

# PROLOGUE

The girl watched her father dig. The fields were quiet; Hettie and Lila were inside with the village women, preparing the body; Gareth had wandered up the mountainside in the morning; and Rory worked on the opposite end of the grave, widening while their father deepened. The highlands in winter were cold and windy and slightly wet.

"Will Mumma go in there?" the girl asked.

Her father paused to wipe sweat from his neck. "Aye."

"And the baby will go here, if he dies?"

Da's pause was longer. "Aye."

"Go inside, Annie," her brother Rory said, his voice cracking.

"Go inside with the women."

"Did the baby kill Mumma?"

"Da! Send her in!"

"Rory, take a break."

Rory threw down his shovel. The girl eyed the shovel as Rory stalked away across the field. "I can dig," she said.

The grave was already deep enough that it would swallow her if she climbed down into it, but she wasn't afraid. Her father, who could always tell when she was trying to understand, hoisted

himself from the half-dug grave to sit beside her on the edge of it. He smelled of earth and sweat; his beard nuzzled her cheek when he drew her into his arms. The two spades were propped against his knee.

"The baby didn't kill your mother," he said. "The hunger killed your mother. The lords killed your mother when they took our food."

The girl thought the baby might still be to blame. The baby was what caused the pain and the blood. Not the lords. She didn't think Da wanted to hear that.

"You are very sad, Da?"

Rory would tell her to stop asking questions. But Rory was on the other end of the clearing, glaring at the valley below. And Da always answered her questions, even the ones that made him pause for a long time and close his eyes.

"Sad," Da said finally. "And angry."

"You're keeping it inside?"

"I'm keeping it inside."

This was the refrain they had, before collections. When our lord comes, whatever you're feeling, you keep it inside. You keep it inside because that's where it's safest.

Her father took her hand in his, so that it was her finger that he pointed at the unbroken ground next to them. "There's space beside this grave, for me. And beside that, for your brothers and sisters."

She did not cry. She kept it inside. "No," she said. "Not yet."

"Not yet," he agreed.

She heard how he said it, and changed her mind. "Never," she said.

His surprise rumbled through his belly. "My little skylark, my

skysung queen," he said. "You are awfully young to be giving orders."

This was silly, because she wasn't a queen and couldn't give orders, but she curled closer and didn't laugh. When he ran a hand over her hair, his palm cupped her entire head.

"Did your mother ever tell you that you have her hair?"

The girl touched her fringe. "I have my hair," she said.

He smiled, lines splitting his face, beard rippling. It had been days since she'd seen him smile. "You have your hair, but it came from her," he said. "Brown as the earth, red as flame. You take her with you."

She tucked a finger into her hair and wrapped a curl around it, thinking: I have a piece of my mother with me. A secret piece. When he set her on her feet and told her to go inside and help prepare the body, she went.

Her father finished digging the grave alone. The baby, who died not long after, was buried alongside his mother.

As winter turned to spring, and spring to summer, her sister Lila took over her mother's chores, and she and her sister Hettie took over Lila's. Lila braided their hair as their mother used to do. In secret, out of earshot of Rory and Lila and Da, she and Hettie sometimes played the old game mumma-and-baby, but it took on a desperate edge. Like pretending had the power to bring her back.

"No, you have to say it like Mumma said it," Hettie said.

But she was starting to have trouble remembering how Mumma said it.

"I have Mumma's hair," she told Hettie, who did not.

Hettie burst into tears. She watched, keeping her feelings inside where they were safest. She asked Hettie if she wanted to play a

different game, and Hettie gulped and wiped her eyes and nodded. They played burn-down-the-village instead, and she let Hettie be the dragonlord.

For a few warm months they had enough to eat—but not enough for the tax and the coming winter. The blight was back. In late summer, when the hair her mother gave her was streaked with gold from the sun, stormscourge dragons were seen in the sky again. The dragonlords had returned to their country estates for the season, and would soon begin harvest collections.

In the house of Don Macky, one of the village leaders, the men of Holbin added the crier's latest decree to the pile of notices delivered in the name of Leon Stormscourge and the Drakarchy of the Far Highlands. The girl, who had slipped in among the men unnoticed, studied this decree as she had studied the earlier ones, upright on her knees on the Mackys' long bench between her father and Rory. The men spoke of cellars and hiding and hoarding, and how much was too much to hide, but she didn't listen.

"Too risky," Don Macky said.

"So is another winter after blight," her father said.

"What does insuborination mean?" the girl asked.

"Insubordination," her father corrected automatically. "It means when you disobey your lord."

"Silas," said Don Macky, nodding at her. "Look at your daughter."

The conversation paused as they looked at the girl, who was moving a finger along the writing of the decree, her lips forming silent syllables as she remembered the crier's words. She had been doing this at their meetings for months now, sandwiched unnoticed in her father's shadow. By now she understood enough of the words on the page to be able to take apart the symbols and turn them back into sounds.

"She isn't—?"

"I think she is."

Da placed a finger at the top of the page. "What does it say, Antigone?"

The girl moved his finger from the right side of the parchment to the left. "It starts here," she said.

Her father brought her to all the meetings after that on purpose. The men of Holbin welcomed her. Not because they had anything new for her to read: because she had become, in some small way, a talisman. This tiny girl, with her too-big name, who was as clever with letters as any lord. Sometimes they would have her read old decrees for their delight. Sometimes her father would lift her on his shoulders to carry her home, and she felt tall enough to touch the summer stars and pretended she was soaring overhead like the dragons that crossed their skies.

"You're faking it," Rory said. "Da only believes you can read because you're his favorite."

The first part hurt her the most, because it wasn't true, but she knew the second part was what hurt Rory. "I'm not," she said.

When she told Lila about it, Lila told her not to give Rory any mind. He was bitter because he had been Mumma's favorite, and now she was gone.

She noticed how Lila said it. "Whose favorite are you?" she asked Lila, who was plaiting her hair.

"No one's," said Lila, after a moment of thought.

"Then you'll be mine. And Hettie can be yours, and Gareth can be Hettie's, so that it's fair."

She felt pleasure at working this solution out. It was like the scales the lord's secretary used on Collection Day, except she imagined not just two trays but five. Lila, Rory, Hettie, Gareth, and her. All with someone who favored them, hanging in perfect balance.

"You silly girl," Lila said with a smile in her voice, and tied off the braid. "You can't make everything fair."

Collection Day approached. Cellars were dug and stocked and hidden. The men argued about how much was safe to set aside. Da made his cellar the largest of all and swore on his wife's grave that no child of his would go hungry again this winter. The boys practiced bowing, the girls practiced curtsying, and Da made sure they knew the Pleas by heart, just in case. In the past, this had been Mumma's lesson, and Da had resented it. This year, as it became his lesson, he drilled them until they knew the lines cold. Mumma had always assured them they would never be needed, but Da made no such promise. Instead, he added a lesson of his own.

"They watch us kneel, they see the back of our heads, and they think we've given in. They don't realize you can think from your knees just as well as from your feet."

They were practicing in front of the house. The door to the hidden cellar was buried under reeds three meters away. The children were kneeling, their father standing in front of them, playing their lord. Up until this point, there had been a fair bit of giggling, as Hettie and Gareth poked each other and attempted stiff faces. But at Da's last words, all poking ceased. They could feel the gravity of what they did rooting them to the earth.

"Rory," Da asked his kneeling son, "what are you thinking of?"

"I'm thinking of the grain my lord doesn't know we've hidden safe," Rory told the ground.

Da went down the line, asking the same question of each child. When he asked Antigone, she said: "I'm keeping what I'm feeling inside."

Looking at the ground, she couldn't see her father's expression.

"Good," he said.

On Collection Day, Da and Rory hauled the cart loaded with grain and other offerings down the path into the center of the village square. Lila carried the gift basket of bread, and the younger children trailed in a line behind. The dragon perch was already shadowed with its visitor, a stormscourge with red-tipped wings and a red crest. Lila told them it was bad luck to look, but when Lila wasn't looking, she risked a glance up at the great stormscourge and found slitted eyes staring back at her. She felt a pulse of fear, but also something else. Excitement.

The talons, the wings, the gleaming scales made the most beautiful animal she'd ever seen.

The queue moved slowly. Their lord took his time asking after each household, with a gracious smile and gently accented Callish. When the time came for her family, their cart was wheeled up for inspection while they made obeisance as they had practiced. She held her breath as numbers were murmured and shared with their lord. Would he notice that their offering represented only a fraction of what they had hidden in the cellar? The secretary frowned over the sums, and was about to bring a question to Leon when Leon's attention was caught by something else.

"Your wife," he said. "Why isn't she here?"

Silas laced his fingers across his waist. "She passed, Lord, in childbirth."

She noticed that he did not give the causes of death he'd given her. He didn't mention the hunger or the blight or Leon's taxes.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Silas," said Leon.

He did look it. He had very kind, gray eyes that turned on Silas's family arrayed behind him in concern. The secretary paused, lips pursed.

"She leaves behind a beautiful family," Leon said.

"Thank you, Lord."

"Have they all been presented to me? The youngest—?"

"Forgive me, I forget myself, Lord. This is Antigone, who only just attained the age of reason."

Lila applied pressure, unneeded, at her back, as she redoubled her curtsy under their lord's gray gaze.

"Antigone," Leon mused. "That's a Dragontongue name."

He sounded thoughtful, and as his interest was caught, so was the dragon's overhead. Its head perked, crest rising ever so slightly along its back as it swung round to observe its rider and the family he interviewed. Her neck prickled at the dragon's attention, but no smoke issued from the nostrils, no warning sign. A tremor was in her father's voice when he answered. "I heard it in a song. Beg pardon, my lord, I hope it does not offend."

"Not at all. I like to think proud names among my serfs only increases the pride of Stormscourge House."

Silas bowed. The dragon lowered its head and its eyes slid shut again. Leon told the girl: "I have a son a little older than you."

"Lord," she answered, keeping her eyes on his fine boots.

Leon Stormscourge nodded to his secretary, who rolled his eyes to the cloudless sky in exasperation. The secretary took two loaves from their family's gift basket, stacked them in Antigone's arms, and announced in reedy Palace-standard Callish, "A condolence for your family's loss."

She tightened her arms around the returned bread and curtsied to her lord, keeping her feelings inside. Silas growled, "May my lord accept the gratitude of his servant for kindness undeserving."

Glancing up at her father, bent double, she saw that his neck was bright red.

Leon flicked a wrist, and the secretary called: "Next!"

There was celebration in the village that night. The grain offerings had passed muster; the excuses had been bought; Leon's good temper had left the Holbiners' schemes successful. In Silas's house, the bread their lord had taken and then given back to them was torn and dipped in honey that had been hidden in the secret cellar, and turned into a feast. They toasted their lord for his mercy, and his stupidity. They toasted the mother he had killed.

The following morning, a shadow passed over their fields. A red-crested stormscourge landed in front of Silas's house. The soldiers, who came down from Harfast and the seat of the Western Triarchy, trickled into the village and surrounded Silas's yard.

Leon was just as mild-mannered today as he had been the day before. "I have spoken with my secretary. It seems there has been a mistake."

Silas didn't bow the way he bowed the day before, from the waist. He got to his knees and placed his hands in the mud. Behind him, his children did the same. It was what they had practiced, except this time, it was not pretend. He began to recite the Pleas he had taught his children, the ones used only at the end. Some soldiers stood between him and his family, surrounding the house, while others searched the yard. When the secret cellar was discovered, Silas ran out of Pleas.

"Your favorite," Leon said. It seemed to be a question, but Silas was unable to answer it.

As her father began to weep, she thought, He needs to keep his feelings inside.

She was so transfixed, watching her father, watching her lord and the dragon bearing down, that she did not notice Rory until he was pulling her to her feet. He rubbed two palms against his eyes. "Go to our lord," he said.

The last thing she wanted was to go closer to their lord or his dragon. "No."

"Annie, go," he said. His voice, which cracked and rose so often when it was used against her, was suddenly very calm. "You'll be all right."

Lila gave her a little push, and her feet began to walk.

She walked toward the dragonlord, and her father was led away from him. She tried to remember afterward how they had crossed paths in the space between the dragon and the house. Had he knelt to greet her, to ghost one last kiss on her forehead, as she walked away from death and he walked toward it? The truth was, she couldn't remember passing him at all. Only the dragon and the lord and her leaden steps toward them as they loomed over her. And then she turned to see her father behind her, his back to her, being led with her siblings into the house.

"Hello again, Antigone," said Leon kindly, as he saw who had been chosen. "Come here."

He set his hand on the back of her neck, as a father might a child he wanted to calm, or a rider with a restless dragon. The stormscourge beside him was alert, nostrils smoking. She no longer found it beautiful. Leon lifted his voice and pronounced his sentence in Dragontongue. She did not understand at the time, but years later, remembering the name of the punishment, she looked it up and read the words in a library far away, recognizing them for the first time.

"For he who earns the dragon's punishment, let his home be his tomb."

He gave the order to his dragon, and her home became a tomb.

When the fire started, she tried to keep her feelings inside. But they didn't stay. They spilled out, along with the Pleas she had been taught as she began to recite them. Leon ignored the feelings

and he ignored the Pleas, too. He held her gently, but he did not let her look away.

"Yes," he said finally, "it is a terrible waste."

He turned her toward him and wiped her eyes with gloved thumbs. He stroked her hair the way her father had at her mother's graveside, and she was so distraught, she clung to him. "There, child. You've learned your lesson now, haven't you? You'll tell your father's friends down in the village?"

Leon settled her on her feet and took to one knee to meet her eyes, as if he were used to giving lessons in the way a child could understand.

"When you try to defy us, we take everything."