

# Prologue

Roxelle kicked her golden bay mare into a trot, riding side by side with Edd along the meandering Morregan River. “Whatever it is, it better be something that’ll leave me slack-jawed with awe,” she warned him, bored. “You know I ought to be back before the eclipse. Father would be furious.”

“You’re such a frightened hen. ‘Father would be furious,’” he smiled with just the right side of his mouth.

Roxelle however did not rise to the bait. She had known him since they were both knee-high, and it has been quite some time since she last allowed him to get a rise out of her with his childish jests. She was sixteen now, a grown and proud lady of The Marches, and it would not do to let herself be troubled over every little thing. This day would be too nice anyway to let him and his remarks spoil it. “I’m not frightened! He promised me we’d have a show of fireworks after the Overshade Day feast. He told me he’d cast them all in the Morregan if I didn’t get back to Dragonfall by noon for the eclipse.”

“Fireworks?” Edd raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “How’d you get Old Sour Robert to bring *fireworks* to Dragonfall?”

“Oh, you’d like to know my secrets, would you?” she teased, with a wide smile and a giggle.

“I’d like to know how he got around the king’s ban on eastern wares.”

“Does it matter? We get to see *fireworks*!”

“I’ve seen them before. Waste of good coin. You should’ve asked him to bring a troop of dwarves or mummers.”

She scoffed. “You’ve seen them, have you? Where?”

“You’d like to know my secrets, would you?” he cackled, as he spurred his blood bay gelding into a gallop, kicking dust into her face and leaving the fire-headed girl no chance to respond.

With a protest dead on her lips, she put the spurs into her own mount and took off after him through the forest, feeling a gentle autumn breeze roll past her intricately-braided hair. The woodlands this time of year were eerily quiet, and even the rushing waters of the

wide Morregan seemed to lose their roar. After turning at a bend in the river-side road, Edd slowed his pace and let her catch up to him.

“You’re such a cunt! I’m going back,” she harrumphed, but made no move to turn about.

“If you go back now, you won’t see *it*.”

“Fine,” she groaned. “But if it’s another dead thing or some shiny rock from the river, I’ll flay the skin off your cock.”

“Truly your father’s daughter, aren’t you? And also, that only happened once and we were five years—”

“Twice,” she corrected him.

“The second time was just the head, it doesn’t count,” he protested.

“No, it definitely counts.”

“Fine, have it your way. Come, it’s not much further.”

The path ahead was one she knew well from all their river-side morning rides through the woods north of The Narrow Mountains. Aside from admiring the tapestry of gold and crimson oak leaves that blanketed the ground and the canopy above them, Roxelle couldn’t quite reason why he’d bring her out here. She didn’t think he’d drag her twenty miles outside Dragonfall to see some leaves, but she was still curious to see how he’d make up for not giving her a present on Overshade Day.

“It’s here,” he said, reining in his horse with not much of a warning.

In front of them was just more river and more trees. A mossy rock stood beside the riverbank, atop which they saw a silver dove with a small roll of paper tied to its leg. She wondered what the little messenger had to say, but it flew away as soon as they took a few steps towards its perch. “Yes, it’s very...” she tried to say something kind, even though she felt he did not deserve it. Fool that he was, she loved him more than her wits told her she should.

“It’s a rock. But we are here for something else,” he said, taking her hand and guiding her forward. As soon as they got past the stone, she saw it. On the side of the mossy rock that faced away from them, all black sinew and brown skin like the silt of the river, sat a dead man.

“You are such a cock!” she started wildly slapping and punching at his back. “I’m never going anywhere with you again. *Never!* I’m serious!” Roxelle frowned as she tried to head back to her horse. Edd caught her by her wrist and dragged her into his arms. After a

fair bit of unfruitful fighting on her part, and some hearty laughter from Edd, he finally let her go. Her face was red with fluster and flush with anger, her beautifully braided hair now frayed in places, and her riding doublet ripped at one seam.

“If you’d listen for once first, instead of kicking and biting, you’d learn I didn’t bring you all the way here to see a corpse.”

“You have until the count of ten to make it right, or I’m going,” she spoke with heavy breath.

“Close your eyes first, and turn around.”

“Why?” she squinted her pale-blue eyes, distrustful.

“Come, we must be at five by now,” he chuckled.

“You better not push me into the river again!” she huffed, and reluctantly did as was bid. “Six...seven...” and by the count of nine, she felt cold metal graze against her alabaster skin, and Edd’s hand pushing her hair out of the way to latch her necklace. She opened her eyes, grabbed the small stone—no bigger than a quail egg—and felt the colour go out of her cheeks as she saw the dragon egg that adorned her neck.

“How did you—”

“Found it on him,” he pointed at the corpse.

Roxelle had still not recovered from her trance by the time Edd crouched next to the lifeless man. *A dragon egg necklace! Damn the man, he always knows how to placate me*, she thought. While quite useless for hatching live dragons—as they’ve been for a nigh on a thousand years since mankind had last seen a dragon—they were still prized precious stones that not many had the privilege of wearing. Her necklace was a thing of beauty, with a chain made from gold woven with silver wire, and the egg stained with the two most sought-after colours of sapphire and ruby, etched with tiny scales.

“He’s a queer one, isn’t he? Do you think he was a wraith?”

“Hm?” she asked, as if she had lost all memory of the last few minutes.

Edd nodded his head towards the dead man. “Him. He just looks queer, is all. Like he had been alive the other day, yet somehow had been dead for a thousand years. I pulled him out of the water when I went swimming yesterday. He should’ve been bloated if he died in the water.”

He had the truth of it, she reasoned. The corpse had hollowed eye sockets but a full head of golden hair, his skin was taut around his bones, and while his teeth and fingernails had not yet fallen, his nose did. The clothes—if it ever had any—had long rotted off his back.

But *wraith*? She did not dignify that foolishness with an answer. *The wraiths and weepers are naught else but stories for children.*

“Thank you for the present,” she told him, in an attempt to shift his mind to her.

He stood up and sat atop the rock. “Do you like it then?”

She clutched her necklace and tilted her head, giving him a smile that would never let one guess she had ever been angry at him. She pulled him to his feet and gave him an answer, with a kiss sweeter than he’d ever tasted. Though the girl was as tall as most men she’d ever met, she still had to raise herself on the tips of her feet to reach his face, but that was one of the things she loved about him so. Tall, brawny, and handsome, the dark-haired merchant’s boy had always been in the fancies of most of the girls at Dragonfall, but he was all hers. Not that she could crow about it, as it wouldn’t do for the daughter of a Marcher lord to be seen with men like him, but she still enjoyed his undivided devotion to her all the same.

“So I did well, then. I must say, I believe my present was just a tinge more impressive than yours,” he smiled.

She rolled her eyes and let go of him, placing her hands on her hips and feigning offence. “You didn’t like the flute?!”

“I did, it’s just not really a *dragon egg*, now is it?”

“Oh? And pray tell, what would be a more worthy present, that would please Lord Adeward, His Majesty?” she curtsied, fluttering her eyelashes in a mocking way.

Edd furrowed his brow, as if he was mulling over the answer. He shrugged. “Another kiss?”

She couldn’t help but laugh. Most of all she loved that about him. Her dark-eyed boy always knew how to pull her out of her sorrows with his humour. “Maybe. We should start back to Dragonfall, though. It’s almost noon.”

“Have it your way then.”

“Oh, don’t pull that long face with me! If you meet me on top of the old perestel to watch the fireworks together, I might be *persuaded* to give you another kiss. Small one,” she giggled, pinching her fingers together to show him just how small she meant.

“I’m naught if not persuasive,” he grinned.

“That you are, fortunately for you.”

They made good time on their Marcher horses as they took the road back to the city, but it seemed it was not good enough. As the forty-feet-tall walls of the riverside city, Dragonfall, came into clear view, the world began to darken around them.

“No, no, no!” Roxelle protested.

“The eclipse. Oh, bugger me, we won’t make it in time to the Perestel.”

“We will. Keep up if you can,” she challenged him, but as she spurred her mare, it only served to make the horse rear its forelegs into the air. The annual eclipse had a queer effect on horses, and most other beasts for that matter. Their mounts began to get restless, and no amount of spurring or shouting could make either of them move. “The wraiths take them! Let’s go on foot,” Roxelle cursed as she dismounted.

“No, let’s just do the ritual by the river. We won’t make it.”

She looked towards the Sun. The Moon had already begun to touch the golden edges of the holy Sun’s crown. Edd had the right of it, she knew. Roxelle hesitated, but not observing the holy rites of Overshade would bring them ill luck all year, her presta would say. “All right, then.”

They knelt by the banks of the Morregan, and gazed into the water to watch the eclipse, so as to not stare into the Sun with their bare eyes. Soon enough, the Moon covered the Sun’s grace with her shroud of dark, but as soon as she’d got there, she had moved along. It had to be expected, as this year’s autumn had been particularly warm. They took water from the Morregan into their hands and washed their faces with it, as the rites dictate, and then stood up. The world seemed to fill with life as the light of the holy Sun had once more seeped into the world of men.

“We should enter from different gates. You take this one, I’ll go around to the western wall,” Edd told her as they rose from the muddy silt.

“He knows naught else *but* you could keep me from coming. The people already whisper of us throughout Wesser. Do you think people not seeing us riding together would help?”

“Would it hurt?”

“I suppose not. Let’s just go,” she sighed.

The cobbled streets of Dragonfall were a riot of song and celebration as she rode towards Amon’s Keep. The lowborn were always the ones most pleased and merry when the winter would be warm, but Roxelle quite liked the snow. It made no matter what she liked, because *if the commoners are happy, then so are we*, her lord father would say.

She didn’t have the heart to open the doors to her lord father’s great hall. Not for fear of him or even shame, but because she was not eager to find what sort of new and queer punishment he’d have for her. They’ve had a rough relationship for quite some years, and she had disobeyed him more than once, but she had *never* missed an eclipse at the Saint Amon’s Perestel before. *Throwing the fireworks into the river would be enough*. She couldn’t delay

forever, so she swallowed her reluctance and she bid the guards to open the heavy oaken doors. There, upon the dais at the end of the great hall sat Lord Robert Morregan atop his dragon-bone throne.

At a wave of Lord Robert's hand, the many servants preparing the tables for the Overshadow feast began to shuffle past Roxelle and out of the room. "Not you, Presta Mareia," the lord told the old woman.

Roxelle curtsied and approached the dais, kneeling in front of her lord father and kissing his hand. "My lord."

"Clearly not. I must be one of your handmaidens, for I seem to be the one who needs wait on *you*, daughter. I hope the trouts of the Morregan enjoy those fireworks."

"Father, I want to—"

"Oh, spare me the song and dance. We've done this how many times now?" he scorned her. "You were with the merchant's boy, again. My own daughter, rolling about in the muck with a common boy," he spat, gesturing with his hand to the mud stains on her riding clothes.

"If only you'd knight him then we could—" she fruitlessly tried to talk again.

"Knight him?! Hah! And, pray tell, where did he fight? What battles has he won?"

She didn't speak, for she knew the answer. To be anointed as a knight one had to have performed acts of bravery and gallantry upon the field of battle, but the near ten year long peace had not been a good season for sprouting a new crop of knights.

"I should've flayed the skin off his cock when he asked me for your hand in marriage," he rose to his feet. With his tall and stout frame, shoulder-length curled copper hair, short and well trimmed beard, the man looked a proper lord. "Marriage!" he made the world sound like a curse. "He ought to be happy his neck is still married to his head. But wraiths take me to Hell, I know you would never forgive me. You're my only weakness, and you use it to hurt me so."

Roxelle looked into his father's pale-blue eyes as if in a mirror, for she was told more than once that she is Lord Robert but with teats. Not the most amusing jape of Edd's, but true enough in a sense. She had not a thimble of her mother's look about her. She had a strong and stout body, and at her age she was bound to grow more into her self for a few more years. "I don't mean to hurt you, Father, but I love—"

"Love! Listen to her. Lord take me now and spare me from hearing this drivel. 'Love,' she says. The Sun and Moon married for love and look what happened. Presta Mareia will tell you. *Did* tell you."

Roxelle searched her dear presta's wrinkled face. Presta Mareia had doted on her Little Fox, ever since she had become her care-taker nigh on ten years ago. She'd seldom raised her voice at her, and had oft been a refuge for the lordling girl whenever she had been troubled. But today, she looked nothing like her usual kindly self.

"The rites and holy laws are very important to us. If not for the sake of your soul, then at least think of what our people would think of the sole heir to the Marcher throne when she's nowhere to be seen at the perestel, and on the holiest day of the year, no less." Presta scolded her.

"She has the right of it. With the lesser lords itching to revolt, Kan Arman preparing an invasion across the strait from our very shores, and our King being a lunatic, you quite simply cannot go on the way you are. People talk about you and your common boy—"

"His name is Edd and we've done nothing that would dishonour you," she interrupted.

Lord Robert nodded, and raised his hand to silence her. "I believe you, Little Fox. But people talk. And fact oft gets corrupted by rumours."

"Then let us marry, and end the rumours."

Her lord father sighed and shook his head. "Presta, give her the dove scroll we received from King Ariel."

Presta Mareia searched the inside of her white sash, and handed her the note.

*I, King Ariel Ray IV of Wesser, rightful ruler of Esser, Lord of the Marchers, Heartlanders, Midlanders, Grovers, Northerners and Anointed of Valaur the holy Sun, do accept on behalf of my youngest son, Arrian of House Ray, your daughter's hand in marriage. Furthermore...*

"NO! I will not," she ripped the letter and threw it at her feet.

"Yes you will. We'll be hosting the royal family in a moon's turn from now. Perhaps less, the roads this winter won't be too harsh. We need a strong alliance with the King, and you need to put these rumours about your dishonour to rest."

"Honour?" she made the word sound like a sneer. "Honour, is it? What would *you* know of it?"

"Roxellana I am warning—"

"Was it honourable to send my brother as a hostage to the Kan's court? All for a war *you* lost? What Marcher lord had ever lost his son and heir, outside the field of battle or the sickbed, aside from *you*? Would Saint Amon have given up his own flesh and blood so meekly?"

“Be silent—“

Her tears began to streak burning trails across her cheeks. “You took my mother away from me when I was five. Five! You didn’t kill her, but the grief of having my baby brother ripped from her bosom might as well have. She thinks she’s made of *glass*, or that the sky will fall on her head, or whatever her latest—“

“SILENCE!” Lord Robert roared like she’d seldom heard him do before. His mouth twitched with anger. “Get out of my sight. I will not have you at my feast table. Begone!”

Roxelle left the great hall in a storm of rage, pushing the heavy oaken doors open so hard, she hit one of the servants who had been listening at the door. She locked herself in her chamber, dismissing her handmaidens, and dropped face-down on her bed.

By the time she cried all the tears she had in her, she heard a knock on her door. “Bugger off,” she said, deflated.

“Come now, I’ve brought you honey cakes!” Presta Mareia’s kindly voice called out.

“Leave me be, Presta.”

“They have walnuts and orange bits...”

Roxelle left the door ajar for a moment, her reddened eyes searing the hall to see if Presta had come alone. She allowed her to come inside the chamber, and locked her door shut. “I hathe him shoh mhuch,” she said, stuffing her face with a sweet treat.

The presta clicked her tongue. “Don’t speak with your mouth full!”

She swallowed, and wiped her eyes with a sleeve. “I hate him so much. It’s not enough he gave me away like a head of cattle to some royal cunt and his jackanpe son, he threw my fireworks into the river!”

“Where do you even get these words? You spend too much time with that wretched Mulley. I taught you to speak like a proper lady,” she frowned.

Roxelle shrugged. “What should I do, Presta? I love him so!”

“You do? Good. Let him go.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You’ll be the death of him. Your lord father has shown far more patience than a man of his stature ought to have done. He is not a bad man, Lord Robert, but he needs to think of his responsibilities to his people first and foremost.”

“Bugger his responsibilities. What about me? When has he ever done something that was only for me?”

Presta had no answer to her question. “You do love this boy, do you not? Then tell me, what would you like more? Him to be dead, and you married to the prince? Or for him to live out his life in peace, but without you?”

The question gave her pause. *Death is so final, but if he is alive there is at least a chance I might see him again*, she reasoned.

“Alive...”

“Good. You have more sense than to break your own heart. I saw to it.”

Roxelle had wanted to cry in that moment, but her dry eyes did not allow it.

“What if the prince is some wicked man, what would I do then?”

Presta chuckled, and pulled out a long hairpin from underneath her decorated golden-red headscarf. “Stick him in the eye.”

The girl laughed, though it hurt to do so, and took the hairpin before she hugged her presta. “Thank you. I’ll miss you so.”

The old woman stroked her mess of copper hair and gave her forehead a motherly kiss. “I will miss you too, Little Fox. I’ll send you lots of doves with news from Dragonfall when you’re there.”

The girl kissed her wrinkled cheek, and let her head fall on the old woman’s shoulder, embracing the woman who had always been her true mother. “We’ll see each other again, have no worries.”

Presta sighed quietly. Late into her sixth decade, she prayed the Lord would give her enough days to see her Little Fox once more before she joins the world of the dead. “Of course. I have to be back at the perestel for the evening prayer. And finish those cakes, you haven’t eaten anything all day. You’re getting skinny.”

“I will. Thank you, again,” she kissed her cheek once more, and let her leave.

Not a full hour later, she had dressed herself in a plain grey tunic and white dress, in the manner of the servant girls around Amon’s keep. She covered her copper hair that marked her as Roxellana of House Morregan, smeared soot on her face, and weaved her way past the guards until she reached the overgrown hole in the eastern wall of Castle Fall. She had to tell Edd about her betrothal, she owed him that.

Walking the streets of Dragonfall brought her fond memories of her childhood years, of the many times she sneaked out of the castle to play with the other children down in

Bastard's Square. She rode by the stables where she first mounted a horse, and past Jolly Derrin's candy stall, who would always have a sweet treat for her. Jackdaw Mulley's house had oft been a place where she could feel truly at home, and she loved all thirteen of his children as if they were her own brothers and sisters. But now these memories tasted of ash, for she knew soon enough she was to leave the city of her childhood, and the land of her love.

Atop the old perestel down Kardaby Lane sat the now empty dovecote, and most evenings, Edd and his flute. The boy had a gift for making people cry, be it with joy or sorrow, at the sound of his music. She wanted to watch the fireworks here with him, but wasn't sure anymore that he'd come, now that they were floating downriver into Morregan Bay. As she approached the arched entrance of the perestel, she heard her love sing his sweet music from above, for all who cared to listen. She whistled the first few notes of *I Loved me a Marcher Girl*, a song he wrote for her, and their way of hailing one another.

He descended from the abandoned dovecote, and embraced her. "Soot on your face, again? Ah, not to worry. I come prepared, as always," he said as he pulled out his handkerchief and grabbed hold of her chin. "How did it go with Old Sour?" he asked, sardonically.

"Great. My fireworks are entertaining the dolphins of Morregan Bay by now, most like."

"I know. Lucky dolphins," He rubbed the soot and ash off her face as best he could, then kissed her cheek.

"Right? Tell me though, why'd you come here if you knew there'd be no fireworks?"

"I had something to tell you," he said, his smile fading somewhat.

"I do as well," she hesitated.

Edd regained his smile seemingly out of nowhere. "Before that, I want you to close your eyes, and give me your hand."

She felt a queer sense of relief. She had to tell him about her father's decision, but this chance to put it off for a while longer eased her. "Is it another dragon necklace?" she asked as she followed his words.

"I'm a bit short on river corpses at the moment. But I reason you'll like this all the same."

She felt something light and thin touch her palm. When her eyes opened, she saw a roll of parchment, with a wick coming out of one end, affixed to a thin, straight wooden stake.

"It's very...what is it?"

“I watched them dump a few crates full of these by the river. One of them fell just by the edge of it into the grass.”

Her eyes lit up, and she felt as if her breath had been knocked out of her chest. “It’s a firework!”

Edd couldn’t help but laugh with joy when he saw how elated she was with her little roll of parchment. “I figure one needs light that wick, and it just goes.”

“Where should we light it? They’re very loud. We can’t have Father know...”

“Let’s go for a ride then.”

She did not need to be told twice. Atop his horse, they rode through the north gate on the road alongside the Morregan, some twenty miles upriver. By then, the Sun had begun to cast its last rays of dying light, before leaving the world of men to search for his estranged lover. The dead man by the riverbank sat on the side of the rock facing them, watching the two lovers with his empty eye sockets as they dismounted.

“This ought to be far enough,” Edd said, as he opened his lamp. “I reckon you just need to stick it in the ground and light the wick.”

Roxelle nodded, and did as he suggested. She let the flame of the lamp lick the end of the white wick. When the fire had consumed it, the firework shot up like a silver comet, and roared with a sound of thunder as it reached past the trees around them. The sky lit up with half a dozen different colours, a spiderweb of burning sparks stretching across its ever-darkening canvas of the dusk. As the wind began to carry the last remnants of the burning star’s smoke and fire on its wings, Roxelle jumped into Edd’s arms and peppered his face with a storm of erratic kisses. He did not move to stop her.

“Was it all you hoped for?”

“Better,” she let her weight be carried by his body, holding her arms around his neck, and reaching up to meet his lips for a true kiss.

“What was it you wanted to tell me at the perestel?” Edd asked.

Her face darkened. In that moment of bliss, she had forgotten everything about the prince, or her father, or that she’d never see him again.

“You wanted to tell me something first.”

He hesitated for a moment, and pulled away from her, kicking the dead man aside and taking a seat upon the rock.

“I’m leaving Dragonfall. Father said I was old enough to sail without his aid, so he signed me up for a voyage to Ruby Island.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Ruby Island? That’s fifteen hundred leagues away!”

“It is, but one trip there and I can buy my way to nobility. We could finally get married! I’d be gone a year, two at the most. But when I get—”

“I’m getting married to Prince Arrian,” she blurted out.

Edd looked as if for a few moments he’d forgotten how to breathe. “Says who?”

“Says Lord Robert. He’ll announce it tomorrow, most like, but I wanted you to hear it from me.”

With a scream of frustration and a face of anger, Edd kicked the splayed corpse by his foot until the head came off, and rolled into the river. She made no move to stop him.

“Take me with you. We could sail away, far, far away, and never have to hear about Dragonfall or my lord father ever again.” She grabbed his tunic and pulled him towards her, holding on to him with a fierceness only a young love could grant someone.

She could see it on his face that he wanted to, more than anything, to take her away and sail for the furthest reaches of the world. But the boy, despite his oft childish nature, did not lack for common sense. “They’d find us. And when they do, I’ll be dead, and you either locked away in some high tower to rot, or join me on the executioner’s block.”

“Don’t you love me at all?” she asked, betrayed.

“More than life itself. I’ll gladly and with no regret jump on a sword for you, but I’d never do so if it meant slitting your throat with the very same blade.”

Presta’s words, again. It truly felt strange for her to have him be the voice of reason.

“At least we had a nice last day together,” she relented, letting go of him and fixing the wrinkles in his tunic.

“We did. Promise me you’ll find me in the next life,” he said with a tremble in his voice. He would not allow himself to cry in front of her.

“I will.”

She clung to him and let her head rest against his chest the entire ride back to Dragonfall, without saying another word. Trying to speak felt like forcing a lump of lead out of her throat, and she did not want to say farewell, not yet. But there was something else that troubled her, something that gave her pause. Had that dead man by the river been on the wrong side of the rock?