

Chapter 1 — The Executioner's Fire

Ashwing's wing cast half the execution platform into shadow.

Mara stood beneath it with one hand resting on the pommel of her sword, listening to the iron fittings of Ashen Court contract in the morning cold. Beyond the platform, tiered galleries climbed toward the palace walls, crowded with nobles in winter silks, officers in black armor, and citizens admitted by royal invitation. No one spoke above a murmur.

They had come to watch a traitor burn.

The stone beneath Mara's boots still bore the marks of the last execution. Three dark arcs crossed the platform where dragonfire had struck and spread. Servants had scrubbed until their hands bled, but some stains could not be removed with water.

Mara knew that better than most.

A pulse of heat pressed against her shoulder.

Too much heat.

She glanced up.

Ashwing crouched behind her, vast enough that the ceremonial pillars seemed like children's toys beside him. His scales were the red of banked coals, deepening to near black along his spine. Thin smoke escaped his nostrils. His amber gaze remained fixed on the empty execution circle.

To the watching crowd, he looked magnificent.

To Mara, he felt wrong.

The bond between them carried no words. Dragon bonds did not open minds like books, however often poets claimed otherwise. They gave sensation, emotion, flashes of instinct. Ashwing's discomfort moved through her as a pressure beneath the ribs—a furnace sealed too tightly.

Are you in pain?

She formed the thought with the focus their old tutors had taught her, though she knew he would receive intention more than language.

Ashwing's claws tightened against the platform.

Stone cracked beneath one talon.

Mara shifted closer to him, hiding the movement beneath the fall of her black execution cloak.

"Hold still," murmured Master Orin.

The royal physician knelt near Ashwing's chest, pretending to adjust a bronze ceremonial chain. His narrow hands moved with practiced efficiency, but his gaze avoided Mara's.

"What did you find?" she asked.

"Nothing unexpected."

"That was not my question."

Orin's fingers paused.

At the base of Ashwing's chest, where overlapping scales protected his flame chamber, a faint dark line disappeared beneath the chain.

Mara had seen it the previous night. She had told herself it was soot.

Now, in the flat winter light, it looked almost like a vein.

Orin pulled the chain higher, covering it.

"His temperature is elevated," he said. "The strain of ceremony can agitate even a disciplined dragon."

Ashwing turned his head.

The motion was slow, but Orin flinched.

Mara noticed.

Before she could press him, the silver doors beneath the royal gallery opened.

Every whisper in Ashen Court died.

King Aldren Veyr descended the seven steps to the platform without escort. He wore no crown. He never wore one to an execution. The absence was deliberate, meant to suggest that justice came not from a man's authority but from some older and purer law.

Mara had believed that once.

Perhaps part of her still did.

Her father stopped beside her and surveyed the court. His hair had gone almost entirely silver during the last decade, though little else about him had softened. He carried age as he carried power: without apology.

"Princess," he said.

"Your Majesty."

His gaze moved to Ashwing. "Will there be difficulty?"

Orin bowed so quickly his forehead nearly struck the chain. "No, Majesty."

Mara felt Ashwing's heat sharpen.

She kept her voice low. "He is unwell."

Aldren regarded her, not the dragon.

"Is he unable to perform?"

"I did not say that."

"Then the distinction is private."

The words landed gently. Her father rarely needed to raise his voice. Anger invited resistance; disappointment made others correct themselves.

Mara looked toward the galleries. Hundreds of faces waited behind masks of solemnity. Above them, banners bearing the crowned flame hung motionless in the winter air.

"The physicians should examine him again," she said.

"Afterward."

"Afterward may be too late."

"For Arden, certainly."

Her jaw tightened.

Aldren's expression did not change. "The western districts have endured three months of rumors. Farmers claim wild dragons are gathering beyond the Glasswood. Miners refuse to enter shafts after sunset. Two bonded riders deserted their posts last week. Fear spreads faster than corruption, Mara. Today the kingdom requires certainty."

"And if certainty is false?"

His gaze sharpened, though his voice remained quiet. "Private discomfort is a poor foundation for public disorder."

Mara knew the lesson. He had taught it to her before her first execution, when she had been seventeen and sick from the smell of scorched scales.

A ruler could grieve.

An executioner could doubt.

Neither could do so where the kingdom might see.

Ashwing's unease pressed harder against the bond. Beneath it, she sensed something else.

Not fear.

Resistance.

Mara turned toward him fully. "Ashwing."

His eye lowered to hers.

For one moment, the galleries and banners vanished. She remembered the ruined aerie where they had first met, when she had been a lonely child hiding from a banquet and he had been young enough to fit between broken pillars. She remembered putting out her hand. Waiting. Letting him choose whether to cross the distance.

He had chosen her.

They had chosen each other every day since.

"Princess Mara."

Corren's voice came from the lower steps.

Mara looked past her father.

Her younger brother stood behind a line of royal officers, his dark formal coat unfastened as though he had dressed while running. A captain blocked his path with one armored arm.

"I need to speak with you," Corren called.

A murmur moved through the nearest gallery.

Aldren did not turn. "This is neither the time nor the place."

"I found a discrepancy in Arden's sentence."

Mara's hand tightened on her sword.

The sentence had been reviewed by the Crown Tribunal, sealed by the king, and delivered to her chambers before dawn. Kael Arden had been convicted of sedition, destruction of royal property, conspiracy with dragon thieves, and the murder of eleven soldiers during the Greyhaven uprising.

There were no discrepancies in royal sentences.

There were only errors discovered too late to name.

"What discrepancy?" Mara asked.

The captain looked to the king.

Aldren's face remained calm, but Mara felt the warning in his silence.

Corren held up a folded strip of parchment. "The testimony from the surviving convoy guard was altered after it entered the archive."

Several officers shifted.

"Remove him," Aldren said.

"Father—"

"Now."

The captain seized Corren's arm. Corren struggled once, then stopped, but his gaze remained fixed on Mara.

"Ask Orin about the blood reports," he said.

Orin went still beside Ashwing.

Mara looked down at him.

The physician's face had lost all color.

Trumpets sounded from beneath the court.

The prisoner was coming.

Iron gates opened at the eastern side of the platform. Six soldiers emerged in two lines, carrying long spears with cinderstone heads. Between them walked Kael Arden.

He wore no shoes.

It was a small cruelty compared with the sentence awaiting him, but Mara noticed it immediately. His feet were bruised and cut from the palace stones. Iron cuffs bound his wrists in front of him, connected by a short chain to a collar around his throat.

He should have looked diminished.

He did not.

Kael was taller than she remembered from the tribunal sketches, though thinner. Dark hair fell across his forehead, badly cut as if someone had taken a knife to it in prison. A healing scar crossed his left temple. More scars marked both hands—pale, branching lines that ran over his knuckles and disappeared beneath his sleeves.

Flameweaver scars.

The crowd recoiled when they saw them.

Mara did not.

She had been taught that rebel healers marked themselves by touching corrupted fire. She had also been taught that such men feared royal dragons.

Kael barely looked at her.

His attention went directly to Ashwing.

Not to the teeth.

Not to the talons.

To the dragon's chest.

The guards brought him to the edge of the execution circle and forced him to his knees. One officer reached for the chain to drag him forward.

"Do not," Kael said.

The officer struck him across the mouth.

Kael rocked sideways, caught himself with his bound hands, and spat blood onto the scorched stone.

Ashwing's anger entered Mara like a blade of heat.

The nearest soldiers stepped back.

Mara raised one hand. "Enough."

The officer bowed.

Kael lifted his head.

His eyes were grey, though not the polished silver celebrated in court ballads. They were the color of ash after rain.

He studied Mara with the same unsettling concentration he had given Ashwing.

No pleading.

No hatred.

Judgment, perhaps, though that was not what disturbed her.

He looked at her as though she were still capable of choosing.

The herald unrolled the sentence.

"Kael Arden of Greyhaven, having been found guilty of sedition against the Crown of Veyrath, conspiracy to free condemned beasts, destruction of royal ward property—"

"Condemned dragons," Kael said.

The herald faltered.

A soldier drove the butt of his spear into Kael's back.

He grunted but did not bow.

Aldren gave Mara the smallest of glances.

Public certainty.

She stepped into the execution circle.

The channel inside her sword gave a faint red glow as it responded to Ashwing's nearness. Cinderstone ran from the pommel to the blade's tip, designed to catch dragonfire and guide it into the ritual lines carved through the platform.

The blade had been made for her eighteenth birthday.

She had killed nine dragons with it.

The number came unbidden.

Mara stopped three paces from Kael.

"Kael Arden," she said, and her voice carried easily through the court. "You were given the right to answer the charges before the Crown Tribunal. You were found guilty by sealed judgment. Before the sentence is carried out, you may speak final words."

He looked beyond her to Ashwing again.

"Who examined him this morning?"

A tremor of unease passed through the galleries.

Mara kept her face still. "Your final words should concern your own soul."

"My soul is my concern." His voice was rough from confinement, but clear. "Your dragon is another matter."

Ashwing's heat surged.

Mara felt the pressure beneath his ribs tighten into pain.

"You are not his healer," she said.

"No. You killed most of them."

The words struck the court harder than a shout.

A spear moved behind him.

Mara did not look away. "You stand condemned for murder."

"And you stand decorated for it."

One of the nobles hissed.

Her father remained silent.

Kael's mouth was bleeding. He wiped it against his shoulder, his gaze never leaving hers.

Mara had faced curses before. Condemned riders had called her monster, butcher, crown-bred hound. Their hatred had been easier to bear than this measured refusal to simplify her.

"You believe defiance will change your sentence?" she asked.

"No."

"Then why provoke the court?"

"Because they will kill him after they kill me."

Ashwing's claws scraped stone.

Mara felt the bond recoil.

She stepped closer to Kael. "Explain."

Aldren said her name softly.

She ignored him.

For the first time, something like urgency cracked Kael's composure.

"Look beneath the left side of his chest chain," he said. "Not at the scales. Between them."

Orin rose too quickly. "Majesty, this is manipulation. Arden has used corrupted bonds before. He can provoke sympathetic distress—"

"With my hands chained?" Kael asked.

"Silence."

Mara turned to Ashwing.

The ceremonial chain crossed his breast in three bronze bands. She had fastened it herself before sunrise. He had been restless then, turning away each time she touched the lowest clasp.

She reached beneath it now.

Ashwing shuddered.

The sensation ripped through the bond—heat, pain, and a sickening cold buried at the center.

Mara's fingers found the edge of a scale.

Beneath it, something pulsed.

Black traced the narrow tissue between the red plates, branching toward his flame chamber.

Her breath stopped.

She had seen such marks only in condemned dragons.

Black flame sickness.

Corruption.

Behind her, Orin began, "Princess—"

"How long?" Mara asked.

No one answered.

She turned.

Orin looked at the king.

That frightened her more than the black vein.

Kael pushed himself upright on his knees. "His breathing is shallow on the left side. His temperature is rising without release. The darkening is moving inward rather than out toward the extremities."

Mara knew little of healing, but she knew Ashwing. He had flown through volcanic storms. He had carried her bleeding across half the northern range. His fire had never once turned against him.

"What causes that?" she asked.

Kael's gaze moved to the sword in her hand.

"Cinderbane."

The word drew confusion from the crowd. Mara had heard it only once, in a classified account of rebel poisons.

Aldren stepped forward. "Enough."

Kael continued as though the king had not spoken. "It enters through stone dust, treated metal, or repeated exposure to contaminated conduits. It poisons the pathways that carry flame through the body."

"He has not been near rebel weapons," Mara said.

"No," Kael replied. "He has been near yours."

The cinderstone channel in her blade glowed brighter.

For one disorienting moment, Mara felt the weight of every execution she had performed. Ashwing above the circle. Her sword inside the ritual line. Fire passing through the blade.

Collected.

Guided.

Taken somewhere she had never asked about.

She looked toward the soldiers.

Their spears were all tipped with cinderstone.

Not ceremonial spearheads. Heavy bolts had been fitted beneath the shafts, attached to compact firing mechanisms. The weapons were angled upward.

Toward Ashwing.

Mara had overseen security herself. Those weapons had not been listed.

"Who authorized these?" she demanded.

The captain nearest the king did not answer.

Aldren's voice remained steady. "Complete the sentence."

Mara stared at him. "The soldiers are equipped to kill Ashwing."

"They are equipped to protect the court."

"From what?"

Her father's eyes settled on the black line beneath Ashwing's scales.

"From uncertainty."

The truth moved through her slowly, too large to understand at once.

He knew.

Perhaps not everything Kael claimed. Perhaps not the cause. But he had known Ashwing might fail before the ceremony began.

Mara looked again at Orin. "Were those veins present yesterday?"

The physician swallowed.

"Answer her," Kael said.

Orin flinched as if struck.

Aldren stepped between Mara and the physician. "You are allowing a condemned rebel to direct this ceremony."

"I am asking whether my dragon is poisoned."

"And I am telling you that panic will kill more people than any poison."

The galleries had begun to stir. Officers whispered to one another. Somewhere in the upper tiers, a child started crying.

Mara felt the fragile structure of the moment—how quickly fear could become flight, how easily hundreds of bodies could crush one another against locked gates.

This was what her father meant.

He was not wrong about the danger.

That was what made him most difficult to defy.

She faced the execution circle again.

Kael watched her.

"Do not mistake hesitation for mercy," she said.

"I don't."

"You do not know me."

"I know you felt his pain and reached for your sword anyway."

Her hand tightened around the hilt.

"What would you have me do?"

The question escaped before she could stop it.

The court seemed to lean toward them.

Kael looked up at Ashwing. His expression changed—not softened, exactly, but stripped of everything except concern.

“Listen when he refuses you.”

Mara went cold.

Ashwing had never refused her.

Not truly.

He had resisted foolish requests as a young dragon. He had ignored orders when injured or exhausted. But when she reached through the bond—when she called with all the authority of their shared fire—he had always answered.

She stepped to the center of the ritual circle.

The carved lines spread around her boots in the shape of a many-pointed flame. Kael knelt at its heart.

Mara raised her sword.

Ashwing shifted behind her.

Pain trembled through the bond.

She sent him calm, command, and the familiar image of their training field: *One breath. One flame. Through the circle.*

The glow inside her blade intensified.

Ashwing drew in a breath.

The sound rolled through Ashen Court like distant thunder.

Heat struck Mara’s back. Nobles shielded their faces. Soldiers braced their spears.

Kael closed his eyes.

Mara waited for fire.

Ashwing exhaled.

A thin flame spilled between his teeth.

It was black.

Not red at the root and darkened by smoke. Not shadowed by the winter light.

Black from its center to its ragged edge.

The crowd screamed.

The flame struck the edge of the execution circle and recoiled as if the stone had rejected it. Darkness ran through the carved channels, consuming the red light inside Mara's sword.

Ashwing roared.

Agony tore across the bond.

Mara staggered, nearly dropping the blade.

"Stop!" she shouted.

Ashwing cut off the flame.

Smoke poured from his mouth. His head lowered until his jaw struck the platform. The bronze chain snapped across his chest.

The black veins beneath his scales were no longer faint.

They spread before Mara's eyes.

Kael surged against his restraints. "He's choking on the flame. Release the chest binding."

A soldier kicked him back into the circle.

"Ashwing." Mara ran toward the dragon.

Her father caught her arm.

"Do not approach him."

She stared at his hand on her sleeve.

"He is in pain."

"He is corrupted."

"No."

The denial came instantly, violently.

Aldren's grip tightened. "The court has witnessed black flame. The law is clear."

The law.

Mara had enforced it nine times.

Corrupted dragons were unstable. Unstable dragons threatened the ward. Threats to the ward were condemned before their sickness could spread through a bond or settlement.

She knew each line of the statute.

She also knew Ashwing's pain as if it lived inside her own bones.

"He needs a healer," she said.

"He needs containment."

Kael laughed once from the ground. There was no humor in it. "Is that what you call an execution when the victim belongs to you?"

Mara looked toward him.

His cuffs had cut his wrists. Blood ran across the pale scars on his hands.

"Can you help him?" she asked.

The question shocked the court into silence.

Kael pushed himself up again. "Yes."

"Do not lie to me."

"I can slow the poison."

"Cinderbane has no cure," Orin said.

Kael turned on him. "Not while the source remains active."

Orin's mouth closed.

Mara felt her father's hand leave her arm.

The loss of contact was worse than the grip.

Aldren stepped back.

His expression became formal, remote—the face he wore when pronouncing judgment.

"Captain," he said.

The soldiers raised their weapons.

Mara moved between them and Ashwing.

Every spear shifted to track her.

The cinderstone mechanisms clicked into firing position.

Prepared.

Measured.

Ready before Ashwing's black flame had ever touched the air.

Her father had not ordered them to fire.

Not yet.

Then the first bolt struck Ashwing beneath the wing.

He screamed through their bond.

Mara spun toward the soldiers and saw the smoking weapon already lowering in the front rank.

The shot had been aimed before the king gave the order.