



## Prologue

It is nearly midnight, and my father is dying.

The physicians continue to scurry around him, grinding up herbs with pestles or chanting over their poultices. But the lavender-scented smoke of the fire can't mask the odour of decaying flesh. Candlelight can't conceal the laboured breath, the claw-like fingers clutching convulsively at the bedclothes. He pushes the nearest doctor away, irritable, and beckons me closer.

The doctors mutter about infection. Still, I obey. As I balance on the edge of the massive oak-framed bed, my red silk skirts are like a spill of blood in the dimness. I lean in, holding tight to one of his hands.

'This . . .' he gestures to the weeping sores on his chest and shoulders, 'a mistake. I . . . stayed too long. And the contagion . . .' His speech is thickened, as if his tongue is swollen. 'I'm sorry, Aderyn.'

I understand him. The sickness that has ravaged one of our port towns for the last month has led to quarantine and death.





My father – to help his people, or in the cause of science, or both – stayed with the afflicted, hoping to discover a cure. He has gambled his life in pursuit of knowledge before. But this time he lost. And now – now he wants absolution. I try to tell him that all will be well, that the doctors might still find a way to save him, but the lie catches in my throat. Instead, I stare into his clouded eyes and murmur, ‘I know. It’s late, Father. You should rest.’

But he shakes his head and grits his teeth, blinking, trying to focus. ‘I want you to . . . stay here, once I’m gone. Stay in the castle.’

His words are not new. I’ve been confined within our castle and the peninsula upon which it stands for years. So many years that I long ago stopped asking when I would be allowed to leave. I have learned that it is possible to stand in the open air with the wind on my face and still suffocate. That it is possible to command others and still be a prisoner.

‘You must stay –’ He breaks off in a paroxysm of coughing; a servant darts in and wipes the blood and spittle from his chin. ‘Stay here, where it’s safe. Promise me.’

Perhaps this sickness is finally claiming his mind. If I never leave, I cannot do what will be required of me. And I cannot believe my father truly expects me to become my own jailor, trapped behind these walls through an oath of my own making.

But I am wrong apparently. He grips my upper arm tightly, pulling himself up, the pressure of his fingers still painful despite his loss of strength. ‘Promise me, Aderyn. You know I love you. All I want is –’ he gasps with pain – ‘to protect you.’

‘I know you love me, Father. And I love you too.’ But I make no promise. I won’t lie to him now.





Mercifully he does not notice my omission. He sinks back into the mattress, eyelids fluttering as the clock begins playing the chimes that lead to the hour. 'Good. You'll understand eventually, I hope. And finally . . . finally, your mother . . .' The words fade into silence.

'Father? What about her? Please, if there's anything you haven't told me, anything . . .' My voice seems to be coming from a long way away. I shake his shoulder. 'Father . . .' The doctors cluster round and I am moved gently to one side as they check pulse and breathing and heartbeat.

And then someone is closing his eyes, and drawing the sheet up over his face. The clock strikes the hour.

'Your Grace?'

For a moment, I don't understand. I think, *My father is dead. He can't answer you.*

But the servant repeats the question. 'Your Grace?'

And then I realise: he is addressing me. I am no longer a seventeen-year-old girl who can spend her time exactly as she wishes. I'm no longer merely Lady Aderyn. I am Her Grace, Protector of the Dominion of Atratys, sole mistress of Merl Castle and all the lands that belong to it.

Somehow, in the space between the end of one day and the start of the next, everything has changed.

For the next week or more, I seem to be submerged, looking out at the world from inside a bubble of my own grief. Grief; anger; pity. For my father. For myself. I take care that no one else should know. I walk and speak as normal, eat and sleep at the appropriate times. The dressmaker brings mourning





gowns, and I try them on; I give my red dress, that had been my favourite, to a servant. Lord Lancelin of Anserys, our steward, sets before me suggestions for my father's Last Flight – food, music, people to be invited – and I make a show of reading through his lists. But the scratches of ink on the pages convey no meaning to me; I agree to everything so that I might be left alone. When I am alone, I sit and stare at the waves breaking against the familiar granite rocks beneath the castle, stare until my eyes are sore. I listen to my own breathing, crushed into immobility by the ache in my chest, the onslaught of this second loss. And so, the time passes.

The day of the Last Flight comes. My father may have ignored the rigid etiquette of the court while he was alive, but his death brings its own set of demands. I am dressed in my new black gown – high-collared, with long sleeves that almost hide my hands – and from somewhere in the vaults my maid produces a heavy mourning diadem of jet and silver. She sets it on top of my dark hair; the clips dig into my scalp. When I arrive at the jetty, the guests – castle inhabitants, tenant farmers and local lords, mostly – are already assembled, a mass of shadow like so much inky seaweed cast up on the shoreline. There are the required number of speeches and songs, and then my father – like my mother, and their parents before – is laid in the high-prowed boat that awaits him and pushed out into the current. At the last minute, a fire is set among the dry kindling piled around the body. Red flames swarm. And as they do, the honour guard steps forward. Each member a noble, representing his or her family, they are dressed in long black cloaks.





One by one, they hand their cloaks to the leather-garbed servants. For a moment, each noble shivers, naked in the chill morning air. And then, they change.

Cranes, cormorants, ravens and rooks, herons and falcons – the air fills as each person shifts seamlessly from human to bird. Birds far larger, far more dangerous than their namesakes that live in our forests and fields. Together, the transformed nobles follow the blazing boat out to the sea. So many different types of bird. But no swans.

Now my father is dead, I am the only swan here.

And I do not fly.

