

# MONARCH RISING

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# 1

## JOSEPHINE

A cockroach flutters ferociously to the ceiling.

I can't see it with closed eyes, but I hear it, sense its extended brown wings relax against its spine as flapping comes to a swift halt. Roaches aren't uncommon in the Ashes. Here, across the mountains from New Georgia, it's flooded with the long-winged creepy-crawlies. Before dawn, when the sun's tucked away like it is now, you can't blink or think without spotting their thumb-sized narrow frames slithering.

I open my eyes, watch the roach glide to the floor. It's three inches away, headed toward the flat sheet covering Aunt Vye's piss-stained floor mattress. The sheet's an ugly green, doused in bleach and other tangy chemicals. But no one complains; when a sheet's used properly, it does what it should: shields limbs and extremities from Radius-infected rats.

Last night, I had the nightmare again, the one about the jig with dreads. It felt real, like it was happening all over. And there, in the sleeping place of real-life terrors, I wasn't seventeen. I was nine again, shivering before her in Moats Alley.

The roach hisses, brings me back to present. Vye can't feel it, but were she to open her brown eyes, she'd catch the cockroach travel up her brown fingers, skim her black coarse hair, and skitter across her neck just before it flaps russet wings, and settles inside my cousin Neal's red sneakers.

I close my eyes tight. Tighter. Wishing I was anywhere but here.

Sweat beads cover my forehead, trickle into wild brows and long black lashes.

Despite the nightmare, the familiar cockroach, the odor, I remind myself: Today's a good day. *The* day, the day of the Lineup. The day I could be picked to leave all this behind, for good. Lingering unease from the nightmare transforms into anxiety about today. I twirl my triangular white Lineup card between index finger and thumb, rub the raised red letters on the card that read: LINEUP ALLOWED. Everyone who passes exams gets one. I exhale deep, trying to breathe out the panic about lining up with other kids, hoping New Georgia Reps pick us to leave the Ashes, to trade this place for a life of luxury across the mountain.

The cockroach climbs out of Neal's shoe. I gotta catch it. If I don't, tonight it'll be under Vye's sheets, waiting for legs to creep up. It crawls over Vye's frayed black dress and disappears. I freeze. Don't move. It's there. In my hair. It crawls between my roots, skitters across my forehead. I grab it—feel it jitter in my palm like a moth in a mason jar. I stick my arm out the window beside my bed—release it, watch it coast into opaque sewer fog.

With my head sticking out the open window, I watch Ashfolk prepare kin for Lineup. Parents outside tattered shacks comb naps out of kids' heads; fathers sit behind offspring on stools brushing kids' hair. Grandparents lick the tips of their thumbs to clean dirty spots on grandkids' faces. My cheeks sit high, smiling, but inside, my heart gulps for air as if thrown into a bottomless ocean. Oceans, fresh air. If I make it past the Lineup and move to New Georgia, I'll never look outside this cutout window again. No more catching flying roaches. In New Georgia, colorful butterflies'll dance on the tips of my fingers.

I release a heavy sigh. Butterfly dances come at a cost. I'll never look out this window, see these people, my people, again.

I fold my lips into my mouth, exhale, and watch a group of Ashfolk walk toward Town Center.

John Ready's speaking today. He spends most his time traveling, rallying

other borderlands for justice, but returns home every year, the day of the Lineup, to perform his infamous speech about the old Revolt War and unity. John's speech never changes, so anyone over age ten knows it by heart.

John was just a kid during Revolt 2030—Vye too, for that matter. She grew up across the mountains, with money. Horror stories she'd tell Neal and I flash before me like a looking glass. I can almost see them, the poor folks back then who called themselves Revolt Rebels, or RR's. How RR's raided government buildings in huge numbers across all fifty-one states. How they ambushed elected officials as they slept, held them in cages barely big enough to hold their bodies. Acts committed to take back the country they loved, freedoms they'd been denied, and meager voices silenced by violence.

Blinking bloody thoughts away, I pull my head in from the window, stretch, peering around the house. Well, it's not really a house at all. It's a dilapidated old shed with three chain-saw-made windows; torn sheets cover the open space like black shades. We each have our own window; plastic navy shower curtains separate my space from Aunt Vye's part—a flat green sheet cuts Vye's area off from Neal's. This room's so small, there's no scent you can't smell. And I smell Neal—he's bare chested, golden frame splayed across his brown cot, gripping his pocketknife.

"Ugh." I hold a scrunched nose. Neal's side is junky—always is. Consumed with foul socks, and red-clay-covered red boots shedding wasteland manure—wastelands where he and most boys in the Ashes collect bones of dead animals to carve rings, necklaces, and other jewelry tradable for clothes, shoes, food, and round currency called tokes. Schlocky is Neal's middle name. And still, there's no girl in the Ashes unwilling to accept him as is.

I pass the bathroom with the body-sized mirror nailed to its door—it's so small in there, walls hug you scooching on and off the compost toilet. Splintered

wood covers narrow hallways like skin tags layer Vye's high cheeks. And kitchen space's so tight Vye calls it a hole-in-a-wall.

In the kitchen, I flip the switch for kicks, knowing full well no lights'll come on. Electric doesn't exist here. After the war, Revolt Rebels left behind the tattered shacks and warehouses they lived in, minus the technology behind the switches to keep homes lit. Then forced the defeated rich folks to take their place. Vye's lived right here ever since. I light a candle. Inhale smoke lit wick creates. Open the wood-burning stove, light it, place a pot of water on top, watch it sizzle. Growls escape my stomach. I stare at the pie on the small wooden slab on the floor—the one we eat on. No use rubbing my belly; I can't eat it—it's already sold. In our house, we earn tokes best we can, and Vye's pies keep us fed.

Nose to pie, I sniff it, inhale smashed pecans and cinnamon—the only goods grown here, then traded with rich folks on the other side of the mountains. But some things grown here barely make it out alive—like animals. No one bothers keeping pets. And if they do, you'll see two- or three-legged cats and dogs hopping around their house, because someone boiled and fried their limbs for dinner, but kept them alive 'cause they couldn't bear to kill 'em straight out.

When water boils and pops like hot grits, I take the pot off the range, pour water in the iron washbowl on my scruffy dresser. Once water cools, I splash my face, watch clear liquid drip down my chin in the cracked mirror before me. I look at my small head, and thick braids growing out my skull. It's been a few months since Vye helped plait it—it's due for a touch-up. But sometimes, I like my hair wild, strands of kinky hair peeking beyond loose braids.

I turn around, plop down on my mattress, stare at my flat pillow—the only photos I have of my parents peek beneath it. I pull the photos out. They're in bad shape. Edges worn, torn, battling mold. But I don't care. It's what's left of them. I stare at their faces; they're so happy it's hard imagining the absence of money

made them fall out of love and take their lives. Aunt Vye assures they weren't always unhappy. Says when reminding's needed, look at their photo, focus on their smiling eyes.

And it works. Their photos make me crave love—and sometimes, I want it so bad it feels like a part of my DNA. If I close my eyes tight, I see tadpole-like strands of deoxyribonucleic acid swimming inside my nuclei, exchanging forehead kisses. Kids wanting a better life avoid love in the Ashes. We bide our broke time waiting for the year we can line up and hope for love in New Georgia. Finding love in the Ashes is possible but risky. I don't wanna connect here, fall in and out of love, struggle, and kill myself over money.

Vye stirs, yawns—half-asleep, she says check the small closet near the front of the house, instructs me to bring what's in it to her. I obey. At the base of the closet, next to Vye's red flats, I spot a cardboard box wrapped in thorny tweed. I kneel, dust fresh rat poop off the top, lift it off the floor, tuck it under my arm. I wash my hands before handing the box to Vye.

“Open it.” Vye grins ear to ear.

Inside is a long muslin rose-gold skirt, a silk spaghetti-strap blouse, and matching two-inch heels. Vye says she bought the outfit off Bootleg Jules last night—traded the skirt, top, and shoes for lemonade moonshine and her famous pecan-cinnamon pie. Says the trio was perfect, just my size, and the regulated color for the Gala.

I close the box. I'm not selfish. Besides, I know—“We can't afford this. Must've cost six tokes.”

Vye smiles. “Hush, child. Let me worry about tokes. Made enough pies this month, sold 'em too.”

Biggest hurdle is getting the Rep to pick you from the Lineup so you can get decked out in rose-gold clothes and attend the Gala—the next step toward Reps

choosing you for a lifetime of luxury and comfort. But after Lineup, some chosen kids don't board the AerTrain—they decide not to go the Gala at all. No one knows why. They return sad-faced without words in clothes their parents went broke for. Don't want Vye wasting tokens, because what if it's hard to leave the Ashes? And more so . . . “What if the Rep doesn't like me . . . if I'm not picked? I'll never go to the Gala and you'd've spent all this . . . for nothing.”

Vye waves her hand, shushing. “Yuh passed the exam. Have yuh seen yuh? Met yuh?”

Pupils pinned to cracked floors, I shrug. Vye's right, yeah, sure, I passed the exams, but I can't help wondering, what if she's wrong? What if it's not enough, I'm not enough? I suck in my bottom lip, stressing over how it's not just about good grades, we gotta be liked too. Liked, and wear smiley faces to impress New Georgia Reps—a Rep with the rights to crush dreams and tell us no at the end of all that impressing. But what do I know? What does anyone know if they ain't a Rep. Years ago, I'd place bets on who'd make it through—stupid bets with zero tokens to gamble when I was often dead wrong. Most Ashfolk are.

Vye lifts my chin; our eyes meet. “Don'tcha know how special yuh are? Yuh ma'd be proud. Dad, too.”

I exhale, smirk, and tremble beneath my skin. I think of my parents. Wish I remembered their faces outside of tarnished photos. Wish someone had bottled their skin, so when I felt confused inside mine, I could melt into theirs.

With narrow eyes, Vye smiles and says, “Go on in dat bathroom. Try duh clothes on.”

I take the box into the bathroom, set it on the toilet, undress, and dress before the cracked mirror. No holes or stains in the fabric. It's perfect.

“Does it fit?” Vye says on the other side of the door.

“Yes,” I lie. The top and skirt fit perfectly, but the rose-gold shoes are too big.

I've never worn heels before, but it shouldn't be an issue. Based on letters written home and bitter whispers from rejected Hopefuls from past Galas—more specifically, girls who don't get picked at the end of the night and return to gray lives back in the Ashes—wiggle room in dancing shoes is better than too tight.

Ignoring the largeness of these shoes, I pretend I'm one of the rich folks. Poised, refined, classy, strutting around New Georgia with a purse full of money. I think of how smash it'd be not wearing red shoes every day. And then I hear the only voice inside my head that grounds me: my best friend, Boah. His daily rants on what Revolt Rebels did to our ancestors brings guilt. Makes me feel bad wishing this place away. I take the clothes off, return them to the box, shut it, slide night clothes back on.

In my room, Neal's gone. And Vye cooks pecan pancakes in the kitchen. I twist ragged braids into a bun on top my head, pull the white paper with my test results from under my Lineup card. It's not the best, but it's a good score. I've waited my whole life for today. But I'm not alone. Everyone who took the exam feels the same—well, those who passed.

We're tested in biology, reading, math, science, and writing. Failers don't get second chances and live the rest of their lives here depressed, heads low, and still poor. Last year, my friend Tessa scored an 87, within the 80–100 passing range. Tessa couldn't wait to line up. In preparation, she studied the *Expectation*: the weekly magazine written in New Georgia, printed in the Mill here, and distributed in the Ashes. Before each year's Lineup, there's an article about that year's Lineup Rep. Plus, there's information on rich boys and girls in New Georgia. I imagine Tessa standing in front of our cracked mirror, cheek pressed against photos of cute boys, fantasizing, prepping for her chance to impress all those people at the Gala. Whenever I asked who I'd look cute with, Tessa'd laugh and say his first name starts with a *B*, ends with an *H*.

Wonder if Boah's half excited as I am? There was a time Boah couldn't wait to leave this place. He'd talk about our life in New Georgia with starry eyes; said in the Ashes we're best friends 'cause we're poor. And one day, if we made it past the Lineup, we'd shoot our shot in New Georgia. That was years ago. Boah's different—now it seems he looks for excuses to stay.

Dragonflies swarm inside my belly. I wonder who's this year's Rep. Bet Boah knows; he worked the Mill last night—he'll have already read the latest issue of the *Expectation*. I feel my smile flip upside down. Tessa worked the Mill too. Were she here, she'd have told me who the Rep is. Then we'd get ready together, line up together, and hope we'd make it through the Gala. But that'll never happen. Nine months ago, while she was sleeping, a rat bit Tessa's thumb. Forty-eight hours later, her mom buried her body in wastelands.

John Ready's Tessa's uncle. When he spoke at her funeral, he reminded us why we should fight. He waved a hand toward the raging crowd, silencing it, then said, "We were once rich, famous. We're immigrants now. Ashfolk. Begging for scraps . . . metal and wood shacks to protect from storms. Working ten hours a day, over yonder at the Mill, printing their *Expectation* magazines for one measly copper toke. Flaunting our proud youth in ego-infused 'expectations,' bragging over rags-to-riches transformation headlines in aristocratic New Georgia society."

John means well, but it isn't all bad. Each season, via AerTrain, New Georgia Reps deliver cots for sleeping, textbooks for homeschooling, and lava rocks and matches to keep warm during winter. Scratches, cuts, and minor sprains we patch ourselves. But when we're severely sick, Reps offer free medical care. Sometimes I'm glad I live here, and not over there. The Ashes is all I know. And besides, it'd be hard going from rich to poor like all the OldTimers did after Revolt 2030. When you're born with nothing, you don't waste time missing what you never

had. But it never hurts to dream and hope; hope for the chance to be picked, the chance to try for something better than this—a chance to leave, escape.

That chance'll happen soon. Lineup begins at nine a.m. I glance at the tattered watch around my wrist. It's six. I touch my cheeks; they're warm from smiling. I lift my chin to the holey roof. The moon's out, but soon, the sun'll rise. If I don't get a move on, I'll be late for Boah. I grab my sketchbook and charcoal stick from the foot of my mattress. Dash out the house in brown cargos, a torn white T-shirt, and red boots, head to the broke amusement park.

When I reach Town Center, the crowd is cheering, clapping, anticipating John's powerful words. It's nerve-racking because, I don't know, it feels strange. John gives this speech every year, but this year something's changed. It's more than this finally being my year. Faces are red, foreheads wrinkled. I hear teeth-sucking and lip-smacking—see eyes speaking without blinking. After last year's Lineup, Boah said there's talk in the Ashes about forming a new generation of rebels.

John opens his speech saying, "Two lives exist in New America: one of poverty, one of riches. One only need glance tuh see which we're in. Poor place. Land of forgotten people. High crime; kids get shot pulling gum out pockets."

No one's shocked when John says this. Usually right after those words leave his instigating-thin lips, the crowd's full of plain faces because they know unwarranted murder is just . . . life. Cops shoot to kill without hesitation. And why shouldn't they? They're never punished—the law is what the bullet in their barrel hits. In the Ashes, protesting is illegal. So, we suck it up and take it—no voice can change it.

Next John points to green peaks in the distance and says, "They don't fool me over there. They foolin' you? No. We know what the Lineup's about. Promises of riches, but only if they like you. If you're smart enough, charming enough, kind

enough, clean enough in clothes inferior to theirs.” Then, like a prayer, John places both hands in front of his lips and says, “They could stop it all, this . . . the poverty. They’ve enough money to make us all rich, but they won’t. Greed ain’t the reason. Their reasons run deeper. It’s revenge. Our rich ancestors watched their poor kin suffer. Look around, folks. This land . . . is revenge.”

Whenever John says “revenge,” I shrug it off. John’s what we call in the Ashes an OldTimer. Rich folks born and raised in New Georgia, when it was just Georgia, before Revolt 2030 forced them here. And like most OldTimers I know, he’s stuck in the past, afraid to seek the future. But I don’t know. Hate to admit it, but maybe truth lives inside John’s vengeful words.

As I walk to the front of the roaring crowd, I watch John unfasten a button, the one closest to his neck. “Let our young folk tell us how the Ashes was formed. Volunteers?”

A round white boy with cornrows stands beside John. I only know him as Rald, the boy who eats buggers. He spouts the history of our people, fingers fidgeting. He says after Revolt 2030, Revolt Rebels became lawmakers known as Reps. Reps kicked rich folks out the city. Moved them here, to what’s become the Ashes—a see-how-you-like-being-poor stance, trapping their oppressors in the lifestyle they’d endured—forcing them, and every generation of their offspring, to live in poverty forever. Rald glances at John Ready, then turns to the crowd with a rebellious grin and says, “Reps can’t be that bad, though, right? They giving us a chance; it’s what Lineup is for. We’ve got a way out.”

When Rald’s done talking, John shakes his head, disappointed, and takes the spotlight again—places one hand in pants pocket, while the other hand points to morning moon. Then he stares into the crowd, looks at me, and says, “Young folks participating in today’s Lineup, I urge you, reconsider. Be unrepressed! Nothing’s across that mountain you can’t find here.”