





## PROLOGUE

Castle Rosethorn was located on a tor overlooking the fertile valley through which ran the Vingaard River. The castle was ancient, dating back to pre-Cataclysm times, modeled after other Solamnic fortresses of the era, although on a more modest scale. But Castle Rosethorn was far different from any other fortress due to the uniqueness of its location and its imaginative design. The castle was considered to possess an almost magical beauty.

Little is known about the architect, for his name was lost to time. Perhaps he had grown weary of drawing up plans for utilitarian fortresses, or perhaps the name “Rosethorn” and the distinctive location on the tor had fired his imagination.

He designed the six sides of its outer defensive curtain wall around the natural jutting stone formations of the tor, putting the contours to both aesthetic and practical use. Each of the six points of the battlements featured bastions that jutted out from the curtain wall, which were dubbed the “thorns.” The keep that blossomed from the thorny walls was the “rose.”

Workmen had spent years delving the moat surrounding the castle out of the solid rock of the tor. The castle could be accessed

only by a causeway and drawbridge and prevented sappers from attempting to enter by digging beneath. Those seeking admittance had to pass through two gates to reach the castle and travel along a narrow cobblestone road. The lower gate was guarded by an iron portcullis that permitted entry to the narrow cobblestone road that ran between the cliff face on the right and the interior wall of the curtain wall on the left.

Known as the “Thorn Gauntlet,” the road climbed as it curved between rock on one side and defensive parapets on the other. A swiftly flowing stream ran down a deep channel cut in the center of the cobblestones.

The upper gate that guarded the “rose” was located near the top of the curving Thorn Gauntlet. The gate was flanked by the waterfall that fed the stream. Once through the gate, the narrow cobblestone road opened onto an expansive bailey that surrounded the keep.

The keep itself consisted of the main building and two round towers: the Watch Tower and the Rose Tower. The Watch Tower was short and wide and had no windows. A spiral staircase that wound around the exterior wall led upward to a bud-shaped cap. The Rose Tower was narrower and tapered toward the top. An interior spiral staircase climbed to a narrow balcony that surrounded the base of its ornate spire, which was crafted to look like a newly blooming rose.

Lord Gregory Rosethorn had climbed the stair of the Rose Tower at dawn, as was often his habit. He liked to look out on the river far below, sparkling in the sunshine and shining on the fields of golden wheat, barley, beans, and oats, as well as lush pasture land. Sheep dotted the grassy hills. Cattle grazed. The smoke of cook fires rose from the village of Ironwood, off in the distance.

The river meandered among the low hills and shallow valleys and disappeared in the thick forests where the leaves were starting to change with the coming of autumn. The orange leaves of the maples flaunted their beauty among the dark blue-green of the firs and the rich green of the oak. The harvest would soon start. It would be a good one this year.

Gregory leaned on the railing to gaze out over the fields, which were flooded yearly by the Vingaard River during the winter ice

melt, providing fertile soil for the crops. He looked north toward the Habakkuk Mountains and the famed Westgate Pass: the only pass through the mountains to the city of Palanthas.

The pass was protected by a fortress known as the High Clerist's Tower. The fortress had been constructed by the founder of Solamnia and the Knighthood—Vinas Solamnus—and had guarded the pass for centuries. It had been abandoned more than three hundred years ago following the Cataclysm, the departure of the gods, and the death of the last High Clerist.

No one had been interested in taking the cleric's place, as the Solamnics had no intention of worshipping gods who had abandoned them during their hour of desperate need.

Gregory looked east toward the Dargaard mountain range. On clear days like today, he could see the peaks from the castle, already capped by snow.

He was arrested by the sight of a fierce storm brewing in the east. Dark, turbulent clouds boiled in the skies above the mountains. Lightning flickered among them, illuminating the clouds with dread purple beauty. The morning sun rose over the peaks and streamed down on the land of Solamnia, defying the threatened darkness.

Storms from the east did not often sweep down from the mountains into Solamnia, but now the clouds grew darker. Their enormous, black, lightning-streaked towers rose high into the heavens. Gregory felt the chill east wind ruffle his hair. He smelled rain, and he could now hear the distant rumble of thunder.

Gregory shivered and not just from the wind. He was overcome with a sense of foreboding. He shook his head, deriding himself. He was a knight of Solamnia, not a child to be frightened of crackling lightning and roaring thunder. Yet he could not banish the feeling. He watched the approaching storm and saw in his mind dark armies rolling unchallenged over the land.

He could not pray to the gods to save his country, as knights had prayed to the gods in days long gone by, for now there were no gods to answer. Yet he waited for a sign that would give him hope. He waited for the sun to grow brighter and stronger and banish the darkness.

The clouds massed and then thundered down the peaks of the

mountains and devoured the sun. The dawn died, banished by what seemed a new night.

Gregory defied the storm and remained on the ramparts, nurturing his hope until a bolt of lightning struck so close he could hear it sizzle and smell the brimstone. The thunder shook the castle walls, and the rain pelted down on his head, thoroughly soaking him.

At last driven from the ramparts, he walked slowly down the tower stairs, trying to shake the feeling of dread from his heart as he shook the water from his long hair, for today was his beloved daughter's Day of Life Gift.

Gregory was determined to think only of her.

"The dark clouds will pass," he said to himself. "Storms that strike this early in the morning rarely last past noon. The sun will shine on her special day."

But when he stopped at a tower window and looked to the east, all he saw was darkness.

# BOOK ONE







## CHAPTER ONE

**D**estina Rosethorn was a child of destiny. She was born in the year 337 AC, and she came by her name when her mother, Atieno, read the omens and told her father, Knight of the Crown Gregory Rosethorn, that his child would shape the destiny of nations.

Gregory was loyal to the Measure, as were all true Solamnic knights, and he did not believe in omens, for they implied that man had no control over his own fate. Given that his son would be the scion of a wealthy and influential Knight of the Crown, Gregory did not need an omen to foretell the future. He chose the name Destin, which means “destiny,” and gave Atieno a pair of golden earrings in the shape of crowns to mark the occasion.

Gregory was therefore understandably surprised when the child who was to shape the destiny of nations turned out to be a girl.

Atieno had known from the omens that she would bear a daughter, but she had withheld that knowledge from her husband. Among her people, female children were trained as warriors to fight alongside the men, for their tribe was small, and if it was attacked, everyone must come to its defense. But her husband was Solamnic, and



while women were trained to fight in the defense of the home, they could not become knights or inherit property without a special dispensation. Atieno loved her husband with all her heart. She would have done anything to please him except the one thing over which she had no control: she had not been able to give him a son to carry on the family name and traditions.

Atieno need not have worried, however. Gregory loved his daughter from the moment she drew her first breath, and he decided to name her Destina, for as he said: "She is destined to be her father's salvation."

He had meant nothing by it except that, unlike a son, a daughter would be there to comfort and care for him when his hair grew gray and his sight grew dim. So he often teased Destina. She would come to hear those words differently, however, and they would come to haunt her.

Gregory had anticipated that sons would still come to him to bear the family name, inherit Castle Rosethorn, and continue the Rosethorn line, but they did not. The next child was a boy who died at birth, and no more children came after. Yet if Gregory was disappointed, he never revealed it to his daughter.

As was typical of many Solamnic knights, Gregory raised his daughter as he would have raised his son, for Solamnic history was rife with tales of valiant women who had held the keep after their menfolk had fallen. He taught Destina to ride and hunt and fight with sword and shield. He took her with him mounted on the front of his horse when she was small. He educated her, taught her to read and write and cipher. He told her the legends of all the great knights of old. Destina's favorite was the legend of Huma Dragonbane.

She would often imagine she was the famous knight and enlivened her sword practice by battling mythical dragons with famed dragonlances, forged of magical dragon metal and given to Huma when he rode his dragon into battle against the Queen of Darkness. Destina's dragonlance was forged of a broom handle, and her small pony played the role of dragon. She pictured herself as Huma's squire, heroically fighting at his side when all the other cowards had abandoned him.

Destina had been devastated to learn at the age of eight that

women were not permitted under the Measure to become knights. She had railed against this prohibition to her father.

“Why can’t women become knights, Papa? It is not fair! I can run faster and ride better than any boy. I can fight, too! I always beat Berthel when we are playing knights and goblins.”

“And his parents were none too pleased that you gave him a bloody nose and split lip,” said Gregory, smiling. “I do not necessarily agree with the Measure in this. Your mother is a skilled warrior and could probably best any knight in the field.”

“The Measure is wrong, Papa,” said Destina. “When I grow up, I will change it.”

“I hope you do,” said Gregory. “But you will have other duties and responsibilities that are far more important than becoming a knight.”

“What are those, Papa?” Destina asked.

“You will be the Lady of Castle Rosethorn,” said her father.

Destina had never given much thought to inheriting her father’s legacy until her father had said those words, but she had heard the pride in his voice. From that moment, her plans and dreams shifted. She would become the Lady of Castle Rosethorn and be honored and renowned throughout the land.

But plans change and dreams die when faced with harsh reality.

Atieno foresaw the coming downturn in their fortunes in the omens, but she did not tell her husband. *He can do nothing to change it*, she said to herself. *And it will only worry him.*

If Gregory Rosethorn had believed in the gods, he might have said they had turned against Solamnia. Drought wiped out the harvest one year. Floods destroyed the crops for the next two years in a row and killed countless numbers of people. The nation had not known such hard times since the Cataclysm.

Gregory was responsible for his tenants. He forgave them the rents they could not pay and made certain they had food and shelter. But some died, and some gave up and left. Within a space of three years, Gregory Rosethorn had lost a great deal of his wealth and was left with only enough to support his family and maintain Castle Rosethorn, which played an important role in the defense of Solamnia.

He had to give up plans for expanding the castle and making the

extensive repairs it needed. He had to reduce the number of servants and men-at-arms. But he made certain he had put aside money for his daughter's dowry. Destina was the joy of his life, and he was determined she would marry well.

At the age of fifteen, Destina was reputed to be the most beautiful young woman in all of Vingaard province. She had inherited her mother's Ergothian beauty, and in a land of pale, washed-out, blue-eyed people, Destina was notable for her burnished brown skin, black hair, black eyes, and flame-dusted cheeks.

Destina thought little of her looks. The Measure stated that true beauty lay in the mind, not the face. She prided herself on being intelligent, resolute, bold, and decisive. She knew about her father's financial problems, and she grieved for him, because she saw the toll his troubles were taking on him. He would spend hours in his library, not reading the books he loved but working on accounts or meeting with his attorney.

Destina determined to ease his burdens. She felt herself, as the future Lady of Castle Rosethorn, to be responsible for the estate. She would marry her childhood friend, Berthel Berthelboch, the son of the wealthiest merchant in the Vingaard province. She would restore the legacy of the Rosethorns.

Berthel was sixteen, handsome, rich, and in love with Destina. She was a year younger, and the two had played together since childhood, for his parents took care to cultivate their relationship with the Rosethorn family. Berthel's father was mayor of the city of Ironwood and was now hoping to ally himself with a family of noble birth to enhance their social standing.

The Berthelbochs had proposed the marriage to Gregory only yesterday, the day before Destina's Day of Life Gift celebration. Destina knew about the proposal, for Berthel had told her. She had been waiting all morning for her father to confer with her about it.

Destina was in her bedchamber, admiring the new gown that she would wear tonight at the celebration dinner. The dress was white velvet, as became a maiden, trimmed with a rose motif stitched in crimson. The gown's bodice was tight-fitting and settled over her curves like cream, coming to a point at the waist then flaring out into a long, flowing skirt.

A storm had wakened her at dawn, and it continued to rage through midmorning. Hail rattled against the lead windowpanes and thunder boomed. Destina had never been afraid of storms, and she did not pay much heed to this one, except to hope it would end soon and not spoil her party.

A tapping on her door drew her attention from her dress.

“Please, mistress,” said a servant with a curtsy, “your father asks that you join him in his library.”

Destina smoothed her dress and tied a ribbon around her long, thick braid of black hair. Her father liked her to look well, and she liked seeing his usually grave face brighten with a smile whenever he saw her. She ran down the stairs from her turret room near the top of the castle to the library that was on the ground floor.

Gregory termed the library “the Rosethorn treasure vault” not only for the fact that books were rare and costly but, most important, for the knowledge contained within them.

The library and its collection dated back to the first lord of Castle Rosethorn, and lords and ladies down through the ages had added to it. The Rosethorn library housed the thirty-seven volumes of the Measure—the extensive set of laws compiled from the writings of the founder of the knights, Vinas Solumnus—plus those books that indexed and cross-indexed all the material so that scholars could readily find a particular reference. The library also contained books on the history of Solamnia: copies of original books that were housed in the Great Library of Palanthas.

Gregory was a student of history. He would spend many happy hours sitting at his desk or in front of the fire reading without fear of interruption—for he did not permit the servants to clean, not wanting to risk damage to his books. He laid the fire himself, dusted the books, and swept the floor himself.

Destina loved the library with its heavy oaken desk, thick rugs, and cavernous fireplace with the dragon-shaped andirons. She reveled in the silence and the cool, shadowy darkness, for Gregory always kept the heavy velvet curtains over the mullioned windows closed to prevent the bright sunlight from fading the rugs and tapestries and the covers of the books.

When she was little, Gregory would sit in his high-backed chair

by the fire, take Destina onto his lap, and read her books about Vinas Solamnus and the Rose Rebellion or about Huma Dragonbane and his fight against the Queen of Darkness. She sometimes fell asleep in his arms, and then he would carry her to her bed and leave her to dream about knights in armor riding dragons into battle.

But those dreams were gone now, replaced by new ones. She was to be the savior of the legacy of the Rosethorns.

Gregory always kept the door to the library closed, so he would not be disturbed. Destina knocked and then opened the door. He was reading as she entered, and she walked softly so as not to interrupt him and stood at the end of his desk in silence until he reached a stopping place.

She was excited on her special day, looking forward to wearing her new gown, sitting at the table with the adults, and eager to see what wonderful present her father would give her.

Gregory marked his place in the book with a ribbon, closed it, and greeted her with a smile. Rising to his feet, he came out from behind the desk, kissed her, and wished her joy of her special day.

“Your hair is wet, Papa,” said Destina, scolding him. “Have you been outside in the storm? You will catch your death of cold.”

“I never take cold, my dear,” said Gregory. “Please sit down, Destina. I have a matter of importance to discuss with you.”

Destina shifted one of the ornately carved, high-backed wooden chairs over to the edge of the desk and sat down opposite her father. She folded her hands in her lap and waited with outward composure, though inwardly she was proud and pleased that her father was speaking to her as a grown-up woman.

“Berthel Berthelboch has made an offer for your hand in marriage, Daughter,” said her father. “That is, his father has made the offer since his son is only sixteen. His father states in his letter that Berthel asked you to marry him and that you accepted him. Is this true, Destina?”

“It is, Papa,” said Destina.

She smiled to remember Berthel’s proposal. He had been so flushed and stammering that Destina had ruined the solemn moment by laughing and had basically proposed to him. She did not, of course, mention that to her father.

Gregory was troubled enough as it was. "Choosing the person with whom you will spend the rest of your life is the most important decision you will ever make. You need to give this matter serious consideration. I know of no harm in Berthel, but he is not your equal either in birth or education. He is not trained in arms or in combat. He knows nothing of the Measure or the Oath. He is ignorant of history. He can scarcely read and write. Do you consider him a proper candidate for a husband, Destina? Do you love him?"

"Berthel is fun and good-natured. I have known him for years. He and I get along well together, and I cannot fault him for liking to go hunting with his friends," Destina replied, evading the question of love.

Some women cannot afford love, she might have said to her father, but she knew the words would hurt him deeply, so she did not say them. She was being practical, doing what was needed. Poets made too much of love anyway, she reflected.

Gregory was regarding her gravely. "I worry about the vast gulf between the two of you, Destina. The Measure says: 'A married couple shall stand together as a strong bulwark against the world.'"

"And you fear there are chinks in Berthel's bulwark," said Destina, teasing.

"Marriage is a serious matter, Destina," said Gregory.

"I know that, Papa," she said. "And at least Bertie's mother does not see the future in the teacups."

Destina knew the moment she spoke the words she'd made a mistake. Her father's eyes narrowed.

"I trust I did *not* just hear you speak disrespectfully of your mother, especially on the day she gave you life!"

"I am sorry, Papa," said Destina contritely. "I love and respect Mama. I truly do. But she is so . . . different."

Destina sighed. He would never understand.

She did not know many girls her age. As the daughter of the Lord of Castle Rosethorn, she had her own duties and responsibilities that kept her apart from her neighbors. But those times when she did have a chance to be around other young women, she found that they, like her, considered their mothers to be a constant source of embarrassment.

One girl's noble lady mother was fond of cooking and would join the servants in the kitchen on baking day, much to her daughter's chagrin. Another girl's mother washed her own stockings, and another scandalized her daughter by going out with the workers in the fields during the harvest.

Destina felt she had good reason to be more aggrieved. At least other mothers were Solamnic by birth. Atieno came from a warrior tribe in Ergoth. She looked different, and she acted different.

She had taught herself the Solamnic language and read and studied all thirty-seven volumes of the Measure when very few Solamnic knights could say the same. But she also kept up the ways of her people and brewed potions and concocted charms and saw visions of the future in tea leaves and would do so for anyone, mortifying her daughter.

"I meant no disrespect to Mama. I spoke without thinking."

He continued to look grave, and she quickly shifted the topic back to her marriage. "I do know what I am doing, Papa. As you say, there is no harm in Berthel. His family's wealth will be a welcome addition to our own."

"You mention nothing about loving him," said Gregory. "I would not have you go through life without knowing what it is to love someone as dearly as I love your mother. You know the story of how we met."

Destina knew the story. She had heard it many times, and she never grew tired of it. She hoped to cheer her father, turn his thoughts away from Berthel for the time being. Gregory always gave in to her wishes. She just needed a little more time.

"Mama was the most beautiful woman you had ever seen. You saved her life . . ."

"And she blessed mine," said Gregory. "I was seventeen and on my knightly quest. I came upon a battle between warring factions of her people. I saw your mother among the warriors, taking part in the battle. Her proud beauty and her courage pierced my heart. She slipped and fell, and one of the bastards tried to drag her off. She fought him and he struck her a savage blow. I was enraged. I killed her attacker and then cradled her in my arms.

"She looked at me, and though we could not understand each other's spoken language, we understood the language in our hearts.

She took me to meet her parents and we stood together, hand-in-hand, making it clear to her father that we wanted to be together.

“He gave his permission and we were wed soon after. I remember little of the wedding,” said Gregory. “The days seemed filled with laughter and love.

“Our journey home took over a month. Your mother would not permit us to travel unless the omens said that the road was safe. Perhaps those spoke truly, for we never met with any danger. I taught her to speak my language. She tried to teach me to speak hers, but I have no ear for languages, and she would laugh at my clumsy attempts. Instead, she taught me to understand the language of nature. She made me hear birdsong and listen to the whisperings of the trees. She opened my eyes to the beauty of the world.

“I brought her home and proudly introduced her to my parents. I saw their eyes narrow, their faces grow cold and stern. Their expressions darkened with disapproval. They were at least polite enough to say nothing to Atieno. I still bear the scars from the cruel words they said to me. They urged me to end the marriage. Since I had not been married in a proper Solamnic ceremony, the marriage did not count. They would find lawyers to arrange it.

“I made it clear to them that if they wanted to hold their first grandchild, they would welcome my wife as an honored member of the family.

“They permitted us to live with them here, but they could never accept your mother. When she spoke of what she saw in her omens, my father would grow outraged and quote the passages where the Measure says that the belief in omens and signs and portents is wicked, for such things take away man’s free will.”

Gregory smiled. “I remember one night at dinner he told her that the Measure says a man should not place his faith in false gods who appear to us in a pleasing shape to tempt us to ruin.

“‘Then your own gods must be false,’ Atieno told him. ‘The Measure tells us that the knights once relied on prayers to the gods to heal the sick. Now you must summon a useless man who claims he has learned how to heal from books. What do books know of healing? What happened to the gods of the knights? Where did they go? Did you misplace them? Did they abandon you?’

“My father was outraged. His face grew red. His mustaches



quivered so that I thought they would fall off. He could not answer her, and he stomped out of the room.”

Gregory smoothed his own long mustaches—the hallmark of the Solamnic knight since the time of Vinus Solamnus. Many knights went clean-shaven these days, claiming the long, droopy mustaches were out of fashion, but Gregory wore his with pride.

“Why do *you* think the gods left us, Papa?” Destina asked.

She loved these talks with her father, for she felt he shared his thoughts with her as an adult. She loved sitting with him in the library, shut away from the rest of the world, discussing learned subjects. She forgot about the marriage in her pleasure in being with him.

“Your mother and I have talked over this question many times,” said Gregory. “She does not think the gods left us, but that they are still here for those who seek them out. I think the gods left because they are testing us, much as we test young squires to make certain they are prepared to take up the mantle of the knighthood.”

“I agree with you, Papa,” said Destina. “Mama talks of a god who lives in the forest or something like that. But I am not a child to believe in such things.”

“And what does Berthel think about faith and religion, Destina? Have you discussed such important matters with him?” Gregory asked mildly.

Destina bit her lip. She now saw the trap her father had laid for her, but only because she was caught in it. A dutiful daughter would have held her tongue and meekly agreed that her father knew best, and she would abide by his judgment. Yet an angry storm, like the storm of this morning, raged inside of Destina and burst out before she could stop it.

“What would you have me do, Papa?” she cried. “I am a woman. I cannot go on knightly quests to find my happiness! Women must find our happiness as best we can, make do with what we have. And Berthel is what I have. He is all I have. Face facts, Papa. Eligible young men of noble blood are not exactly battering down the walls of the castle to ask for my hand in marriage!”

Destina swallowed. Gregory said nothing, and Destina hardly dared look at him, fearing he was so angry he could not speak. When she finally raised her eyes, she saw him regarding her with sorrow.

“Forgive me, Destina,” he said. “I have failed you. I will have my attorney draw up the marriage contract.”

“Berthel and I get along well,” said Destina, seeking to comfort him. “I will be content.”

He nodded absently. “You must make me a promise. According to the law, you will be free to marry when you are eighteen, but the law does not permit either a man or a woman to inherit property until they are of legal age at twenty-one. Promise me you and Berthel will wait until you are twenty-one.”

“I promise, Papa,” said Destina. “But why should I wait?”

“I could say the additional years will give Berthel time to grow into a better man,” said Gregory dryly. “But, in truth, I plan to secure your future, and you must be of legal age to sign contracts and make other business arrangements. Since Berthel is a year older, he could make decisions as your husband, and you would have no say in them.”

“I understand. And how will you secure my future, Papa?” Destina asked.

“All in good time, Destina,” said her father, smiling. “What are your plans after you are married?”

Destina’s plan was to use her future husband’s wealth to restore and repair Castle Rosethorn, but she knew mentioning that would upset her father. “We will live here with you and Mama. Berthel will ride into Ironwood to work for his parents, and I will continue with my duties and learn to be the lady of the manor. You have promised to teach me how to manage the accounts.”

“So I did,” said Gregory. “Someday, when you are older. For now, will you agree to my terms?”

“Very well, Papa. I will wait. Have you told Mama about the marriage?”

“I spoke to her before I summoned you.”

“What did she say?” Destina asked. “Was she upset? She does not like the Berthelbochs.”

“She brushed it off. She saw an omen that the marriage would never happen.”

Destina sighed. “I hope Mama does not say anything about omens tonight at dinner with our guests.”

“The talk at dinner will be of politics and the upcoming vote for

Grand Master,” said Gregory. “Since such discussions always end in shouting, I would much rather talk about omens.”

He rose to his feet, and Destina knew it was time to leave him to his studies.

“I am eager to see my gift, Papa,” she said as he accompanied her to the door. “Will you give it to me at dinner?”

“Who says I have a gift for you?” Gregory asked, teasing. Then he relented and said, “Your mother plans a private celebration. I will give you your gift then.”

He held the door for her and stood gazing at her with tenderness and love and a strange, deep, underlying sorrow.

“My blessing on you, Daughter.” Gregory kissed her on the forehead, then went back to his desk and his reading.

Destina shut the door quietly and stood outside it. She had never seen her father so downcast. She told herself he was simply disturbed by this proposed marriage. Like most fathers, he would never think any man worthy of his beloved daughter. But she knew him well, and she had the feeling that this sorrow extended far deeper than worry over the deficiencies of his future son-in-law. She assumed those worries were over money.

Yet Destina was pleased with her choice. She was not a romantic to believe in happily-ever-afters. Few people among the Solamnic nobility married for love. For them, marriage was a business deal: wealthy merchants like the Berthelbochs traded money for titles. Berthel was handsome and congenial and well-liked. Many young women in Ironwood were jealous of Destina. And if Berthel wanted to spend all his time hunting, at least he would not be around to interfere with her plans.

Destina joined her father and mother in the solar after the mid-day meal. The solar was the most pleasant room in the castle, for the afternoon sun shone through the numerous windows, lighting it and filling it with warmth.

The storm had at last abated. Atieno had opened the windows, and the rain-washed air was sweet and refreshing.

Atieno was in particularly good spirits. Among her people, a girl attained womanhood at the age of fifteen.

Gregory joined them, bearing a wooden box containing his gift.

He grew more cheerful, as he always did when he was in his wife's presence. He kissed her and wished her joy of the day she had given him his daughter, his happiness.

"What is my gift, Mama?" Destina asked.

Atieno presented Destina with a golden chain.

"Gold for the sun, for the sheaf of wheat, for the leaves in autumn," said Atieno. "Gold for the goddess of the yellow star."

Destina was not to be lured into more discussion of gods that did not exist. She hung the chain around her neck and thanked her mother.

Gregory presented his daughter with his gift: a silver chalice decorated with a kingfisher motif. The kingfisher bird, with its bright blue-sky and orange-fire plumage, had been chosen as the mascot for the knights by Vinus Solamnus. The kingfisher symbolized courage and hope, for it was said that on the day of the creation of the world, the bold kingfisher was the first bird who dared to take flight.

"For your hope chest, Daughter," said Gregory.

"Papa, thank you! This is beautiful." Destina flung her arms around her father's neck and kissed him.

Gregory embraced her and then poured wine for himself and his wife to celebrate.

"Please, Papa, just a little for me in my new chalice?" Destina begged. "After all, Mama says that I am a woman today."

She held out the chalice, and Gregory poured several swallows of red wine from the pitcher into the cup. Gregory and Atieno drank a toast to their daughter. Destina replied with thanks to her parents for giving her life and sipped the wine, admiring the chalice as she did so, turning it around and around in her hand. When she had finished, she handed the cup to her mother.

"You must tell my future in the dregs, Mama," Destina said. "Tell Papa I am going to be happy with Bertie."

Atieno frowned and exchanged glances with her husband.

"I spoke to her," said Gregory. "She is determined. But she has promised to wait until she is twenty-one."

Atieno shrugged. "The omen says it will not happen."

"Look again, Mama, please," said Destina. "Perhaps you made a mistake."

Atieno gazed into the chalice where the lees had sunk to the bottom.

“What do you see, Mama?” Destina asked. “Are Bertie and I going to have sixteen children?”

To her astonishment, Atieno gave a cry of horror and flung the chalice away from her. The silver cup hit the stone floor with a resounding clang and rolled beneath a table.

Atieno made a warding gesture with her hand and muttered a few words that Destina did not understand and presumed were what her mother termed “magic.” Atieno then jumped from her chair and ran from the room.

Gregory stared after her in concern. “What is wrong with your mother? What did she say?”

“It seems Mama saw a bad omen in the dregs, and I believe she spoke a magic charm to ward off evil. It has nothing to do with Berthel, Papa, so don’t look so severe.”

“What was the omen about, then?” Gregory asked.

“I . . . um . . . couldn’t really understand her,” said Destina, uncomfortable talking about it. “I will go speak to her.”

She went in search of her mother and found Atieno in her bedchamber, bundled in a fur-lined cloak, huddled in a chair. The sun shone through the barred windows. The day was unusually mild for early autumn, and the room was stiflingly hot, for the servants had built a roaring fire. Atieno came from a warm clime and had never grown used to the Solamnic cold.

Destina gazed at her and thought of the story her father had told about meeting her and falling in love with her at first sight. Destina understood why he had done so. She knew she herself was pretty; she had only to look at her reflection in a burnished steel mirror to know that. But her mother was beautiful.

Atieno was not certain of her age in the Solamnic calendar, for her people counted the passage of time differently than the Solamnic. Gregory was thirty-two, and Atieno was likely close to that. Yet she looked so young that people often took her for Destina’s sister instead of her mother.

Today Atieno wore her coil of sleek black hair bundled in a jeweled net at the back of her head. Her black eyes were large and some-

times as sharp and piercing as the eyes of a hawk and sometimes dream-laden and luminous. She never rubbed berry balm on her lips or cheeks to redden them as some women did, nor did she need to dab her long lashes with soot to enhance her eyes.

Her gown was crimson and cut in the style that was the fashion among Solamnic women, sleek and smooth silk velvet; trimmed with fanciful embroidery and with long, tight sleeves and a long, trailing train.

Atieno gazed out the window at the bright blue sky above and burnished orange leaves below.

“Come look at the lovely colors, Destina. They are the colors of the kingfisher. Blue above and orange beneath.”

Destina was not interested in kingfishers or the colors of autumn. The Measure prohibited the belief in omens and portents, and Destina tried to obey, but she had so many questions and not one of the thirty-seven volumes of the Measure could answer them.

Atieno seemed to take such comfort from her omens and her signs and her portents that Destina longed to feel the same assurance, the same serene acceptance. She had not dared to tell her father, but she had once begged her mother to teach her to read the omens, hoping to find explanations for the inexplicable. Atieno had disappointed her.

“The omens come unbidden, Destina,” Atieno had told her. “You must learn to see with your heart and not your eyes.”

“Mama, that makes no sense,” Destina had said, exasperated.

“Sense is for the senseless,” Atieno had replied, and Destina had given up.

Atieno continued to gaze out the window. Destina saw tears on her mother’s cheeks, and she grew even more frightened. Destina had never in her life seen her mother cry.

“Mama, what did you see in the dregs?” Destina demanded.

“How can we face what is coming?” Atieno asked. “How can we bear it?”

She turned to Destina and said softly, “My poor child . . .”

Destina took refuge in the Measure. “Mama, remember what the Measure says: ‘Paladine forges the sword, but man chooses how to wield it.’ That means each person is responsible for what he or she

does in this life. The Measure also warns: "Trust not the soothsayer, for his words are lies to snare the unwary."

"And my people say: 'The wolf is born to kill. The sheep is born to be killed,'" Atieno said, fixing her with shimmering dark eyes.

"Mama, please tell me what you saw in the chalice!" Destina said desperately.

"Bring the chalice to me," said Atieno. "I will show you."

Destina hurried to the solar to fetch the chalice. She had to get down on her hands and knees to retrieve it. She returned to her mother and held it out to her.

Atieno recoiled, refusing to touch it.

"Look into it, Daughter, and tell me what you see."

"Mother, you know I never see anything except dregs," Destina protested.

"If you want to see, look!" Atieno insisted.

Destina sighed and peered into the cup, and this time she saw that the dregs had formed a recognizable pattern. She laughed and said before she thought, "Isn't that funny, Mama. The lees are in the shape of a dragon. See, here is the tail and the head and the wings . . ."

She heard a strangled gasp and looked up at her mother. The blood had drained from Atieno's face and lips, leaving her brown skin gray and leaden. "You saw the dragon! The same omen. I hoped I might be wrong, but you confirm it!"

"Mama, you are frightening me," said Destina. "I saw the *shape* of a dragon. These are nothing but lees, the dregs, dead yeast. Here, I will show you!"

She dipped her index finger into the chalice and ran it around the inside. The dragon disappeared, staining her finger red. Destina lifted her finger to show her mother.

"There, Mama. You need not worry. The dead yeast is gone and so is the dragon."

Atieno stared in horror at the red blotch on Destina's finger. She sank into a chair, looking so ill that Destina shouted for her father.

"My beloved, what is wrong?" he asked as he entered. He looked at Destina. "What happened?"

"I asked her about the bad omen in the chalice. Mama said she saw a dragon in the lees," said Destina.

“A dragon?” Gregory repeated, his voice hollow. “You saw a dragon?”

Atieno ran to him and embraced him, holding him tightly.

“Do not go to the tower, my love!” she pleaded. “Do not go!”

“What tower?” Gregory asked.

In answer, Atieno cast a frightened look outside the window. Gregory followed her gaze. The tall spire of High Clerist’s Tower could be seen in the distance. He gave a strained smile.

“My dearest wife, the tower has been abandoned for hundreds of years. I have no reason to go there. You need not worry.”

Atieno kissed him, then drew back from him. “The day is fine. You and Destina should walk outside in the fresh air.”

“You are upset. I do not want to leave you alone,” said Gregory. “Will you be all right?”

“No,” said Atieno, regarding him with dark, shimmering eyes. “But I will make do. Please go now.”

She closed the curtains, blotting out the sun.

“Put on your cloak, Destina,” said Gregory. “Your mother is right. We will walk upon the ramparts and enjoy the sunshine.”





## CHAPTER TWO

Destina wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and climbed the stairs alongside her father to the Rose Tower ramparts.

The two walked on in silence. The wind was chill with the coming of winter. Gregory glanced at Destina often, as though trying to make up his mind to speak or not. Destina noticed his discomfort.

“Please, tell me what is troubling you, Papa. I hope you are not upset with me.”

“Quite the contrary,” said Gregory. “I have another gift for you. I met with my attorney, William Bolland, to draw up my will—”

“Your will!” Destina clutched at him in terror. “Papa, what are you saying?”

“Only that I am mortal, as are all men, and I must take responsibility for my family should something happen to me,” said Gregory, giving her a reassuring smile. “I plan to live for a long time, Destina. Do not fear. This is what I meant this morning by securing your future.”

Destina was able to breathe again.

“I have made my will declaring that if I die, you are to inherit everything when you reach your majority at twenty-one. William

Bolland will draw it up and keep copies of it and the marriage contract. Your mother and I have agreed that you should be the landowner in the event of my death.”

Destina was overwhelmed with pleasure and pride to know her father trusted her enough to bequeath Castle Rosethorn to her care. He might well have left it to his brother, Uncle Vincent.

“I thank you more than I can say, Papa,” Destina said, her voice choked.

“Your grandfather believed women should not inherit land and put it in his will that if I died without a will declaring my wishes, your uncle, Vincent, would inherit the land. As it is, my will and testament now supersede your grandfather’s. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” said Destina. “Will Uncle Vincent be upset if I inherit?”

“Your uncle’s wife brought him her own wealth, and our father made him a gift of land, so he is a rich man in his own right,” said Gregory. “I have spoken to him and told him what I intend. He is fond of you and thinks that you will do well.”

Destina was pleased with his praise.

“The Berthelbochs are worthy people, but they know nothing of managing such extensive holdings. They know nothing of the duties and responsibilities of a nobleman as required by the Oath and the Measure. I have taught you this as I would have taught a son, Destina. I know I can count upon you to care for our tenants, who are dependent on us.”

“I will study even harder now,” said Destina. “I will make you proud of me, Papa.”

“You already do,” said Gregory. “You cannot be a knight, Destina, but if something were to happen to me, you can and will be the Lady of Castle Rosethorn. You will keep the Rosethorn name and carry on the family legacy. The Rosethorns built Castle Rosethorn during the reign of the Kingpriest. They built it strong, to last throughout time. Our castle withstood the Cataclysm, when the gods hurled the fiery mountain down on Krynn in anger at the arrogance of the Kingpriest. Many others were destroyed, but Castle Rosethorn stood, and we were able to provide shelter to those who turned to us in despair. We opened our doors and gave freely of what we had.

“The gods may have left, but we remained true to the Oath and the Measure. Particularly the oath the knights take: *Est sularus oth mithas*. ‘My honor is my life.’ Too many knights these days rely only upon the Measure. They have forgotten or no longer care about honor.”

He paused in their walk and turned to look at the High Clerist’s Tower, standing guard over the Westgate Pass, protecting the road that led to Solamnia’s capital, the city of Palanthis.

His expression grew troubled. “I will be leaving tomorrow for Palanthis in company with Lord Marcus and Lord Reginald. I hope to address the Knight’s Grand Circle.”

“What about, Papa?”

“Lord Marcus and Lord Reginald have returned from their travels in the east and they bring disturbing reports of bands of goblins, ogres, and evil men attacking and burning cities.”

“You always said we were never to fear such low, cowardly creatures as goblins and ogres, Papa,” said Destina dismissively. “If a knight so much as rattles his sword at a goblin, the creature will shriek and run away.”

“So it has been in the past, but not now,” said Gregory. “Marcus and Reginald believe that a dark and powerful foe is gathering strength in the Plains of Neraka and driving these attacks. There is purpose and intelligence behind them.”

“What makes them think that?” Destina asked.

“Usually marauding goblins and ogres strike a town, loot it, and run off with their spoils. These armies strike a town, occupy it, fortify it, then move on to take the next one. They are amassing vast amounts of territory, and they are slowly and steadily advancing west, toward Solamnia.”

Destina felt a qualm of fear. If there was war, her father would have to fight! Perhaps this was why he had been talking of wills and inheritance. “What are you saying, Papa? Will Mama’s omen come true? I saw the dragon myself!”

“I did not mean to worry you,” said Gregory. “I have a daunting task ahead of me. In a few days, I will be traveling to Palanthis to report what their lordships have learned to the Grand Circle. They asked me to speak since I hold a certain amount of influence. I must

try to make the Circle understand that now is the time for the knighthood to band together, strengthen our fortifications, and raise armies to face the darkness I fear is coming. We should not waste time and resources fighting political battles with each other.”

Gregory paused, then added almost to himself, “I am afraid no one will heed my warnings, but I must try.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“The Grand Circle meets in a fortnight,” said Gregory. “I will return as soon as it is over. Sooner, if no one listens to me.”

“They will listen, Papa. Do not worry. I will study the Measure diligently to learn my duty as lady of the castle, even though I am not a knight.”

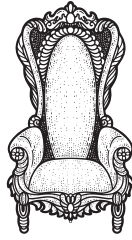
Gregory regarded his daughter with affection. “The Measure says: ‘A true knight’s worth springs from the beating heart.’ Note that it does not delineate between a man’s heart and a woman’s. And now our guests will be arriving, and you must wear your new gown. Your mother’s gift looks well on you.”

Destina fingered the golden chain. “She said it is gold for some goddess of the yellow star. Did you ever hear of such a god?”

“No, but mother is much more learned in such things than I am. Are you *certain* you want to go through with this betrothal, Destina?” Gregory asked as they walked down the stairs that led from the ramparts. “You can yet change your mind.”

“I am certain, Papa,” said Destina. “I have my future planned out, and this marriage is the first step.”

A smattering of dead yeast was not going change that!



## CHAPTER THREE

Gregory closely observed Berthel during the dinner celebrating Destina's birthday. He supposed the young man could be considered handsome by modern standards with his long, curly, brown hair and clean-shaven face flushed with the good spirits of youth and perhaps some embarrassment at being in the presence of his future father-in-law.

Berthel was attentive and respectful of Destina, and he was clearly in love with her. He could not take his eyes from her the entire time they were eating. But he also talked a good deal about hunting and spent most of the meal describing how he had tracked and killed a wild boar.

His parents smiled proudly on him and doted on Destina, giving her a silver comb for her hair as a birthday gift. Atieno was a gracious hostess, though she said little and ate less. With Berthel's tale of the wild boar done, the talk turned, as Gregory had foreseen, to politics. The Berthelbochs were supporters of Derek Crownward and tried to persuade Gregory to vote for him. He said politely he had not yet made up his mind.

Destina seemed pleased with her choice of husband, for she smiled

kindly on Berthel and let him hold her hand as she accompanied him and his parents to the door. Gregory was somewhat reassured.

And he had several years to hope Destina would find someone else.

THE DAY AFTER Destina's birthday, Gregory Rosethorn set out for Palanthis, traveling with two young friends, Lord Marcus and Lord Reginald, who had just recently been accepted into the Solamnic knighthood. He had been their sponsor, for their families had been friends for many years. The young men were both first in their generation to become knights.

Lord Reginald was in his early twenties, blond and blue-eyed, big and a little portly. His armor was a tight fit, and he was always laughingly complaining it had shrunk. Lord Marcus had black skin, black hair, and black eyes. His ancestors came from Nordmaar, a land near the distant minotaur homeland to the northeast. A seafaring people, his ancestors had been shipwrecked on the northern coast of Solamnia a century ago at about the time of the Third Dragon War. His family continued the seafaring tradition, becoming prosperous merchant seamen.

Gregory and his party followed the river northward until their path intersected with the old Knight's High Road. Destroyed by the Cataclysm, the road had never been adequately repaired, but it was still the best and safest route across the central Solamnic Plain. They found that the bridge over the River Klaar, south of the former Uth Brightblade holdings, had collapsed in a flood, and they had to make a short detour, riding north to ford the river.

They rejoined the Knight's High Road and continued to follow it northwest toward the High Clerist's Tower and the pass that led to Palanthis.

As they traveled, the three discussed the coming meeting of the Grand Circle and the rules by which such meetings were governed. The younger knights had never participated in a Grand Circle, and they were understandably nervous and eager to make a good impression on their fellow knights. Gregory could quote the *Measure verbatim*, and he did so for their edification.