



A black and white illustration. In the foreground, a woman with long hair is seen from behind, holding a large, light-colored balloon with both hands. The balloon is tied to a string that goes down to the bottom right. The background is a dense forest of evergreen trees. In the upper left, there are mountains and a night sky with stars and clouds. The overall style is a detailed line drawing with cross-hatching for shading.

PROLOGUE

A DARK THRONE

THE Dark Queen sat shrouded in shadow on her elevated throne. The rusted chandeliers had been snuffed out decades ago, but a few meager candles on the floor in pools of wax lit the red tapestry that led to the throne. The air was musty and heavy, suffocating to all but the Queen.

She stood slowly and walked to the high, Gothic window that opened to the south. All was aglow in the moonlight. Norchbury Wood and the Evernought mountain range obscured her view of the rest of Crowwald, but the Dark Queen could not stop thinking about one young woman.

“It’s all coming to an end,” she said softly, coldly, to no one in particular.

Though she drank in the shadow of the evening, Crowwald was not yet as dark as she’d envisioned it. She rubbed the rough-cut stones that decorated her boney fingers. She let a current of questions—*How long must I wait for complete power? What if I cannot get the Kindred Stone away from her?*—feed her fear. *Yes!* The Queen quaked in delight as the pain of fear rippled over her. She regained composure.

“That stone—it’s just a trinket. It’s actually quite perfect. A spot of hope for that slurry brat. How delightful it will be to swat it away,” she mused. There was no one with more right to the throne than she.

The Dark Queen felt the familiar compulsion to descend to the dungeon. At times, the subterranean prison had been full—overly full—during her reign. Now, however, there was only one occupant.

Within a cold, gray cell, an old man slumped in a corner. He was a picture of skin, bones, and rotten teeth. Sparse gray hair fell over seldom-raised green eyes. He wore a damp, tattered plum suit with a deep, empty quill pocket. His thin humming

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broke the silence: “Seven Wanderers destined for the same twisted fate, each woke up and went on their way.” The broken voice wavered, almost a whisper.

The Dark Queen’s mood shifted into a quiet anger. “Fascinating that you can remember a silly children’s rhyme like that, and yet you withhold the information I request.”

“Wanderers... twisted fate... went on their way,” the old man’s voice rasped.

“Say it louder!” she demanded. As if condensing from the air itself, water collected and began to fill the cell, floating the man’s coat around him. “What is it you want to say, old man? Let me hear it!”

The smell of sour fruit and pond water was overwhelming. Even the Cloaked Brood, waiting gruffly behind the Queen outside of the cube, had closed their slit nostrils. The delirious old man gagged.

But then he cried out, “My son! Oh, my stars! Is that you?” His eyes brightened and he reached out as if to hold a hand.

A wave of water splashed over him, striking him back into sense. Anger flooded his worn eyes.

“Soon, the time is coming, and I’ll require your help reuniting what’s rightfully mine,” the Dark Queen intoned coldly.

“I prefer death,” he choked out.

“Which can easily be arranged. Your death? Or your son’s death? You choose,” she smirked.

“The crown is not rightfully yours,” muttered the man between labored breaths, coughing up sour water.

She cackled. “You see, that’s where you’re wrong, Greeley. The crown was never meant to be hers.”