

# Chapter One



THE QUEEN WAS DYING. THIS MUCH WAS CERTAIN.

Healers from all parts of the Monarchy had gathered in Nine Towers to examine Her Majesty. For weeks, the halls of the royal palace echoed with their discussions. Everyone had a different theory about the nature of the illness that gripped Queen Sula. In the end, they could agree on only these two facts:

There was no cure.

A month more was as long as anyone dared hope she would live.

It was not unusual for monarchs to take ill and die relatively young. It had, in fact, been the case for

as long as anyone could remember. But there had always been a plan. When Jeniah, the queen's daughter, turned eighteen, her mother would abdicate and allow the princess to ascend to the throne. That was how it had always worked, for the nearly one thousand years their family had ruled.

But Jeniah had just turned twelve. And if the healers were to be believed, she would ascend to power much sooner than planned.

When word spread of the queen's fate, Jeniah locked herself in her bedchambers for three days. No one disturbed her. The servants who'd helped raise the young princess left trays of food near her door so she wouldn't starve. But no one spoke to the heir apparent. It was impossible to understand what the girl felt.

Jeniah sat in her room, refusing to cry. She braided her long, black hair with green glass beads. She played her recorder, filling the room with a lullaby her mother had taught her. But she would not cry. She knew the tears would come—and that they would be unstoppable—once her mother was truly gone. Knowing death was coming for the queen didn't make Jeniah sad. She was too terrified to be sad.

Jeniah knew nothing about *being* a queen. She had

never been permitted in the throne room when her mother held court. “The time will come for all that,” the princess’s caregivers had promised each time Jeniah asked to watch. “Someday.” Everyone had believed Jeniah had six more years to learn.

But “someday” turned out to be “now.” She wasn’t ready. She was scared she wouldn’t have time. Surely there was much to learn about being a fair and just leader.

Jeniah had to turn her terror into resolve. She *would* learn how to be a queen. The time for tears would come. For now, she had to stay strong. She stared in the mirror, shook her finger at her reflection, and reminded herself to be brave.

So, when the queen knocked softly on Jeniah’s bedroom door at the end of the princess’s third day of seclusion and whispered for her daughter, the young girl answered with squared shoulders and a straight back. “You should be in bed,” she told her mother. Her words sounded braver than she felt. For months, Jeniah had watched her mother’s health dwindle away.

The woman who stood at her door was barely recognizable as the one who’d raised her. The queen’s illness made her appear much older than she truly was. Her eyes were swollen; her back was hunched. Where

mother and daughter once shared smooth, dark skin, the queen's was now dry and cracked. Despite all that, Jeniah didn't have to search hard to find the kindness she'd always seen in her mother's regal face.

"Come," the queen said, her voice wavering. "We're going to the top of Lithe Tower."

As she took her mother's arm, Jeniah's breath seized. Lithe Tower was the tallest of the castle's nine monoliths, twice the size of the others. It was the highest point in all the land, with a view reserved for the monarch. The only exception occurred when an heir apparent was escorted there shortly before the start of a new reign.

This truth—this hard, hard truth—weakened Jeniah's march up to the tower entrance. Her knees trembled. *This is real*, she told herself. For the three days she'd locked herself in her room, her mother's illness had not been real.

Jeniah and the queen strode arm in arm down a narrow passage made of rough, silver-dappled stone. As they came to a wooden door at the hall's end, the queen produced a long key. It had teeth in four directions, like a weather vane.

"Bring the torch," Queen Sula instructed as the lock on the door clicked open. Jeniah took a torch from

the wall. Together, they crossed the door's threshold. The spiral staircase beyond was so narrow, they had to proceed single file. They climbed and climbed the endless stairs. The princess moved closer to her mother, where the scent of the rose water and mint salve that eased the queen's pain overpowered the passageway's musty smell.

The queen struggled with each step, keeping one hand on the wall. Despite this, Jeniah imagined that the shadows cowered from her mother's approach the farther up they went.

As Jeniah's legs started to ache, the stairs disappeared into an opening in the ceiling. Queen and princess emerged from the dark stairwell onto the very top of Lithe Tower. They stood on a wide, flat stone circle covered by a clear glass dome. When Jeniah moved to the edge and looked down, she could see the eight other cloud-colored spires that made up the rest of Nine Towers forming a circle around Lithe. Not far from the castle gates, a slender dirt road split the countryside on its way to the nearest town, Emberfell.

"Look around," the queen said.

Jeniah stepped back. Nothing blocked her view. The Caprack Mountains on the horizon joined land

and sky like jagged gray stitches. That one seam kept the pair united in all directions.

Her gaze swept down from the skyline. Rolling fields, lush green forests, and verdant farmland rich with golden harvests stretched out from the base of Nine Towers. A twisting river cut a swath through the west lands, looking like liquid fire in the setting sun. As dusk approached, lanterns from a patchwork of towns and villages made a pinprick mosaic of light across the land.

It was the most beautiful thing Jeniah had ever seen.

“This is our Monarchy,” Queen Sula said. “It has been a land of peace and prosperity for a thousand years. Your first duty as queen is, and always will be, to protect that.”

Jeniah nodded. Standing in place, she turned around slowly. She memorized every inch of the land, as if sealing the promise to serve as guardian. As she did, something curious happened. The tiny dots of warm, amber light that marked every village and town for miles flickered and, one by one, turned bright blue. She turned to her mother, eyebrow raised.

The queen smiled. “Tonight is what the people call Tower Rise. It’s a rare holiday. It occurs only when a new monarch ascends Lithe Tower for the first time.”

The queen held up her right hand where she wore two identical rings, each with an opal wrapped in silver filigree. Only the monarch could wear these. Queen Sula slid one ring from her own finger onto Jeniah's. "The people know you're here, watching over them. They know you are no longer merely a princess. You are now Queen Ascendant. This is their tribute."

Jeniah closed her fist. The ring hung so loosely on her finger, she was afraid it would slip off. In the distance, the blue lights winked as if the entire Monarchy were showing approval. Jeniah imagined she should have felt honored by the people's gesture, but instead she felt embarrassed, as if she'd been caught spying. Still, she continued to survey all that would soon be hers to govern. Her eyes fell just east of the river and stopped.

Between the rushing river and a thriving forest sat a small patch of land, a blemish scarring the middle of the otherwise gorgeous realm. Jeniah had almost missed it. Even now, as she tried to look directly at it, she found it difficult. Almost as if her eyes *didn't want* to see it.

Determined, she moved to a brass spyglass mounted in a Y-shaped stone at the platform's edge. She trained the glass's lens on the dark area. Black

trees with black branches and black leaves grappled with one another in an eternal choke hold. Shadows seemed drawn to the unsightly region—a serrated slash shaped like the curved blade Cook used to butcher cows. No light could touch it.

Or maybe light *refused* to touch it.

The queen laid a hand on the princess’s shoulder. “Do you know what that is?”

Jeniah knew. Her heart had told her, the moment her eyes fell on the spot. “Dreadwillow Carse.” The words thrummed on her lips. For as long as Jeniah could remember, the name had only ever lived as a whisper among the royal family’s servants. A footnote in the lectures of her teachers. An oddity—like a treasonous, distant relative—that was never, ever discussed.

“And what do you know about it?” the queen asked.

Never, ever discussed, save one fact that had been repeated to her over and over since Jeniah could first talk. “I’m not to go there. Ever.”

“Very good,” the queen said. “Wherever you go in the Monarchy, you will be welcomed warmly. But you must never set foot in Dreadwillow Carse.”

Jeniah, who’d never been good at holding in the thoughts that pressed against her insides, asked the necessary question. “Why?”

The queen stood as tall as her illness would allow. “It is forbidden. The people rely on us to maintain peace and prosperity. And it is written in the oldest books: if any monarch enters Dreadwillow Carse, then the Monarchy will fall.”

A chill crawled on spider’s legs over Jeniah’s hands. She’d been told before never to enter. She’d never been told the Monarchy was at stake. “Do you understand?” the queen asked.

Jeniah knew that tone. It meant the queen wasn’t to be questioned. Yet it was a tone that always *inspired* questions in Jeniah. “But why—?”

“You can never go to Dreadwillow Carse,” the queen interrupted. And then she repeated, “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mother. I understand.”

But Jeniah didn’t understand. Each step she took as they descended the crooked stairs fanned the flames of new questions for which she *needed* answers.

What was Dreadwillow Carse? How was it possible they did not rule there? And, most important, why would the Monarchy end if she entered the Carse?

When they returned to the castle halls, the queen’s gait faltered. Jeniah took her mother’s arm and guided her back to her bedchambers.

“Time is short,” the queen said. “Tomorrow, you will meet with a new tutor. He will teach you what you need to know to rule over your people justly. Listen to everything he says.”

“Yes, Mother.”

The queen laced her fingers with her daughter’s. “You will make an excellent queen.”

THAT NIGHT, LYING in bed, Jeniah tried to think about how badly she wanted to make her mother proud by upholding the legacy of benevolence laid out by her ancestors. She tried to think about how the lives and happiness of everyone in the Monarchy depended on her learning to become a fair and just queen. She tried to think about anything and everything that wasn’t Dreadwillow Carse.

*If any monarch enters Dreadwillow Carse, then the Monarchy will fall.*

She failed.

# Chapter Two



THE QUEEN WAS DYING AND EVERYONE KNEW IT.

But as usual, nothing had changed.

Aon Greenlaw sat on a rock at the western border of Emberfell. She stared at her hometown, where revelry filled the streets. Everywhere she looked, people danced and sang merrily to the reels played by the musicians stationed at every corner. Colorful silk banners zigzagged from rooftop to rooftop. Even here, at the farthest edge of town, she could smell the freshly baked cream puffs that the village bakery made only for special occasions.

*Special?* Aon thought. *It's not right.* This was something

Aon thought often. But she only ever *thought* it. Saying that—or anything like it—would prompt her father to repeat the same thing he always said.

“The queen wants her people to be happy,” he would say, and then he’d playfully trace a star on her cheek, connecting her freckles with his finger. That was all anyone said when Aon questioned the joy that filled the land. “That’s what every monarch has wanted for a thousand years. It would be disrespectful not to honor their wishes.”

And although Aon was told this anytime someone died, or poor weather ended a picnic, or she had any reason to possibly be sad, she had a hard time believing that anyone—queen or not—would want people to be happy that she was dying.

Three days earlier, when she’d first heard of the queen’s illness, Aon had gone to bed. She’d pretended to have the flu, but really, she was sick with grief. The queen had always been good. She didn’t deserve to die. And then there was Princess Jeniah, only a month older than Aon. What would it be like to rule the Monarchy at this age? How must the princess have been feeling?

But Aon kept these questions to herself. She had no choice. The Monarchy had always been a rich and

thriving land and its people a happy and peaceful populace. She'd learned long ago not to express melancholy or even discuss it. To admit to anyone that she was sad about the queen would mean admitting the very worst thing about herself, the thing she never wanted anyone to know.

That deep, deep down, in ways she couldn't understand, Aon was broken.

She *wanted* to be happy all the time like everyone else. She wanted to give in to bliss and rest in the knowledge that their monarch kept them all safe and prosperous. But while Aon could fool everyone else into thinking she was just like them, she would never be able to fool herself.

So, all day long, as Emberfell prepared to celebrate Tower Rise, Aon had played her part. She'd thrown herself into the merriment. She'd danced joyously. She'd laughed as her neighbor friends wove her long, blond hair into a braid that circled her head. She'd appeared, for all to see, thoroughly and unquestionably happy. Until at last, as the sun started to set and the excitement in Emberfell hit a fever pitch, she seized her chance and quietly slipped away. She took the western path to the one place where she felt whole and well and normal.

With her back to the town, Aon took a deep breath and stared into the maw of Dreadwillow Carse.

In all other directions, the edges of the village gently faded into the picturesque landscapes beyond. Brown earth gave way to green grass and thick trees. The change was so gentle, it was hard to tell where Emberfell ended and the world beyond began.

But along the west side, which butted up against the black marsh, there was no mistaking where the village stopped. A pronounced dark line marked Emberfell's border, as if the ground had been scorched by an invisible wall of flame.

From an early age, all in Emberfell were advised to stay away from the Carse. The warning was scarcely needed. One look into the unforgiving blackness sent unwary travelers scurrying. Most in Emberfell saw the Carse as a blight to be endured.

Aon saw it as something else: a remedy.

Clutching a long, unlit candle in her sweaty hand, she inched forward. Her toes just grazed the black border. A tingly mix of excitement and fear buzzed through her. The terrifying thrill of standing at the edge of a cliff, the dizziness of climbing the tallest hill, and the pain of a deep wound that felt like it could

never be healed all wrestled inside her. And eagerness. Aon also felt eager.

Everything—the hair on the back of her neck, the knot in the pit of her stomach—*begged* Aon not to move forward. The Carse had this effect on anyone who passed by. But Aon wasn't like anyone else. She alone could ignore that feeling. She lit the candle and walked cautiously onto the black ground beyond.

*One . . . two . . . three . . .* She counted the steps in her head like always.

The earth in Dreadwillow Carse gave slightly. The moist soil rushed in to meet her feet and crept up the edges of her boots. She trod softly, fearing her steps would convince the mire to swallow her whole.

*Thirteen . . . fourteen . . . fifteen . . .*

With each step, a weight pulled at Aon's shoulders, like the heavy wool cerements the people of Emberfell wrapped around the dead. Something slick and thorny took purchase in her chest. The sadness she felt over the queen consumed her, drowning out Emberfell's raucous celebration in the distance.

*Twenty-one . . . twenty-two . . . twenty-three . . .* Aon paused as something slithered at her ankles. A tangle of mirebramble, the carnivorous vines known for

pulling anything that moved down into the Carse's muck, froze near her heels. She pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth impatiently. When she refused to move, the vines slid off in search of other prey. Aon continued.

*Twenty-four . . . twenty-five . . . twenty-six . . .* The farthest she'd ever gone before was thirty-two steps. But today she needed to go farther. She *needed* to.

*Today is the day*, she promised herself as she had so many times before. *Today I learn what really happened to Mother.*

A hint of something rank—spoiled milk maybe?—hung in the air. Dreadwillow trees lined the path, their branches with teardrop-shaped leaves drooping under the burden of festering, black moss. They brushed Aon's shoulders as she passed beneath. Each touch sapped her of hope and convinced her she'd never leave.

What a change it was to shrug off the burden of joy! At home, she had all the food she could ever want, comforts that would be lavish and shameful were they not afforded to everyone in the land. Every monarch had seen to it that the people wanted for nothing and suffered no indignities.

Yet it was here, giving in to her worry and sorrow,

where Aon felt less broken. No one would understand her sadness. She could not understand their glee.

Aon stopped at a hook-shaped rock that poked up out of the ground. In all her previous visits to the Carse, she'd never gone farther than this. She'd never been able to. Here, at this spot, she was filled with alarm and exhaustion. *Just a few more steps*, she coaxed herself. But her legs failed to obey. Resigned, Aon closed her eyes and listened. After several moments of silence, she heard it.

There were no words. Just a light tune that trilled from somewhere in the darkest depths of the Carse. A sad, haunting waltz. It was almost like singing. But it couldn't be. No one lived here. A trick of the wind in the trees, she'd always told herself.

Aon let her head roll back and her arms hang limply at her sides. When she heard that song, she felt as if she'd been turned into a stream. She wanted just to stand there and pour herself into the song, itself a melodic river. They would fill each other.

A viscous mist rose off the dark-watered bog on either side of her path. The giddiness Aon felt at being able to express her sadness vanished, replaced swiftly by terror. This always happened. The longer she stayed inside the Carse, the sorrow turned to fear.

The comfort she found in the strange music failed her. Now the music sounded shrill and discordant. She turned and hurried back out of the swamp.

As she stepped across the border onto the path outside Emberfell, Aon's misery melted away. Her mind cleared. As always, the haunting dirge vanished. A pang hiccupped inside her, and she felt as if something very, very valuable had been ripped from her head. Or her heart.

She took three deep breaths. Each inhalation brought her calm; each exhalation took away a little more terror. In moments, she went back to being who she believed she was: a slightly broken girl.

A chorus of bells rang out. Aon shot a glance at Emberfell. Almost immediately, the dancing and merriment stopped as the whole town scrambled about. It was later than she thought. Wiping away any tell-tale tears, Aon wended her way through the town and headed for the village's east side. Outside the mayor's house, she tapped the base of the tall glass statue of Queen Sula that watched over Emberfell with arms extended, welcoming all. Everyone who passed the statue touched the base for luck and made a wish. Aon always wished not to be caught going into the Carse.

Turning onto the street where she lived, Aon could

just make out the outline of her father. He was leaning on his crutch in front of their house at the end of the lane.

Aon's father hobbled forward, holding a small tin lantern. The fire within cast shadows like cobwebs across his jovial face. As he reached out to hug his daughter, he nearly fell. Aon chided him gently. "You should be sitting."

Her father pointed up and down the street. All the town's families stood outside their homes, holding lanterns. "If I sit, I can't hold it high enough for our new queen to see. And we don't want that, do we?"

Aon kissed her father's hand. No one, she often thought, loved the Monarchy more than her father. He would do anything to please his queen.

The cry of a horn echoed down the streets of Emberfell. "It's time," Father said.

Aon bent over and picked up a cube of blue glass at her father's feet. For days, he had collected scraps of broken glass. He'd made the cube using tree sap to bind the pieces together and shield the sharp edges. When the horn sounded again, Aon slid the cube over the lantern. Father lifted it high over his head. Everyone in Emberfell placed similar domes of blue glass over their lights. The village immediately got darker.

A cheer rang out from the crowd. Aon turned her gaze southwest. Nine Towers had become a distant silhouette. The queen and the princess were no doubt at the very top of Lithe Tower.

Aon stared into their lantern. While everyone else's light shone a solid blue, her father's cube twinkled with dozens of azures and sapphires and cobalts, and more blues than she could count. It didn't burn the brightest, but it was certainly the most beautiful.

"So?" Father asked. "Do you think Princess Jeniah will be happy?"

Aon wondered, as she often did, if her father ever suspected. Could he squint at her, even now in the dim light, and see not his daughter but an ungrateful girl with imperfect joy? She believed that if he could, she might go to Dreadwillow Carse and never return. The shame would be that terrible.

Aon smiled, because she knew she was supposed to, and she squeezed her father's hand. "Aren't we all?"

# Chapter Three



THE LIBRARY THAT TOOK UP THE MAJORITY OF SORIN TOWER WAS said to be the finest in the land. Some of the servants joked that there were so many books in the library, the queen could have used them to build a tenth tower. It was here that the sum of all the Monarchy's knowledge was kept. It was also here that Jeniah had resolved to discover the secret of Dreadwillow Carse. Arms shaking under the weight of the books she'd gathered, the princess wove her way through the stacks. She scanned the spines, searching for any titles that could help in her quest.

*The History of Napkin Folding?* No. *A Compendium of Tax Tables?* Definitely not.

Making her way toward her favorite table—the one near the stained-glass window with an image of one of her ancestors, King Isaar—Jeniah paused to glance at the library’s collection of fairy tales. She smiled to herself. She missed the days when her mother had taught her their language by having Jeniah read her a story each night before bed.

Some children read storybooks and dreamt of being princesses and princes. In those stories, royalty was often brave. They took journeys that made them the heroes the people of the land needed. But a real princess or prince would read the same books and think, *My life’s not like that at all.*

So what did princesses dream of?

For Jeniah, it was magic.

Tales of powerful wizards casting spells had captured her imagination from a young age. From the moment she first knew she would be queen one day, Jeniah hoped to discover that magic really was possible. Then, she wouldn’t *need* to know how to rule. Magic would mean she would always do what was right.

But Jeniah had been raised to believe that magic

was a lie. *A clever fiction*, her last tutor, Miss Dellers, had called it. *An illusion that beguiles even as it burns.*

And it wasn't only Miss Dellers. Over the years, Jeniah had been instructed by seven different tutors—all exemplary scholars in their fields—and they'd all said the same thing. No matter the lesson—and the subject matters ranged from etiquette to advanced mathematics—the conversation almost always turned to the idea of magic. Jeniah made sure of that.

But the scholars all agreed. Magic was a lovely idea and nothing more.

And yet . . .

Of all the questions that fought for attention in Jeniah's mind following her trip up Lithe Tower, the most powerful proved to be this: What could possibly topple the entire Monarchy should a monarch step a single foot inside the Carse?

Magic. That had to be it.

If there was magic in her Monarchy—or the Carse—then Jeniah needed to know about it. Magic, she felt, would make her a great queen. And maybe, just maybe, it could save her mother.

Jeniah had known about the Carse all her life. It had never been more than a fable to her, a scary story the

royals told one another on the darkest of nights. But even though curiosity ran through Jeniah as if it were her very blood, she'd never before felt the need to learn more about the desolate place. That had changed. Why?

Because last night, she had *seen* it.

The Carse, the warning . . . They had only ever been words. Now, it was all real. Now, there were *consequences*. Now, the sight of the twisted, black, and impenetrable bog burned in Jeniah's memory. Each time the image invaded her thoughts, questions—like flaming arrows in the night—accompanied it.

Every future monarch had first been taken to Lithe Tower, just as Jeniah had. Been shown the Monarchy, as she had. And, no doubt, been reminded never to enter Dreadwillow Carse. And for more than a thousand years, the Monarchy had endured and thrived. Each monarch had obeyed.

Yet since seeing the Carse, Jeniah had been unable to stop the deluge of questions that occupied her thoughts. This vexed the princess. Questions without ready answers were new to Jeniah. Growing up, she'd had very little to wonder about. From an early age, she had been spoon-fed all she needed to know. If her mother told her something, it was true. A queen was not to be disputed. If a tutor taught Jeniah history, she

could rely on the account, as her mother had chosen the tutor.

So, it was very strange for Jeniah to suddenly find her brain exploding with queries and quandaries and the notion that there were things to know that weren't just going to be imparted to her, as had been her experience. Things she *shouldn't* know . . . but felt she *needed* to.

Where had the decree come from? Had anyone ever questioned it? Were others' inquiries as swiftly silenced as Jeniah's had been? Had any of her ancestors, stalwart and beloved leaders to the last, ever *tried* to learn more? Had Jeniah's mother, who had never accepted any answer she didn't like, ever once sought the truth?

Jeniah had tried to shake off her doubts. She'd promised her mother she would never go to Dreadwillow Carse. That was what it took to be queen. But ignoring questions didn't banish them. She knew there was only one thing to cure this sickness of curiosity. Just one sure tonic.

*Answers.*

So, that morning, she'd thrown herself into the books. She'd climbed countless stairs, visiting each of Sorin Tower's twenty floors to recover the dustiest,

most ancient tomes the mammoth library held. She'd curled up in different corners, resting books on her raised knees, and struggled to translate forgotten languages she barely recognized. She'd pored over ancient scrolls so brittle and faded, she hadn't dared sneeze and risk scattering them to dust. In everything she'd read thus far, in everything she'd learned, only one fact seemed to hold true.

The Carse didn't exist.

Not officially, anyway. No history revealed its origin. No royal biography mentioned its significance. In all, Jeniah examined nearly eighty texts—some rumored to be as old as the land itself—and only three mentioned the Carse. Those three tomes told her what she already knew: *if any monarch enters Dreadwillow Carse, then the Monarchy will fall.*

Exhausted after hours of reading, Jeniah slumped over a table. She'd just closed her bleary eyes when a thunderous crack announced the opening of the library door. She looked up, startled. She'd asked the servants not to disturb her. So who would possibly . . . ?

A short, round man with sickly pale skin bounded into the room. The princess blinked at the sight. The man wore ratty old furs tied to him with frayed bits of rope. Jeniah almost couldn't see his face for the

salt-and-pepper hair that engulfed his head. His bare feet were coated in an inch of oily black mud that squished with every step he took. A weathered leather glove covered most of his outstretched left forearm. A sleek falcon with feathers that matched the man's hair color gripped the glove with shiny white talons.

Was this . . . ? It couldn't be.

In her drive to learn all she could about the Carse, Jeniah had forgotten about the new tutor her mother had promised. And even if she had remembered to expect him, nothing could have prepared her to expect . . . *this*.

The man, who had a distinct waddle when he walked, stopped next to Jeniah. A strong odor of lavender and sulfur hovered about him. He smiled broadly, revealing crooked teeth, one of which was framed with a thin strip of gold. "You must be Jeniah."

The princess's eyes narrowed. Typically, anyone who approached her did so with a bow. Called her "Your Highness." At the very least, referred to her as *Princess Jeniah*. She'd never really liked the formality. But its absence was peculiar.

The man flicked his wrist. The falcon cawed, flew into the air, and perched atop the nearest bookcase. "I believe you're expecting me."

*No*, the princess thought. *No, I really wasn't*. But she nodded hesitantly. "You're my new tutor."

When the man squinted at this, his eyebrows swallowed his eyes. "If you like."

Jeniah started to wonder if an intruder had entered the castle. Her past teachers had worn the long, flowing robes of a scholar. They'd carried sacks full of books, assorted quills, and dioramas depicting key events in the history of the Monarchy. This man had nothing. Except his glove. And the bird.

"I don't believe," she said, eyeing the falcon above, "that animals are allowed in the library."

"And why not?" the man demanded, scratching his thick beard. "Gerheart up there? He has as much right to learn as anyone."

"But he can't read."

"Reading," the man said, pulling up a chair, "is just *one* way of learning. For example, my name is Skonas. There, you learned something by hearing. True?"

Jeniah found herself gripping the sides of her chair tightly. What sort of tutor was this? "My mother said you would teach me how to be queen," she said, sitting up straight.

"Did she? I don't recall that being in the job description."

“Well, then why are you here?”

Skonas rubbed his hands together. “I am here to teach you three lessons. You will then use those lessons to set yourself a fourth and final lesson.”

“And . . . and then I’ll know how to be queen?”

Skonas sniffed. “Is that important?”

Jeniah’s heart fell. He wasn’t making any sense. This odd man did not seem capable of teaching her anything, let alone how to rule her people. Clearly the queen, in her weakened state, had not been very diligent in choosing her daughter’s new tutor.

“This is your first lesson. It’s—” Skonas paused as Jeniah scrambled to take out a piece of parchment and dip her quill in an inkwell. He gave her the most curious look, as if he had no idea what she was doing. Then he turned his back and continued. “It’s the lesson from which all other lessons spring: you are your own best teacher. Repeat that.”

Jeniah’s brow furrowed, but she obeyed. “I am my own best teacher.”

Skonas spun around. “Do you believe that?”

“Do I believe what?”

“That you are your own best teacher.”

Jeniah looked down at the parchment and quill. She found herself longing for Miss Dellers. Things

were much clearer with the stately woman. Miss Dellers spoke only to impart important knowledge. Jeniah had no idea if any of what Skonas was saying was worth writing down.

“If that were true,” she said slowly, “you’d be out of a job. Wouldn’t you?”

Skonas cackled. “Very astute,” he said. “Strangely clever. You’re beginning well.” But he didn’t answer her question.

Sighing, she dipped her quill into the inkwell again. But before she could write a single word, Skonas snatched her parchment away.

“What are you doing?” he asked, holding the page at arm’s length as if it were poisonous.

“I’m writing that down. I write down all my lessons. And if all other lessons come from the first lesson,” Jeniah reasoned, “it must be the most important.”

Skonas looked amused. “Yes, I can see why you’d think that.”

“So it’s true?”

“No.”

Skonas crumpled up the parchment and tossed it aside. Jeniah balled her fists.

“No,” the teacher repeated, “it is not the most important lesson. The most important is the fourth. And

when we get to that point—if we get to that point—there will be no need to write it down.”

Jeniah tossed her quill aside, exasperated. “And why is that?”

Skonas paused. Then he leaned forward and looked deeply into the girl’s eyes. The princess felt her pulse pound in her throat. She’d already resolved to dismiss everything the man had said. But that look in his eyes . . . The same instinct that fueled her curiosity about Dreadwillow Carse now told her one thing: Skonas was about to speak an irrefutable truth.

“Because it will be imprinted on your soul.”

As Jeniah pondered his meaning, the teacher pursed his lips and whistled. Gerheart called in return and then swooped down, landing on Skonas’s gloved arm. Skonas nodded to the princess and turned to the door.

“Where are you going?” Jeniah asked.

“We’re done for today.” Skonas exited without another word.

# Chapter Four



NO ONE LIVING IN EMBERFELL COULD REMEMBER THE LAST TIME a gloamingtide fête followed Tower Rise so closely. A quick look through the history books found no such instance in the last two hundred years.

But death never claimed monarchs on a convenient schedule. It was impossible to predict whether the two events—one a calendar mainstay, the other a jape of fate—might coincide. Now, they did. Just three short days following the Monarchy’s tribute to the Queen Ascendant, preparations began across the land for the welcoming of autumn.

And the arrival of the Crimson Hoods.

Word came the day after Tower Rise that Emberfell would receive the Crimson Hoods. As mysterious as they were vaunted, the cloaked and silent envoys of the queen visited only one town during each gloamingtide celebration. Their presence was considered a great honor in itself. But no honor was greater than to be *selected* by the Hoods.

Four times a year—one for each gloamingtide that marked the passing of the seasons—the Crimson Hoods took one of the chosen town’s residents away to serve the queen. These selected few went to live, so it was said, in one of the Nine Towers. They were lavished, so it was said, with privileges and extravagances previously reserved for the monarch and the monarch’s family. In exchange, they performed duties vital to the continued prosperity of all in the land. So it was said.

What these duties were, no one knew. And no one cared. It was a chance to serve the monarch in a way very, very few could. That service was superior to any excess the queen could provide.

Although gloamingtide heralded its official arrival, autumn had been in evidence for some time. An early frost—welcome respite from a particularly warm summer—prompted everyone to don woolly sweaters and caps. The smell of burning leaves and

cooking spices promised evenings of comforting fires and even more comforting food.

Aon stood atop a ladder, cheerfully removing the bright banners from Tower Rise that hung from the rooftop thatching. Below, her father sat using a nail as a needle and thin rope as thread to pierce through colorful leaves and small gourds, making garlands that would replace the banners. When he finished a strand, he wove a glossy purple ribbon throughout. The ribbon had been Aon's idea.

While Aon hid a sorrow no one in Emberfell would understand, it was not her permanent state. Most days, Aon was *very* happy. Today, for example. She loved autumn, and the gloamingtide festivals were among her most cherished memories. She looked forward to drinking spiced cider later that night until she got sick, after the Crimson Hoods had taken one of Emberfell's lucky citizens with them to Nine Towers. Aon was not incapable of happiness. But she enjoyed her secret bouts of grief like a wicked indulgence.

Aon moved the ladder across the street, and her father fed strands of garland up to her.

"I forgot to tell you," her father said, grinning. "Jackdaw Fen will be gracing all with a new song at the celebration tonight."

Aon giggled. Her father belonged to a trio of bards. They called themselves Jackdaw Fen. Every gloamingtide, they entertained the whole town with songs around the bonfire. “What’s this one about?” she asked.

“Wrote it myself,” her father said proudly. “It’s based on the legend of Pirep and Tali.”

Aon applauded. The fable of Pirep and Tali—two girls who got lost in Dreadwillow Carse—had always been one of her favorite bedtime stories. She suspected she liked it because her mother’s family tree showed she had ancestors named Pirep and Tali. Her mother had often teased, saying Aon’s distant relatives were the same girls from the tale. But it was just make-believe.

Aon also liked the story because it was sad. The girls got lost in the Carse and never came out. But, of course, the people of Emberfell still thought it had a happy ending. Because nothing made them sad or scared or heartbroken. Nothing.

Aon raised her arms, very much resembling the statue of Queen Sula. “I look forward to a command performance,” she said in her most regal voice.

Aon and her father laughed as Aon carefully tied the first garland to the chimney of their neighbor, Mrs. Grandwyn. It stretched across the road to the

awning of their house. The sunlight caught the purple ribbon, making the garland shimmer.

“It’s beautiful!” her father declared. “You’ve outdone yourself this year, rose blossom.”

Aon looked sharply down at her father, whose eyes immediately darted the other way. Rose blossom. The nickname her mother had given Aon. He hadn’t used it for three years. It was the smallest of slips, yet it told Aon so much. Somewhere deep under his ever-present smile, in some place his mind reserved for the oldest of dreams, her father still remembered.

Now, as he busied himself with the next garland, Aon’s heart ached to pose the questions that had gone unanswered for years.

*Do you miss Mother?*

*How often do you think of her?*

*If you could speak to her one more time, what would you say?*

Aon had her own answers to these questions, so many answers that all she wanted to do was say them out loud to someone who could help her understand them. But it would never happen. It would mean talking about her mother. And no one, anywhere, did that. Ever.

There were times—like this—when Aon wondered

if everyone's happiness was really a mask. Was it possible the other people of the land could feel all the emotions she felt—the grief, the anger—and hid them in the name of pleasing their monarch?

But these slips—when people were on the verge of remembering someone's absence or expressing a feeling other than joy—only ever lasted a moment, until the twinkle in their eyes returned, vanquishing unpleasant thoughts.

No. Aon was the only one who felt this way. She was the only one who was broken.

“Come on,” Aon's father boomed merrily. “We've got twelve more to hang before the Crimson Hoods arrive.”

Aon did as she was told. And she smiled.

THE SUN WAS but a sliver disappearing behind the mountains when the Crimson Hoods arrived.

A watchman in a turret at the western edge of town spotted the pair coming and rang the bell. Everyone everywhere dropped what they were doing and spilled out into the streets. Aon and her father had been finishing their dinner when they heard the bell. They fussed with each other's clothes—he straightened her dress; she smoothed his wrinkly shirt—before heading out into the street.

The townsfolk lined up in front of their houses and stood up tall. There was no guarantee that the Hoods would visit your street, but you wanted to be ready if they did. Aon slipped her hand into her father's. She almost gasped as she saw the two Hoods round the corner and make their way slowly down her own street. Someone *she knew* was being chosen.

The Hoods walked closer and closer. The queen's envoys wore the long robes of monks, with voluminous cowls stained a deep, dark red, the exact color of a sunset heralding an oncoming storm. Their faces were never, ever seen. They slowed as they approached Aon's house.

For a moment, Aon thought they were going to choose *her*. It was rare, but not unheard of, for the Hoods to select a child. Her heart and mind raced; her heart marveled at the thrill of serving the queen, and her mind filled with questions she would ask.

*Why choose me, Your Majesty? Did I please you in some way? What is Dreadwillow Carse? Why does it make me feel sad? Why do you want us to be happy so badly?*

*Am I really broken?*

Yes. That was the first question she needed answered.

The Hoods stopped in front of Aon's father.

Each Hood reached out an arm and laid it gently on her father's shoulders.

Aon's throat burned with bile, even as her father's face beamed with pride. A cheer rang up and down the streets of Emberfell. Aon couldn't move. She hardly noticed when her father bent over and pulled her in tightly.

"Can you believe it?" he whispered. She could feel his tears of joy as he pressed his cheek to hers.

*No.* He was happy? He was being taken away from his daughter. How could he be happy? She had no one left. *What about me?* Aon thought.

"You will be cared for," her father assured her. "And I will always love you."

"Will I see you again?" It was the only thing she could think to ask.

Father held her chin up so their eyes met. "Aon, the greatest thing that can happen to us is here now. You *will* be happy, I promise."

He hadn't answered her question.

Aon tied her last strand of purple ribbon to her father's crutch. She needed to know he'd have *one* reminder of her. Then she kissed him on the cheek as the Hoods led him away.

The revelry grew louder as Aon's father passed their neighbors, limping and waving. Aon barely noticed when Mrs. Grandwyn took her hand and led

her to the house across the street. She had seen this happen before. If the Crimson Hoods claimed a family's provider, a neighbor would take in the rest of the family. No questions were asked. No tears were shed. Emberfell took care of its own.

Aon felt it immediately. Once the Hoods turned the corner, once her father was out of sight, everything returned to normal on their street. No more words were spoken about Aon's father. Later tonight, at the bonfire, it would be as if he had never been there. Jackdaw Fen would perform, now as a duo. From here on out, Aon Greenlaw would always have been a member of the Grandwyn family. The wound left behind by Aon's father's exit would be closed just that quickly.

And life—the life they all knew and loved and embraced and never questioned—would go on.

# Chapter Five



AFTER FOUR DAYS WITH SKONAS, JENIAH HAD ARRIVED AT A conclusion: Her first duty as queen would be passing a law with severe penalties for anyone who answered a question with another question.

That was all her new teacher seemed able to do. When she asked him how best to settle a dispute between land owners, he would ask, “Why do you suppose land owners argue?” When she asked the proper way to host dignitaries from across the Monarchy, he would ask, “Are you sure there’s just one proper way?” This went on from sunrise to sundown. He’d

imparted no lessons since that first one: *You are your own best teacher.*

Jeniah went to bed each night, furious that she wasn't any closer to learning how to be queen than before Skonas had arrived. She didn't *know* how to be her own best teacher. She would stare at the canopy over her bed, trying to figure out why her mother had selected this odd man to be her tutor. While she believed Skonas to be a fool, she knew her mother wasn't, not by any means.

Three times a day, Jeniah joined the queen at her bedside for meals. Her mother would ask, "How are your lessons with Skonas?" And Jeniah would report, "Fine." She was reluctant to admit that she didn't understand what her tutor was doing. Nor would she admit that she didn't know why the queen had chosen him. Queens—even future queens—she reasoned, should know these things. So Jeniah hid her ignorance and prayed she'd figure it out.

Every day, she would meet Skonas in the library after breakfast. They would stare at each other silently across the table. She waited for him to give her an order, set her a lesson. Most often, he took out a pair of knitting needles and began to craft what Jeniah could only guess was a sock for his lengthy beard.

When she could take it no longer, she'd collect some books and continue searching for information about the Carse. All the while, Skonas simply sat there—knitting and humming a peculiar tune he'd been humming for hours on end, day after day—until Jeniah asked a question about something she'd read.

And then he would answer with a question.

On the fifth day, Jeniah stopped going to the library. She didn't see the point. When Sirilla, the lady's maid who helped the princess dress each morning, came to her chambers, Jeniah flatly refused to get out of bed. "Why should I bother?" she asked. "I'm not learning anything. He's not teaching me what I need to know."

"Begging your pardon, Your Highness," Sirilla said, "but you *are* the Queen Ascendant. He cannot refuse your command."

Jeniah considered this. Never once had she used her authority to get what she wanted. *Kind words win hearts; cross words turn them*, her mother had always said. And it was advice that had worked for them both. Until now.

Unhappy that it had come to this, Jeniah quickly dressed and went in search of her tutor. He *would* answer her questions today. But she found the library

empty. Asking around the castle, Jeniah learned he was in the gardens just outside Lithe Tower.

Jeniah found Skonas standing near a six-foot-tall stone obelisk with a great flame on top that burned morning, noon, and night. This was a memorial to all past monarchs. An inscription ran along the monolith's base: *In the name of peace*. Skonas stood with his head bowed, as if praying.

Jeniah summoned her best royal voice. It was the tone her mother used to let people know she would not be swayed from her course. She walked right up to Skonas, hands planted firmly on her hips, and leveled her most serious stare at him. "I have questions for you."

Skonas raised his head. "Questions are the lamplight that lead us from the darkness. And you know what lamplight really is, yes?" He leaned in and met her serious stare. "*Fire*. You should tread carefully, Your Highness."

But Jeniah wouldn't be intimidated. "Then surely answers extinguish the flames."

"So you're saying answers return you to the dark?"

"Well, n-no . . . I—I mean . . ."

"How can you seek answers if you don't know what they really are?"

Jeniah growled. He was being tricky again.

“As Queen Ascendant, I command you to answer me: Why can’t I go into Dreadwillow Carse?”

The tutor sniffed and turned his gaze to the sky. He held out his forearm, wrapped in his falconer’s glove. “Why do you think?”

The princess stifled a volcanic scream.

But she continued with her firm, royal voice. “I’ve been told that if any monarch goes into Dreadwillow Carse, the Monarchy will fall. If I’m to be queen, I need to know what that means. Is it a prophecy?”

Skonas tilted his head thoughtfully. Then he said, “I don’t believe in prophecies. They’re too . . . absolute. People are too fickle to adhere to absolutes. Prophecies are stories that cheat so the storyteller can pretend he knew all along what would happen.

“What you’ve been told is a *warning*. Quite different. You’ve heard plenty of those in your life, I’d imagine. ‘If you touch the fire, then you’ll get burned.’ ‘If you play in the rain, then you’ll catch a cold.’ If. Then. It’s a choice. Prophecies don’t offer a choice. But warnings do. And living is all about choices, wouldn’t you agree?”

This was the most Skonas had said to Jeniah since that first day. It seemed using her authority as

Queen Ascendant was the key. She continued. “But those warnings make sense,” she said. “At some point, someone touched a fire and got burned. So they warned others. No monarch has ever entered the Carse, or the Monarchy would have fallen by now. How can you warn someone about something that clearly has never happened?”

A smile bullied its way onto Skonas’s lips. “Strangely clever,” he said. Skonas said that to Jeniah a lot. He seemed to think it was a compliment. But Jeniah could never be sure.

Overhead, Gerheart cried. A moment later, the falcon landed on Skonas’s arm. The tutor fed his bird a chunk of bread and then said, “Not all warnings are perfect, you know.” He held his gloved hand over the fire atop the obelisk. “You see? I’m not getting burned.”

Jeniah rolled her eyes. “Of course not. You’re wearing a glove.”

“But the warning doesn’t say, ‘If you touch the fire, you’ll get burned . . . unless you’re wearing a glove.’ Even warnings need to be heeded with caution.”

“So, you’re saying there are ways around certain warnings?”

“I’m saying,” Skonas said, sending Gerheart flying

with a flick of his wrist, “that all warnings must be considered.”

Jeniah reeled at the idea. Not the idea that warnings should be considered, but that Skonas was actually making sense. “Where did the warning come from?” she asked.

“Where does any ancient knowledge come from? It’s handed down through the generations until the significance of the person who first said it is lost to the winds of time. Sometimes, we lose their name altogether. And despite this, the knowledge gets repeated and repeated over and over.”

Jeniah’s nose wrinkled. She didn’t like not knowing who had issued the warning in the first place. It could have been anyone. Following a rule *just because* it had always been followed felt strange. She liked to understand rules. She needed to.

“And you know what’s interesting?” Skonas said. “The same is true of lies. Say a lie over and over, and people will start to think it’s true.”

Which was *exactly* what Jeniah had been thinking. Suppose the warning had been spread by someone who had stolen something from the royal family. Perhaps they’d hidden it in the Carse, and to keep the family from investigating, spread a rumor that

entering the Carse would mean disaster. The idea was far-fetched, of course . . . but still possible.

On the other hand, Jeniah had first heard the warning from the queen. Jeniah trusted her mother, and her mother believed in the warning with all her heart. Maybe the queen knew more than Skonas. Maybe she had a very good reason to believe the Monarchy would fall if a monarch entered the Carse.

But maybe only one held any value: Maybe the warning was wrong.

“One other thing,” Skonas said. He leaned over until their faces were a mere hairbreadth apart. For days, the tutor had been amiable. Jovial, even. The look on his face as he peered into Jeniah’s eyes made him appear more serious than she’d ever seen him. “If you think you’ll get anywhere with me by throwing royal commands around, you are gravely mistaken. I come to teach Ascendants out of courtesy to the reigning monarch. I am not a royal subject, and you have no power over me. Remember that.”

Skonas whistled. Gerheart swooped down and perched on the tutor’s arm. Skonas nodded to the princess and walked off, leaving her alone at the memorial.

*Warnings must be considered,* Skonas had said. So

Jeniah considered. She closed her eyes and repeated the centuries-old warning over and over again to herself softly. After an hour of this—an hour filled with fervent whispers and deep thought—the princess came to a realization that sent her running to her bedchambers in search of her longest hooded cloak.

The warning said *she* couldn't enter the Carse.

It didn't say she couldn't send in someone else.