

# RED QUEEN

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# ONE

*I hate First Friday.* It makes the village crowded, and now, in the heat of high summer, that's the last thing anyone wants. From my place in the shade it isn't so bad, but the stink of bodies, all sweating with the morning work, is enough to make milk curdle. The air shimmers with heat and humidity, and even the puddles from yesterday's storm are hot, swirling with rainbow streaks of oil and grease.

The market deflates, with everyone closing up their stalls for the day. The merchants are distracted, careless, and it's easy for me to take whatever I want from their wares. By the time I'm done, my pockets bulge with trinkets and I've got an apple for the road. Not bad for a few minutes' work. As the throng of people moves, I let myself be taken away by the human current. My hands dart in and out, always in fleeting touches. Some paper bills from a man's pocket, a bracelet from a woman's wrist—nothing too big. Villagers are too busy shuffling along to notice a pickpocket in their midst.

The high, stilt buildings for which the village is named (the Stilts, very original) rise all around us, ten feet above the muddy ground. In

the spring the lower bank is underwater, but right now it's August, when dehydration and sun sickness stalk the village. Almost everyone looks forward to the first Friday of each month, when work and school end early. But not me. No, I'd rather be in school, learning nothing in a classroom full of children.

Not that I'll be in school much longer. My eighteenth birthday is coming, and with it, conscription. I'm not apprenticed, I don't have a job, so I'm going to be sent to the war like all the other *idle* ones. It's no wonder there's no work left, what with every man, woman, and child trying to stay out of the army.

My brothers went to war when they turned eighteen, all three of them sent to fight Lakelanders. Only Shade can write worth a lick, and he sends me letters when he can. I haven't heard from my other brothers, Bree and Tramy, in over a year. But no news is good news. Families can go years without hearing a thing, only to find their sons and daughters waiting on the front doorstep, home on leave or sometimes blissfully discharged. But usually you receive a letter made of heavy paper, stamped with the king's crown seal below a short thank-you for your child's life. Maybe you even get a few buttons from their torn, obliterated uniforms.

I was thirteen when Bree left. He kissed me on the cheek and gave me a single pair of earrings for my little sister, Gisa, and me to split. They were dangling glass beads, the hazy pink color of sunset. We pierced our ears ourselves that night. Tramy and Shade kept up the tradition when they went. Now Gisa and I have one ear each set with three tiny stones to remind us of our brothers fighting somewhere. I didn't really believe they'd have to go, not until the legionnaire in his polished armor showed up and took them away one after another. And this fall, they'll come for me. I've already started saving—and

stealing—to buy Gisa some earrings when I go.

*Don't think about it.* That's what Mom always says, about the army, about my brothers, about everything. *Great advice, Mom.*

Down the street, at the crossing of Mill and Marcher roads, the crowd thickens and more villagers join the current. A gang of kids, little thieves in training, flutters through the fray with sticky, searching fingers. They're too young to be good at it, and Security officers are quick to intervene. Usually the kids would be sent to the stocks, or the jail at the outpost, but the officers want to see First Friday. They settle for giving the ringleaders a few harsh knocks before letting them go. *Small mercies.*

The tiniest pressure at my waist makes me spin, acting on instinct. I grab at the hand foolish enough to pickpocket me, squeezing tight so the little imp won't be able to run away. But instead of a scrawny kid, I find myself staring up at a smirking face.

Kilorn Warren. A fisherman's apprentice, a war orphan, and probably my only real friend. We used to beat each other up as children, but now that we're older—and he's a foot taller than me—I try to avoid scuffles. He has his uses, I suppose. Reaching high shelves, for example.

"You're getting faster." He chuckles, shaking off my grip.

"Or you're getting slower."

He rolls his eyes and snatches the apple out of my hand.

"Are we waiting for Gisa?" he asks, taking a bite of the fruit.

"She has a pass for the day. Working."

"Then let's get moving. Don't want to miss the show."

"And what a tragedy that would be."

"Tsk, ts, Mare," he teases, shaking a finger at me. "This is supposed to be fun."

"It's *supposed* to be a warning, you dumb fool."

But he's already walking off with his long strides, forcing me to almost trot to keep up. His gait weaves, off balance. *Sea legs*, he calls them, though he's never been to the far-off sea. I guess long hours on his master's fishing boat, even on the river, are bound to have some effect.

Like my dad, Kilorn's father was sent off to war, but whereas mine returned missing a leg and a lung, Mr. Warren came back in a shoe box. Kilorn's mother ran off after that, leaving her young son to fend for himself. He almost starved to death but somehow kept picking fights with me. I fed him so that I wouldn't have to kick around a bag of bones, and now, ten years later, here he is. At least he's apprenticed and won't face the war.

We get to the foot of the hill, where the crowd is thicker, pushing and prodding on all sides. First Friday attendance is mandatory, unless you are, like my sister, an "essential laborer." As if embroidering silk is essential. But the Silvers love their silk, don't they? Even the Security officers, a few of them anyway, can be bribed with pieces sewn by my sister. Not that I know anything about that.

The shadows around us deepen as we climb up the stone stairs, toward the crest of the hill. Kilorn takes them two at a time, almost leaving me behind, but he stops to wait. He smirks down at me and tosses a lock of faded, tawny hair out of his green eyes.

"Sometimes I forget you have the legs of a child."

"Better than the brain of one," I snap, giving him a light smack on the cheek as I pass. His laughter follows me up the steps.

"You're grouchier than usual."

"I just hate these things."

"I know," he murmurs, solemn for once.

And then we're in the arena, the sun blazing hot overhead. Built

ten years ago, the arena is easily the largest structure in the Stilts. It's nothing compared to the colossal ones in the cities, but still, the soaring arches of steel, the thousands of feet of concrete, are enough to make a village girl catch her breath.

Security officers are everywhere, their black-and-silver uniforms standing out in the crowd. This is First Friday, and they can't wait to watch the proceedings. They carry long rifles or pistols, though they don't need them. As is customary, the officers are Silvers, and Silvers have nothing to fear from us Reds. Everyone knows that. We are not their equals, though you wouldn't know it from looking at us. The only thing that serves to distinguish us, outwardly at least, is that Silvers stand tall. Our backs are bent by work and unanswered hope and the inevitable disappointment with our lot in life.

Inside the open-topped arena is just as hot as out, and Kilorn, always on his toes, leads me to some shade. We don't get seats here, just long concrete benches, but the few Silver nobles up above enjoy cool, comfortable boxes. There they have drinks, food, *ice* even in high summer, cushioned chairs, electric lights, and other comforts I'll never enjoy. The Silvers don't bat an eye at any of it, complaining about the "wretched conditions." I'll give them a wretched condition, if I ever have the chance. All we get are hard benches and a few screechy video screens almost too bright and too noisy to stand.

"Bet you a day's wages it's another strongarm today," Kilorn says, tossing his apple core toward the arena floor.

"No bet," I shoot back at him. Many Reds gamble their earnings on the fights, hoping to win a little something to help them get through another week. But not me, not even with Kilorn. It's easier to cut the bookie's purse than try to win money from it. "You shouldn't waste your money like that."

“It’s not a waste if I’m right. It’s *always* a strongarm beating up on someone.”

Strongarms usually make up at least one-half of the fights, their skills and abilities better suited to the arena than almost any other Silver. They seem to revel in it, using their superhuman strength to toss other champions around like rag dolls.

“What about the other one?” I ask, thinking about the range of Silvers that could appear. Telkies, swifts, nymphs, greenys, stone-skins—all of them terrible to watch.

“Not sure. Hopefully something cool. I could use some fun.”

Kilorn and I don’t really see eye to eye on the Feats of First Friday. For me, watching two champions rip into each other is not enjoyable, but Kilorn loves it. *Let them ruin each other*, he says. *They’re not our people*.

He doesn’t understand what the Feats are about. This isn’t mindless entertainment, meant to give us some respite from grueling work. This is calculated, cold, a message. Only Silvers can fight in the arenas because only a Silver can *survive* the arena. They fight to show us their strength and power. *You are no match for us. We are your betters. We are gods*. It’s written in every superhuman blow the champions land.

And they’re absolutely right. Last month I watched a swift battle a telky and, though the swift could move faster than the eye could see, the telky stopped him cold. With just the power of his mind, he lifted the other fighter right off the ground. The swift started to choke; I think the telky had some invisible grip on his throat. When the swift’s face turned blue, they called the match. Kilorn cheered. He’d bet on the telky.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Silvers and Reds, welcome to First Friday, the Feat of August.” The announcer’s voice echoes around the arena, magnified by the walls. He sounds bored, as usual, and I don’t blame him.



Once, the Feats were not matches at all, but executions. Prisoners and enemies of the state would be transported to Archeon, the capital, and killed in front of a Silver crowd. I guess the Silvers liked that, and the matches began. Not to kill but to entertain. Then they became the Feats and spread out to the other cities, to different arenas and different audiences. Eventually the Reds were granted admission, confined to the cheap seats. It wasn't long until the Silvers built arenas everywhere, even villages like the Stilts, and attendance that was once a gift became a mandatory curse. My brother Shade says it's because arena cities enjoyed a marked reduction in Red crime, dissent, even the few acts of rebellion. Now Silvers don't have to use execution or the legions or even Security to keep the peace; two champions can scare us just as easily.

Today, the two in question look up to the job. The first to walk out onto the white sand is announced as Cantos Carros, a Silver from Harbor Bay in the east. The video screen blares a clear picture of the warrior, and no one needs to tell me this is a strongarm. He has arms like tree trunks, corded and veined and straining against his own skin. When he smiles, I can see all his teeth are gone or broken. Maybe he ran afoul of his own toothbrush when he was a growing boy.

Next to me, Kilorn cheers and the other villagers roar with him. A Security officer throws a loaf of bread at the louder ones for their trouble. To my left, another hands a screaming child a bright yellow piece of paper. 'Lec papers—extra electricity rations. All of it to make us cheer, to make us scream, to force us to watch, even if we don't want to.

"That's right, let him hear you!" the announcer drawls, forcing as much enthusiasm into his voice as he can. "And here we have his opponent, straight from the capital, Samson Merandus."

The other warrior looks pale and weedy next to the human-shaped

hunk of muscle, but his blue steel armor is fine and polished to a high sheen. He's probably the second son of a second son, trying to win renown in the arena. Though he should be scared, he looks strangely calm.

His last name sounds familiar, but that's not unusual. Many Silvers belong to famous families, called houses, with dozens of members. The governing family of our region, the Capital Valley, is House Welle, though I've never seen Governor Welle in my life. He never visits it more than once or twice a year, and even then, he *never* stoops to entering a Red village like mine. I saw his riverboat once, a sleek thing with green-and-gold flags. He's a greeny, and when he passed, the trees on the bank burst into blossom and flowers popped out of the ground. I thought it was beautiful, until one of the older boys threw rocks at his boat. The stones fell harmlessly into the river. They put the boy in the stocks anyway.

"It'll be the strongarm for sure."

Kilorn frowns at the small champion. "How do you know? What's Samson's power?"

"Who cares, he's still going to lose," I scoff, settling in to watch.

The usual call rings out over the arena. Many rise to their feet, eager to watch, but I stay seated in silent protest. As calm as I might look, anger boils in my skin. Anger, and jealousy. *We are gods*, echoes in my head.

"Champions, set your feet."

They do, digging in their heels on opposite sides of the arena. Guns aren't allowed in arena fights, so Cantos draws a short, wide sword. I doubt he'll need it. Samson produces no weapon, his fingers merely twitching by his side.

A low, humming electric tone runs through the arena. *I hate this*

*part.* The sound vibrates in my teeth, in my bones, pulsing until I think something might shatter. It ends abruptly with a chirping chime. *It begins.* I exhale.

It looks like a bloodbath right away. Cantos barrels forward like a bull, kicking up sand in his wake. Samson tries to dodge Cantos, using his shoulder to slide around the Silver, but the strongarm is quick. He gets hold of Samson's leg and tosses him across the arena like he's made of feathers. The subsequent cheers cover Samson's roar of pain as he collides with the cement wall, but it's written on his face. Before he can hope to stand, Cantos is over him, heaving him skyward. He hits the sand in a heap of what can only be broken bones but somehow rises to his feet again.

"Is he a punching bag?" Kilorn laughs. "Let him have it, Cantos!"

Kilorn doesn't care about an extra loaf of bread or a few more minutes of electricity. That's not why he cheers. He honestly wants to see blood, Silver blood—*silverblood*—stain the arena. It doesn't matter that the blood is everything we aren't, everything we can't be, everything we *want*. He just needs to see it and trick himself into thinking they are truly human, that they can be hurt and defeated. But I know better. Their blood is a threat, a warning, a promise. *We are not the same and never will be.*

He's not disappointed. Even the box seats can see the metallic, iridescent liquid dripping from Samson's mouth. It reflects the summer sun like a watery mirror, painting a river down his neck and into his armor.

This is the true division between Silvers and Reds: the color of our blood. This simple difference somehow makes them stronger, smarter, *better* than us.

Samson spits, sending a sunburst of silverblood across the arena.

Ten yards away, Cantos tightens his grip on his sword, ready to incapacitate Samson and end this.

“Poor fool,” I mutter. It seems Kilorn is right. *Nothing but a punching bag.*

Cantos pounds through the sand, sword held high, eyes on fire. And then he freezes midstep, his armor clanking with the sudden stop. From the middle of the arena, the bleeding warrior points at Cantos, with a stare to break bone.

Samson flicks his fingers and Cantos walks, perfectly in time with Samson’s movements. His mouth falls open, like he’s gone slow or stupid. *Like his mind is gone.*

I can’t believe my eyes.

A deathly quiet falls over the arena as we watch, not understanding the scene below us. Even Kilorn has nothing to say.

“A whisper,” I breathe aloud.

Never before have I seen one in the arena—I doubt anyone has. Whispers are rare, dangerous, and powerful, even among the Silvers, even in the *capital*. The rumors about them vary, but it boils down to something simple and chilling: they can enter your head, read your thoughts, and *control your mind*. And this is exactly what Samson is doing, having whispered his way past Cantos’s armor and muscle, into his very brain, where there are no defenses.

Cantos raises his sword, hands trembling. He’s trying to fight Samson’s power. But strong as he is, there’s no fighting the enemy in his mind.

Another twist of Samson’s hand and silverblood splashes across the sand as Cantos plunges his sword straight through his armor, into the flesh of his own stomach. Even up in the seats, I can hear the sickening squelch of metal cutting through meat.

As the blood gushes from Cantos, gasps echo across the arena. We've never seen so much blood here before.

Blue lights flash to life, bathing the arena floor in a ghostly glow, signaling the end of the match. Silver healers run across the sand, rushing to the fallen Cantos. Silvers aren't supposed to die here. Silvers are supposed to fight bravely, to flaunt their skills, to put on a good show—but not *die*. After all, they aren't Reds.

Officers move faster than I've ever seen before. A few are swifts, rushing to and fro in a blur as they herd us out. They don't want us around if Cantos dies on the sand. Meanwhile, Samson strides from the arena like a titan. His gaze falls on Cantos's body, and I expect him to look apologetic. Instead, his face is blank, emotionless, and so cold. The match was nothing to him. *We* are nothing to him.

In school, we learned about the world before ours, about the angels and gods that lived in the sky, ruling the earth with kind and loving hands. Some say those are just stories, but I don't believe that.

The gods rule us still. They have come down from the stars. And they are no longer kind.