



THE  
CRIMSON  
CROWN



CHAPTER ONE

# CLAN PRINCESS

It was the largest gathering of the Spirit clans Raisa had ever seen. They came from all over the Fells—from Demonai Camp to the west, from Hunter's Camp to the east, and from the rugged northern reaches and the river valleys near the West Wall. Some traveled all the way from the fishing camps along Invaders Bay. Demonai warriors rode in from the wilderness, proudly painted, feathered, and braided. Sun-weathered traders journeyed home from throughout the Seven Realms, bringing exotic goods and news from the down-realms.

Even the elders said that the only other such celebration in their lifetime was the one that marked Raisa's mother Marianna's wedding to Averill Demonai—the first marriage of a Gray Wolf queen to clan royalty since the Great Captivity began.

This time they feasted together on the lower slopes of Hanalea to celebrate the crowning of one of their own—Raisa *ana*'Marianna, called Briar Rose in the high country—as queen

of the Fells. The camp was bedecked with garlands of thorny high country roses—Raisa’s clan totem, which always came into bloom near the time of her birthday.

Each camp came bearing gifts, competing in honoring and celebrating the new queen. Raisa accumulated enough finery to last for years to come. Clan metalsmiths presented her with a circlet of roses and thorns in beaten gold. They provided silver fittings for her saddles and bridles crafted by leatherworkers.

Demonai Camp brought her a made-to-measure longbow and a quiver of black-fletched arrows to replace the weapons she’d lost when Micah Bayar carried her off from Oden’s Ford. Marisa Pines Camp gifted her with lotions, remedies, and fragrances that would remind her of the high country in her flatland palace.

Hunter’s Camp contributed haunches of venison, fish from the Dyrnnewater, braces of rabbits, and wild boars, which had been roasting on spits all day.

Storytellers and musicians showered Raisa with songs and stories, predicting a long and glorious reign. This premature praise made her squirm. She was superstitious enough to believe in not tempting fate.

I just don’t want to be known as the queen who inherited trouble and transformed it into disaster, she thought. And that was a distinct possibility.

This celebration was distinguished—some said ruined—by the presence of wizards. Wizards had been forbidden in the Spirit Mountains for a thousand years. Hayden Fire Dancer had, of course, been born into Marisa Pines Camp, the mixed-blood son of the clan Matriarch, Willo Watersong. And Han Alister insisted on coming to the celebration as Raisa’s bodyguard.

His presence made a tense situation even worse.

It’s unfair, Raisa thought. After all, it was the Demonai who had called Han home from Oden’s Ford to help them fight the Wizard Council.

Raisa was acutely aware of Han’s presence, unable to dismiss memories of shared kisses and fierce, desperate embraces. All day long she’d felt the pressure of his blue-eyed gaze. He burned like a meteor in her peripheral vision.

He wore clan garb—leggings that showed off his long legs, and a feast day coat that Willo Watersong had provided, his amulets tucked discreetly underneath. Han knew his way around Marisa Pines Camp. He’d fostered there every summer before he’d become a wizard.

New barriers had grown up between Raisa and Han since her coronation. They both knew there could be no marriage between a wizard thief and the queen of the realm, but disagreed on what to do about it.

Han’s idea was that she abandon the throne and run off with him, and she’d said no. Raisa had proposed that they become clandestine lovers, and he’d said no. Now she couldn’t seem to regain her footing with him. And the constant crowds around Raisa prevented a heart-to-heart.

She still wore the ring that Han had given her at her coronation. The moonstones and pearls glittered next to the time-burnished gold of Hanalea’s wolf ring.

The day began with horse and footraces in the cool of the mountain morning. There followed games, including a dangerous ball game played from horseback. After that, mock battles and archery competitions.

Night Bird won the archery competition, and Nightwalker came in second. Raisa placed in one of the shorter horse races. “You ride like a Demonai,” her father said proudly. He and Elena were constantly beside her, introducing matriarchs and patriarchs from all over the Spirits. Elena *Cennestre* especially basked in Raisa’s reflected glory, greeting old friends and rivals, throwing her head back to release her delicious laugh.

Averill’s pleasure was more muted. Like Raisa, he still mourned Queen Marianna.

The feasting began in earnest at dusk—all the guests seated at long tables under the darkening sky. Her father sat on one side of Raisa, her grandmother on the other; Willo next to Averill, and Nightwalker next to Elena, in a position of honor.

Except for Willo, they’re all Demonai, Raisa thought. That warlike clan seemed ascendant. They had married into the Gray Wolf line, and now even the reigning queen carried Demonai blood.

It was a warm night, and Nightwalker wore a deerskin vest that bared his muscular arms. His Demonai amulet glittered in the torchlight, his dark eyes shadowed by the chiseled terrain of his face.

Other than Demonai, Raisa’s table consisted mostly of matriarchs and patriarchs from other camps. Searching the clearing, she spotted Han, exiled with Dancer to a faraway table in the fringes of the trees.

Bonfires flared on the peaks all around them, each blaze marking the resting place of one of Raisa’s ancestors, the Gray Wolf queens. Sparks spiraled upward to mingle with the stars—a tribute from the uplanders who’d been unable to attend the feast.

As the plates were cleared, Willo rose from her seat. The conversations around the tables died away.

“Once again, welcome to our hearth,” she said. “Tonight we honor Briar Rose *ana*’Marianna, thirty-third in the new line of Gray Wolf queens. The first in the new line who is also a clan princess.”

This was met with a rumble of approval.

“In Briar Rose is mingled the blood of all of the peoples of the Fells,” Willo said. “Let us hope that her crowning ushers in a new season of peace and cooperation among the Spirit clans, the gifted, and Valefolk.”

The reaction to this was mixed—scattered cheers amid murmured disapproval. Willo pressed her lips together, rounding her shoulders in disappointment. “Lord Demonai will speak now,” she said, and sat down.

Averill rose to full-throated cheering, and stood waiting until the noise died away. “Thank you, Willo Watersong. I must admit, grief and joy are at war within me—grief at the loss of my beloved Marianna, and joy that my daughter Briar Rose is now queen. Grief tempers joy, making it stronger through contrast, as the valleys between make the mountains higher.”

He rested a hand on Raisa’s shoulder. “These are difficult times. The speakers predict a descent into the valley of war. But on this day, from this height, we can see across our troubles to the victory on the other side. We will never settle for less.”

Cheers thundered through the trees. Well, Raisa thought. That’s a warlike speech in contrast to Willo’s conciliatory one. My father is a true Demonai.

“I have more to say,” Averill said, hushing the crowd. He

waited until he was sure he had everyone's attention, then went on.

"I will not marry again," he said. "I am no longer young, and the death of those we love reminds us of our own mortality." He paused, peering out from under his heavy brows. "Not that I intend to make an exit anytime soon. Life still brings many pleasures my way. I take great joy in making Lord Bayar miserable."

Laughter rolled around the clearing.

Averill squeezed Raisa's shoulder. "Ordinarily, Briar Rose would follow me as Matriarch of Demonai Camp when I go to meet the Maker," Averill said. "But it seems she has found another calling." He smiled down at her.

Raisa blinked back at her father. She had not expected a discussion of the Demonai succession at her coronation feast.

"I have another daughter, Daylily, also called Mellony, but she does not feel the call of her clan blood. She has no desire to learn the Old Ways. She will not come to the uplands."

Mellony had resisted leaving court to foster in the camps. Queen Marianna had given in to her, saying there was no need, as Mellony was not the heir to the throne.

But she could be if anything happened to me, Raisa thought. That mistake would be difficult to remedy now. Any suggestion that Mellony go to the camps would likely be poorly received.

Averill's next words yanked Raisa's attention back to the present.

"It seems wise, in these dangerous times, to make the lines of succession clear. And so I have chosen a son to succeed me as Patriarch of Demonai Camp."

This wasn't unusual. Clan adoptions were informal affairs. They might happen at any age, to serve the needs of the family, or the camp at large.

Raisa's breath caught as it came to her who Averill's successor must be. She looked at Nightwalker, who sat loose-limbed and relaxed, eyes fixed on Raisa as if to measure her reaction.

"I name Reid Nightwalker Demonai my son and successor as Patriarch of Demonai Camp," Averill said.

There arose a spate of clapping and cheering. Raisa looked from face to face. It seemed to be welcome news to most.

With three exceptions: Han and Dancer looked on with stony faces, then put their heads together, whispering.

Then there was Night Bird. The young Demonai warrior stared at Averill, eyes wide. She shook her head ever so slightly. Then rose and left the table, disappearing into the darkness.

Raisa stared after her, confused. Then she realized that Night Bird understood what Averill was really aiming at—a match between Raisa and Nightwalker. A match Night Bird perhaps wanted for herself. And Averill Demonai was an excellent marksman.

When Averill sat down, Raisa struggled to maintain her trader face. *Why didn't you tell me?* she thought. It seemed she should have participated in this decision, or at least have been notified ahead of time.

Averill smiled at her, patting her hand.

You have a trader face, too, Raisa thought. Too good at keeping secrets.

The dancing began with the youngest children, whose enthusiasm trumped any lack of skill as they showed off their steps to

the Gray Wolf queen. There followed midsummer dances, and some traditional name day dances, to honor those who would be celebrated the next day.

Suddenly, Raisa's father stood before her, hands extended. "Dance with me, daughter," he said, smiling. "It has been a long time."

And so Raisa did, circling the fire with her sturdy Demonai father. Though Raisa was small, her father stood only a few inches taller than her, so they were a good match for dancing. Her body recalled the movements of the familiar Dance of Many Braids. The pace accelerated, and Raisa allowed herself to be carried away by the music, her feet flying in her new moccasins. The dancers wove intricate patterns, coming together and then shattering apart.

As the night went on, the older dancers dropped out, but the young people continued, shouting out requests, fueled by upcountry wine, seeming to draw energy from each other. Bats fluttered drunkenly in the trees overhead, singing their silent mating songs.

More and more, Raisa found herself dancing opposite Nightwalker, her pulse picking up the cadence of the drums. Her clan blood thrummed in her veins as sweat trickled between her breasts, and her skirts swirled around her legs. They danced the Dance of the Berry Moon and the Dance of the Flower Moon. During the Dance of the Gray Wolf, the shadows outside the glare of the torches seethed with yellow eyes and lithe, furred bodies.

Shilo Trailblazer called out, "Demonai Woman!"—a traditional war dance of matched pairs that dated from the Wizard Wars.

Voices shouted out support. The Demonai loved battle dances—stylized depictions of battles between wizards and the Demonai, culminating in a symbolic slaughter of the gifted.

A flicker of motion caught Raisa's eye. Willo Watersong rose and left the circle of onlookers, leaving Han and Dancer sitting alone. Han watched Raisa, his eyes in shadow, head cocked to one side as if waiting to see what she would do.

It was one thing for the Demonai to dance battle dances among themselves. It was another to confront two wizards with their history of bloodshed.

Raisa mopped her face with her sleeve. "I'll sit out," she said, turning toward the sidelines.

But Elena stepped into her path. "Please," she said, looking into Raisa's eyes. "Dance with us, granddaughter. We danced the flatlander dances yesterday. This celebration is for us."

"Please," Nightwalker said, taking Raisa's hand. "Dance with me, Briar Rose."

And when Raisa looked back for Han, he had disappeared.

"All right," she said. "Just a few more."

As the round began, men and women danced opposite each other, shaking their weapons, tossing catcalls and challenges back and forth, competing for the honor of confronting the armies of wizards that had invaded the Fells. Raisa and Nightwalker came together in mock combat, glaring into each other's eyes.

The men chorused, "Wait by the fire, wife, and have babies. Your sons will grow up to fight jinxflingers." Nightwalker struck a pose, scowling down at Raisa, lips twitching as he fought back a smile.

"Wait by the fire, husband," Raisa replied. "And bind up my

wounds when I return. I will fight jinxflingers so my sons won't have to."

They split apart and danced some more.

"Wait by the fire, wife, and prepare a meal to restore me when I return from the wars," the men said.

"Wait by the fire, husband," Raisa called with the others. "Heat the water to wash jinxflinger blood from my clothes."

And, finally, the last chorus.

"Ride beside me, wife, and kill the jinxflinger that gets past me," the men said.

"Ride beside me, husband, and we will drive the jinxflingers into the sea," the women sang.

By the time the dance ended, Raisa was trembling and weak in the knees. She looked for Han again, but he was still missing.

When demands for Hanalea's Triumph could no longer be ignored, Raisa agreed to dance the part of Hanalea, and Nightwalker, of course, chose the Demonai role. They donned the ritual amulets signifying their parts and picked up their ceremonial weapons. Other players selected their roles as demons, warriors, and soldiers. But no one volunteered for the unpopular role of the Demon King.

Until Han Alister stepped forward, out of the darkness. "I'll dance the Demon King part," he said in Clan. "It's fitting, don't you think?" He paused for a heartbeat, then added into a charged silence, "Since I'm one of only two wizards here."

He was barefoot, still in clan leggings but now wearing a beaded dancing jacket trimmed in feathers. His skin shown pale against the time-darkened deerskin, his blond hair glittering under the torchlight. He already wore the flame-patterned

feathered wristlets and the stylized serpent amulet that identified him as the Demon King.

"Hunts Alone!" Averill looked vastly unhappy. "Do you even know the part?"

"I've some practice at clan dances," Han said. "But I'm no expert. So I'll take the part nobody wants." He smiled, but it never reached his eyes. "I'll try not to step on anyone's toes."

But something in his expression sent the opposite message.