myself glancing down our line to meet Tolly’s eye. He furrows his brow. He doesn’t know what Davidson means. My stomach flops a bit, and I bite my lip against the sensation. Usually whatever one of us lacks, the other provides. But in this, we’re both at sea. *And so is Father.* Angry as I am with him, this scares me more than anything else. Father can’t protect us from what he doesn’t understand.

Mare doesn’t understand either, wrinkling her nose in confusion. *These people,* I curse to myself. I wonder if even the scowling, scarred woman knows what Davidson means.

The premier himself gives a small chuckle. *The old man is enjoying this.* He lowers his eyes, letting dark lashes brush against his cheeks. If he

wanted to, he could be handsome. I suppose it doesn't serve whatever agenda he has. "I'm not a king, as you all know." He looks back up and turns his gaze on Father, then Cal, then Anabel. "I serve at the will of my people, and my people have other elected politicians to represent their interests. They must be in agreement. When I return to Montfort to request more troops—"

"*Return?*" Cal echoes, and Davidson stops short. "When did you plan to tell us this?"

After a moment, Davidson shrugs. "Now."

Mare's lips twist. Fighting a scowl or a smirk, I can't tell. But probably the latter.

I'm not the only one to notice. Cal's eyes flicker, looking between her and the premier with a growing suspicion. "And what will we do in your absence, Premier?" he demands. "Wait? Or fight with one hand tied behind our backs?"

"Your Majesty, I'm flattered you consider Montfort so vital to your cause," Davidson says, grinning. "I apologize, but the laws of my country cannot be broken, not even in war. I won't betray the principles of Montfort, and I stand by the rights of my people. After all, they're some of the people who will help you reclaim your own country." The warning in his words is

just as clear as the easy smile still pasted on his face.

Father is better at this than Cal. He dons an empty smile of his own.

“We would never ask a ruler to turn on his own nation, sir.”

“Of course not,” the scarred Red woman adds dryly. Father takes her disrespect in stride, but only for the coalition’s sake. If not for our alliance, I suspect he would kill her, to teach everyone a lesson in propriety.

Cal calms a little, doing his best to keep his head. “How long will you be gone, Premier?”

“It depends on my government, but I don’t expect a long debate,”

Davidson says.

Queen Anabel claps her hands in amusement. She laughs, deepening the lines on her face. “How interesting, sir. And what does your government consider a long debate?”

At this point, I feel like I’m watching a play led by mediocre actors. Not one of them—Father, Anabel, Davidson—trusts a breath out of the others.

“Oh, years.” Davidson sighs, matching her forced humor. “Democracy is a funny thing. Not that any of you know that yet.”

The final jab is meant to sting, and it does. Anabel’s smile turns frosty.

She taps a hand against the table, another warning. Her ability can destroy with ease. Just like the rest of us. All deadly, all with our own motives at

play. I don't know how much longer I can stand it.

"I'm excited to see it for myself."

The temperature rises before the words are barely out of Mare's mouth. She's the only one who doesn't glance at Cal. He glares at her, eyes burning, while his teeth worry at his lip. She remains resolute, her expression pleasantly blank. I think she's taking a page out of Davidson's book.

Quickly, I put a hand to my mouth, stifling a surprised giggle. Mare Barrow is so wickedly talented when it comes to upsetting Calore men. At this point, I wonder if she plans it. Lies awake at night and schemes on how best to confuse Maven or distract Cal.

But does she? Could she?

On instinct, I try to smother the spark of hope that bursts in my chest. Then I let it bloom.

She did it to Maven. Kept him occupied. Kept him off balance. Kept him away from you. Why can't she do the same with Cal?

"Then you will be a good envoy for Norta instead." I try to sound bored, uninterested. Not eager. I don't want anyone to realize I'm throwing the bone far away, knowing the puppy will follow. Mare's eyes snap to me, her brows rising a centimeter. *Come on, Mare.* I'm glad no one here can read

my mind.

“No, she won’t, Evangeline,” Cal says quickly, forcing the words through gritted teeth. “I mean no disrespect, Premier, but we don’t know enough about your nation—”

I blink at my betrothed, tipping my head. Silver hair slides across the scaled armor at my collarbone. The power I have in this moment, however small, snaps through my nerves. “And what better way to know? She’ll be well received, a hero. Montfort is a country of newbloods. Her presence will help our cause. Won’t it, Premier?”

Davidson fixes me with his blank eyes. I feel his stare go through me.

Look all you want, Red. “Undoubtedly.”

“You trust her to report what she finds there? Without embellishment or omission?” Anabel scoffs in disbelief. “Make no mistake, Princess Evangeline, the girl has no loyalty to anyone with Silver blood.”

Both Cal and Mare lower their eyes at the same moment, as if fighting not to look at each other.

I shrug. “Then send a Silver with her. Perhaps Lord Jacos?” The older man, thin in his yellow robes, seems startled by the sound of his own name. He has a frayed appearance, like a worn piece of cloth. “If memory serves, you’re a scholar, aren’t you?”

“I am,” he murmurs.

Mare’s head snaps up. Her cheeks are red, but the rest of her seems composed. “Send whoever you want with us. I’ll be going to Montfort, and no king has the right to stop me. But they can certainly try.”

Excellent. Calore tightens in his chair. His grandmother looms close, smaller in comparison to him. But their resemblance is still clear. Same bronze eyes, broad shoulders, straight nose. The same soldier’s heart. And, ultimately, the same ambition. She watches him as she speaks, wary of his response. “So Lord Jacos and Mare Barrow will represent the true king of Nortá alongside—”

His bracelet sparks, birthing a small red flame. It walks along his knuckles slowly.

“The true king will represent himself,” Cal says, his eyes on the fire.

Across the room, Mare clenches her teeth. It takes all my restraint to stay silent in my seat, but inside, I cheer and dance. *So easily done.*

“Tiberias,” Anabel hisses. He doesn’t bother to respond. And she can’t press him. *You did this to yourself, you stupid old woman. You named him king. Now obey.*

“I admit, I have some of Uncle Julian’s—and my mother’s—natural curiosity,” Cal says. He softens at the mention and memory of his mother.

Admittedly, I don't know much about her. Coriane Jacos was not a subject Queen Elara tolerated well. "I want to visit this Free Republic, and discover if all the stories are true." Then his voice lowers. He looks at Mare with such intensity, as if he can will her to return his gaze. She doesn't. "I like to see things for myself."

Davidson nods with a flicker in his eye, his blank mask slipping a little, just for a second. "You are most welcome, Your Majesty."

"Good." Cal winks out the fire before rapping his knuckles on the table.

"Then it's settled."

His grandmother purses her lips, giving her the appearance of having eaten something sour. "Settled?" she scoffs. "Nothing's settled. You need to plant your flag in Delphie, proclaim your capital; you need to win territory, win resources, win the *people*, sway more of the High Houses to your side —"

Cal is undeterred. "I do need resources, Grandmother. *Soldiers*.

Montfort has them."

"You're very right," Father says, his voice a deep rumble that puts an old fear in my heart.

Is he angry with me for pushing this? Or is he pleased? As a child, I learned what it was to cross Volo Samos. You became a ghost. Ignored,

unwanted. Until you earned your way back to his love with achievement and intelligence.

Out of the corner of my eye, I look at my father. The king of the Rift sits tall on his throne, pale and perfect. Beneath his meticulously manicured beard, I catch sight of a smirk. And I breathe a small, silent sigh of relief.

“A plea from the rightful king of Nortra himself will go far with the premier’s government,” Father continues. “And it will only strengthen this alliance of ours. So it’s only right I send an envoy of my own, to represent the Kingdom of the Rift as well.”

Not Tolly—don’t! my mind screams. Mare Barrow promised not to kill him, but I hardly trust her word, especially under such opportune circumstances. I can already see it. A foolish accident that would be anything but. And Elane will have to go too, his dutiful wife at his side. *If Father sends Tolly, we’ll get back a corpse.*

“Evangeline will go with you.”

Nausea wipes out relief in a heartbeat.

I’m torn between calling for another cup of wine and vomiting all over my own feet. Voices scream in my head, every one saying the same thing.

You did this to yourself, you stupid little girl.



THREE

Mare

My laughter echoes down the eastern walls and over the dark fields. I double over, hands pressed against the smooth parapet, gasping for breath. I can't control it. True laughter, the deep kind from the pit of my stomach, takes over. The noise is hollow, harsh, and dusty from disuse. My scars bite, stinging along my neck and spine, but I can't hold it back. I laugh until my ribs hurt and I have to sit down, putting my back against the cold stone. It doesn't stop, and even when I bite my lips closed, little bursts still make it through.

No one can hear me but the patrols, and I doubt they care about a single girl laughing alone in the darkness. I've earned the right to laugh or cry or scream as I see fit. Little pieces of me want to do all three. But laughter wins out.

I sound deranged, and maybe I am. I certainly have an excuse, after today. People are still clearing bodies from the other side of Corvium. Cal chose his crown over everything I thought we were fighting for. Both are

still bleeding wounds no healer can fix. Wounds I have to ignore right now, for my own sanity. The only thing I can do is put my face in my hands, clench my teeth, and fight my infernal, idiotic laugh.

This is complete and total lunacy.

Evangeline, Cal, and *me*, all headed to Montfort. What a terrific *joke*.

I said as much in my message to Kilorn, still safe back in Piedmont. He would want to know about everything, as much as I could say. After I convinced him to stay behind, it's only fair to keep him in the loop. And of course, I *want* him in the loop. I want someone else to laugh with me, and curse over what's to come.

I chuckle darkly again, tipping my head back against the stonework.

The stars above me are pinpricks, dimmed by the city lights of Corvium as well as the rising moon. The stars seem to watch, looking down at the fortress city. I wonder if Iris Cygnet's gods are laughing with me. If they even exist.

I wonder if Jon is laughing too.

The thought of him chills my blood, killing whatever manic giggle I have left. That wretched, prophesizing newblood is out there somewhere, having escaped us. But to do what? Sit on a hill and watch? Let his red eyes tick back and forth as we all kill each other? Is he some kind of game

master, content to nudge us into position and play out whatever future he chooses? If it were remotely possible, I would try to find him. Force him to protect us from lethal fate. But that's absurd. He'll see me coming. We can only find Jon if he wants to be found.

Frustrated, I scrub my fingers over my face and scalp, letting my nails drag across my skin. The sharp sensation brings me back to reality, little by little. So does the cold. The stone beneath my body loses warmth as night wears on. The thin fabric of my uniform does little to keep me from shivering, while the sharp, solid edges of the wall are hardly comfortable. Still, I don't move.

Moving means sleep, but it also means going back down. To the others, to the barracks. Even if I don my best scowl and run, I'll have to face Reds and newbloods and Silvers too. Julian, certainly. I can just imagine him waiting on my cot, ready with another lecture. What he could possibly say, I don't know.

He'll side with Cal, I think. At the end of all this. When it becomes clear we won't let Cal keep his throne. Silvers are nothing if not loyal to blood. And Julian is nothing if not loyal to his dead sister. Cal is the last piece of her left. He won't turn his back on that, even for all his talk of revolution and history. He won't leave Cal alone.

Tiberias. Call. Him. Tiberias.

It even hurts to think the name. His real name. His future. Tiberias Calore the Seventh, King of Norta, Flame of the North. I picture him on his brother's throne, safe in a cage of Silent Stone. Or would he drag out the diamondglass inferno his father sat? Destroy every shred of Maven, erase him from history? He'll rebuild his father's palace. The Kingdom of Norta will return to the way it was. Except for the Samos king in the Rift, everything will go back to what it was meant to be the day I fell into the arena.

Making everything that has occurred since that day be for nothing.

I refuse to let that happen.

And, luckily, I'm not alone in this endeavor.

The moonlight glows on the black stone, making the gold accents of every tower and parapet gleam silver. Patrols wind below me, guards in red and green uniforms keeping watch. Scarlet Guard and Montfort. Their counterparts, Silvers in house colors, are less frequent, and they clump together. Yellow Laris, black Haven, red and blue Iral, red and orange Lerolan. No Samos colors. They're royal now, thanks to Volo's ambition and opportunity. No need to waste their time on something as ordinary as the nightly rounds.

I wonder what Maven thinks of that. He fixated on Tiberias so much, I can only imagine the weight of another rival king like Volo. Everything revolved around his brother, even though Maven seemingly had everything he could want. The crown, the throne, *me*. He still felt that shadow. Elara's doing. She coiled and curled him into what she needed, cutting away and building up in equal measure. His obsession helped fuel his need for power, and enabled her own. Will it extend to King Volo? Or are Maven's darkest and most dangerous desires restricted to us? Kill Tiberias, keep me? Only time will tell. When he strikes again, and he will, I'll know.

I only hope we're ready.

Davidson's troops, the Scarlet Guard and our spreading infiltration—we're enough. We have to be.

But that doesn't mean I can't take precautions.

“When do we leave?”

It took some dreaded social interaction, but I managed to ask my way to Davidson's quarters. He commands some larger offices in the administrative sector, forming a suite currently filled with Montfort brass. And Scarlet Guard too, although Farley isn't here. The officers take my entrance in stride, giving way to the person they still call lightning girl. Most busy themselves with packing. Papers, folders, charts, mostly.

Nothing that actually belongs to anyone here. Intelligence for smarter people than me to devour. Probably left over from whatever Silver officers used this space last.

Ada, one of my newblood recruits, is at the center of the activity. Her eyes run over every scrap of paper before someone else packs it away. She's memorizing it all, using her ability of perfect memory. I catch her eye as I pass, and we share a nod. When we go to Montfort, Ada will be dispatched to Command at Farley's orders. I don't suppose I'll see her again for a long time.

Davidson looks up from his bare desk. The corners of his angled eyes crinkle, the only indicator of a smile. Despite the harsh, unforgiving light of the office, he looks handsome as ever. Distinguished. Intimidating. A king in power if not title. When he waves me over, I swallow hard, remembering what he looked like in the siege. Bloody, exhausted, afraid. And determined. Just like the rest of us. It calms me a little.

"You did well up there, Barrow," he says. With a toss of his head, he gestures in the vague direction of the core tower.

I blink, scoffing. "You mean I kept my mouth shut."

At the window, someone laughs. I glance over to see Tyton leaning against the glass, arms crossed, his usual lock of white hair drooping over

one eye. He has a clean forest-green uniform too, though a little short at the wrists and legs. No lightning insignia to mark him for what he is: an electrician like me. Because it isn't his uniform. The last time I saw him, he was painted eyebrows to ankles in silver blood. He drums his fingers against his arm, brandishing them like the weapons they are.

“Is that possible?” he says without looking at me, his voice deep.

Davidson surveys me, shaking his head a bit. “Actually, I’m pleased with what you told the others, Mare. About accompanying me home.”

“Like I said, I’m curious about—”

The premier puts up his hand, palm out, to stop me short. “Save it. I think Lord Jacos is the only person here who does anything simply for the sake of curiosity.” *Well, he isn't wrong.* “What do you really want from Montfort?”

At the window, Tyton’s eyes flicker in the light as he finally deigns to look at me.

I raise my chin. “Only what you promised.”

“Resettlement?” For once, Davidson looks truly startled. “You want to —”

“I want my family safe.” My voice never wavers. I push a little of what I remember from a dead Silver and her etiquette rules into my bearing.