

HELEN SCHEUERER



VOWS & RUINS

AN EPIC ROMANTIC FANTASY

THE LEGENDS OF THEZMARR

BOOK II

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

For the true champions of Thezmarr – my readers.



PROPHECY OF THE MIDREALMS

*In the shadow of a fallen kingdom, in the eye of the storm
A daughter of darkness will wield a blade in one hand
And rule death with the other*

*When the skies are blackened, in the end of days
The Veil will fall.
The tide will turn when her blade is drawn.*

A dawn of fire and blood.

CHAPTER ONE

THEA



For the past three weeks, the blood-spattered training ring had become Thea's home, just as the rage coursing through her had become her anthem.

Girl. Alchemist. Shieldbearer. Woman. Guardian. Apprentice. Wraith slayer. Heir.

Each marker had burned hot and bright, and faded in her wake like ash as she strived for the only name she cared about: *Warsword*.

The fate stone resting against her heart was a stark reminder of just how little time she had left to achieve that dream. Two and a half years. A blink of an eye in a lifetime. A drop in an ocean. She had to make it count.

Thea flipped her blade in her scar-flecked hand, revelling in the weight of real steel, in the way it carved through the air at her will. She moved in a predatory circle around her opponent, ignoring the throbbing pain in her ribs and the strange tingling sensation of two bruised, swollen knuckles.

'You can't dance around me all day, Thea,' prompted Torj Elderbrock, the Bear Slayer, his own blade raised.

Desperate to shed the restlessness within, Thea struck, whirling lightly on her feet, aiming a precise slash at Torj's exposed side, the silver glinting in the early morning light.

He blocked easily. The ringing impact of his sword against hers vibrated up her arm, a reminder of the Furies-given strength the Warsword kept in check during their sparring sessions.

Little did he know that he wasn't the only one trying to contain his abilities.

Almost no one knew of the magic that stalked beneath Thea's skin, of the chaos she could unleash. The unbroken lightning was a song as she sparred. Like a cyren call from the ancient deep, it lured her to the greater power she could summon at her fingertips. Neither the comfort of the steel in her hand nor the persistent ache of her muscles could quell that crackle of magic surging through her now.

'Come on, Thea!' Kipp called enthusiastically from the sideline, shoving his auburn hair from his eyes with a grin.

Cal whistled his own encouragement from where he stood, bruised and bloodied from his own sparring match. 'You slayed a fucking shadow wraith. You can take him.'

'It was a reaper, actually,' Thea called back.

At Cal and Kipp's encouragement, guilt bloomed amid the sea of anger. They'd tried to talk to her over the last few weeks, but there was so much she couldn't tell them, so much she didn't understand herself.

Thea twirled her blade and adjusted her stance, readying herself to attack again, her Guardian totem strapped to her right arm, the crossed-swords symbol glinting in the sunlight as she delivered a swift upward cut to her temporary mentor.

Temporary, because her sworn mentor, Wilder Hawthorne, the Hand of Death and the most infamous warrior in all the midrealms, had abandoned her.

Their time together was a heated blur, culminating in the discovery of who she truly was...

A lost heir of Delmira. A *storm wielder*.

And then he'd drawn the line between them.

After unleashing her storm magic atop the cliffs and passing out, Thea had awoken in Hawthorne's bed to find him staring at her, his expression unreadable. For the briefest of moments, time had slowed between them, as a piece of a lifelong puzzle slid into place.

And then, mere minutes later, he'd disappeared without so much as a word.

She hadn't seen the bastard since.

No amount of training, no matter how hard she pushed herself, could douse her fury. It boiled within her, tangling with her raw magic, threatening to spill out into her life like a flood of flames. She wanted to be

a Warsword more than anything. And he was sworn to guide her. To help her prepare for the Great Rite.

He'd left her when she needed him most.

There was also the other fire he'd lit within her. The longing, the *need* for him raged equally as hot, even now. No matter what she did to stamp it out.

She hated him for it.

Exhaling, Thea parried and struck again, this time feinting right and raining down a succession of brutal slices.

'Good,' Torj allowed, knocking her sword aside.

But she'd anticipated that. She drew a steel star from her boot and, with a flick of her wrist, sent it flying.

It cleaved through the air and pinned Torj's sleeve to a nearby tree.

'I said *swords only* this time,' he grunted, his ice-blue eyes darkening in annoyance.

'I have to use whatever advantage I have,' Thea countered. She had honed a unique set of skills throughout her years of secret training, and she would use any and all of them to get what she wanted.

Torj's muscles rippled as he removed the throwing star from his now torn sleeve as easily as though it were a piece of lint. 'If you want me to keep training you with the others, you have to *listen*.'

Thea knew she was being unfair, that it was more than generous of the Bear Slayer to step up and take her under his wing alongside his own apprentice, Cal, and their inseparable friend, Kipp. But Torj didn't know her secret. He didn't know the kind of devastation she could wreak upon the realm. He didn't know that training her was *dangerous*.

Where the fuck is Hawthorne?

Torj seemed to sense the cause of her agitation and gave a heavy sigh, no doubt fed up with her foul mood and endless questions. 'He gave his word. He'll be back when he can. He knows your training is his responsibility.'

'Does he?' Thea muttered.

'Yes.'

'He's got a funny way of showing it.'

'Enough whining, Zoltaire,' Torj retorted. 'If you've got time to complain, you've got time to spar with more than one opponent.' He motioned to Cal. 'You're in. Kipp, you too.'

Thea rolled her sore shoulders, lifting her chin in defiance. *Good*. She wanted the challenge; she *needed* it. It was the only thing that kept the storm at bay.

Her friends grimaced as they approached, weapons in hand. They had been on the receiving end of her renewed training obsession for weeks now and all three of them bore the injuries to prove it. But it was Thea who never gave in. It was Thea who insisted they continue, even when they were bleeding and broken on the ground.

If she couldn't train with Hawthorne and she couldn't talk with Wren, she would hone her rage into a weapon of its own.

Her sister's name echoed through her like a bell. Thea hadn't seen it coming, the betrayal, and the tightness in her chest hadn't loosened since. It had only grown more taut, serving to fuel that tempest brewing inside her.

Thea took a deep breath and eyed up her opponents, determined to master the new strikes Torj had shown her. The golden-haired Warsword gave them a nod, and Thea launched herself into an attack. Her footwork was exact, the distribution of her weight flawless. Since the initiation, she had hardly put her sword down, had scarcely spent a second that wasn't training some part of herself for battle.

It showed.

Sweat-slicked and aching, she whirled her sword overhead again and struck Cal first. Her friend raised his shield just in time, while Kipp circled at her back. She ignored the strained look on his face, the one that told her he didn't recognise the snarling warrior before him as she advanced, striking with all her strength, carving, slashing and dodging as Cal came to Kipp's side.

She told herself that this was *good*, that they needed her at her hardest and fiercest if they were to improve as well. The midrealms needed more elite warriors, now more than ever.

Kipp's long-limbed, wiry build worked against him, and while Cal was lean and muscular, he didn't have the Furies-given strength or agility of a Warsword. Not yet.

And so she didn't hesitate. She didn't go easy on them. She beat both of them back, forcing them to yield more and more ground to her.

Thea forgot her pain and exhaustion. Her anger, her magic and her ambition roiled into one powerful driving force as she duelled the pair. She lost herself in the rhythm of the fight, until the rest of the world faded away,

until Torj's words of warning sounded distant, as though directed at someone else.

They sounded like, *Stop, Thea – I said stop!*

But the challenge had her in its thrall.

That's enough, Thea —

She barely registered the storm clouds gathering overhead.

Zoltaire, that's an order!

She hardly noticed the sweat dripping down her face, or the horrified expressions of her friends. Raining down blow after blow, dirt clouding at her boots, wind whipping at her face, she sparred.

She lived for the clang of the steel. She could feel its song in her soul. A balm to the lightning coursing through her veins —

Her sword met another.

The impact rattled her bones and sent her sprawling back. Something was different.

Blinded by the need to win, by the desperation to be worthy of the Great Rite, she scrambled up and lunged again, seeing nothing but red.

Again, her attack was powerfully deflected.

Only this time, she understood why. Her grip faltered and her weapon buckled as it met the other.

Naarvian steel.

A Warsword's blade.

It blocked her blow effortlessly, locking her sword in place and dragging it to the ground.

A second blade pressed against her neck. A cold kiss. The promise of blood spilt.

Somewhere in the distance, lightning sparked.

'You were given an order, Alchemist,' sounded a deep, commanding voice.

Thea would have known that voice anywhere. It had pulled her back from the brink of death, had whispered her name against her lips, had broken her heart in more ways than one...

Silver eyes met hers and Thea's breath caught.

The Hand of Death towered above her, his powerfully built frame clad in black armour that dripped red.

Against all reason, despite all her fury, that rich timbre skittered along her bones as Wilder Hawthorne leant in close and murmured, 'Or should I

call you “Princess” now?’

CHAPTER TWO

WILDER



The sight of her shook Wilder to the core. Not just the raging tempest in her celadon gaze, but the change in her appearance. She wore her bronze-and-gold hair in the usual side braid, but her fierce, beautiful face was gaunt, savage, battered and bruised. He could see two of her scarred knuckles were dislocated, and though she moved fluidly, she winced slightly when she twisted. No doubt she had injured her ribs.

Thea hadn't been looking after herself.

The state of her took him back to the shock of seeing her pitted against the reaper in the Bloodwoods, back to the way she'd been on the cusp of death itself when he'd ordered her to stay with him.

'Don't you dare give up now,' he'd told her.

Lightning had split the sky, had pierced the reaper, but it hadn't been enough. The fucking monster had still got its talons in her, had still marked the flesh above her heart with its evil, a promise of a fate worse than death.

There had been no question when Wilder had given her his vial of Aveum springwater. If there were ever a reason to use it, that had been it, and he regretted nothing.

Wilder had hoped that the three weeks away from her would stifle the inferno blazing inside him, but he had no such luck. It struck him anew, stronger than ever, like a blow to the chest as soon as he clapped eyes on her.

And now, he was furious with her.

'What the fuck have you been doing to yourself?' he demanded, not caring that Torj and the two Guardians still stood within earshot. It was all he could do to keep himself from grabbing her and pulling her close.

Thea's eyes narrowed, her knuckles paling as her grip tightened around her sword. 'I've been training.'

'*Training?*' Wilder gave a dark laugh. The harsh sound was enough to send Torj, Cal and Kipp slinking away from the training ring, leaving mentor and apprentice to withstand the gathering storm alone.

Wilder took in the sight of her once more, rage unfurling low in his gut. 'There's a right way to train, and getting yourself into this state isn't it.'

'Whose fault is that?' Thea spat.

'It's *your* fault. Given everything you did to get here, I thought you'd be taking this more seriously. I thought you'd realise that you need to be *strong*, not broken.'

Thea lifted her chin, defiant. 'I'm far from broken.'

'Your dislocated knuckles and your cracked ribs say otherwise,' Wilder replied coldly. 'I thought you learnt this lesson when you were a shieldbearer. There are days to rest, and days to fight.'

Thea took a step towards him, her eyes blazing. 'Every day's a fighting day when death is closing in on you.'

'Death comes for us all, Princess. One way or another. You're no use to anyone if you keel over because a broken rib punctured your lung. And those knuckles? If they're not set, you could do permanent damage to your hand.'

He watched her suck in a breath, watched as she warred with her temper and the truth of his words.

He wasn't nearly done with her. 'When was the last time you ate a decent meal? A full serving?'

'I eat.'

'Not well enough. And don't even start me on your drills. What was that display just now?' he pressed, gesturing to the ring. 'Is *that* how you're sparring?'

'I was *winning*.'

'You were *messy*. Undisciplined. What's worse, you're not nearly where you should be. I was leagues ahead in my development —'

'Probably because your mentor actually deigned to *teach you*, not run off into the wilderness.'

She was suddenly close enough that Wilder could feel the warmth radiating from her body. He could smell the storm on her, a violent sea with

notes of bergamot. He couldn't stop his gaze tracing her curves, curves he hadn't worshipped nearly enough during their brief time together.

Gods, he was not ready to fight this battle.

'Where did you go?' she asked. 'What was so important that you had to rush off without a word after everything we'd been through? After what we discovered?'

Wilder clenched his jaw. He hadn't wanted to leave her, ever. But he had needed to be sure that there weren't more reapers rallying together and thirsting for her power, that word of the woman with lightning in her blood hadn't spread. So he'd left her in his cabin and gone to the closest tear in the Veil in search of monsters and secrets.

He'd found them in droves.

'My whereabouts are no concern of yours,' he told her at last.

Thea's nostrils flared slightly, her jaw clenched as she shook her head in what seemed to be grim satisfaction, as though she had been proven right. 'So this is truly how you mean it to be between us? Master and apprentice and nothing more. Like nothing ever happened?'

Furies save him, his mind went right back to the moment he'd had her against the tree in the Bloodwoods, plunging his cock into her while she cried out his name, each stroke more intoxicating than the last.

He gritted his teeth. 'Yes.'

'Then stop looking at me like that,' she snapped.

'Like what?'

'Like you've seen me naked.'

He couldn't help the blush that stained his cheeks then, but he steeled himself and unsheathed his sword. 'If you've trained so damn hard, if your injuries are so insignificant,' he said, his voice dangerously low, 'let's see what you can do.'

Thea's glare could have wilted a lesser man, and he didn't blame her. In fact, it was *good* that she was angry. Perhaps she'd claw his face off rather than rake her claws down his back —

She got into her starting stance, feet apart and knees bent.

Wilder didn't wait. He attacked. Containing the brute force of his Furies-given strength, he unleashed blow after blow, hoping to show her just how far she had yet to go, how much there was still to learn as a Guardian, and that there were limits to what she could achieve in such a short space of time. He was careful of those swollen knuckles, of the

obvious pain in her side. When she wasn't so headstrong he'd teach her about the importance of self-care, but he knew no words would puncture that hard exterior now.

Thea matched his every strike. He could feel her muscles trembling with the effort of blocking, but she was fast and agile, even as he advanced, forcing her across the width of the training area.

As she moved, he saw her fate stone come loose from the confines of her shirt.

'I saw you throw that off the cliff,' he murmured, brows furrowed.

She thrust her sword at him. 'It found its way back to me.'

'How?' He deflected her blade and delivered a swift counterattack.

'It was on the table after you left,' she said through gritted teeth.

He dodged another strike. 'How?'

'Fate.'

'And you just put it back on? Without knowing —'

'You don't get to judge my choices.'

He could feel the rage rippling off her in waves, and it stoked his own anger, and his desire. The warring emotions tangled into an insatiable drug as they duelled across the grounds, a blur of silver, sparks flying from their steel.

Overhead, the heavy clouds that had gathered across the morning sun broke.

The skies opened up, and rain began to pelt down on them.

Neither yielded.

Wilder moved by pure muscle memory, his thoughts consumed by her as each slice, each thrust of the blade fuelled the tension that pulsed between them. Water flew from their weapons and limbs as they fought in the downpour.

Wilder parried and deflected a vicious cut, locking his blade to hers and forcing her backwards, the heels of her boots digging into the fast-forming mud.

'Tell me, *mentor*.' Thea hissed the last word as though it were dirty. 'What do *you* have to be so furious about?'

The steel sang between them, echoing up into the surrounding mountains.

Wilder pivoted, blood roaring in his ears as he flipped his sword and threw a horizontal slash from his stronger side to her weaker side, causing

her to falter.

‘What do *I* have to be furious about?’ he repeated, advancing.

She lunged, messily. He dodged the blow and moved forward into her space, blocking her next strike and trapping her blade with his.

‘You mean besides this situation? The one I never wanted to be in?’ The words came tumbling out. ‘You mean besides Osiris forcing my hand and using my defence of you against me?’

Thea was panting. But he didn’t stop, a fist of rage clamping around him.

‘Or do you mean the fact that you thought so little of me that you imagined I’d discard you upon knowing the truth about your fate stone? About your heritage? And now, to come back to find you —’

Thea surged forward, taking him by surprise and driving him back. ‘But that’s *exactly* what you did, you bastard. You *left*. You fucking *left me*.’

Her words pierced his heart, regret bitter on his tongue. But he wouldn’t apologise, not at the risk of undoing the distance he’d put between them. Distance was good. Distance was safe.

They burst into another heated round of sparring, blades flashing, mud spraying beneath their boots in the flurry of footwork.

He blocked a savage blow and kicked her feet out from under her with an efficient sweep of his leg.

She landed on her back in a puddle.

Wilder’s triumph was fleeting, because Thea was quick, faster than he remembered. In an instant, she’d kicked out, delivering a surprisingly powerful strike to the back of his knees. He buckled.

Before he had registered it, Thea flung herself on top of him, trapping him beneath her. She straddled his waist, the sharp edge of her sword drawn to his throat as she leant in close, her breasts heaving against his chest.

‘You’re a bastard.’

‘You knew that from the start,’ he growled. That tight coil of desire within him unravelled as his focus honed in on every point of contact between them, on the friction between their bodies, on her heat pressing into him.

He could feel the cold brush of the steel against his skin, his throat bobbing as he drank in the sight of her, as he relished her touch, however violent. His cock was rock hard between them; there was no denying it.

Her gaze pierced his. She was so close, close enough that he might just risk slitting his own throat on her blade to lean in and —

Her eyes dropped to his mouth and she bit her lower lip, her breath audibly catching, rage and arousal entwined.

In that moment, Wilder didn't care what vows he'd made to himself. He didn't care that he was her mentor and that she was not only his apprentice, but a lost princess of the midrealms. He wanted her mouth on his, he wanted —

She cast the sword aside and kissed him.

Furies save him. *This. This* was why he hadn't slept in weeks. *This* was what he had imagined day after day since they'd parted.

A low, carnal moan escaped him as he opened his mouth to her, her tongue brushing against his, her teeth capturing his lower lip. Wilder kissed her fiercely, uninhibited, unleashed, fighting the roaring instinct to strip her bare and fuck her in the mud.

He ground into her from beneath, cursing the layers of clothing between them, seeking the wet heat of her. He gripped her backside and crushed her against his erection. A whimper caught in her throat and she pressed her breasts to his chest. They were starved, desperate for one another. Those three weeks had been the longest of his life.

He sat up, cradling her in his lap, breaking their kiss only to scrape his teeth down the side of her neck, tasting sweat and rain, eliciting a soft cry of pleasure from her. Longing coursed through him and the urge to take her then and there heightened, becoming all-consuming. He cupped her breast through her shirt, her nipple hard against his palm, and she gasped.

'Wilder —'

Gods, he loved it when she said his name. It caused a vibration in his chest, a storm of his own —

Thea leapt off him. The cold swept in as she snatched up her blade and sheathed it, veering back from him as though burned. 'We can't,' she panted. 'You made yourself clear in the broom closet. Remember? Do you remember what you said to me?'

'If you insist on this stupid arrangement, then so be it. We will be mentor and apprentice, nothing more... What happened in the Bloodwoods was a mistake. It won't ever happen again, Alchemist.'

Wilder was on his feet in an instant, straightening his clothes and adjusting his cock. 'I remember,' he murmured. He blinked through the

rain, cursing himself and his lack of control. He was a Warsword of Thezmarr, for fuck's sake, and he'd caved. Within mere moments of his return, despite all his vows and good intentions, he'd caved. And in the middle of the drenched training ground, no less. Anyone could have seen them.

But he couldn't help himself – not when it came to her.

'You're right. This shouldn't have happened.' He forced out the words, looking away from the blush staining her cheeks, from the rise and fall of her breasts. 'It was a mistake.'

'I suppose you can add it to your list,' Thea said bitterly. 'It gets longer by the day.'

Wilder raked his fingers through his hair. He would *never* put her on any such list, but perhaps that was best left unsaid. He took a steadying breath, gathering himself before he rummaged through his pocket and thrust a blood-stained piece of parchment at her.

'What's this?'

'Drills, weights, endurance exercises and meditations for you to do.'

'Unbelievable,' she muttered.

And Wilder couldn't help but echo a reply he had made to her once before. 'You have no idea.'

Still fighting to catch her breath, she studied his instructions with a scowl. 'Some of these look more like dances than combat practice.'

'I don't dance. I kill. As will you.' He met her gaze, unflinching. 'You're going to be training hard. Training right.'

'I *have* been training hard.'

'Not with me.' He made sure the implication was clear: whatever she had experienced up until now was nothing. The training at the hands of the guild's masters had only been the beginning. His anger sparked anew as he thought of how she'd run herself ragged, of how she'd failed to tend to those dislocated knuckles. He'd put them back in place himself if he could stand the idea of hurting her. 'You're to see a healer at once. If we're going to be living together —'

Thea blanched. '*What?*'

'You'll be moving into the cabin after the evening meal tonight.'

'I will do no such thing.'

'Apprentices share quarters with their masters.'

'Cal still lives at the fortress,' Thea argued.

‘Because Torj does,’ Hawthorne ground out. ‘I do not live at the fortress, nor do I wish to. Therefore, you’ll be moving to the cabin. And if we’re going to be living together in my house, then you’ll live by *my* rules.’

Wilder felt the flicker of lightning from her. He met her incredulous glare with a challenging one of his own.

‘You’re the one who wanted to be an apprentice so badly. This is it, Princess.’

CHAPTER THREE

THEA



Thank the Furies he'd walked off. If Thea had stood out there in the rain with him any longer, there was no telling whether she would have fought him again, fucked him, or both. Her heart hammered in her chest, in time with the pulse of heat between her legs.

Wilder Hawthorne had looked as fierce as ever, his sharp jaw lined with a dark beard, his sun-kissed skin covered in dirt from travel. He was just as he had been when they had fought the reaper together: formidable, deadly... *Hers*.

She pushed the thought aside. He had never truly been hers. But when she'd had him beneath her, her blade pressed to his throat and all that hard muscle against her, not a single sane thought had remained in her head.

Suddenly, she'd been taken back to the hours before the initiation test, where she'd gripped that arrow as Hawthorne fucked her against the tree, his beautiful, tattooed body bare in the dappled moonlight. Pleasure, and something deeper, had rolled through her as he'd moved inside her, as he'd moaned her name against her lips.

'*Once was not enough, Thea...*' he had groaned after wringing a shattering climax from her that left her trembling. '*Not nearly enough.*'

Now, as she gathered her belongings, she stewed in her anger. How *dare* he? How dare he leave her high and dry, only to swoop back in three weeks later with such commands? And *living together*? What in the midrealms was he playing at?

She winced as she sheathed her blade with more vigour than she intended, peering down at her swollen knuckles. *Dislocated*, Hawthorne had declared.

Truth be told, she couldn't even remember during which sparring session it had happened. The past few weeks had blurred into one long streak of swordplay, archery, strategy meetings and endurance training as she had tried to forget everything else. She'd gone about life as an official Guardian of Thezmarr as required: committing to training, drills and learning the art of war. She was the first woman warrior of the guild in over two decades, and she wouldn't waste the opportunity. To be part of Thezmarr was more than a lifestyle; it was a culture, a religion.

Flexing her fingers tentatively as she started back towards the fortress, she hissed at the pain, noting the restricted movement and the mottled blue-and-green discolouration. As the rain subsided and the noon sun hit its peak, her instinct was to find Cal and Kipp and partake in whatever drills they were now trying to master, but... Gods, she hated it when Hawthorne was right. If the swelling on her knuckles continued, or the tug of pain in her ribs worsened, she'd be of no use to anyone, least of all herself.

Usually she'd go to Wren for this sort of thing. The Master Alchemist, Farissa, had taught her sister every healing trick in the book, and the Furies knew Wren had tended to more than her fair share of scrapes over the years. But those days were over. Instead, when Thea reached the fortress, she made for the library.

Malik, the former Warsword and Hawthorne's brother, was there in his usual armchair by the fire.

'Hello, Shieldbreaker,' Thea said as the giant man looked up from the leather belt he was braiding and beamed at her.

Malik's dog, Dax, wagged his tail from his spot at his master's feet.

Thea dropped into the chair beside them and held out her injured hand. 'Don't suppose you can do something about this?' she asked.

Malik stared, his gaze going distant for a moment before he took her small hand in his much larger one, shaking his head slowly.

'It was worth a shot.' Thea sighed. 'Guess I'll have to go to the infirm —'

There was a loud *pop*. Followed by blinding pain.

'Fuck!' Thea shouted, rearing back. 'Furies fucking save —'

Another *pop* sounded. And a garbled scream escaped Thea as more agony lanced through her hand.

But then came the relief.

Thea's fingers were tingling, but that initial pain had vanished.

She moved her fingers cautiously. They were still stiff, still aching, but the range of movement wasn't nearly as restricted.

Malik gripped her hand gently, stopping her from flexing.

'No moving them for a while, huh?' she asked.

Malik shook his head again, getting to his feet and rummaging through the basket of kindling by the hearth.

Thea felt a bead of sweat drip down between her shoulder blades as she sagged back into the chair. 'You could have warned me,' she muttered.

Malik ignored this, returning to his chair and holding out his palm.

Thea reluctantly returned her hand to him, watching as he set a straight stick against the line of one of her injured fingers and bound it with the leather he'd been using to braid. He did the same for the second injured finger.

When he was done, Thea lifted her hand up, examining the ludicrous strapping. 'What in the realms am I meant to do with this?'

Malik grinned.

'Your sense of humour needs work, my friend,' Thea huffed, but she gave his arm a grateful squeeze all the same. 'Suppose it'll force me to work on my weaker sword hand.'

After Hawthorne had left, after he'd promised that they'd work things out together and then abandoned her in her moment of need, it was Malik Thea had turned to. He had been her one constant since earning her Guardian totem, even after she'd realised that he'd known who she was all along.

'You once told me: beware the fury of a patient Delmirian,' she'd said to him. *'I know now that I'm a Delmirian... But I don't know what the rest means, Mal. I'm certainly not the patient type, am I?'*

Malik had reached for the dagger – his dagger – at her hip, and tapped its grip twice.

For whatever reason, it had given her comfort in a sea of rage. As had the foreign words etched along the weapon's blade: *Glory in death, immortality in legend*. She'd vowed then and there that with her brief remaining years, that was what she would strive for.

Now, Malik the Shieldbreaker watched her from his armchair, fondness in his gaze. His expression was so different, so open compared to that of his Warsword sibling.

Thea raised a brow, her fingers throbbing dully. ‘In case I haven’t mentioned it recently... Your brother’s a complete arse, by the way.’

Malik looked delighted.



Hawthorne’s return had brought with it a near insatiable fervour to win, to prove him wrong, to beat him. Which was why Thea found herself wandering the corridors she knew Wren frequented. Her sister had been trying to meet with her for weeks, insisting that they learn to train their magic, but Thea had been too angry to face her. But though Wren was the last person she’d admit it to, Thea was actually desperate to harness her power. At night, with only her fate stone for company, she would close her eyes and imagine the keen edge storm magic would give her against her opponents, against whatever obstacles awaited her in the Great Rite. It had already helped her defeat a *rheguld reaper*; what more could she do with such abilities at her fingertips?

Tentative hope blooming in her chest, Thea arrived at her sister’s quarters and pounded on the door.

It swung inward almost immediately and she was confronted by a familiar pair of celadon eyes.

‘Thea!’ Her sister rushed forward to grasp her arms and pull her inside.

Instinctively, Thea jerked out of Wren’s grip and was met with a pained expression.

‘I thought...’ Wren ventured slowly. ‘I thought this might mean you’d forgiven me...’

Still tense, Thea cleared her throat. ‘One step at a time.’

‘Alright,’ Wren said, before forcing a note of brightness into her words. ‘What can I do for you?’

Thea licked her lips. ‘I... I want to know more about my – our – magic. I want to learn how to control it, harness it.’

Wren was beaming. ‘I’ve been waiting for this day for so long!’ She reached for her cloak on the hook by the door.

Thea bit her tongue, refraining from pointing out that the day would have arrived sooner had Wren not deceived her so thoroughly. ‘Where are we going?’

‘To see Audra.’

‘Now?’

‘Absolutely.’

From Wren’s confidence, Thea deduced that her sister and the librarian had conversed on the subject numerous times before, but she quelled her annoyance. It didn’t matter, so long as Audra knew how to help her. With her guidance, Thea would be the first storm-wielding Warsword to walk the midrealms.

Wren was already impatiently tugging her down the hall. She skidded to a stop outside another door, rapping her knuckles against the timber.

‘What?’ Audra snapped as she yanked the door open, before her eyes fell upon the two sisters. ‘Oh. It’s you.’

‘We’re ready, Audra,’ Wren told her eagerly. ‘Thea wants to learn —’

‘Well, don’t just stand out there, get inside. Quickly.’ Audra ushered them into the room, her grey dress swishing around her ankles, her ceremonial daggers strapped to her waist as always. She rounded on Thea. ‘It’s about time.’

Thea folded her arms defensively over her chest. ‘So, you *have* known all along.’

Audra didn’t seem fazed by her accusatory tone. ‘I only suspected,’ she answered calmly.

‘You didn’t think sharing those suspicions might be worthwhile?’

‘The longer you didn’t know, the longer you were protected. Delmira was not looked upon fondly in its final days. And when Wren discovered the truth, I thought it was her place to share that with you, not mine.’

Wren shifted awkwardly before reaching for Thea again. ‘Thee, you have to forgive me. I did it for *you*.’

Thea scoffed. ‘Whatever helps you sleep at night.’

Audra cleared her throat. ‘This would go easier if you worked *together*.’

‘You should have told her that *before* she lied to me, *before* she used alchemy on me for years on end. And all that time, Wren, you told me not to think about who our family was. That they were awful for abandoning us, when *you knew* who they were.’

‘Well, it sounds like they *were* awful. And besides, now you know, what have you done with the knowledge?’ Wren bit back. ‘Have you even looked them up? Do you feel better about being a Thezmarrian orphan now?’

‘I’m here now, aren’t I? I’m ready to learn, ready to harness my magic.’

‘Now that it serves your purpose,’ Wren snapped.

Thea took a step towards her, fists clenched. Her fury was a living beast inside her, roiling through her, demanding freedom from its chains. And the worst part was that it didn’t rage for Wren alone, but for herself as well. For what *had* she done with that knowledge? She’d been too afraid to look up their family history, too cowardly to learn what her true name was, lest it untether her from the self that she had fought so hard to forge.

There had been a book in Hawthorne’s cabin, *A Study of Royal Lineage Throughout the Midrealms*... He’d left it open, practically marking the page for her. But Thea had closed it and shoved it away, unable to muster the fortitude to read it. She had lived in the shadow of it ever since.

‘That’s enough,’ Audra said with sufficient force that both young women’s attention snapped to her. ‘I am not here to mend sisterly squabbles. I am here because the pair of you need help. Or will you deny it?’

In answer, Thea’s magic simmered beneath the surface and an ache bloomed behind her eyes. Her sleep had been broken, haunted by dreams of the reaper in the Bloodwoods, and the vision her brush with death had shown her. That vision came to her again now...

The scorched courtyard smelt of blood and heather.

Bodies lay lifeless on the cobbles; seeping crimson into the ground while the wheels on an upturned cart still spun, mead flowing from broken barrels...

Darkness had descended upon Thezmarr, and at its heart was a copper-haired little girl, no older than six, clutching a necklace of dried flowers and a small scythe of Naarvian steel to her pounding chest. The last of the onyx power left the blade in curling tendrils, wisps of magic swallowed by rolling thunder that seemed to call her name.

Anya.

The little girl whose name chimed like a familiar, eerie bell at the back of Thea’s mind. So strange, what the monster had shown her. Thea shuddered at the memory and forced herself to picture something else: images of herself wielding lightning in the Great Rite, stronger than she’d ever been.

She met Audra’s expectant gaze at last. ‘I won’t deny it.’

The librarian pushed her spectacles back up her nose and gave a stiff nod. ‘Good. And you, Elwren?’

Wren was nodding. 'I need help,' she said, voice cracking.

Thea had to fight the urge to go to her. It had always been the two of them, together against the world. She hated the thought of her sister suffering, in pain without Thea by her side. But Wren had broken something between them, and Thea had been nothing but a fool for it, so she remained where she was, even as a tear tracked down Wren's cheek.

'Just as well,' Audra was saying. 'Today, we learn the history of storm wielders, of your family. Then in our next session, we'll go somewhere safe, where we can endeavour to partake in a more practical lesson —'

'Can't we start on the practical today?' Thea interjected, thinking of how she might use the skills in her private sparring sessions.

'No.'

Irritation flared. 'What could you know of storm magic?' Thea demanded.

'I'm a librarian,' Audra said bluntly. 'I know everything.'

'That's not it,' Thea ventured. 'There's something more.'

Audra gave a huff of amusement. 'I take it you don't know the meaning of my name?'

Thea frowned. 'Why would I?'

'*Audra* is a name passed down through all the women in my family. It means "storm".'

Thea's skin prickled. 'Why? Why did they give you a name with that meaning?'

Wren was staring at Audra now, gobsmacked. Thea felt some small satisfaction at that. At last, something her sister didn't know.

Audra sniffed. 'I'm a descendant of the tutors who used to teach the Delmirian line.' The older woman surveyed them critically, as though weighing up whether they were worthy. 'I am the granddaughter of the tutor who taught your parents storm magic.'

Thea baulked. 'What? But you're...'

'A librarian?' Audra supplied drily.

'A warrior,' Thea corrected. 'How —'

'The details are irrelevant. What matters is that I'm the only person who has any inkling of knowledge about how you might summon and control your power.' She gestured to the far corner of the room, where dozens of books had been stacked in precarious piles atop a wide table. 'For our theory and history lessons, we'll be here.'

For the first time since her arrival, Thea looked around and realised she had no idea where they were. ‘Where is here?’

Audra gave a long-suffering sigh. ‘My private chambers. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that these sessions are *confidential*. Shall we begin?’

Without waiting for a response, she pushed a familiar-looking tome towards the sisters. It was the book from Hawthorne’s cabin, with a messy star scrawled beside a list of royals. But the list ended without branching off into the offspring of the reigning couple. The line had died, or so it had been recorded.

‘You come from a long line of powerful storm wielders. Your parents, King Soren and Queen Brigh of the Embervale family —’

Thea’s stomach turned to lead. She was not a Zoltaire. She didn’t even know where that name had come from, had never asked.

She was an *Embervale*.

As was Wren.

Elwren *Embervale*. Althea *Embervale*... It didn’t sound right. It didn’t sound like *her*.

Audra continued. ‘— possessed some of the most potent magic the midrealms had ever seen. It was said that their magic could be felt across the realms, causing terror tempests in faraway lands.’

Thea recalled the crackle of lightning at her fingertips, how she’d summoned it to strike the reaper in the Bloodwoods, and again when it nearly cleaved the sky in two atop the cliffs by the black mountains.

Had *her* magic been felt elsewhere too?

‘When Delmira descended into ruin thirty years ago, the blame fell at the feet of King Soren and Queen Brigh. They were tyrants who sought to bring the other kingdoms under their command. As a result, their own kingdom succumbed to the dark forces from beyond the Veil a few years before you were born, but not before the Embervale royals poisoned the minds of the Naarvian king and queen. They followed in your parents’ footsteps, taking up their power-hungry mantle, only to follow their demise as well.’

A sour taste filled Thea’s mouth. All those times she had wondered about her heritage, had wondered if she was from a family of fighters. She had imagined a warrior father, a sword-swinging mother... But she had never considered something so damning. She was the daughter of tyrants, a

truth so at odds with her lifelong dream of becoming a defender of the midrealms.

Audra paused to let her words sink in before she spoke again. ‘There are things you need to know – laws, protocols and such – before you make any decisions about your futures.’

‘I have been researching,’ Wren offered eagerly, her hands tracing over the Embervale family tree in the book before her. ‘I know that if an heir of a fallen kingdom announces themselves, the rest of the kingdoms are obligated to help them rebuild, to see the heir back on their throne for the balance of the midrealms.’

Thea’s blood went cold. ‘What?’

Wren forged on, still trailing her fingers across their written lineage. ‘But there was no royal announcement of any heirs being born before Delmira fell, no official line of succession.’

‘Broken kingdom or not, you are storm wielders,’ Audra replied. ‘There is no denying that you are the trueborn heirs of the Embervale family.’

Wren glanced from their warden to Thea, looking nervous. ‘Then we can take back the kingdom? Thea can reclaim the Delmirian throne?’

Thea was convinced she was misunderstanding. There was no way that her alchemy-loving sister was considering such a ridiculous notion, was there? Wren was too clever for that.

To Thea’s surprise, Audra was more patient than usual. ‘While that law does require the kingdoms to help heirs rebuild, it’s not so simple. Delmira is known as the dark stain on the midrealms’ history... And the children of adversaries are not celebrated.’

Thea’s ears were ringing now.

Audra wasn’t done. ‘Think about it. What existing rulers will want to pour their coin and limited resources into the rebuilding of a kingdom that might once again try to overthrow them?’

Wren made a noise of frustration. ‘It sounds like you’re trying to convince us to keep ourselves a secret... To hide.’

‘That is between the heirs of Delmira and no one else. I’m trying to convince you to be *smart*,’ Audra cautioned.

Wren turned to Thea, her eyes bright, as though she’d heard none of Audra’s warnings. ‘Think what this could mean, Thee. Imagine what you could change... You could see women warriors return to Thezmarr. Or start

a women warrior guild of your own. Reclaim your throne, our kingdom and —’

‘What throne? What kingdom?’ Thea shook her head in disbelief, her chest painfully tight. ‘I have no interest in being an heir of a fallen kingdom. I have no desire to rule over lands that fester and host swarms of shadow wraiths. The only reason I am here is to learn how to master my magic, so that I might be a stronger Warsword, a better protector of the midrealms.’

Silence slid between them like a bolt into a lock.

A long moment passed, amplifying the unnatural void of quiet.

Dread unfurled in the pit of Thea’s stomach. ‘What?’

‘Althea...’ Audra said gently.

Gentle was not in Audra’s nature. That alone was enough to startle Thea, to clamp her teeth down on the inside of her cheek.

Audra’s hand slid across the table towards her. ‘You cannot be *both* a storm wielder and a Warsword.’

Thea drew back from her touch, staring at the librarian. ‘What?’

‘The laws of the midrealms are ironclad. A born magic wielder cannot undertake the Great Rite. It has been this way for centuries. A Warsword has to be without bias towards any kingdom.’

Thea blinked slowly, feeling nauseous. ‘That’s...’ But she couldn’t finish her sentence.

‘You have to choose, Thea,’ Audra said. Any fleeting notes of compassion were gone. Her voice was now sharp with authority, with command.

Thea was still shaking her head, her hands trembling as she stood on unsteady feet. ‘I can’t.’

‘You must.’

Wren reached for her. ‘Thea, magic is a part of you. You can’t deny who you are. You’re an heir —’

That familiar storm of fury reared up inside her and Thea shoved her chair back, starting towards the door. ‘I already told you. I have no interest in ruling a kingdom of ruins.’

And with that, she left. She could give no more.

CHAPTER FOUR

WILDER



Wilder was hunched over a table in the library opposite Malik, a sea of open books between them. His brother stared intently at a page of footwork diagrams, his fingers braiding leather strings absentmindedly, his dog Dax curled up at his feet.

Wilder watched them for a moment with a pang of regret. Malik had been the first person who had faced his wrath when he'd discovered the truth about Thea.

'You knew all along... You knew when you gave her that dagger six fucking years ago,' he had yelled. 'Gods, you even fucking told her, didn't you? What was it you said to her when Enovius nearly had you in his clutches? "Beware the fury of a patient Delmirian"? Then you gave me that damn book. For fuck's sake, Mal.'

All the while, Malik had smiled, and Wilder had had no choice but to move past it. He would never know how Malik had come by the information about the Zoltaire sisters. He could only trust that, like him, Mal always had Thea's best interests at heart.

Now, sensing Wilder's attention, his brother looked up, recognition passing over his face. As though making up his mind, the gentle giant reached into his pocket and held out a squashed scroll.

Wilder sat back and sighed. 'You opening my mail now, too?'

Malik didn't look bothered in the slightest.

Wilder took the parchment and unravelled it, scanning its contents, realising now that it was probably best that Malik had indeed been on the receiving end of the message, rather than anyone else in the guild. The

missive was from his contact in Naarva – *Dratos the Dawnless*, as he called himself – who reported his findings of monsters across the fallen kingdom.

Keep them away from the southern isle, it read.

He waved the parchment at Malik. ‘You read it?’

Mal didn’t answer, but inclined his head slightly, which told Wilder that he had.

‘Dratos overestimates my influence.’

Malik made a noise of agreement, before tapping one of the books in front of Wilder.

‘I know, I know,’ he said, balling up the message and tossing it atop the glowing embers in the hearth, watching it catch alight.

He scanned the overwhelming spread of books on the table. They had been putting together a training program for Thea. So far, they had combined the best of the official Guardian curriculum and their own apprenticeship lessons into a gruelling schedule, but one that would give her the best shot if the Great Rite were to open and challenge her.

The hour was late now. Wilder gathered the sheets of parchment they’d worked on and left his brother and Dax by the fire, dreading the council meeting that was due to start shortly. He had always hated them, usually making excuses to be elsewhere whenever he was asked to attend one. The missive delivered to his cabin, however, had stated that this meeting was *mandatory*.

He was so caught up in thoughts of the report he was supposed to deliver that he slammed straight into someone as he rounded a corner.

Thea.

‘What are you doing?’ he said, tucking the papers into his jerkin. But when he stared down at her, he realised there was something wrong. Where she’d usually tilt her chin up and meet his eyes in challenge, her gaze darted away.

His attention snagged on the splints at her fingers. Was this why she was upset? Had a healer told her she couldn’t spar until she was healed? ‘Did you have your ribs seen to as well?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

A lie. Wilder saw it instantly, folding his arms across his chest. ‘Let’s try that again. *Have you had your ribs seen to?*’

He could practically hear her grinding her teeth. ‘No.’

Gripping her arm, he pulled her into the nearest room. An unused workshop space. Closing the door behind them, he turned to her. 'Show me.'

'You can't be serious.'

'Have you ever known me to joke about your wellbeing?'

After a brief glaring standoff, Thea gave a muffled cry of frustration, her hands shooting to her shirt, yanking the fabric from her waistband to reveal her bare side. 'There. Happy?'

Tilting his head, Wilder surveyed the mottled bruising there, wincing on her behalf. He leant in, biting his bottom lip as he slid his hand ever so gently across her skin.

She took a trembling breath beneath his touch.

Carefully, he applied pressure across her ribs, his eyes flicking to her to gauge her reaction.

'It's fine,' Thea muttered.

'You're hardly a good judge of that.' He continued his examination. There was no swelling, but he watched her face for signs of wheezing and pain. 'Nor have you got a reputation for honesty.'

Thea's cheeks flushed, even more so as his hand travelled north, pushing her chest band up and exploring the ribs closest to her breast.

Blood roared in his ears, but he tried to maintain a dispassionate tone. 'Have you been coughing? Suffering shortness of breath?'

'No,' she replied, despite the fact that they were both keenly aware she sounded breathless.

'You need to look after yourself. To keep yourself healthy so that when I train you, I don't break you.'

Her pupils dilated. 'Nothing can break me, Warsword. Least of all you.'

'Is that so?' Her skin was warm beneath his fingers, goosebumps breaking out across her side.

'Have you finished groping me?' she said sharply.

Hawthorne dropped his hands and stepped back, refusing to blush and hoping she didn't notice the effect she was having on him. 'Have you finished lying to me?'

Thea didn't answer.

Wilder sighed and gestured to her ribs. 'They're bruised, not broken.'

'See? Fine.'

He couldn't help himself. He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing her eyes to meet his. 'Not fine, Alchemist. You're far from fine.'

'Don't tell me what I am.'

'Then don't lie to me.'

They stared at one another, neither one of them willing to yield. It was Thea who broke away, adjusting her chest band and tucking her shirt back in.

But Wilder couldn't stand it. 'Tell me what's wrong. Besides —'

Thea's brows shot up. 'Besides everything with you?'

'Yes,' he said, resigned. 'There's something more. I can tell.'

Thea looked torn between storming off and arguing with him, but in the end, she threw her hands up in defeat. 'I don't have time to argue or pretend this doesn't matter to me,' she snapped. 'Two and a half years, that's all I get. And now I have to choose.'

Wilder frowned, ignoring the reference to the fate stone he knew rested between her breasts. 'Choose?'

Thea broke into frantic pacing across the room. 'Audra says that I can't be both a magic wielder and a Warsword. That I have to choose. She says the laws are *ironclad* —'

'Since when do you give a shit about laws?' Wilder said.

'Since I discovered I'm a fucking heir of a kingdom,' Thea bit back, still pacing. 'Since I became an apprentice to a Warsword who won't fucking train me. Since I found out that yet again, the laws of men can determine who and what I am in the limited time I have left in these realms.' The words came pouring out of her, and it was only then that she met his eyes again, and he saw the truth behind her outburst: fear, hopelessness.

He didn't go to her. He didn't touch her. Instead, he reached into his jerkin and pulled out the training program he'd created, offering it to her.

'You've never let the laws hold you back before,' he said quietly. 'If you master your storm magic alongside your warrior training, who the fuck is going to stop you?'

He pushed the pages into Thea's hand, her expression stunned.

'Get your things,' he told her. 'And be ready. Tomorrow we have work to do.'



Walking away from Thea took more willpower than Wilder cared to admit, but he was already late for the council meeting. He strode into the dimly lit room and surveyed the figures seated in high-backed chairs around the mahogany table. Osiris, the Guild Master, sat at the head of the table as usual; Vernich was to his right, and to Wilder's surprise, Audra, the librarian, was to his left.

Nodding in greeting, Wilder removed the swords from his back and took up his place opposite the Bear Slayer further down the table. Torj gave him a shit-eating grin that made Wilder want to throttle him. He'd asked his friend – though he used the term loosely now – to look out for Thea in his absence, which apparently had amused his fellow Warsword to no end. But to Wilder's relief, there was no time for innuendo or ribbing as Osiris called the meeting to a start.

'We have much to discuss this evening,' he said, his face grave. 'We are all familiar with the words that changed the course of Thezmarr's history over twenty years ago...' The Guild Master waited for a moment before he recited: '*A daughter of darkness will wield a blade in one hand, and rule death with the other...*'

He looked to them expectantly.

'We know the damn prophecy,' Wilder told him, cracking his knuckles on the table.

'Tell me how it ends, then, Hawthorne,' Osiris challenged.

Wilder had to leash his temper. '*A dawn of fire and blood,*' he answered.

Osiris threw him a dirty look before addressing the room once more. 'That dawn is here. It is official. As the prophecy foretold, the Daughter of Darkness has risen,' he announced. 'Our spies tell me that she seeks vengeance for what was done to her at Thezmarr, and that she is building an army.'

Wilder remained still in his seat. He had heard whispers along the Veil, but none so damning as the words spilling from the Guild Master's mouth, none that took him back to the moments in his life he longed to forget: those on the brink of war, those in the heart of it. The battles that had nearly seen the end of the two Warswords he cared about the most.

'And what was done to her, exactly, Osiris?' Audra asked, her voice devoid of emotion.

The Guild Master's eyes narrowed. 'You know damn well what happened here, Audra.'

'Yes, but not after...' The librarian paused. 'Not after you sent her away in a damn rowboat with an old Warsword.'

'He was ordered to leave her on the Broken Isles.'

'To die.'

'She was the Daughter of Darkness, Audra. What else was I supposed to do?'

Audra simply shook her head in disgust.

The tension was becoming too much.

'Where?' Torj interjected, trying to keep the peace as always. 'Where is she building this supposed army?'

'Naarva,' Osiris replied, tearing his eyes away from Audra. 'Where else? It's far enough away from the remaining kingdoms that she can do so in relative secrecy and without interference. The fallen kingdom is shrouded in shadow and mist.'

'And the forces?' Torj pressed. 'Who fills her ranks?'

'Men who sympathise with her cause, from all over the midrealms and beyond. Some cursed, some just stupid – or vulnerable and downtrodden,' the Guild Master said, his disdain clear. 'Those who would prefer to see the midrealms fall to chaos. And half-wraiths, or so my sources tell me.'

Wilder forced himself into the conversation. 'Do we have numbers?'

'None as yet. She keeps things well hidden,' Osiris told them.

Wilder glanced at Audra, who stiffened when Osiris next spoke.

'There are also tales of this supposed Daughter of Darkness rallying another force against the midrealms...' he said slowly.

Audra made a noise at the back of her throat. 'Now I see the true reason why the invitation to this meeting was extended to me.'

Wilder shifted in his seat as he looked between the stern-faced woman and the Guild Master, locked in a staring contest. 'Can someone fill the rest of us in, then?'

Audra's eyes narrowed before she turned to Wilder. 'What Osiris is implying is that this alleged Daughter of Darkness has been rallying the former women warriors of Thezmarr to her cause.'

Torj barked a laugh. 'What?'

'Our dear Guild Master is also implying that I know something about it, which, of course, I do not. I cut ties with all those Thezmarr spat out twenty

years ago. I was given no choice.'

'Audra, please,' Osiris snapped. 'You're honestly telling me that you have no idea where they went after that day?'

Audra stared at him and said flatly, 'No idea.'

'I find that hard to believe.'

'And I find it hard to believe that former members of this guild would ever take up with an evil oppressor,' Audra bit back. 'No matter how badly they were treated here.'

'Audra —'

But it was Vernich who interrupted, getting to his feet with a frustrated grunt. 'It is not the former women warriors of this fortress you need concern yourself with, Guild Master. The Daughter of Darkness seeks far more powerful alliances than that.'

Audra coughed pointedly, making her feelings about the backhanded defence of Thezmarr's former warriors clear.

Osiris' eyes narrowed. 'Go on...'

'The Daughter of Darkness seeks strength, power... She seeks magic unlike the world has seen for many years. She seeks the lost heirs of the midrealms.'

Wilder's stomach bottomed out. Only decades of training kept him in place.

And despite her mask of calm, Audra paled.

Osiris answered with a dark laugh before putting his head in his hands. 'You can't be serious.'

But Vernich's face was sombre. 'Who better to ally with than magic wielders born of lines who sought to spread their own darkness at one time or another?'

'There are no heirs,' Osiris argued. 'Delmira fell before an heir was born to King Soren and Queen Brigh. And the Naarvian royals fled, right into a swarm of wraiths. They're all dead.'

Vernich shrugged. 'They can't be. Not if she has made her intentions known to those who matter. Several of my sources have reported to me that she wants the heirs. So much so that she has spread word that she'll spare the kingdom who hands them over, whoever they are.' He sat down again and started to clean the dirt from beneath his fingernails with his dagger.

'Gods...' Osiris muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

'The kingdoms have a duty to any heirs,' Audra ventured.

‘By law, yes, they do,’ the Guild Master replied, seeming to mull this over before he faced the Warswords again. ‘Do any of you have an idea of when the Great Rite will next open? Will your apprentices be ready for it?’

‘Come now, Osiris,’ Torj replied. ‘It’s only been three weeks. That’s far too soon to tell.’

‘The Great Rite opens of its own accord,’ Wilder added, his skin crawling. ‘There’s no knowing when that might happen next.’

Osiris ran a hand over his closely shaved head, sighing heavily. ‘We need more Warswords.’

Audra had watched their exchange unfold without a flicker of emotion on her face. But now, she clasped her hands together in front of her on the table. ‘What you *need* is more warriors,’ she said. ‘What you *need* is more Naarvian steel. I have been telling you that for two damn decades.’

‘What’s more Naarvian steel without Warswords to wield it?’ Vernich snapped.

‘I think we’ve proved well enough that a Warsword isn’t the only one —’

‘Furies save us, woman. Not this again.’

Wilder saw a muscle twitch in Audra’s jaw, but she fell silent. He frowned. That was also unlike her...

It was Torj who spoke next. ‘What are our orders, Osiris?’

The Guild Master stood, bracing his knuckles on the table, his gaze falling to each Warsword in turn. ‘If there are heirs to be found, I want you to be the ones to find them. Use all the resources in your power. Scour the midrealms for them. Uncover who they are. And when you do... bring them to me.’

With that, the meeting was over. Wilder’s hands were numb as he gathered his swords and made for the door. The world was slipping out from underneath him —

‘Keep walking, Warsword,’ Audra’s voice sounded behind him. ‘Keep walking.’

He did as he was told, moving one foot in front of the other until the council room was behind him and he was on his way to the Great Hall, the librarian at his side.

‘You were quiet...’ he managed.

‘I have learnt to hold my words until they are most effective,’ she replied, surveying him with an amused look. ‘They’re the sharpest weapons

that way.'

Wilder glanced around the deserted corridor. 'We can't tell her. *Them*.'

Audra raised a brow, resting her hands on her *ceremonial* daggers. 'Which part, exactly? That there is a tyrannical heir hunter after them, or that it's also your sworn duty to hand them over?'

'Both. Everything.' Wilder rubbed the back of his neck and then stopped himself. It was something Talemir always used to do when he was under pressure. 'She's already struggling. She already has the fate stone to deal with. One more thing might push her over the edge.'

'Perhaps she needs to go over the edge.'

'Not yet,' Wilder replied. 'We need to keep her safe.'

'The safest place for her is here. Right beneath their noses. Her and Elwren both,' Audra whispered. 'They do not leave the grounds. Not for anything.'

'Agreed.'

'You must prepare her for the horrors ahead,' the librarian warned.

'What do you think I've been doing, Audra?'

But she gave him a knowing look, as though she could see right through him. 'You must train her, hard. Even it means becoming her enemy. Even if it means she never looks at you the same way again.'

His fought the urge to rub the ache at his chest. 'I know,' he murmured.

'Do you?' Audra challenged, an edge to her words. 'This is your duty – to her, to the midrealms. Althea has the power to change the fates of us all.'

CHAPTER FIVE

THEA



Thea strode into the Great Hall with her head held high, relishing the stillness that fell like a blanket across the tables before her. The first time it had happened she had stopped in her tracks, her cheeks flushing at the whispers that broke out, at the wide eyes that stared. But now, she let them see her: the woman they'd scorned, the woman they now feared. Magic or not, she was no ordinary Guardian of the midrealms, and they all knew it.

From across the hall, she felt Hawthorne's searing gaze upon her, but she wouldn't falter now – not after weeks of leaning into the reputation she'd started to build for herself here. Resting her good hand on the hilt of Malik's dagger and glancing at her Guardian totem to make sure it was straight, she made for her usual seat.

A few feet away, she noticed Evander, her former lover, trying to catch her eye as he made space on the bench beside him. He'd been attempting to talk with her for a while now, but she had zero interest in anything he had to say. She ignored him, suppressing a shudder. How she'd ever found him attractive was beyond her.

Several fellow Guardians scrambled to make sure there was enough room for her at their table. Then there was more shuffling as Cal and Kipp found their places at her sides.

'How'd the reunion with Hawthorne go?' Kipp asked, ignoring the stares around them and reaching for a basket of bread.

Thea waved her splinted fingers. 'Wonderfully.'

'Really?'

'No.'

Beside her, Cal finished retying his chestnut hair in a short tail and laughed. 'If he's standing up there in one piece, I'd say it went well enough...'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Thea refused to look to the head table. Instead, she reached for Cal's mug of peppermint tea and took a long, appreciative sip.

'It means, dear Thea,' Kipp replied around a mouthful of food, 'that when we left you in the ring, you looked ready to throw your beloved mentor off a cliff.'

'Perhaps I should have.'

'I'm sure we'd agree with you if you just told us what happened...' Cal ventured.

Thea hadn't told them about her and Hawthorne. At first, it had been because she wanted to keep the secret for herself, as though it were something precious she wasn't ready to share with the world. But after he'd left, it had become a matter of embarrassment, and so she'd said nothing about it.

She sighed and served herself several pieces of lamb, smothering them with enough gravy to make even Kipp pause. 'Telling you won't change anything,' she answered. 'But I do have to move into his cabin.'

Kipp's eyes bulged. 'What?'

'That's what he said.'

But Cal shrugged. 'It makes sense. You *are* his apprentice, after all. You're basically his shadow for the next year or so.'

'Hard to be someone's shadow when they're not here,' she muttered, her traitorous gaze darting to the head table. Hawthorne sat beside Osiris, his food untouched, his large hand grasping a tankard. His eyes flicked to her, as though he could sense her watching him. Gods, she could still feel his phantom touch along her ribs.

Thea looked away. That crackling anger she felt was bruised with something else: hurt. Even now it all felt so surreal. For the briefest of moments they'd been together – a team, unstoppable and fierce – only to have their connection snuffed out so suddenly. Sometimes she wondered if she'd dreamt it. But the surging energy between them told her otherwise, as did the kiss they'd shared during their sparring match. She resented him with every fibre of her being, but that hatred was entangled with something else – something deeper, something darker.

‘How’s *your* training going?’ Thea asked the others, trying to distract herself.

‘Very interesting indeed. Esylt, as much of a cranky bastard as he is, has been very generous in his tutelage,’ Kipp replied with a grin.

After Thea had recovered from the initiation, she had been thrilled to discover that the weapons master himself had taken Kipp on as his unofficial apprentice of strategy. Her friend had taken to the role like a duck to water, though he resented that he still needed to maintain a certain standard of physical training as well.

‘I also had a meeting with the lovely Elwren earlier,’ he went on. ‘Can you pass the mead?’

After Thea’s so-called lesson with Audra, hearing her sister’s name aloud was like a knife to the heart. Wren wanted them to reclaim the damn throne. And for what? Hand trembling, she reached for the jug and passed it to Kipp —

Something crackled at her fingertips.

Kipp jumped, snatching his hand away as though burned. ‘Ouch!’

Suddenly queasy, Thea blinked at him. ‘What?’

‘You didn’t feel that?’ Kipp’s brows were still furrowed and he was examining his fingers. ‘Some weird static...’

Thea shook her head.

Cal gave him a sympathetic nod. ‘Hate it when that happens.’

Still looking a little bewildered, Kipp eventually just gave a sheepish laugh and shrugged.

‘What does your work with Esylt have to do with Wren?’ Thea asked as though nothing had happened, ignoring the churning in her gut.

Kipp made a frustrated sound. ‘Can’t you two just kiss and make up already?’

‘No.’

‘Can you at least tell us what she did?’

‘No.’

Her friend shook his head and piled more food onto his plate. How he was still so slim was a wonder to them all.

Kipp motioned for Thea and Cal to lean in, lowering his voice when he spoke again. ‘The alchemists have been working on a special type of gas... They think it may be able to patch up the tears in the Veil.’

Thea’s mouth fell open. ‘Truly?’

Kipp jutted his chin towards Wren's usual table. 'Maybe you should talk to her about it.'

'Maybe you should just tell me.'

But this time Kipp waved her off. 'Can't say more. Strategy meetings are *very* confidential.'

Cal rolled his eyes. 'You couldn't keep a secret to save your life.'

'Nonsense. Up until a few months ago, you fools didn't even know my real name.'

Thea kept quiet. She had enough secrets of her own to worry about. And the mention of real names sent a pulse of anxiety through her. For her friends didn't know that *Althea Zoltaire* had always been a placeholder. *Embervale*. *Althea Embervale* was her true name.

A server approached, sliding a massive bowl heaped with greens in front of her. 'For you, Guardian Zoltaire.'

Thea blinked at the pile of vegetables. 'What?'

'I was instructed to bring this to you specifically,' the boy said, looking increasingly uncomfortable.

The back of Thea's neck prickled. She glanced up at the head table, finding Hawthorne's eyes on her again.

Beside her, Cal and Kipp were snickering.

'You'd best eat your vegetables if you want to grow up big and strong, Thea,' Kipp teased.

Broccoli, spinach, beans, peas and a bunch of rich foliage she didn't have the faintest idea about. Thea ground her teeth. 'That's enough greens for ten men.'

The server shrugged. 'You can expect a bowl like this every night,' he said. 'It was made, er... very clear to me that it's of the utmost importance.'

Thea didn't dare look at Hawthorne again, her cheeks flaming.

'Will we see you tomorrow?' Cal asked, wiping the grin off his face.

'Depends. Will you be running laps before dawn?'

'Definitely not,' Kipp scoffed.

'I'll try,' Cal offered.

Thea shrugged, knowing full well he wouldn't drag himself from his bed a moment before he had to. 'Then I guess we'll...'

She trailed off as something – *someone* – caught her attention across the hall.

Sebastos Barlowe. His gaze was fixed on the Bloodletter at the head table, who was signalling something to him. After a few subtle hand gestures, Seb got up mid-meal and slipped out one of the side doors. Moments later, Vernich excused himself and left as well.

Old habits kicked in. Ignoring the eyes on her, especially the stares coming from Wren's table, Thea left the hall. Once, she'd made it her mission to spy on the comings and goings of Thezmarr. She could easily make herself invisible again. Treading on light dancer's feet, she crept through the empty passageway, spotting Vernich's cloak vanishing around a corner.

She made quick work of following the pair and found herself on the floor above, opposite the trophy room that housed all of Talemir Starling's championship records. Low voices echoed down the corridor and she darted for cover under the nearest staircase.

'What happened in the meeting?' Seb asked eagerly.

There was a long pause. Thea's hand drifted to the faded scar that marred the skin beneath her shirt.

'Do you remember the prophecy?' Vernich's gravelly voice sounded.

'Of course,' Seb replied.

'It seems that the Daughter of Darkness to which it refers has risen...'

Thea's dinner threatened to make a reappearance. She flattened herself even further against the wall.

'What?' Seb blurted.

There was a noise of frustration from the Warsword. 'Risen. Come to power. Keep up,' he snapped. 'She's looking for something. Something that could change the course of fate. And I'm going to get it.'

Thea's heart was hammering. What exactly had she stumbled across? Was Vernich in league with the supposed Daughter of Darkness? Body tensed, she strained to hear the reply.

'— never get it to hold,' the Warsword muttered. 'It's a temporary solution.'

'Where's the nearest tear in the Veil? Shouldn't we go see for ourselves?' Sebastos replied hurriedly. 'If we leave now, no one will question our absence.'

Just the sound of him made Thea's skin crawl. Time and time again he'd tried to underhandedly destroy her and her friends. The fact that he wore a Guardian totem, that he'd secured an apprenticeship, was just plain wrong.

If there was a blight on Thezmarr, it was Sebastos Barlowe. And now, he was carrying out the orders of someone even worse.

‘The dark should provide adequate cover,’ Vernich said slowly.

Thea’s fingernails cut into her palms.

‘Saddle the horses. We’ll ride out in fifteen. Don’t let anyone see you.’

‘Course not, sir.’

Thea heard Vernich’s heavy footsteps fade in the opposite direction and breathed a sigh of relief, stepping out into the corridor once more – only to have Seb startle her.

‘What are you doing out here, stray?’ he snapped, nose already wrinkling in disgust at the sight of her.

A fresh wave of loathing washed over her as she surveyed Seb, the bastard who’d caused her nothing but trouble as a shieldbearer, but whose life she’d saved time and time again. In that moment she found herself wishing that she’d left him to the reapers in the ruins of Delmira, or that she’d let Cal shoot an arrow through his heart instead of his shoulder. He deserved it.

‘Fuck off, Seb,’ she muttered, trying to brush past him.

‘Why the hurry?’ he sneered. ‘Off to suck some more Warsword cock so you can get another totem?’

Thea gave a dark laugh. ‘Is that how you got yours? We both know you never felt its call. There’s not a worthy bone in your body.’

The bandage on his shoulder was gone, but she knew the exact place the arrow had pierced, and she knew it would hurt if she grabbed it. It was tempting. She knew he’d scream; she’d relish the sound.

Seb’s eyes narrowed. ‘Careful now, stray. No one’s out here to see you fall.’

Thea clasped her hands behind her back so she didn’t strangle him, her mind still reeling with what she’d overheard. Thankfully, he didn’t seem overly suspicious to find her here. ‘What do you want?’ she snapped.

His lip curled. ‘I want you gone. But I can’t seem to get rid of you. You’re like a disease —’

‘Got a lot of experience with those?’ She gave his crotch a pointed look.

Rage flashed in his eyes and he took a menacing step towards her. ‘But I’ll settle for getting rid of your sister,’ he said loudly.

Thea saw red. She lunged —

Only to be hauled back roughly by her shirt.

Seb's face broke into a satisfied smirk. 'See you around, stray.'

Blood roared in Thea's ears as she kicked out at whoever had dragged her back, desperate to rain as much pain down on Seb as possible.

'Enough,' a familiar voice growled in her ear.

'I had him,' Thea spat, wrenching her shirt out of Hawthorne's grasp.

'Did you?'

'Yes.'

'Looked to me like you were about to scrap with him in the corridor like a common tavern brawler and bust up your knuckles some more.'

Thea took a deep breath, forcing that rage, that power, back down as best she could.

He studied her. 'That hot head of yours will get you nowhere.'

'No?' she snapped, yanking her fate stone from the folds of her shirt. 'Then perhaps I'll just have to test the fates —'

One second she was standing in the corridor; the next she was pressed up against the cold stone wall, Hawthorne's hand engulfing hers, his silver eyes ablaze with fury. 'What did I tell you about talking like that?'

His powerful body was flush with hers, a muscular thigh between her legs and his face so close to hers that his breath tickled her skin. That achingly familiar scent of leather and rosewood wrapped around her.

'Now who's the hothead?' she challenged. But damn him – her gaze dropped to the soft curve of his lips as the heat of him seeped through her clothes. She felt the shift in him, the awareness of every inch of them pressed together. Her eyes trailed down the strong column of his throat, noting how it bobbed as he swallowed, as though he didn't trust himself to speak.

His warm hand was still wrapped around hers. She could feel the flutter of his pulse in his wrist. It matched her own, the staccato rhythm fast and wanting. A slight change in footing had his hard length brushing against her stomach and she inhaled sharply, wanting nothing more than to undo his belt and guide him into her.

Gods, she had never ached for someone like this. Her desire had long since overridden her anger, and it was all she could do not to drag his mouth to hers there in the corridor.

Hawthorne's nostrils flared and he took a measured breath, stepping back from her, blinking back the lustful haze in his eyes. 'I meant it when I said we've got work to do tomorrow. You're going to pay for your

behaviour with Barlowe in the morning,' he said at last, deep voice rumbling. 'Go get your things. I expect you at the cabin within the hour.'

Thea watched him stride away, his shoulders rigid, his fists clenched at his sides. Only then did she exhale, the air whistling between her teeth as he disappeared back into the hall.

Her heart was pounding, and it wasn't from the near brawl with Seb, or what she'd heard Vernich say.

What was Hawthorne thinking? Forcing them to share such close quarters? Was he so intent on shattering her temper? Or worse, her self-control? She'd already slipped once. That kiss in the training ground was seared into her like a brand. Thea had only just managed to leash herself, and even now, she could feel the imprint of his lips on hers.

Her hand drifted to her mouth as she pictured Hawthorne's cabin with its small living room, and beyond it, his large bed... She pictured him in it, the sheets bunched at his waist. Did he sleep nude?

Gods, this was not helping matters. She was practically radiating heat at the mere thought.

Cursing under her breath, she went to pack her belongings.



With a small pack of meagre possessions slung over her shoulder, Thea reached the cabin at the western foot of the mountains. She was trying to decide how to broach the topic of Seb and Vernich with Hawthorne when she stopped short at the closed front door. If she was indeed to live here, knocking seemed ridiculous.

'Fuck it,' she muttered as she climbed the porch steps and pushed the door open.

It was exactly as she remembered it, the opposite of its inhabitant: warm and welcoming. A fire crackled in the hearth; two tattered armchairs sat before it. A table and chairs were shoved up against the wall beneath one of the windows, while a handful of potted plants were placed around the room.

There was no sign of the Warsword himself, nor of the flower necklace he'd kept from their first journey together. But there was something new discarded on the side table... A blue jewel glinted in the flickering light of

the fire, and Thea found herself drawn to it. She dropped her bag on the floor and picked it up, turning it over between her fingers.

It was a sapphire. She'd seen its like gracing the elegant necks of the noble ladies in Harenth when she'd attended King Artos' feast.

Hawthorne had another woman's necklace. Her stomach bottomed out as the realisation hit her, a bitter taste coating her tongue. Hawthorne *had another woman's necklace* and it was here in his cabin. Where he never allowed anyone.

Had she truly been so foolish as to think —

Thea dropped the jewel as though it had burned her. She refused to let her mind wander there, refused to bow to that kernel of jealousy that sparked within. Hawthorne was her mentor; that was the only sense in which he belonged to her. He was free to do whatever, or *whoever* he pleased.

Steeling herself, she scooped up her pack and padded into the dimly lit bedroom.

Where a narrow cot had been set up against the far wall.

Resignation doused Thea's anger. *Dax's bed is better than that*, she thought.

Grateful for the fact that at least Hawthorne was elsewhere, she slipped off her boots and made for the bathing chamber, hoping to wash up and slide into her cot without having to see him at all.

But when she opened the door, light spilt out.

Before her stood Wilder Hawthorne, nude but for a towel clutched in front of his crotch, his silver eyes aflame.

The Furies knew she hadn't forgotten what that sculpted, tattooed body looked like, but it was another thing entirely to see it naked and glistening in the flesh.

Holy gods...

Thea flushed at the sight of him, heat blooming between her legs as she surveyed his damp, tousled hair, the breadth of his shoulders and the ridged plane of his abdomen —

'What are you doing?' he growled, still holding a fistful of towel in front of him.

With her breath trapped in her chest, her eyes dropped to the V-taper of golden skin at the bottom of Hawthorne's stomach, where dark hair trailed down, pointing like an arrow to his —

‘I...’

‘Use your words, Princess.’

Thea waited for the fury and lightning to surge, but it wasn’t magic coursing through her now.

It was molten desire.

‘We need a lock for the door,’ she managed, forcing her gaze up.

He pushed past her, that intoxicating scent of rosewood and leather following. ‘No, we don’t,’ he muttered. ‘Next time, knock.’

Thea wracked her brain for a clever retort, but every thought emptied from her head as Hawthorne brushed past her, his hot skin grazing hers briefly.

Her eyes traced the tattoo down his spine. Dark and beautiful, in a language she didn’t understand, just like him.

He’d told her what it meant once: *Glory in death, immortality in legend*. The same words engraved on the blade of her dagger.

‘We rise at dawn and head to the stables at first light.’ His voice was thick as he moved through the room, his powerful frame rippling with every step.

He hadn’t bothered to cover the curve of his muscular backside.

Her mouth went dry as she stared. Stared and stared as the candlelight from the bathing chamber illuminated the bedroom.

Enough so that when he dropped his towel completely and slid beneath the sheets, she knew for certain that he did, in fact, sleep nude.

CHAPTER SIX

WILDER



When Wilder woke the next morning, groggy and dazed, she was gone. Her cot was neatly made up, and a faint hint of her sea-salt-and-bergamot scent lingered, but there was no other sign of her. How had she slipped past him without waking him? He was usually such a light sleeper that even the most minor of disturbances had him on his feet, weapon in hand.

Pulling his pants on, he padded out to the living room, where, pinned beneath the sapphire necklace he'd meant to return to his drawer last night, he found a piece of parchment:

Meet you at the stables.

She hadn't signed it, but rather scribbled a bolt of lightning beneath the words.

He almost wanted to laugh at that.

Almost.

Instead, he toyed with the jewel, resenting that he'd felt the need to rummage through his old things for it. The fitful sleep he'd had only made matters worse, made it harder to keep that mental armour in place against the world. No good would come from wallowing in the past; he knew that well enough by now. But something stopped him from throwing the necklace into the cluttered drawer. Instead he tossed it back onto the table with a muttered curse.

The first kiss of dawn stained the sky as Wilder reached the fortress stables. He wondered if Thea felt as hollow as he did. He'd wanted to wake up with her in his arms. He had imagined holding her to his chest as he

rocked into her, slowly and deeply, as though they had all the time in the world.

A dream. Nothing more.

He had let his emotions rule him before and no good had come from it. That would be the end of it.

He had to make a Warsword of her yet.

Already resigning himself to a trying morning, he took a deep breath of the crisp air before entering the stables.

Only to halt as he heard voices from the tack room.

‘— was a fool back then, Thea. I didn’t know what I was saying.’

Thea sounded tired when she replied, ‘It hardly matters now, Van.’

Van? Who the fuck is ‘Van’?

‘But it *does* matter. I was wrong to say those things to you, to call you a —,’

‘Just leave it.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why the fuck not?’ Thea snapped. ‘You’ve left it for over six years already. What’s a few more?’

Wilder tensed where he stood by the stable entry. Who was she talking to? Why were things so familiar between them? And more importantly, what had the bastard said to her to warrant such an apology in the first place? Wilder’s knuckles cracked as he clenched his fists.

‘Because,’ *Van* persisted, ‘I still care for you. I’ve seen the woman, the *warrior* you’ve become... and I’m not threatened, not anymore. I’m *proud*. I want to be with you.’

Wilder’s blood went cold and an ugly, unwelcome feeling stirred in his chest. It was like a viper unfurling from its nest as he imagined whoever the prick was with Thea, touching her, kissing her —

Wilder was suddenly at the door to the tack room, recognition flooding him as he spotted Evander, the stable master’s apprentice, reaching for Thea.

She easily sidestepped out of his grasp, and her gaze found Wilder’s, as though she wasn’t surprised in the least to see him there.

Evander, however, whirled around and blanched as he realised whose shadow darkened the doorway.

‘Warsword Hawthorne,’ he stammered, taking a step back from Thea, snatching up a spare bridle from the work table with trembling hands.

Wilder didn't so much as look at the blithering idiot. 'Get out.'

Evander didn't need telling twice. He darted forward, squeezing past the Warsword and fleeing the stables altogether.

The searing look Thea shot Wilder would have wilted the hardest of warriors. 'Did that make you feel like a big man?'

'I don't need a simpering stable boy for that.'

Thea snorted – actually *snorted*. 'Could have fooled me.'

Wilder didn't move a muscle. *Good. It's better that she hates me. Things will be easier if she feels this way about me...*

That familiar fiery glare pierced him completely, and he could *feel* the anger surging in her magic – *fuelling* it. As a Warsword, Wilder was sensitive to any magic, but he didn't know if it was his Furies-given abilities that heightened his awareness of Thea and her power now, or... if it was something to do with what had happened between them.

Whatever the reason, as he met her gaze and refused to look away, he could sense that unbroken storm raging within her.

It made him uneasy.

Feigning indifference, he leant against the doorframe. 'We gonna talk about it yet?'

'About what?'

'Your magic, Princess.'

He saw her pulse flutter in her neck before she folded her arms over her chest and scoffed. 'You're not my friend. You're not my... anything, besides my mentor. And even that's debatable. I don't have to talk about it with you. I'm here to train, to learn, and that's it. That's all I want from you.'

Wilder was glad he was braced against the wall as he felt the wind get knocked out of him. *I guess I deserved that*, he thought. He hid it well, though, straightening instead. 'You finished fucking around in here, then?'

'If you've finished swinging your dick.'

The filthy words from her wicked mouth gave him pause for a second, but he forced himself to move. 'This way.'

Jaw clenched, he led her to the intended stall.

'This is the Bloodletter's stallion,' Thea said, frowning at the enormous horse within.

'So?' he asked.

'I thought he'd ridden out somewhere... Last night.'

Wilder shrugged. 'He took another horse then. I asked him yesterday if we could borrow Brutus this morning.'

'Brutus?'

Wilder couldn't help rolling his eyes. 'Just the sort of name Vernich would come up with, no?'

'What's yours called?'

Not a chance was he telling her that story. He cleared his throat and ignored her question. 'You're taking Brutus out to the corral. He needs to be warmed up and taken for a ride.'

Thea frowned. 'That's it?'

'That's it.' Wilder motioned for her to enter the stall. 'Go easy on your ribs.'

What he hadn't told her was that Vernich's stallion was notoriously difficult and aggressive – the horse had barely been broken in even after all these years. But if Thea wanted to be a Warsword, she needed to be able to tame a Tverrian stallion.

Gripping the horse's lead rope, she halted. 'You just going to stand there all day?'

Wilder held the stall gate open for her. 'Hardly. I'm going to warm my feet by the fire and have breakfast,' he said coolly. 'Have fun.'

Her answering glare was enough to get him moving, but not before he noted the strain in her arms as she tried to haul the unruly beast from the stall, Brutus pawing the straw-covered ground impatiently.

When Wilder reached the courtyard of the fortress, he turned back to peer down over the grounds. He saw that Thea had managed to get the stallion to the corral, only to have him bite her. Wilder flinched as those nasty teeth clamped around her arm. But she had to learn.

To his surprise, she didn't lose her temper. Instead, she went to the nearby bushes and plucked some foliage. She made quick work of chewing and applying it to her wound, before continuing to wrangle the stallion into submission.

Perhaps there was hope for her yet.



Wilder watched Thea from a distance for most of the morning. If she could handle Brutus, she would have no trouble capturing her own Tverrian stallion when her time came.

Around noon, he found himself trudging through the undergrowth of the Bloodwoods, relishing its eeriness, the canopy blocking out the high sun and the damp, cool air kissing his heated skin. He had told Thea to meet him at the training ring, but he knew better than that. For years she'd gone to the same hiding spot: the clearing amid the dense forest of bleeding trees, their sap sticky and red, supposedly the blood of warrior ancestors long dead.

And sure enough, there she was.

Through the trees, he watched as Thea sought the arrow he'd shot at her all those months ago, embedded in the tree. Only it wasn't there. Wilder himself had removed it weeks ago. It was currently stashed away in his cabin. It had been a stupid idea to keep it.

But that didn't stop him watching as Thea slowly ran her fingers over the small scar left in the tree trunk, her expression softening.

Wilder's gut tightened. It had worked out for the best, he tried to tell himself.

In the clearing, Thea smacked her palm against the offending tree with a huff of frustration before rummaging through her pockets until she found the parchment he'd given her. After scanning over his neat script, she stood and began to take herself through the first set of exercises on the list.

Wilder watched on in silence, noting how quickly she had improved, how naturally the movements came to her... She was so focused, so determined, and with every drill, she seemed to beat back one personal darkness after the other.

'It's rude to spy on people,' her voice rang through the clearing, though she didn't so much as glance in his direction.

'Well, you would know,' he replied, striding into view. How long had she been aware of his presence? 'We were supposed to meet at the training ring,' he added.

'So how did you find me?' Thea asked, not pausing as she swept through another set of exercises.

'Easy,' he shrugged. 'You never do what you're told. Figured you'd be here.'

'Have you come to punish me for my disobedience, then?'

He bit back a chuckle. 'I should, but no.'

'So why are you here?'

'To check your form, to monitor your progress...'

Thea raised a single brow. 'Have you drawn a conclusion?'

'Not as yet.'

'You sure? Nothing to criticise? No words of wisdom?'

'There is one thing...' he ventured slowly.

'Of course there is.'

He couldn't help the smile that tugged at the corner of his mouth. 'Eat the damn greens next time.'

She frowned. 'What?'

'The greens. At dinner. Eat them.'

'But —'

'Consider it part of your training, Apprentice.'

She rolled her eyes. He could tell she was suppressing a laugh; the thought made him feel lighter than he had in weeks. But the feeling didn't last long. Wilder knew she was waiting for him to say more, to critique the drills she'd been doing, but he remained silent and simply continued to watch.

'When are you going to tell me of the Great Rite?' she asked eventually, wiping the perspiration from her brow. She had asked him about it before, when their relationship had been just as volatile, on the way to Harenth. He'd been less than forthcoming then – in fact, if he recalled correctly, his exact words had been, '*I wouldn't tell you if Enovius himself had a blade to my heart.*'

From her expression, Thea had resigned herself to a similar response now.

But Wilder was in the mood to surprise her, so he rubbed the back of his neck and considered her. 'It is difficult to explain,' he started, motioning for her to continue her current exercise. She did. 'The Great Rite is not contained to a single location. Nor does it adhere to the seasons, or even time itself...'

Thea didn't stop moving, didn't question him, but her footwork slowed slightly, and he could tell she was listening with bated breath.

'There are several openings that I know about across the midrealms,' he continued, fighting against the urge to shove the memories away. 'But they are not readily accessible. A warrior has to wait until they welcome a

challenger, until the warrior feels the call. There is no predicting when the Great Rite opens. There's no pattern. It's once in a blue moon...'

Thea paused then. 'When was the last time it opened?'

Wilder met her gaze. 'When I gained my Warsword totem.'

'How long ago?'

'Just over seven years.'

A soft cry escaped Thea's lips, her knees buckling. 'I don't have seven years.'

'I know.' The two words were heavy between them.

'When were you going to tell me this?'

'When I could trust that you weren't going to do something stupid.'

'And can you trust me with that?' she challenged.

He made a noise of disbelief, but continued. 'You have to take your chance the moment it opens, the second you feel its call.'

'What if it doesn't open before...'

Twenty-seven. That was the age carved into that damn fate stone of hers. Just two and a half years from now.

'It will,' he said.

'How can you be sure?' she pressed, lightning sparking at the fingers that still gripped her sword.

Wilder eyed her warily, but didn't flinch. 'I just am.'

Thea's shoulders sagged, her blade falling to her side. 'What happened during your Rite?'

'You're yet to earn that tale.'

She huffed a sigh. 'Fair enough.'

Wilder's head jerked back in surprise. 'What? No argument?'

'Not now,' Thea said.

The air grew too thick between them suddenly, the intensity too great, and Thea broke their eye contact, flicking her braid over her shoulder and returning to her drills.

Wilder cleared his throat and started back to the fortress. 'You're expected at the last group training session for the day. Don't miss it.'



The last time Wilder had visited the northern arena, the majority of the Thezmarrians there had been shieldbearers. Now, as he looked from his vantage point onto the training ground, he saw that much had changed. Their numbers had dwindled, both due to the battle with the reapers at the ruins of Delmira and the forfeits and failures of the initiation test. But the group he surveyed now was stronger, more united. And there was no denying the person at the centre of it all – Thea.

Gods, she was beautiful. A vision of fierce determination.

The warrior woman who'd claimed the heart of a reaper.

And a Warsword, Wilder thought bitterly.

Even from a distance, he could see how the cohort stared at her. Her expression was steely; this was not the first time she had experienced this. He'd seen their treatment of her firsthand. But what Wilder realised as she slowly warmed up, her movements fluid and confident, Malik's dagger at her hip, was that the quiet was not in rejection of her, not in outrage at her presence, but in *reverence*.

Somehow, in between her unconventional entry to the guild and slaying the reaper, she had been the one to bring them all together. Thea and her unlikely friends.

She wore a plain shirt and dark pants, her hair braided down the side in the warrior fashion from distant realms. Wilder watched her as he started down the incline towards the arena, pride welling in his chest as she took up two swords. She was a born dual wielder, like him, like Talemir... She was incredibly light on her feet and her reflexes were lightning fast, as though she'd been trained since she was an infant. He wondered where those skills had come from.

Groups of warriors parted for him as he made a beeline for her without thinking.

But another Warsword was already there.

Torj's large frame engulfed Thea as he stood close behind her, nudging her feet apart with his own, his front pressed to her back as he widened her stance. The Bear Slayer's arms closed over Thea's as he adjusted her grip on her blades —

'That's not how it's done,' Wilder growled before he even realised he was standing beside them.

Torj glanced up, surprised and then amused, instantly stepping back from Thea.

Thea's expression betrayed nothing.

'Didn't realise you were here, Hawthorne,' Torj said, his eyes bright. 'You're clearly the best man for the job. I'll take my leave, then.'

Wilder didn't speak as Torj gave him a nod and returned to his own apprentice.

'What was that about?' Thea asked, her brow raised.

'Who would you rather train you: a man who throws around a hammer? Or the Warsword trained by Talemir Starling, dual wielding champion?'

Furies save him, it was the second time that jealousy had reared its ugly head. He needed to get himself under control. He was the Hand of Death, for fuck's sake.

Her mouth quirked. 'Alright, then. Teach me your ways, Warsword.'

Wilder's heart stuttered at the gleam in her gaze, and he took up his position behind her, the echoes of steel from the training around them fading away.

'Feet apart. Left foot forward.' His voice was husky and he didn't miss the soft intake of breath from Thea as she did as he bid. 'Arms up. Guard position.' His whole body encircled hers, his rough hands brushing against the bare skin of her forearms, warm in the afternoon sun. 'If you wish to dual wield effectively, your blades should be of equal weight. How do these feel?'

'Good,' she murmured. 'They feel good.'

It was all Wilder could do to stop himself inhaling the scent of her. Gods, he'd craved her, her closeness, for what felt like eternity. 'Distribute your body weight evenly so it's easier to pivot at the last second,' he instructed, fighting to keep his words even.

She shifted her feet.

He made a noise of approval. 'Remember, you should use an unexpected combination of the blade's edge and its point.' He moved the swords in her hands so that they glinted in the sun, the light reflecting off the edges and then the tips. 'Start with a reversed downward cut. Bring this sword over your head to better charge the blow. Then, launch the cut forward and bring your left sword up to cover the exposed side.'

Wilder could feel how tense her body was beneath his, how determined she was. She allowed him to steer her arms through the drill, allowed him to meld his body to hers and lead her through the rotation.

He could feel the eyes of their fellow warriors on them, watching where they were joined, how they moved together. He could sense the undercurrent of their fascination, their recognition.

Let them see, Wilder thought irrationally. *Let them see that she belongs with me.*

‘Remember to change your lead leg. Remember to maintain that lightness on your feet,’ he told her softly. ‘The advantage you have is that the rules have not been etched into you over the decades. Your movements will be unpredictable, fresh, unconventional... You learn the fundamentals, and then you can leverage them to surprise your rival.’

Thea flexed her fingers beneath his around the grips, and he continued to guide her through each movement, each slice, each slash, ready to end any enemy.

He recalled the words Talemir had once said to him. ‘You need to hone a tunnel of focus around you when you swing any blade, but especially when you wield two. It’s just you and these swords, an extension of yourself, of your strength and power. And any man, any monster who breaches that tunnel... Death awaits them.’

The rest of the arena fell away and it was just the two of them, moving as one, sharing the same breath, blades carving through the air.

Heart pounding, he broke away from her. ‘Show me.’

Thea looked equally shaken, but she squared her shoulders and planted her feet apart again, exactly as he’d demonstrated.

Then, she unleashed herself upon her imaginary opponent.

She was good. *Really* good. Her blades lashed at the air, through the neck of an enemy he couldn’t see, delivering slices to their ribs, their vulnerable tendons.

‘You need to learn to read a man,’ he offered.

‘Or a woman,’ she countered through her teeth.

‘Or a woman,’ he agreed, pushing the thoughts of the Daughter of Darkness away. ‘You can read an opponent’s intentions in their eyes, in their hesitations and their footwork.’

‘I’ve seen it,’ she said, not stilling for a moment. ‘People are easy to read. But what of a monster’s intentions?’

‘You’ve seen a monster’s intentions up close already, which is more than some Guardians can ever say.’ He followed her across the space as she

moved. 'Mind your footwork. Two steps forward is more than enough there.'

She delivered a brutal double slice. 'That's only one type of monster. There are more than shadow wraiths and reapers.'

'There are,' he allowed. 'What creatures have you heard of?'

Thea continued to hack and slash her way across the arena, her fellow Guardians leaping out of her way. 'Cyrens, teerah panthers, arachnes, sea and mountain drakes, sea serpents, reef dwellers... I read about a cyren queen who has a host of drakes at her call... But what makes a monster a monster? How do you discern between a monster and a beast that just serves its own instincts?'

It was the most she'd said to him in a long while.

Wilder didn't take his eyes off her as she cleaved through her imagined opponents. 'Talemir always said that beasts kill out of instinct. Monsters, and humans, kill out of cruelty, greed, selfishness, agenda...'

'He taught you a lot.'

'He did.'

At last, Thea paused, panting slightly, loose strands of hair stuck to the damp skin at the nape of her neck. 'And what of Warswords?'

'What of them?'

'Have any of them... gone bad?'

Wilder froze.

'Have any of them become... monsters?' Thea pressed.

The word echoed through Wilder like a warning bell, but he composed himself. 'Over the course of history, there have been a handful of instances where the Furies gifted powers to a warrior who couldn't cope.'

'Is that what happened to Talemir?'

A dozen images flashed in Wilder's mind then. Shadows and nightmares, pain and suffering. 'No,' he replied. 'Talemir wasn't like that. He's no fallen Warsword.'

He noticed Thea's attention had slid elsewhere. To Vernich and his apprentice, who were finishing up their training several yards away.

Ah. Her questions made sense now. Both the Bloodletter and his lapdog had wronged her, terribly so. Wilder himself had pulled Thea bodily off the Barlowe prick more than once now.

'A fallen Warsword is a warrior who is corrupted by the power within them. Not someone who's just an arsehole.'

But Thea was shaking her head. 'I overheard them the other night...' she said quietly. 'Vernich is looking for something. For the Daughter of Darkness. It sounded like —'

'Doesn't matter what it sounded like,' Wilder told her sharply. 'He might be a bastard, but Vernich would sooner die than betray Thezmarr.'

Thea's gaze snapped back to him. 'Have you ever —'

'Enough talk.'

Her eyes lit up. 'Are we actually going to —'

Realising that the rest of the arena had emptied a long while ago, Wilder unsheathed his own swords and advanced. It was one thing to be led through a range of exercises, another thing entirely to feel ringing steel vibrating up one's arms. His apprentice would know the difference.

'Let's spar, Princess,' he commanded, voice low.

Thea's answering grin was manic. 'Thought you'd never ask.'

And she didn't hesitate. Wilder's apprentice threw herself into a series of attacks, her twin blades gleaming in the sinking sun.

He blocked each blow before they could be fully extended. But it didn't faze her, didn't break her focus or determination.

'You have to be faster than this,' he warned, taking a long step to the outside of their circle with his leading foot, twisting his hips and adding momentum to both blades as he brought them down on her strikes.

The energy that surged between them – he felt it in his bones.

'You have to be stronger.' He lunged, sweeping her legs out from under her with his own.

Thea flipped back up onto her feet, delivering an upward cut with one sword and swinging the other over her head —

Wilder hit her ribs with the flat of his left blade. 'Left yourself vulnerable there.'

Thea cursed.

'We live because we make others bleed,' he told her, batting away another of her blows. 'You will see the light leave a man's eyes, a monster's eyes, more times than you can count before your time in these realms is done.'

His own words and the stark truth of them hit him in the chest with enough force to make him falter. Because Thea's time left in the world was limited, fleeting, and that fact lingered between them like a ghost.

But it didn't deter her. She used his hesitation against him and broke away to engage in a flurry of vicious slices and parries.

Wilder retreated a step, and another, allowing her to advance, to think she had the advantage. She had him up against the far wall of the arena.

But he wouldn't let her win.

She had to learn, and learn the hard way.

He attacked, all his unchecked Warsword strength raining down on her – for no enemy, man or monster, would show her mercy.

There was a blur of silver.

Followed by bright flashes of light.

And Wilder found himself thrown back, a bunch of throwing stars spearing through his clothes, pinning him to the wall.

Thea echoed the same words he had once said to her in Harenth. 'You'll have to try harder than that to hit me.'

He blinked at the pieces of metal holding him in place. Two through his sleeves, another either side of his ribs, and one in between his legs, dangerously close to his balls. But it was not the accuracy of the throws alone that stunned him... It was that the stars were humming with storm magic.

Lightning flickered at the blades' edges.

Thea stalked towards him, her eyes bright with challenge. More fierce and beautiful than he'd ever seen her, cheeks flushed with exertion, she halted before him, surveying with satisfaction his heaving chest and the shock clearly written on his face.

How had he never felt power like this before? Magic rippled from each of the stars as one by one, his apprentice, a lost princess of Delmira, the woman he loved, plucked them from the wall, freeing him.

She looked at him as though she were expecting anger, as though what she'd done was somehow wrong.

He would have been lying if he said he wasn't afraid for her. There was a hunt for her and her magic across the realms. But he refused to be the one to teach her to fear it, to fear her own power.

'Who's going to stop you?' he said quietly.

And to his surprise, Thea smiled.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEA



During mid-meal the next day, Thea didn't eat in the Great Hall, but rather snatched a helping of bread and cheese from the kitchens and ate alone, lest that poor serving boy be forced to bring her another overly large helping of greens. But as she passed the hall, she spotted Wren inside. She looked how Thea so often felt when she was being honest with herself: sad and fragile, with dark circles beneath her eyes. Her sister sat at the table, but she wasn't eating. Instead, she turned a teapot over in her hands, her brow furrowed.

Not just any teapot. The *Ladies' Luncheon* teapot. The assassin's weapon Wren had designed herself.

Despite her anger, Thea couldn't help but admire her sister. It was not the first time her ingenuity had led to the creation of such a thing, and Thea had no doubt that she had perfected it over the past few weeks.

'Thea!' Samra exclaimed, clapping her on the shoulder. 'You're coming to join us at last?'

Thea winced. 'Uh, no, sorry, Sam,' she replied, already backing away, ignoring the pang of guilt. She hadn't just cut Wren out, but her other friends as well.

Ida appeared at Sam's other side. 'Oh, come on, Althea Nine Lives. Whatever it is, it can't be that bad.'

'She hasn't told you?' Thea ventured, chancing another glimpse at Wren through the doorway.

'No, she's told us nothing.' Sam frowned. 'But you have to talk to her. She's barely slept, says she's been having nightmares but won't tell us what

they're about... She's not eating much, either. Actually, you're not looking so great yourself...'

Thea huffed a laugh. 'Thanks.'

'You always make up when you fight,' Ida said gently.

'This is different.' Thea sighed, her chest heavy.

'She's still your sister.'

Thea stole another glance at Wren. *They might have a point*, she thought.



'Good of you to join our practical lessons at last, Althea,' Audra said, surveying her coolly as Thea approached her and Wren at the edge of the Plains of Orax, the Chained Islands looming just across the way. 'You've fallen behind what Elwren has learnt —'

'I don't mind,' Wren cut in. 'We can start again.'

Thea bit back a retort about not needing her charity. For the first time since she'd found out about her supposed ultimatum, all didn't feel lost. She'd wielded her magic against Hawthorne and *won*. Perhaps things weren't as dire as she thought.

Thea looked to Audra, who did nothing to mask her impatience. 'I'm not in the habit of repeating myself.' The librarian rested her hands on the hilts of her jewelled daggers and paced a few steps. 'So listen carefully. I will not say this again.'

Thea tensed, unsure what to expect from their stern-faced warden.

Audra met her gaze and began to speak. 'What I know, I gleaned from my grandparents when I was younger, as well as my extensive research. My priority in these lessons first and foremost is your safety and the safety of others. I expect obedience and respect. Storm magic is fraught with risk. It is one of the most unstable magics known to us in the midrealms, one of the most unpredictable.'

'Oh, good,' Thea mumbled.

Audra shot her a warning look. 'The risks are high. You, the wielder, are at risk of being controlled by the storm, of falling into its lure. You risk letting your own power out and not being able to contain it. You risk

making yourself vulnerable to burning through your reserves and rendering yourself a shell —’

‘If there are so many risks, what’s the point?’ she heard herself say. ‘Especially when you made it clear that us announcing who we are to the world wouldn’t be met with celebration from the other kingdoms.’

‘The point is, Althea... that you could master it all.’

Inside her, as if in answer, Thea’s magic sparked. What if she *did* master it all? Her life as a Guardian of Thezmarr would be over. It would change the course of the limited years she had left.

If Audra noticed her reaction, she said nothing about it. Instead, she continued. ‘Your magic is one with the storm. You can answer the call of a storm and manipulate it, or conjure one from nothing yourself.’

That made sense. Even with her treated fate stone muting her powers, she felt the energy of the storm like it was an irremovable part of her, but so far, she had always been at its mercy, not the other way around.

‘How do we control it?’ she said quietly.

‘You find your centre,’ Audra told her. ‘You find that pocket of calm within and sink into yourself – seek the whisper of the wind, the taste of rain in the air, the pulse beyond the clouds. In order to be the master of storms, you must first become the master of yourself.’

Thea nearly groaned. She was hardly a master of anything at the moment.

‘You need to find the kernel of power within, the piece beyond the raw magic that threatens to overcome your senses. That kernel is the key to the rest of it. Understand?’

Not in the slightest, Thea thought, suppressing the urge to glance at Wren before she nodded.

‘Just as well,’ Audra said. ‘Now, let’s work on finding your calm.’

Thea heard Wren smother a laugh.

Audra had them sit on the grass at the edge of the Plains of Orax, overlooking the Chained Islands. Thea gazed at them wistfully. The pull between the paths before her was almost physical. Heir or Warsword. Magic or blades. Unimaginable power or a chance to outsmart her fate stone... She had faced so much to obtain her Guardian totem; she would face far more still to acquire the Warsword symbol. Why did she have to choose between what she had fought so hard for and who she apparently was?

Wilder's voice echoed in her ear. '*Who's going to stop you?*'

'You have to *focus*, Althea,' Audra reprimanded her. Obviously her magic training wasn't faring nearly as well as her warrior side.

'Sorry,' she muttered, turning back to her warden.

Audra led them through a mind-numbingly boring meditation, wherein Thea tried and failed to locate a supposed pocket of peace within. But as she removed her fate stone, her power barrelled into her and she seized it, letting lightning spark at her fingertips.

'Audra,' she murmured, looking at the forks of white light in her hands. 'I did it.'

'Did you find the calm I was talking about?' the librarian asked flatly.

'I —'

'No, you didn't. You forged ahead as usual. Therefore you didn't do it. You've taken a shortcut. Were you to use that power at a heightened level now, you'd destroy yourself.'

The lightning snuffed out.

Sitting cross-legged beside Thea, Wren gave her an encouraging nod that only served to infuriate her further.

She turned her back to her sister and tried again. And again. And again.

Nothing.

Or worse than nothing: a glimpse of a now familiar figure.

*Any*a.

With her eye-patch and malnourished frame, sometimes with blood on her hands.

'Althea. Focus,' Audra snapped again.

'I *am* focusing,' she bit back through gritted teeth, mimicking Wren's position as an icy wind picked up, whipping through her tangled hair and stinging her cheeks.

'Clearly not well enough,' Audra chided.

Wren's hand closed around her arm. 'Thea, just think of all the good you could do with your magic...'

Thea shook her head, closing her eyes. She tried to block Wren out and tap into the current that was constantly surging through her.

But her sister's grip remained. 'All I'm asking is that you think about it, Thee. As a queen, you —'

Wren gave a strangled gasp.

Thea's eyes flew open in time to see her sister thrown bodily from her, blue lightning surging around them.

Wren landed hard a few feet away in the grass, wide-eyed, jaw slack.

'Wren!' Thea cried, flinging herself after her.

But Wren held up a hand, stopping her short. 'I'm alright.'

Thea stared at her, heart pounding, noting how her sister's eyes were lined with tears, how her hand hovered above her heart.

'I hurt you...' Thea murmured, the words tasting bitter on her tongue.

Wren shook her head. 'No, it's fine —'

'It's not,' Thea argued. 'I —'

'And that is what happens when you don't listen, Althea,' Audra snapped, rushing to Wren's side and helping her up.

Deflated and hollow, Thea watched her sister, noting how she winced as she moved.

'I'm so sorry, Wren,' she said, her voice strained. 'I didn't mean to —'

Audra cleared her throat, turning both Thea and Wren towards the path that led back to the fortress. 'That concludes today's session.'

But Wren twisted to face Thea again. 'Have dinner with me, Samra and Ida? Like old times? Samra's been hoarding a stupidly large supply of wine under her bed for weeks...'

A pang of guilt hit Thea low in her gut. She'd hurt Wren, and Wren was still inviting her to dinner? But Thea still couldn't bring herself to agree.

'I'm not ready,' she told her sister, no anger lacing her voice, only sadness.

Wren seemed to gather herself, blinking back those unshed tears before she nodded. 'When you are, I'll be here.'

Thea pulled away. 'I know.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THEA



Feeling as bruised on the inside as she did on the outside, that evening Thea found Cal and Kipp in the armoury, arguing over the merits of cavalry versus archery units. Thea lingered in the doorway, watching their heated debate, already feeling a smile tug at the corner of her mouth and a familiar warmth spread in her chest.

‘It entirely depends!’ Kipp waved his hands passionately. ‘Is it a siege? An open battle on a field? Are there watchtowers? What about archers *on horseback*? Honestly, Callahan, I’m questioning my middling opinion of you.’

‘I was only saying that archers can —’

‘It’s like asking me what’s better: a beautiful naked woman on her back or on her knees?’

In spite of the day she’d had, Thea snorted. ‘What *is* better, Kristopher?’

Kipp leapt a foot in the air, clapping a hand to his heart. ‘Furies save me, Thea, I nearly shat my pants.’

‘Then I’d hope the Furies would save Cal and me first.’

Cal shook his head and shoved their friend aside, slinging an arm around Thea and giving her a squeeze. ‘Where have you been? We’ve hardly seen you lately.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry. I was hoping you’d have some time tonight? For a drink?’ She lifted the ceramic jug she’d brought from the cabin. ‘Perhaps some sour mead from the Laughing Fox, courtesy of Wilder Hawthorne?’

She’d found it hidden at the back of the pantry. Hopefully the hard bastard wouldn’t notice it missing, at least for a long while yet. She figured

her friends deserved a little something extra for withstanding her recent moods.

Kipp's eyes lit up. 'You wouldn't tease me, would you?'

'Not about sour mead,' Thea replied, smiling. 'I wouldn't want to be placed in a shit unit during the next battle.'

Kipp swiped the growler from her and cradled it like a swaddled infant. 'Good to know *someone* sees the value in my esteemed position.'

'Oh, sure, "unofficial apprentice" to Esylt was a much sought-after post,' Cal scoffed.

'I'll have you know there was nearly a full-blown riot over who would take the role,' Kipp said.

'I'm sure,' Thea replied, hiding her grin.

'But enough about me – for now. There are more important matters at hand.' Kipp linked an arm through Thea's. 'Where shall we drink?'

'One of your rooms?' Thea suggested.

The young men exchanged baffled looks before bursting out in incredulous laughter.

'Rooms?' Cal wheezed. 'You think lowly apprentices get rooms of their own?'

Thea was taken aback. 'When you moved from the dormitories, I just assumed...'

Kipp chuckled. 'We've got little cots, like dog beds. In fact, I think mine *was* a dog bed, judging by the smell.'

'Oh,' Thea managed. 'I thought that was just me.'

'Hate to break it to you...' Kipp elbowed her, in a particularly tender spot. 'But you're not that special.'

So... Hawthorne had been treating her just like all the other apprentices. She shrugged off the thought. 'Bloodwoods?'

Kipp looked horrified. 'We love you, Thea, but I'm not freezing my bollocks off in the dark for you.'

'Because in the light would be so much better?' She laughed. 'Where, then?'

Kipp tapped his chin thoughtfully. 'I know a place,' he said, making for the door.

Cal gave a long-suffering sigh. 'Of course you do.'

Unsure what to expect, but feeling lighter than she had in weeks, Thea followed her friends just beyond the stables to an abandoned courtyard,

where Kipp paced, scuffing the dirt with his boots. 'It's somewhere here,' he muttered, more to himself than to the others.

'What are you looking for?'

Kipp was quiet, still pacing, still kicking at the ground. 'This!' he said victoriously, reaching down and pulling on the handle to an iron hatch.

'What is that?' Cal asked, his voice laced with scepticism.

'Shut up and help me with this, would you?' Kipp retorted, motioning to the heavy trap door.

Thea watched on, fascinated. She'd never noticed the hatch before, but why would she? The small courtyard was hardly used but for readying horses and unloading supplies.

With a series of grunts, the young men pulled the door free, revealing a ladder down into a cellar. Thea's skin prickled in recognition. But it wasn't until she had climbed down and Kipp had lit a torch that she truly knew it for what it was.

Though it was full to the brim with kegs and barrels now, it was undeniably the same room where she and the other children had been hidden two decades before, during the attack on Thezmarr. As she wandered its perimeter, she even spotted the grate from which she'd spied upon the women surrendering their weapons in the main courtyard, the smell of burnt hair and heather drifting through the grate.

'Thea?' Kipp was saying. 'How about that mead?'

She nodded, passing it to him. 'What is this place? How do you know about it?'

Kipp looked around as though checking to make sure no one else could hear as Cal closed the door above and slid down the ladder, dropping down beside them.

'It's the masters' cellar. I discovered it a long time ago,' he explained, pointing to a locked door. 'That there is the main fortress larder.'

Cal motioned to a door on the opposite side. 'What about that one?'

'That? Oh... That's nothing.'

'Nothing? It's never *nothing* with you.'

Kipp gave a conspirator's grin at that and tugged a kerchief from his pocket. He waved it at them, a bushy fox's tail embroidered in the corner. 'The Son of the Fox has his secrets, my friends. A man of mystery.'

Thea rolled her eyes. 'You just going to cradle that mead all night, man of mystery, or are we gonna drink it?'

Kipp laughed and took a swig straight from the jug, passing it to her. He went about examining the stores, as though taking stock of what might come in handy later, ever the strategist.

Thea drank from the growler, the sour mead washing over her tongue, nearly moaning at the crisp taste. She hadn't indulged in a long time, not when training was so brutal and she was up before dawn every morning. Making herself comfortable atop one of the barrels, she held the jug out to Cal.

He jumped up onto the drum beside hers and accepted gratefully, drinking deep. 'This a reward for all the ruthless drills you've been doing?'

The mead nearly came out of Thea's nose. 'Reward? You're joking.'

Cal frowned. 'No?'

Kipp returned to them, a few of his pockets bulging, but his face was serious as he surveyed her, his eyes lingering on her splinted fingers and bruises. 'You've been training hard...'

'That's my job,' Thea replied, a little defensively.

'You need to be in one piece for the Great Rite,' Cal said carefully, passing the jug to Kipp.

'I know that.'

'Do you?' Kipp pressed. 'We're worried —'

'Don't be.'

'Oh, it's that simple, is it?' Cal's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Thea sighed. 'Let's talk about something else.'

'Like?'

'Like...' She cleared her throat. 'Have you ever heard of fallen Warswords?'

'No...' Cal said slowly. 'No one in particular, in any case. I know it's possible, though. The power can become too great for a warrior...'

'So you don't think someone like... someone like Vernich... could be one?'

Kipp's nose wrinkled at the Bloodletter's name. 'You know I'd be the first person to think that after what he did.'

The image of Kipp's face caving beneath the fists of the older Warsword swam in Thea's vision. It was one of her worst memories of Thezmarr. Cal shuddered as well.

'But I don't think he's anything more than a cruel bastard,' Kipp finished. 'Why do you ask?'

Thea tried to give a casual shrug. 'I followed him and Seb the other night.'

'And?'

'And I heard them talking about the Daughter of Darkness from the prophecy... Saying she has risen. And that she's after something. A weapon of sorts, it sounded like.'

Both Cal and Kipp were staring at her.

'Vernich said he's going to get it...'

Her friends exchanged sceptical looks. 'You should ask Hawthorne about it,' Cal suggested.

'That's like trying to get blood from a stone.'

Cal shrugged. 'I don't know about this thing with Vernich... But Hawthorne has done it before – hunted down a fallen Warsword, I mean. He would know the signs. There were stories going round a few years back.'

Of course Hawthorne knew about it. That didn't help her one bit, though. She sighed. 'Forget it. I don't want to think about it anymore. I want to talk, to have fun.'

'You missed us, huh?' Kipp said with a wink.

'I wouldn't go that far.'

'Horseshit. It pains you to be without us.' He raised the jug in salute. 'Well, never fear, wraith slayer, we're here to stay.'

'Speak for yourself,' Cal sniffed. 'I can think of better places to be than this damp shithole.'

'There's always a booth for us at the Laughing Fox!'

Cal threw his hands up. 'Great, I'll just forfeit my hard-won apprenticeship and pop over to Hailford, shall I?'

Thea felt the smile tugging at her mouth as she listened. However idiotic they were, her friends were good for her soul. They soothed the ache in her chest, a loneliness that had yawned wide open since Wren, since Hawthorne...

It must have shown on her face, because Kipp's gaze slid to hers. 'You know you can talk to us, right?'

'I know.'

'Do you? Because you've hardly said more than a handful of words to us since the initiation,' Kipp ventured. 'I thought we were closer than that, after everything we've been through.'

Thea didn't miss the note of hurt in his voice. Fuck, she'd messed it up with everyone, hadn't she?

Cal's knee nudged hers. 'What happened with you and the Warsword?'

The breath Thea exhaled was shaky. 'We...'

'Slept together?' Kipp finished matter-of-factly.

Thea cringed, feeling her ears grow hot before she managed to compose herself. They'd kept their questions and suspicions to themselves for a long while already, well aware that things were far from simple between her and her mentor. Realistically, it had only been a matter of time before they found out. 'I wouldn't exactly call it that.'

'What would you call it?' Kipp asked.

'Fucked against a tree like a pair of animals...?'

Mead exploded from Cal as he coughed and spluttered, eyes bulging.

Kipp looked at him, disappointed. 'That can't be a surprise to you, Callahan.'

'What? Why not? How was I supposed to know —'

Thea couldn't help but laugh, watching the liquor still dripping from her friend's nose.

Kipp slung his arm around Cal. 'Poor Callahan. So innocent in the ways of the world...'

'Piss off.'

But Kipp hadn't finished. 'Haven't you seen that poor man? He's like a caged animal when dear old Thea's around, like he's trying to break free.'

'Oh, please,' Thea scoffed. 'He wants nothing to do with me now.'

It was Kipp's turn to scoff. 'I thought you were smarter than that, wraith slayer. The man's unhinged because of you.'

'Unhinged is right.'

'Can someone tell me what the fuck you're talking about? How did this happen?' Cal exclaimed.

'Well, Callahan... When a man and a woman —'

'Fuck off, Kipp! You know what I mean.' He turned to Thea, his gaze imploring.

She shrugged. 'It was never easy between us. But... I don't know. One moment we were going to be together and the next... The next he was my mentor, and I was his apprentice. He never wanted that. Never wanted me.'

'I don't believe that for a second.' Kipp pressed the jug back into her hands. 'But it sounds like you need this more than I do.'

Cal was still looking bewildered. 'How did I not know this was going on?'

'Because you, my friend, have your head so far up your own arse it's a miracle you've noticed anything at all these past few months,' Kipp declared merrily.

Cal gave Thea a sideways glance. 'See what I've been dealing with when you're not around?'

Thea laughed, taking a deep drink from the growler. 'I'll endeavour to help you out a bit more going forward.'

'I'd be much obliged.' He waited a beat, his curious expression reminding Thea of Samra before she was about to ask something utterly inappropriate. 'So... All that Warsword prowess... Does it translate —'

Thea's gaze snapped to his. 'Don't you dare ask.'

Cal's cheeks flamed as Kipp wandered to a nearby shelf and innocently pulled a bottle loose. 'Is that why you're training so hard? In the hopes that little Cal might become big Cal one day?'

Cal rolled his eyes and ignored the last remark. 'Well, if I'm struggling with training, you've got no hope.'

'Absolutely none,' Kipp agreed wholeheartedly, uncorking the bottle with his teeth and giving it an enthusiastic sniff. 'But I don't need help getting a girl. Or have you forgotten the black-haired beauty at the Fox? Goes by the name of Milla? Is hopelessly in love with me? Can't keep her lovely hands off me? Besides, I have no interest in being a Warsword. Never have.'

Thea found herself laughing, a quiet chuckle at first and then a deep burst from her belly. As she laughed, the fear and fury that had coiled so tightly within her unravelled, lightened, dissipated.

Kipp smiled back at her. 'Glad you find us so amusing, wraith slayer.'

'Not sure how I feel about the new name, *Kristopher*.'

'If you do this apprentice thing right, you'll have many more names by the end,' Cal offered.

'Oh? Have you got one picked out for yourself already?' she asked him. 'A Warsword name?'

Cal shrugged. 'Maybe.'

'*Maybe*?' Kipp's face lit up with glee. 'You *have* to tell us.'

'No fucking way.'

Kipp surged forward and elbowed him in the ribs repeatedly. 'Thea shared her deep dark secret, now it's your turn.'

Cal winced. 'Alright, alright.'

'You'd hold up terribly under torture,' Thea said drily.

'The name!' Kipp demanded.

Cal fixed them with a serious stare and took a breath. 'Callahan the Flaming Arrow.'

A moment passed, then another.

Finally, Thea dared to look at Kipp, who, upon eye contact, roared with laughter.

Thea soon followed, her eyes streaming. 'How long have you been thinking up *that* one?'

Cal clicked his tongue and frowned. 'Forget it.'

Thea and Kipp only laughed harder.

When they were done wiping the tears from their eyes, Kipp proudly adjusted the totem strapped to his arm and turned to Thea. 'We're heading out on our first solo Guardian mission tomorrow if you'd care to join?'

'Really?'

Kipp grinned. 'Don't look so surprised. They were bound to let us out sometime.'

'Where are you headed? Harenth?'

'I wish,' Kipp replied. 'No, we're set to ride up the coast, to see to a disturbance that was reported there.'

'What kind of disturbance?'

'Not sure yet. That's the job – to gather more information and report back to the Guild Master. Fancy an adventure, Althea Zoltaire?'

Thea wrung her hands. 'I'll have to check with Hawthorne...'

'You should,' Cal chimed in. 'Torj says it's about time we made ourselves useful as Guardians, and got some real-world experience, you know?'

'I've got *plenty* of real-world experience,' Kipp said with a wink. 'But someone's gotta guide Callahan.'

'You're a constant pain in my arse,' Cal muttered.

'You should probably get that looked at.'

Cal's nostrils flared in wild frustration, and Thea couldn't help but laugh again, the tension from the day easing. How the pair hadn't killed one another in her absence, she had no idea.

Kipp gave her a gentle nudge. 'We leave before dawn from the northern gate.'



When Thea returned to Hawthorne's cabin, her cheeks ached and she felt more like herself than she had in weeks. Hope fluttered in her chest. Perhaps all was not as bad as it first seemed. Despite the incident on the plains, Wren had still invited her to dinner... Things with Cal and Kipp were good. Perhaps now, she and her mentor could reach an understanding, could speak like adults... Maybe they could work this thing out between them.

With those words on her lips, she opened the door and let herself in. Inside, the cabin was bathed in the soft glow of the dying fire.

Hawthorne must already be in bed... She glanced around for some indication of the hour, but there was no clock to be seen. Sighing at the prospect of another night in the narrow cot with Hawthorne mere feet away from her, she pushed her boots off by the heel and left them by the door.

Still alert from the drink and merriment, she wandered around the room, taking in the little details: the potted plants that the Warsword somehow managed to keep alive though he was barely here; the tattered armchairs, where several rips had been sewn up with precise sutures. Then, on the side table... that damn jewel again. She picked it up and turned it over between her fingers, marvelling at the depth of its blue colour, wondering to whom it belonged.

The scent of rosewood and leather wrapped around her suddenly.

'What are you doing?' Hawthorne's deep voice rumbled.

CHAPTER NINE

THEA



The Warsword stood in the doorway to the bedroom. He wore loose pants that sat dangerously low on his hips, and his shirt was unbuttoned, revealing a strip of bare sun-kissed skin. A scowl graced his handsome face.

Thea refrained from jumping, instead dropping the sapphire back onto the table. ‘Nothing.’

Hawthorne’s gaze fell upon the jewel, something unreadable in his expression. ‘That’s not what you think it is,’ he murmured.

‘How can you know what I think?’ Thea bit back, trying to tear her gaze away from the rippling plane of his abdomen.

‘It’s written all over that beautiful face of yours.’

Thea’s heart stuttered. ‘So, now I’m beautiful?’

Hawthorne made a noise at the back of his throat. ‘You’ve always been beautiful.’ His words were gruff, but there was stark honesty there, too. His gaze upon her was hooded, hungry.

Thea flushed, suddenly all too aware of her own heartbeat pounding against her breast. ‘Hawthorne...’ she said quietly. It was both a question and a plea. What was this thing between them? How had it got so tangled?

He grimaced. ‘I hate when you call me that,’ he murmured, taking a step towards her.

‘I hate a lot of things you call me...’ she ventured, sucking in a breath as he closed the space between them.

‘Is that so, *Princess*?’ he replied, the deep timbre of his voice making her toes curl in her boots.

‘Yes,’ she said through gritted teeth. *Damn this man, damn him to Enovius*, she cursed silently. ‘Quit playing with me.’

‘I’m not playing.’

‘No? You made yourself clear when I was made your apprentice. You don’t want me. You don’t —’

‘Don’t *want you?*’ he cut in, his words harsh. ‘How can you think that? After everything? How can you not *feel* it? This thing drawing us together?’

She stared at him. His silver eyes were intense as he grabbed a fistful of her shirt. ‘You have no idea how much I want you. How I *burn for you*. You lit an inferno within me and it won’t stop. I can’t stop —’

Thea kissed him, crushing her mouth to his, her fingers tangling in his hair.

She felt his words deep in her chest, in her bones. The anger had only magnified their wanting for one another, alongside all that raged against the world and what it had demanded of them.

Hawthorne – *Wilder* – froze for a moment, as though warring with himself, as though he didn’t dare breathe. ‘I can’t fight this anymore,’ he groaned against her lips. ‘Not tonight.’

His arms snaked around her, pressing every part of her to him as he returned her kiss fiercely. His mouth was hot and lush and bruising. His tongue met hers and sent a thrill straight to her core.

‘Me either,’ she whispered. She dragged his shirt from his shoulders, desperate to feel his heated skin beneath her touch, desperate to get him naked. The fabric fluttered to the floor and she trailed her fingers down his torso, toying with the waistband of his pants, noting the bulge beneath, her blood heating at the sight.

He tore her shirt apart with a growl, buttons popping as he claimed her mouth once more, ripping her chest band down, freeing her breasts.

Thea moaned as he cupped them in his rough palms, pinching her hard nipples between his fingers. She arched into his touch. *More, more*. Her body, her heart demanded more.

Wilder obliged her silent command, ripping open her trousers and wrenching them down her bare legs.

She palmed him through his pants and he groaned, the sound making her buckle.

The same dark frenzy she remembered from the Bloodwoods took hold of them both. Thea felt herself winding tighter and tighter, relentless heat pulsing between her legs. She fumbled for his pants, but he batted her hands

aside, focused on removing hers completely, getting to his knees before her as he stripped them away.

Her undergarments were next, and suddenly she was naked, completely exposed.

Wilder kissed her breast, his tongue circling her nipple before he moved to the other, teeth scraping, causing her to arch as his hands cupped her backside.

‘I have many regrets in this life,’ he murmured against her skin, kissing a path down to her navel. ‘But not tasting you that night in the woods is one of the biggest. I need to rectify that now. Let me show you how much I *don’t want you*, Thea.’

Suddenly, he was hoisting her up, carrying her not to the bed, but to one of the armchairs in front of the fire. He placed her down gently and she sank into the cushions, her skin flushing as he spread her legs wide. His gaze was heavy-lidded with lust as he looked upon her, spying the slick wetness between her thighs.

He glanced up at her, his lips parted. ‘I need to taste you,’ he said again, his voice thick.

Thea swallowed and gave a single nod.

That was all the permission the Warsword needed. He hooked her legs over the arms of the chair and put his mouth on her.

Thea saw stars.

He licked up her centre in a long, luxurious stroke before circling over and over. Thea threaded her fingers through his hair as he kissed the most intimate part of her, spreading her wider and feasting upon her.

She cried out as he sucked on her clit, coaxing waves of pleasure from her, making her climb higher and higher into the ecstasy of him.

Squeezing her breasts, pinching her nipples, she moaned, ‘Oh gods...’

‘The gods have no place here,’ he told her as he slid a finger inside her.

Two.

Bliss crested, causing her to writhe beneath his touch.

‘You’re perfect,’ he said. And he worked her into a furious frenzy of desire.

She knew no inhibitions then, no shame or vulnerability. Only him and the pleasure he unravelled in her. All she could do was ride out the tidal wave, rendering her as powerless as a piece of driftwood in a surging storm.

‘I want you undone, Thea...’ Wilder murmured against her.

He fucked her with his tongue and fingers, her thighs clamping around his head as she lost herself in him, as she did exactly as he bid.

There was freedom in this, she realised abstractly as she reached the point of no return. There was freedom in letting go.

And so she did.

She cried out, nearly sobbing as she climaxed, as Wilder wrung every last drop of pleasure from her trembling body.

CHAPTER TEN

WILDER



Wilder would never forget the taste of her. He'd never forget the sight of her, head tipped back in ecstasy, utterly bare and exposed before him, her skin flushed and damp. It was everything he'd hoped it would be and more.

If he'd done his job right, she'd never forget it either.

Gods, she had no idea how perfect she was. He'd spoken the words, but they did little justice to what he saw, what he felt.

His heart racing, Wilder dropped a light kiss on each of her knees, still drinking in the sight of her limp and sated.

Then, Thea reached for him, his desire clearly tented at the front of his pants, her gaze lustful.

He caught her hands. 'You don't have to —'

She stood, twisting her hands from his grip, pulling him up with her to find the buckle of his belt. 'I want to. You have no idea how much I want to,' she murmured, her eyes falling to where the buttons of his pants popped open beneath her fingers.

He was rock hard, his breathing shallow. How many times had he found his release imagining a moment like this? Imagining the feel of her —

Intense pleasure unfurled as she freed his cock, her warm hand wrapping around him, leisurely stroking him up and down. He moaned, loudly. Furies save him, her touch set him alight, and he'd never stop burning for her.

Thea licked her lips as she looked upon the size of him in her hand, her breasts rising and falling with each breath, her nipples hard and tempting. The sight of her watching him sent a fierce craving through Wilder and he

leant in to take one of her nipples in his mouth, but Thea's other hand pushed him back as she increased the pressure on his cock.

A low rumble of need escaped Wilder as she worked him. Gods, she had no idea the willpower it required not to scoop her up and take her against the wall.

'Thea...' he said, half plea, half warning, his whole body tense with anticipation.

But she didn't stop, not that he wanted her to. She kissed him, rough and hard, and dragged his pants down over his hips, leaving them bunched around his knees. Her silken strokes down his cock were intoxicating, awakening the beast within, coaxing all his desire to the surface. The ache, the need for her roared through him and he kissed her back savagely, his tongue exploring her mouth, brushing against hers, his hands tangling in her hair, heat surging beneath his skin.

Thea broke away too soon.

'I want to taste you,' she told him, her gaze dipping low between them, surveying his arousal.

Wilder's head tipped back and he raked a hand through his hair, nearly coming on the spot at those words leaving that wicked mouth. He knew he should object; he knew that this would muddy the waters between them even more. His guilt and sense of duty warred with this desire, making him falter.

I shouldn't...

He took a step back, needing to hold on to something, needing to anchor himself somehow. His grip found the mantel of the fireplace, his fingers digging into the stone there.

Then Thea got on her knees.

His mouth went dry at the sight of her, naked and waiting for him.

This was happening. She was going to suck his cock, and the thought alone fuelled the most primal instinct within. Every inch of him was ablaze, crying out for her touch, but he remembered himself for a moment. If they were going to do this... They were going to do it right. Reaching for the basket by the fire, he grabbed a spare blanket and dropped it to the floor in front of her.

His own cheeks heated as a shy smile tugged at the corner of Thea's mouth and she settled her knees on the soft fabric.

Her gaze didn't leave his as she adjusted her grip on his cock and traced the length of his shaft with the tip of her tongue.

'Fuck...' He groaned at the light, teasing sensation, a sultry promise of what was to come.

Thea's tongue swirled across the broad tip of him and his head fell back once more, her name on his lips, his fingers digging into the mantel, crumbling the stone.

She teased and taunted the crown of his cock until his knees were weak, until he was arching his hips towards her.

Her nails raked down his thighs in silent demand and he looked down, her eyes meeting his as her lips closed over his throbbing tip. Then she took him deep, deep into her mouth, enough for him to brush the back of her throat.

'Fuck, Thea,' he barked through the lust-filled haze.

Her other hand swept across his balls and his whole body jerked with the force of the added sensation.

Unable to bite back the sounds any longer, his moans filled the cabin as he gripped her hair at the roots with one hand, guiding her up and down his shaft, losing himself to the first ripples of a building climax.

Together, they found their rhythm, one that had Wilder rocking on his heels to meet every slide of her mouth. Everything faded away but her and the wet warmth of her lips, the caress of her tongue, building and building that heat inside him.

Thea moaned around his cock, the vibration sending a jolt of pure pleasure straight to his balls.

He felt them tighten, begging to empty into her.

She took him deeper still.

Wilder's vision spotted and the stone where he gripped the mantel came away in pieces as he warred with his last thread of control. But the hot, tight glide into Thea's throat was like nothing he'd ever experienced. His body answered to her every command, white-hot need coursing through him.

Then, she curled her tongue around him, hitting the sensitive underside of the crown of his cock, tipping him over the point of no return.

'Thea —' was all the warning he gave her, before release surged through his entire body. His climax hit him like an avalanche, barrelling into him and leaving him breathless. Completely uninhibited, he shuddered as he spilt himself into her mouth with a deep, carnal moan.

Thea lapped at him, taking everything he gave, swallowing him down.

A bead of sweat trickled down Wilder's chest as he panted, unsure how he was still upright. As the world slowly came back to him, he realised he was clutching a handful of broken stone from the fireplace.

'That was...' But Wilder didn't have the words for what it was. He didn't have a single sensible thought in his head, other than that he needed to bury his cock inside Thea. He needed more of her.

Thea slid her mouth off him and kissed the sensitive skin below his hip, smiling softly, before pulling him down to the blanket on the floor. She was still naked, her body damp with sweat and arousal. He reached for the cushions and a throw on his armchair, making things more comfortable. Then he kicked off his pants and joined her, his heart swelling at the quiet intimacy between them.

In front of them, the fire crackled quietly, and Wilder didn't hesitate to draw Thea into his arms and kiss her soundly, not caring that she tasted of him, relishing the feel of her bare skin against his.

He traced the lines of her curves, memorising the feel of her, his cock already hardening for her again. 'You...' Emotion cracked his voice and he found that he still couldn't form the words.

Thea simply nestled closer, her lips finding his.

Gods, he could stay like this forever.

They kissed as though they had all the time in the world, a slow, unhurried exploration of one another, their hands drifting across each other's bodies, learning every dip and hollow.

Wilder didn't know how long they stayed like that, but the fire burned low, and when it was no more than glowing orange embers, the room grew cold.

'Shall we go to bed?' Thea murmured against his chest, tracing his nipple.

Bed... The two of them together, sharing his bed.

An act so normal, yet so intimate.

An intimacy they couldn't come back from.

Thea laced her fingers through his and made to get up, goosebumps breaking out across her arms.

But Wilder hesitated.

Hurt flashed across Thea's face before she masked it, pulling the blanket over herself.

Chest suddenly tight, Wilder got to his feet, needing to look anywhere but her, shoving his legs through his pants and tucking his still-hard cock away. The hurt she felt in this moment was nothing. He knew that from experience. People had been truly hurt on his watch.

To share a bed with him... To be *his* in that permanent way... It would only lead to more pain for her.

He was already keeping secrets from her, to keep her safe. To protect her. And he would do so at all costs. It was his duty.

He knew he was doing a piss-poor job of it. He couldn't tame his desire, his rage, his *anything* when it came to her.

That had to stop. Now.

He had vowed to make a Warsword of her, and pleasuring each other in front of the fire wasn't a part of that. All those weeks ago, that reaper had found her alone, her power raw and untrained, a beacon to those lurking in the shadows who sought such things. And it had nearly taken her. It had nearly clamped its talons around her heart.

Now, there was a daughter of darkness seeking lost heirs. Now, there was a hunt for her.

Thea was watching him, her expression a mask of indifference. 'So this changed nothing? It remains as it was between us?' she asked, all emotion stripped from her tone, the blanket held tightly around her naked body.

Wilder allowed a beat of silence to follow. 'You still want to be a Warsword?'

That unbroken tempest in her eyes was back. 'Yes.'

'Then it remains as it was.'



Try as he might, Wilder couldn't sleep, not with her so close, not with the intoxicating scent of her lingering on his skin. It was all he could do not to take her in his arms and carry her to his bed. She'd accepted his choice, if one could call it that. A wise decision. For they couldn't go down that road, the one of midnight embraces and slow, tender fucking until the early hours of the morning. Not if she was to pass the Great Rite. One of them had to see sense, and this time, it was him.

From where he lay as still as death in his bed, he could hear her murmuring in her sleep. Quiet pleas at first, then terrified whimpering and loud cries. His throat constricted as he heard her thrashing around in the blankets of her cot, and saw the outline of her limbs flailing against an enemy he couldn't see.

It killed him. Every word of anguish from her lips had him rigid, guilt-ridden and desperate to help her.

Yet he did nothing. He had to leave her to face her demons alone. For that was exactly what the Great Rite would demand of her.

And he was determined to prepare her for that, no matter how brutally it tore his heart apart.

So Wilder settled in for a sleepless night, watching over her as she stood against the terrors of her own mind, her own memory.



When he woke, Thea was gone again. He didn't like the fact that, once again, he hadn't stirred as she'd readied herself for the day, hadn't heard the water splashing in the bathing room or the door clicking shut behind her.

She was getting too stealthy for her own good.

He hauled himself out of bed and pulled on a pair of loose-fitting pants. In the living room, there was no note waiting for him. The silence was deafening. What had he expected? He'd gotten her naked and vulnerable, only to turn her away.

Raking a hand through his hair, he looked around his cabin. There was no sign that Thea had eaten or drunk anything before heading out; no mug on the side table, no plate or bowl. He knew well enough that she wouldn't waste valuable training hours running back to the fortress to bother the cook before dawn.

Thea still wasn't taking care of herself. Not enough food or water, not enough sleep. He'd have to change that. Sighing heavily, he opened his cupboards, searching through the various tins he'd collected over the years until he spotted the one he was looking for. Removing the lid, he sniffed its contents.

Peppermint tea; Thea's favourite. He'd known it was in there somewhere. He set it down on the side table and found an overly large mug

in his mismatched collection, setting that down too.

He couldn't coddle her, couldn't hold her hand through what it meant to become a Warsword. But this... this was something small. This he could do.

Wilder took the note she'd left him the previous day and turned it over. There, he inked a jagged lightning bolt of his own and propped the note against the tin. Hopefully she'd see it when she got back.

He'd have to work on the bigger picture more gradually, honing her discipline for not only working hard, but knowing when to stop, when to rest. That was just as hard as the drills and something she was clearly struggling with.

He ran through a list of things he still had to teach her in his mind. Then there were the actual things she needed – armour; new boots, most likely; decent tack for her horse...

Heaving another sigh, Wilder went to get dressed, but stopped short upon entering the bedroom again. Her corner of the room was neat but for the clothes he'd torn last night. A pang of guilt hit him low in the gut and he didn't hesitate to scoop them up. It was still dark outside, and so for the next hour, he sat by the fire, mending her shirt and pants with a needle and thread.

As he sewed, he tried to keep the memories of her at bay.

He failed miserably.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEA



Thankfully it was too early for even Evander to be tending to the stalls and polishing the tack when Thea arrived to saddle her horse. There wasn't even a hint of the dawn to come over the treeline, just the bright crescent moon amid the inky black above, highlighting the jagged lines of the mountains beyond.

Checking her cinch, Thea shoved away any lingering feelings of guilt about not checking with Hawthorne about today. He'd figure it out soon enough – and if he panicked over her whereabouts? It would serve him right. Perhaps it was her turn to jerk him around. After last night, she wasn't sure where they stood. His words said one thing, but his actions... His actions had left her in pleasure-soaked pieces.

It remains as it was, he'd said. But whatever it was between them was anything but clear.

Her stomach fluttered at the memory of his mouth on her, of his tongue... No one had ever pleased her like that before. No one had —

Thea shook her head. Now was certainly not the time and place to reminisce about what the Warsword's tongue was capable of doing between her legs. Especially not a Warsword who behaved like a bastard afterwards. No, she would focus on the task at hand, on the first solo mission she and her friends had been granted as Guardians of the midrealms.

She led her mare from the stall and removed the splints from her fingers, flexing her hand. *On the mend*, she decided, satisfied. Thankfully, her ribs were much better as well; she mounted up with only a faint twinge of pain.

Head held high, Thea rode to the northern gate, where Cal and Kipp were waiting.

Kipp beamed at the sight of her before throwing his hand out to Cal. 'That's three gold to me, my friend.'

Cal clicked his tongue in frustration. 'I told you I wasn't taking the bet.'

'Nonsense. I called it.'

'I didn't say you didn't call it, I said I didn't take the bet,' Cal replied.

Kipp waved him off. 'I'll collect later, then.' Atop his horse, he opened his arms wide in a dramatic greeting. 'Welcome, Thea!'

Thea snorted. 'You knew I'd come.'

'Of course I knew,' Kipp declared. 'Callahan here doubted you, but I —'

'Oh, for fuck's sake, Kipp,' Cal snapped. 'Can we get on with it, or what?'

Kipp had the audacity to look offended. He motioned to Thea and her mare. 'After you, wraith slayer.'

Thea couldn't help smiling as she urged her horse forward.

'Thank the Furies you're here,' Cal muttered as she passed.

Thea didn't know why it felt natural for her to take the lead, even though it was really Cal and Kipp's mission. But it didn't seem to bother either of them in the slightest. Perhaps her reputation as a wraith slayer preceded her, or perhaps they just recognised she was as competent as any of them. Still, it made warmth swell in her chest. She had come a long way since those initial days as a shieldbearer at Thezmarr. They all had. Pride bloomed as she glimpsed their Guardian totems strapped to their arms: the tokens they had fought tooth and nail to earn in the initiation test, the pair of crossed swords that marked their official entry into the guild of warriors.

They rode beyond the fortress walls before the first rays of dawn broke through the darkness, and by the time the rose gold and orange hues illuminated the sky, they were on the coastal trail north. The trio rode close together so they could chat over the steady hoofbeats across the dirt path.

'Vernich tried to petition that Barlowe join us for this trip,' Cal confided in Thea.

She twisted in her saddle, brows shooting up. 'He didn't.'

But Cal was nodding. 'Reckoned that if we were going, his apprentice ought to as well.'

'How'd you get out of that?' she asked.

‘Torj,’ Kipp supplied. ‘He put his foot down, apparently. Said that there was bad blood between us all and it would compromise the mission.’

‘I was telling the story,’ Cal muttered. ‘You weren’t even there.’

‘Well, go on, then,’ Kipp said, reaching across to clap his friend on the shoulder.

Cal shook his head in disbelief before addressing Thea again. ‘I’ve never seen Torj like that. He was ready to hurl the Bloodletter across the room. Or clobber him with his war hammer.’

‘He defended you that furiously?’ Thea asked.

‘Hawthorne would do the same for you,’ Cal replied.

Vernich’s bloody, swollen face flashed in Thea’s mind: the justice Hawthorne had delivered to his fellow Warsword upon hearing of his role in her and Kipp’s near-fatal injuries.

‘I know,’ she murmured.

Cal shifted in his saddle. ‘Torj said he might be able to arrange it so that I can visit my family in the spring.’

Thea’s eyes went wide. In the early days of their friendship, Cal had told her that he’d come to Thezmarr as a teenager, leaving behind three sisters in his homeland. ‘Really? That’s amazing, Cal. How long’s it been since you went home?’

‘Years... It will be strange to see them again. If this comes to pass.’

‘I’m sure it will,’ Thea reassured him. ‘Torj is a good man. If he says he’ll make it happen, he will. I’m happy for you.’

‘Thanks.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Does it make you think you should make up with Wren?’

Thea huffed a laugh. ‘Not quite. But nice try.’

A few feet behind them, Kipp cleared his throat. ‘Who put this in my pocket?’ he asked loudly, fishing a flask from the inside of his cloak.

Thea exchanged an amused look with Cal. ‘It’s barely dawn...’

‘Exactly. It’s practically night still.’ He took a swig from the vessel and leant forward to hand it to Thea.

She laughed. ‘Suppose it’ll keep us warm,’ she said, taking a measured sip.

‘Kipp...’ Cal ventured, clearly conflicted. ‘This is a serious mission.’

‘No one’s forcing you, Callahan. Suit yourself. Thea and I will share.’

‘I didn’t say I didn’t want any —’

‘Funny, that’s exactly what your words sounded like to me,’ Kipp teased.

But Thea took pity on Cal and handed him the flask. ‘What do you know about this so-called mission, anyway?’

Cal winced at the taste of the liquor and passed it back to Kipp before speaking again. ‘Only that there was some sort of disturbance reported up the north coast. A ship lingering close to the Veil. We’re to find it and observe it.’

Thea blinked. ‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it. Torj and Eyllt were very clear about the orders. Under no circumstances are we to take any action or interfere in any way.’

Thea rolled her eyes. ‘You made this sound much more adventurous last night.’ She hadn’t realised how much she’d been anticipating some action, the opportunity to swing her sword and fell some enemies. The encounter with Hawthorne had left her more restless than before...

‘Thea, every day is an adventure with us,’ Kipp reassured her with a wink.

Though day had broken on the horizon, the once promising rays of the sun had weakened, offering a grey and moody morning. As they rode north, the seas to the left of their cliffside path grew darker, the waves in the distance reaching the clouds above.

A bark sounded from behind them and Thea jumped, spotting a big black dog bounding after them.

She beamed. ‘Dax!’

Cal watched the mongrel warily. ‘Is this the same beast that watched over you in the dorms?’

‘Sure is,’ Thea said, watching Dax overtake them and dart through the rocks ahead. ‘He’s Malik’s dog.’

‘Malik?’

‘Hawthorne’s brother. He’s the former Warsword who lives at the fortress.’

‘I didn’t know Hawthorne had a brother,’ Kipp said, frowning.

‘Nor did I, until we travelled back from Harenth. But I’ve been friends with Malik for ages.’

‘Isn’t he the big fellow who doesn’t speak?’ Cal asked.

Thea shrugged. ‘He doesn’t need to speak.’

Cal nodded. ‘Fair enough.’

A thunderous rumble from out to sea snatched her attention away. Across the expanse of dark water was the Veil, towering taller than ever, a wall of roiling mist descending from the sky, where a storm brewed.

‘We should get moving,’ Thea warned, trying to ignore the spark of interest from her magic. Her hand went to her fate stone, checking it was still there. For so long, Thea had resented its existence, and now she sought its comfort, hoping it would continue to repress the magic that threatened to spill out of her.

She pushed ahead, following the swish of Dax’s tail around each bend in the path, leaning forward in the saddle to make things a little easier for her mare as the incline increased. But there was no ignoring the storm that broke out across the sea. Thunder and lightning cleaved through the air, and Thea could only close her eyes and brace herself against the onslaught on her senses, and the way it called to the crackle of magic in her veins.

She forced herself to inhale deeply through her nose, and exhale through her mouth. The same technique Hawthorne’s little list of exercises specified for calming the mind before a battle. But it was no use —

The storm dragged her under.



A girl, no older than twelve, stood on the edge of a cliff, looking out to the raging sea below. She wore a patch over her right eye, while her matted copper hair whipped around her face in the wind.

Anya.

She faced the bleak horizon, as though something she desperately sought was somewhere out there, waiting for her. The girl’s clothes were little more than tattered rags on her too-thin body, her feet bare. She inched towards the rocky edge.

Thea’s heart seized. She’s going to jump.

But the girl didn’t take another step. Her knees didn’t bend in preparation for her final leap.

She simply stood on the edge, as though she belonged there, as though she had lived on the precipice of death her whole life.

Thunder clapped in the distance, and the girl didn’t so much as flinch.

But her gaze flicked to where Thea stood.

As though for a moment, in the flash of lightning, she'd seen Thea too.



A sharp bark sounded, penetrating the vision. Thea started in the saddle, gripping the horn with a gasp.

Cal and Kipp were riding so close their horses were whinnying in protest, but both young men's concerned gazes were trained on her. Ahead, Dax barked again, as though he sensed her coming back to them.

'What the fuck was that?' Cal demanded, scanning Thea's face as she gathered herself.

'What was what?' she managed, her throat feeling raw and swollen.

'We didn't know if you were having some sort of fit, or if you'd passed out,' Kipp blurted, his whole lanky body tense as though he'd expected to have to catch her. 'I mean, you didn't even have that much fire extract, Thea...'

'I'm fine,' she muttered, her voice thick. Her magic, her connection to the storms – it was getting out of control. First she had hurt Wren, now this? How long before she had an outburst and revealed who she was to the realms?

'No one ever believes that old chestnut,' Kipp informed her, his face still serious.

'I must have fallen asleep. I... I haven't been sleeping well,' she told them.

'Nightmares?' Cal asked.

'Something like that.'

But Kipp narrowed his eyes, still not giving her mare any space. 'Why do I get the feeling we're not getting the whole story?'

Thea forced a smile. 'The wraith slayer has her secrets, Kipp. You can't be the only mysterious one around here.'

At last, Kipp acquiesced, though he didn't look happy about it. 'If you feel faint again, fucking say so. We can't bloody well return you to Hawthorne in pieces – he'd skin us alive. Probably poor Torj, too.'

'He would not —'

Kipp silenced her with a challenging look and she threw up a hand in surrender.

‘If you two would shut up...’ Cal murmured from a few feet ahead, where Dax had come to a stop at a crest in the trail.

Thea was still reeling from the strange vision the storm had shown her, her magic still vibrating in her bones, but she urged her horse up alongside the others, where they peered over the ridge.

‘Hide the horses,’ Kipp said suddenly, his voice full of command. ‘Stay low to the ground.’

Thea and Cal did as he ordered, dismounting swiftly and tethering their horses out of sight.

‘On your bellies,’ Kipp told them, already crawling back to the peak of the trail on his elbows.

Thea’s heart rate spiked. Whatever was over that ridge wasn’t good news for them, that much was clear.

When she found her place beside Kipp and took in the sight below, her heart lodged in her throat. Far down on the shore were several boats pushed up into the sand, and a small unit of men gathered on the beach. They wore no colours Thea recognised from Harenth, Tver or Aveum, nor was it likely anyone from the three kingdoms would seek to moor here. There were far better ports for access to Thezmarr... if that was what they wanted.

‘Look...’ Cal whispered, pointing out to sea. There was a much larger ship anchored out beyond the shallows, though again, Thea didn’t see any recognisable banners or flags.

‘Who are they?’ she murmured.

‘Can’t tell,’ Cal replied.

Thea turned to Kipp, but her friend was studying the force below, his lips moving as he counted.

‘We should get closer,’ she said, starting forward.

Kipp gripped her arm with surprising strength. ‘No.’

‘But you want to be able to report back, don’t you? We just need to get a little —’

‘No, Thea,’ Kipp said. There was no amusement or lightness in his tone.

‘He’s right, Thea,’ Cal put in. ‘We’re not to act, those were the orders —’

‘It’s not acting if we’re just creeping a bit closer for a better look.’

‘Yes, it is. We’re Guardians now, Thea. We must follow the orders we’re given,’ Kipp told her.

‘Then why send Guardians instead of scouts?’ she snapped.

‘Osiris and Esyllt sent *me* especially. I have a better understanding of armies and how they work than any scout.’ Kipp spoke without any of his usual bravado, just stating a fact. It was the most serious Thea had ever seen him.

He waited expectantly.

She drew a deep breath. ‘Alright.’

Kipp gave her a grateful nod and went back to his counting.



Thea didn’t know how long they stayed on that crest, but slowly, the sky was darkening.

‘Shouldn’t we be heading back?’ she asked.

Kipp shook his head. ‘I’ve changed my mind...’

‘About what?’ Cal said sharply.

‘Taking action.’

Thea raised a brow. ‘Oh?’

‘Those are invading forces down there,’ he told them, chewing his lip. ‘I won’t leave them unchallenged and primed to attack Thezmarr or Harenth.’

A thrill shot through Thea. ‘So, what’s your plan?’

‘First, we’ll need a distraction.’ He gave Cal’s bow and quiver a meaningful look. ‘Perhaps it’s time the Flaming Arrow earned his name...’

Cal gave a wolfish grin. ‘Just tell me the target.’

Kipp was all business as he laid out his rather brilliant strategy. The trio couldn’t take on the forces themselves, but that didn’t mean they were powerless, and the dark of night offered ample cover for inflicting damage.

‘We’ll wait until they’ve eaten and drunk their fill. Let’s hole up here at the foot of this ridge for an hour or so,’ Kipp said. ‘No fire. Just eat your share of the rations and get some rest. I’ll take the first watch.’

Thea accepted a piece of bread from Cal as Kipp returned to his post. ‘I’ve never seen him like this,’ she remarked, reaching to stroke Dax, who’d nestled beside her.

‘He’s always like that after a meeting with Esyllt. The two of them are always whispering away in his study... Thick as thieves.’

‘You don’t ask what they talk about?’

‘Oh, I ask,’ Cal said. ‘But he never says a word. For all his messing around, Kipp takes his role very seriously.’

‘I can see that.’

Cal studied her for a moment, his lips moving as though he wanted to say more, but he didn’t. Instead, he sighed. ‘Get some rest,’ he told her. ‘You’re still looking a bit off.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

Thea curled up on her side as night fell around them. In the distance, thunder rumbled once more, and that ever-present magic inside her sparked to life again, utterly unnerving. Even Dax’s presence by her feet did little to calm the storm within.

She pulled her cloak tight under her chin. Seeking what little comfort she could amid the power she didn’t understand, she pictured Wilder Hawthorne’s face.



Thea woke with a start to Cal shaking her gently by the shoulder.

‘It’s time,’ he murmured. He jutted his chin towards Kipp, who waited at the top of the ridge, a small pack strapped to his back.

Thea wasn’t sure how she’d managed to sleep, but with her friends spurring her into action, she was alert within moments. ‘We’re really doing this? Going against orders?’

‘Absolutely,’ Kipp said, not taking his eyes off the camp below. ‘They’re well on their way to being drunk now,’ he told her as she came to stand beside him.

‘I’ll need fifteen minutes to get down to the camp and find a position,’ Cal said, shouldering his quiver of arrows and testing the string of his bow.

‘You can do it in ten,’ Kipp challenged.

Cal clicked his tongue in frustration, shaking his head before he crested the ridge, disappearing into the night.

Kipp’s face broke into a wide smile. ‘Now, we wait.’

They didn’t have to wait long.

Ten minutes later, a fire sparked to life at the northern end of the camp below: a flicker of light at first, before wild flame roared into being.

‘Thanks, Cal,’ Kipp murmured, already starting down the hillside. Thea followed.

The enemy camp was abandoned in chaos as the men surged towards the fire, buckets of water in hand. Cal had lit one of their supply crates on fire, and judging by the size of the flames, it was the one with all the liquor.

Thea stifled a laugh at that.

While the forces were distracted, she followed Kipp’s lead, sneaking through the site. In the darkness they went from boat to boat, boring holes in the vessels’ hulls with their daggers. The timber splintered beneath their efforts, but it wouldn’t be until the boats took on water that their enemy would know something was wrong.

Thea was onto her fourth when she heard the distinct crank of a crossbow being loaded —

‘Kipp!’ she shouted, throwing herself against the side of the boat.

Her friend moved just in time, and Thea launched herself after their attacker. Another bolt came for her, whistling through the air, but she ducked and, in three paces, she’d caught up. A second later, she disarmed her opponent and, without hesitation, dragged her dagger across the fragile column his throat.

Warm blood spilt into the sand, a ragged choking sound escaping the enemy.

‘Gods, Thea...’ Kipp murmured, frozen in shock.

But Thea didn’t think about how quickly she’d acted, how easy it had been to take a life, not even as the dead man’s blood puddled at her boots. Instead, she spotted something on his cloak.

‘Kipp,’ Thea said softly. ‘Look...’

She pulled at the sopping garment, running her fingers over the small sigil she found on the fabric.

A pair of wings.

For a moment, Kipp only stared at her bloodied fingers, but he soon shook himself out of whatever trance he’d fallen into. ‘Bring it with you,’ he said, his expression grim.

Thea nodded, ripping the design from the cloak and stuffing it in her pocket, leaving the corpse to the mercy of the incoming tide.

‘Fire’s almost out,’ she warned with a glance towards the plumes of smoke at the far end of the camp.

For good measure, Kipp spilt drums of oil across their sacks of flour and grain. 'Let's get out of here.'

Like shadows in the night, they slipped away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WILDER



By mid-afternoon, Wilder hadn't seen any sign of Thea. Had it only been the night before that he'd had his face buried between her thighs? That her mouth had been on him? He told himself that she was just keeping her distance after his harsh words... and that he had to respect that.

But by sundown, there still had not been a whisper of Thea's whereabouts in the fortress, and when Wilder returned to his cabin, it was as silent and still as when he'd left it. The peppermint tea he'd set out for her was untouched, his note with the lightning bolt still propped up against it. He'd snuck enough glances at Thea during mealtimes in the Great Hall to know that she would never leave peppermint tea unattended, that she was just as likely to take Cal's mug and sip from it while hers brewed. If she had been home – *here* – he'd know it.

Worry prickled at him now. He hadn't *explicitly* told her she wasn't allowed to leave Thezmarr, but he hadn't thought he needed to. Yet another mistake on his part. Thea was reckless at the best of times and had a tendency to find trouble, or have it find her. Especially when it came to that prick apprentice of Vernich's. But where would she go? She certainly wasn't one to let complications between the two of them interfere with her training.

Wilder wracked his brain, trying to recall if he'd seen her friends or her sister throughout the day. He hadn't.

Jaw clenched, he snatched his cloak up once more and headed back to the fortress.

There, he found himself banging on the door to Torj's apartments.

‘Coming, coming,’ he heard his fellow Warsword mutter from inside. When Torj flung the door open, he frowned. ‘Where’s the fucking fire, Hawthorne?’

‘You seen my apprentice?’ he growled, stepping inside without an invitation.

‘Not recently,’ Torj started. ‘Probably because she’s off with mine up the northern coast.’

Wilder’s blood went cold. ‘What?’

Torj shut the door and folded his arms over his broad chest, brows raised as if to say, *Don’t bring your foul mood to my doorstep*. But Wilder didn’t give a flying fuck what he was bringing to Torj’s doorstep. If he knew where Thea was, Torj was going to tell him everything.

Torj sighed. ‘Thea went with Cal and Kipp to observe that disturbance to the north.’

‘No one told me,’ Wilder ground out. Images of reapers and shadow wraiths attacking Thea invaded his mind. He saw her snatched up and taken to the Daughter of Darkness, a prize to be tortured and used. Gods, he felt sick.

‘I assumed your apprentice would. But then... she doesn’t seem like your biggest fan these days.’

‘You don’t understand —’ Wilder cut himself off, desperation clawing at his insides. He couldn’t tell Torj. Couldn’t explain. ‘You should have —’

Torj shook his head. ‘Your bullshit is your bullshit, Hawthorne. I’m staying well out of it.’

‘Is that so?’ Wilder cracked his knuckles, his fear for Thea turning to something more violent.

‘You spoiling for a fight?’ Torj challenged, his blue eyes shining. ‘As I recall, that’s how you used to deal with things.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Then by all means, I’ll beat you to a pulp in the training arena, but I like my furniture as is.’

‘Your furniture is shit.’

Torj snorted. ‘True. But I like it intact all the same.’

Wilder took a deep breath and tried to wrangle his temper, his terror, under control. Regret tasted sour on his tongue. Thea didn’t know that the dangers out there hunted *her*. Anything could happen to her. She had put

herself at risk without even knowing, and it was his fault. He'd been too caught up in everything else —

Torj was watching him pace. 'Instead of using your fists, you could use your words for a change.'

'You're one to talk.'

'Sometimes a conversation is the better option.'

Wilder ground his teeth. 'When are they due back?'

'Should have been back by now.'

Wilder's stomach went leaden. 'And no sign of them?'

'Not yet. But Kipp, Esyllt's would-be apprentice, he's thorough. He was asked to come back with actionable information. They've likely camped out there to re-check things in the morning.'

'And they're not doing anything but scouting?'

'Those were the orders.'

It was Wilder's turn to snort. Thea wasn't known for following the rules. His mind churned through the worst-case scenarios, each more harrowing than the last. It wasn't that he didn't think she was capable. It was that he hadn't prepared her. If anything happened to her, it would be on him. And he'd been down that path before. Tal, Malik... He hadn't been able to save them.

Wilder stopped pacing to rummage through the bottles in Torj's side cabinet, looking for his supply of fire extract. 'Where's your liquor?'

'I'm doing a cleanse,' Torj replied, deadpan.

Wilder gave him a stony look and waited.

Torj waved to the lower half of the cabinet. 'Bottom left cupboard. If I don't hide it, Kipp tends to help himself.'

Wilder huffed a laugh at that. It wasn't surprising, considering the lad had been raised at the Laughing Fox. But as he reached for the bottle, he paused, spotting a familiar-looking vial. Carefully, he picked it up.

'You still have yours?' he asked, studying the blue-tinted springwater from Aveum. Most Warswords used theirs within the first few years of service.

'Long ago, someone told me not to use it on myself. That it would be more powerful if it was used on someone you care for, someone you love. Figured I've survived this long, I'd best hold on to it for when I need a miracle,' Torj answered. 'I take it yours is gone?'

There was no point in denying it. 'Yes.'

‘You use it on Malik in Islaton?’ Torj asked.

Wilder shook his head stiffly, trying not to sink into the visceral memory of his brother being slammed against the white stones by a monster of darkness. It haunted his dreams often enough. He needed his mind intact during the daylight hours.

‘By the time I got to Malik, Guardians had already used his vial on him. Some of their own, too,’ he said. ‘I was stopped from giving him mine. The healer said he was too far gone – that if four vials hadn’t saved his mind, a fifth would make no difference.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Torj grimaced, shoving his hands in his pockets as he leant against the wall. ‘I can’t imagine how hard that would have been for you.’

‘It is what it is. Given his size, the bastard probably needed fifty vials.’

Torj’s features softened. ‘When did you use yours, then?’

Wilder tensed, gently placing the precious vial back where he’d found it. ‘Three weeks ago.’

The Bear Slayer frowned. ‘During the reaper attack? I didn’t realise you were hurt.’

‘I wasn’t.’

Realisation dawned slowly on Torj’s face. ‘I see.’

At last, Wilder found the fire extract and took a swig of the burning liquor straight from the bottle. ‘Nothing to see.’

‘One of these days, Hawthorne...’ Torj started, moving across the room to stoke the dying fire in the hearth.

‘One of these days *what?*’

Torj shrugged. ‘You’re gonna have to get over yourself and let someone in. Accept help and all that.’

‘Oh, fuck off.’

Wilder headed for the door. Gods, Torj Elderbrock was a good Warsword, but an even better man. He hated that.



Torj’s assurances did nothing to soothe Wilder’s fears, especially as he paced the fortress corridors and remembered the storms that so often ravaged the northern coast. That should have been his first thought. He was losing his fucking mind. If he’d acted like a decent human being last night,

she might have checked with him before leaving. She might not have gone at all. But again, his inability to control himself had put Thea in danger.

Swearing under his breath, he headed out into the chilled night.

There was still so much he hadn't taught her, hadn't shown her – things she would need to know if she was not only to survive, but to emerge from the Great Rite victorious. He couldn't help Thea now, he realised. He had to trust that she could take care of herself. But what he *could* do was see to it that upon her return, she was equipped for the battles ahead; that she had everything she needed.

And so Wilder didn't return to the cabin. Instead, he headed to the library, where he knew Audra would be.

When he found her among the books, the warrior-turned-librarian gave him a pointed look, her brows raised. 'Took you long enough,' she mused.

'I know,' Wilder replied. 'You've got something I need.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEA



The ride back to the fortress the next morning was miserable. Rain hammered down in relentless, sideways sheets, soaking Thea, Cal and Kipp to the bone as they made their way down the trail. Even Dax, who usually loved the rain, darted ahead of them, eager for the warmth of his master's room. The roar of the wind made it too hard to talk, but none of them were in a chatty mood anyway.

Despite the actions they'd taken, the boats on Thezmarrian shores and the unknown ship anchored out to sea left a pit of dread yawning wide in Thea's gut.

They had watched as two crews attempted to take their boats out beyond the break, long enough to see them sink, the men struggling to swim back to land. Kipp had double- and triple-checked his count before they left, with Thea and Cal dragging him away by the end, insisting it wouldn't be long until they sent a unit to investigate the surrounding areas. Besides, visibility had grown so poor that there was little point remaining atop the ridge.

It was late afternoon by the time they neared home. The sun was masked by thick, dark clouds, making the cold lines of Thezmarr all the more ominous. Thankfully, the fortress walls were at last in sight. Thea wanted nothing more than to go back to Hawthorne's cabin and sink into that deep wooden tub of his.

She would have no such luck, though. Dax left them as they reached the gate and Kipp informed them that they were to head straight to the council room. He sent a wide-eyed shieldbearer ahead to summon Esyllt, Osiris and the Warswords there, too.

The trio left their horses with a stable hand, Thea cursing all the while that there was no time to dry off or change. Looking like a drowned rat, she wrung out her cloak in the courtyard as best she could before following the others inside.

The council room felt smaller to her somehow, though it was unchanged since her last visit. A handful of torches lined the walls, illuminating the mahogany table in the centre, surrounded by six high-backed chairs. The same heavy crimson curtains covered the window, but Thea doubted that opening them would make a difference to the dim light within.

She looked to one of the chairs at the end of the table, picturing herself perched there at the mercy of the Warswords and the Guild Master. Gods, she had been so terrified then... On the verge of being kicked out of Thezmarr for good, Hawthorne having dragged her there from the Bloodwoods in punishment for breaking the law.

Thea remained standing with Cal and Kipp while they waited for their superiors to arrive. Esyllt was the first one to storm in, looking more harried than usual. Thea fully expected him to start barking orders or issuing demands, but he simply gave Kipp a curt nod and took a seat at the table.

Vernich entered next, shadowed by Seb, whose face was pinched into a sour expression.

Thea felt her friends tense beside her. They, more than anyone, had cause to hate the Bloodletter's apprentice. Bile rose in her throat as she remembered the sight of them hanging unconscious and half drowned in the mountains. Put there by Seb and his lackeys out of spite and jealousy.

'Should have let me kill him,' Cal muttered.

Kipp made a noise of agreement.

Seeming to sense their animosity, Seb stayed by the door, glaring daggers at Thea, while Vernich sat opposite the weapons master.

Torj and Osiris strode in, deep in conversation. Both men were dressed in armour, the Bear Slayer carrying his famous war hammer at his side. The Warsword towered over the Guild Master, his features sharper, the blue of his eyes brighter, his golden hair pulled into a knot at the back of his head.

But Thea's attention was drawn away as Hawthorne entered last, pushing the door open with such force that it collided with Seb's face.

The apprentice gave a cry of pain, clutching at his nose.

'Didn't see you there,' Hawthorne said gruffly, drawing up a chair and taking his place. His silver eyes betrayed nothing, but the tense set of his

jaw hinted at the anger beneath the surface.

Thea grimaced inwardly and shifted nervously on her feet, knowing there would be a price to pay for her actions.

No one, not even Vernich, paid any attention to Seb, who was still standing by the door, cursing under his breath and clutching his bleeding nose. Instead, all eyes were on the trio, and more specifically, Kipp.

‘Well?’ Esysllt said at last, folding his arms over his chest and waiting.

Kipp didn’t so much as draw breath before launching into his report. ‘An unknown force of men, at least two hundred strong, likely more. Six rowboats on our shores, with a larger ship anchored out towards the Veil.’

‘Weapons?’ Esysllt asked.

‘No cavalry. But a unit of archers for certain, and every man was armed with at least a broadsword.’

‘And you saw no identifying sigil? No banners?’ Osiris cut in.

Kipp gave Thea a nod and she produced the torn piece of fabric from her pocket. It was still wet with blood, flecks of red splattering on the wooden surface as she dropped it down on the table for all to see.

Thea didn’t miss the intake of breath from their superiors. There was no mistaking the pair of wraith wings embroidered there.

‘Fuck...’ Torj muttered, peering across the table.

No one asked about the blood.

The Daughter of Darkness has risen. She hadn’t wanted to believe it, hadn’t let herself truly entertain the notion, until now.

Thea’s skin prickled. She could feel Hawthorne’s eyes on her, could feel his fury radiating off him. She had left with the others without a word to spite him, but already regretted not leaving a note, already dreaded the confrontation.

No one else seemed to notice. They had all fixated back on Kipp.

‘There was no indication as to their point of origin?’ Esysllt pressed.

‘None, sir. They were already anchored when we arrived. Though, their proximity to the Veil was concerning.’

‘You think they came through it?’

Kipp hesitated. ‘If I had to guess.’

‘You do.’

‘Then yes, I’d say they came through the Veil. We have manned watchtowers and scouts stationed all around the north and south coasts of

Thezmarr, sir. We would have seen them coming had they sailed from elsewhere in the midrealms.'

'And you carried out your orders to remain hidden?' Esvllt asked.

'Strictly speaking... Yes, sir. No one saw us.'

'And not strictly speaking?' the weapons master pressed, his eyes narrowing.

Kipp pushed his shoulders back. 'We sabotaged all of the rowboats. Two sank before our eyes; the rest are stranded on the shore, completely useless. We also saw to it that their supplies were destroyed. They can't get to the main ship, which is moored by the Veil. Nor do they have any rations to —'

'So, you disobeyed direct orders?'

Panic spiked in Thea as she saw Kipp's throat bob in surprise. He lowered his head in shame. 'Yes, sir.'

Thea had to shove her hands in her pockets to keep from wringing them, but Esvllt seemed to study Kipp, something gleaming in his eyes.

'Excellent work,' he declared.

Kipp blinked. 'Sir?'

'Anything else to report?' the weapons master asked, ignoring his shock.

'I'd suggest sending a unit to mop them up, sir,' Kipp ventured, clearly not quite recovered.

Esvllt nodded. 'Agreed.' Then he turned to Osiris. 'You know what this means...'

A muscle twitched in the Guild Master's jaw. 'The hunt has begun. The Daughter of Darkness is coming,' he said bluntly. 'This means war.'

An icy chill raked down Thea's spine. They had known it for a long time; the darkening days, the monsters slipping through the Veil, the reaper and wraith attacks... But all the same, the word carried a different weight, and there was no putting it back where it had come from.

War.

War was on the midrealms' doorstep.

The silence that filled the council room was deafening.

Getting to his feet again, Osiris cleared his throat and addressed the Warswords. 'You have your orders. And you're to brief the commanders on the situation. Reach out to your sources, see if there are reports of any other forces landing in any of the kingdoms. Send ravens to Harenth, Tver and

Aveum, and to our Guardians stationed throughout the midrealms. Make sure they know that we are no longer dealing with just monsters, but men as well. More of them than we anticipated.’ He threw a disgusted glance at the patch of cloth on the table. ‘They wear her sigil. They must be destroyed at all costs.’

A few murmurs of agreement followed, and before Thea knew it, everyone was leaving.

Hawthorne remained. His face was a mask of icy calm.

Cal and Kipp both offered her pitying looks over their shoulders before they followed after their mentors, closing the door behind them.

‘You left,’ Hawthorne said, his voice dangerously low.

She lifted her chin. ‘There was work to be done.’

‘You put yourself in danger.’

‘It comes with the territory, Warsword.’

‘Whose blood was on the sigil?’ he asked, an edge to his tone. The smear of crimson still stained the table.

‘Not mine.’

He seemed to war with himself over which battle he wanted to fight next.

Thea waited.

‘Did something happen with your magic?’ he demanded.

‘No.’

‘Then why can I sense a storm on you?’

‘Probably because it rained the whole ride back.’ Thea gestured to her sodden clothes.

Hawthorne’s jaw clenched. ‘You know what I meant. Did something happen?’

The vision of Anya flashed in Thea’s mind, but she didn’t reply.

‘By not mastering it, you’re making yourself vulnerable,’ Hawthorne told her.

‘I’m the best fighter in the whole fucking cohort,’ she snapped.

‘You still shouldn’t have left.’

‘I shouldn’t have done a lot of things,’ she bit back.

The Warsword before her flinched – actually *flinched* at her words.

Thea heaved a sigh and pushed her damp hair back from her face. ‘Can we fight about something else?’

Hawthorne's mask of fury slid back into place. 'Oh, I'm sure there are more than enough topics,' he replied drily. 'I want to show you something.'

'I thought you had ravens to send.'

'Good gods, woman, for once, will you just do as I ask?' All the anger had faded from his expression, and now he waited for her by the door.

Unable to quash her curiosity, Thea met his gaze and gave a stiff nod.

Hawthorne led her down several corridors to a small room on the same floor: a linen storeroom, by the looks of things.

'What are we —'

But Thea cut herself off and stared.

For in the corner of the room, displayed on a mannequin, was a set of armour.

Simple black leather. And shaped for a woman, bust and all.

She loosed a shaky breath and stepped forward, taking in the boiled leather pieces that seemed too perfect to be true. The vest was form-fitting and lightly embossed with embellishments. Vambraces and pauldrons covered the top half of the mannequin, with pants and greaves on the lower half.

'This is mine?' she dared to ask in a near-whisper.

'It's yours,' Hawthorne said from behind her. 'All new Guardians are due to be measured for armour next week, but the current smith doesn't make women's pieces, so we had to improvise.'

Thea couldn't take her eyes off it. The armour was a work of art. 'You had this made for me?'

'Altered,' Hawthorne corrected her, his voice rough. 'I had it altered for you. Audra knew where some of the women's armour was hidden away from before the laws changed... I suggested it was time we got some pieces out of storage.' He cleared his throat. 'I know the pain of having ill-fitting armour...' His hand went absentmindedly to the shoulder Thea knew plagued him. 'Figured it was one less thing you'd complain about if we sorted it from the outset,' he added casually.

At last, Thea turned to him. 'How did you know my size?'

'I have some familiarity with your body, Thea...' His voice was husky.

She blushed, her mind instantly taking her back to being naked in his armchair, his hands all over her, his mouth and tongue —

He cleared his throat again. 'I had a rough idea, but I asked Farissa to get your sister's measurements. You're similar sizes.'

Swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat, Thea returned her gaze to the armour. 'Can I...?' She didn't care if it sounded silly, if her excitement was childish.

'Try it on,' Hawthorne said quietly. 'I'll leave —'

'Don't,' Thea said, too quickly, her face heating again as she caught his gaze. 'I... I don't know how... how to put it on.'

Hawthorne seemed frozen for a moment, before colour tipped his cheeks and he straightened. 'Right.'

Ignoring the fluttering in her stomach, Thea lifted her still-damp sleeves uselessly. 'So...?'

The Warsword hesitated one more beat before launching into action. 'Leave your undershirt on. Get out of those pants.'

Thea bit her lip, but did as he bid, pushing her boots off at the heel and sliding the damp fabric down her legs.

'Here,' he said, passing her the leathers and averting his eyes, like he hadn't had his face between her legs only the night before last. The thought made a smile tug at Thea's lips.

With her skin damp, she struggled to slide the new pants up her lower half, and soon she was sweating with the effort.

'You alright there?' Hawthorne quipped from where he faced the wall.

'I need a minute.'

She could have sworn she heard a soft chuckle.

At last, she had the leather pants on. 'Alright. Next?'

Hawthorne turned, his eyes roaming across her tightly clad legs for a moment. 'Greaves,' he said, businesslike as he handed them to her. 'They protect your shins. There's two buckles at the back.'

Thea fitted the sheaths of leather to her shins and reached around the back to her calves.

'Here,' Hawthorne said, lowering himself onto one knee.

Desire coursed through Thea at the sight. The last time he'd been on his knees...

But the Warsword pulled her leg up, placing her foot on his knee and reaching around to the buckles at her calf. 'I don't want to be here all night, *Apprentice*.'

Deft fingers fastened the two clasps and then placed her foot back on the ground before tending to the second greave. Thea felt like she should say something, but the words tangled on the tip of her tongue and all she

could do was watch the warrior before her, his dark brow furrowed as he finished with the last buckle and gently returned her foot to the floor.

Her breath caught in her throat as he stood, towering over her as always, before he turned to the mannequin and removed the vest from its torso.

‘Arms up,’ he told her.

She lifted her hands into the air and he slipped the leather creation over her head, pulling it down over her torso. It was black, with studded and embossed detailing across the breast, and far lighter than Thea had anticipated.

She twisted to look at Hawthorne, but he held her in place. ‘Stop moving,’ he said, a note of laughter in his tone. ‘It laces up at the side here.’ He pulled on a leather cord to demonstrate.

‘Like a corset,’ she blurted.

‘Corsets lace up at the back, Princess,’ he murmured.

And for a brief second, Thea wondered how many corsets his talented fingers had unlaced, the sapphire from his cabin springing instantly to mind. She swallowed down her stupid jealousy.

As Hawthorne worked at the ties, Thea felt the vest moulding to her body, form-fitting but not restrictive. She ran her hands down the front of it, appreciating the elegant but practical design.

‘It’ll fit you like a second skin after a few weeks of wear,’ Hawthorne told her, finishing with the laces and moving on to the shoulder strap buckles just above her breasts. Brow furrowed again, he tightened each one, his knuckles brushing against her through the thin fabric of her shirt.

Thea tried to remember to breathe. He was just so damn close, and the heady scent of him made her want to lean in, to press her body to his.

‘How does it feel?’ he asked.

Thea blinked.

Hawthorne gave one of the straps a tug. ‘The vest?’

‘Good,’ she said quickly. ‘It feels good.’

Nodding to himself, Hawthorne brought the pauldrons to her. ‘These slip over the arm like this, and sit up on your shoulder.’

Thea removed her Guardian totem from her arm and braced herself. His fingers brushed along her skin as he helped her into the shoulder pieces. Was he deliberately torturing her?

‘I’ll have to teach you how to oil this set properly. You need to take care of it if you want it to last,’ he told her.

When he had finished with the pauldrons and fitted her vambraces to her forearms, he at last stepped back, something unreadable flashing across his face.

‘Well?’ she prompted, feeling self-conscious beneath the weight of his stare.

‘You tell me,’ he said with an overly nonchalant shrug. ‘It’s your armour.’

Thea chewed her bottom lip, then moved. Though there was limited space, she launched into a basic footwork drill to test her agility.

‘Well?’ Hawthorne echoed back to her.

She looked up, in complete and utter disbelief. ‘I feel... incredible. Strong.’

He smiled then, warm and genuine. ‘Decent armour will do that.’

She wanted to reach out and touch him, to wrap her arms around him to express the warmth blooming in her chest, the appreciation for what he’d done. But Thea stilled her fidgeting.

‘Thank you,’ she said, leaving the distance between them. ‘Thank you for this.’

Hawthorne shrugged. ‘All Guardians get armour.’

‘But you... you did this for me.’

He hesitated, just a fraction, before he reached for the door. ‘Can’t have you chasing danger without armour, Princess.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WILDER



Standing atop the jagged cliffs at the edge of the world, black mountains looming overhead, Wilder stared at what he and his apprentice had found.

He had awoken that morning with a bad feeling. Overnight there had been an almost imperceivable shift in the air, and over the past few days at the fortress, he'd heard half a dozen complaints about a foul smell drifting down from the rocks at the border of their territory. Those things alone were cause enough for Wilder to investigate, given the state of the midrealms. It hadn't taken much to convince Thea to join him.

Now, in the early morning light, they could see a nest of gnarled vines that had sprouted against the rock. Its offshoots were the colour of dark seaweed, and they seemed to emerge from the face of the cliff itself. A putrid, rotting stench filled the air.

'What is that?' Thea murmured at his shoulder.

'A vine blight,' Wilder replied, surveying the mass of writhing green tendrils. Gods, it had something in its clutches —

'A monster?'

Wilder nodded. 'I had a report of one emerging in Naarva,' he told her. 'I knew it was only a matter of time until one found its way here too. While you were with Audra, I heard one of the guards complaining about the smell drifting down from here...'

'It's disgusting.'

'The smell is the least of it.' Wilder paced the area in front of the thing, not daring to touch it, but trying to ascertain what, exactly, the blight had made its victim. 'From what the alchemists tell me, they start as little more

than a seed, drifting through a tear in the Veil... From there, they find a host and feed off it until they're strong enough. Then, they grow of their own accord, devouring everything in their path.'

Thea frowned. 'But this is coming *out of the cliff...*'

'Is it?' Wilder asked, not taking his eyes off the monstrosity, his blood running cold as he realised what it had trapped in its snare.

Thea's sharp intake of breath sounded behind him as she, too, saw it.

Membranous red-and-black wings were crumpled beneath the vines' death grip. Patches of what looked to be human skin webbed with black veins peeked through the creeping undergrowth.

'Is it alive?' Thea murmured.

Wilder forced the bile back down his throat. He knew their kind well, far better than he cared to admit to his apprentice. But he couldn't help correcting her: 'He. It's a *he*.'

'What? It's got *wings*. The... blight... It's eating another monster,' Thea argued.

As though sensing their presence, the blight gripped its prey tighter, the creature within its grasp emitting a moan of pain.

'Do you think it's one of *hers*?' Thea asked. 'Do you think the Daughter of Darkness sent it here?'

'Maybe...' Wilder allowed.

Thea stepped forward and Wilder's arm shot out to stop her.

'Those vines are poisonous. A mere brush against your skin will cause immeasurable pain. It can get into your brain, too – with the right point of entry, it can render you a husk of the person you were.'

His apprentice shuddered. 'How do we kill it?'

Wilder braced himself. 'First, you're going to put the creature it has trapped out of his misery.'

'The other monster? What is it?'

'Something that's part shadow wraith.' He knew the words would shock her, given all they had faced together.

As expected, her eyes widened. 'Then shouldn't we just let the blight kill it?'

'No.'

'I didn't know a monster could be half human...' Thea murmured, frowning at the sight.

‘Now you know,’ Wilder allowed. ‘You’re aware of the differences between wraiths and reapers?’

‘Reapers are the sires of the wraiths – the leaders of their kind, of a sort,’ Thea recited. ‘They’re bigger. They have horns and more power.’

Wilder nodded, suppressing a shudder. ‘The reapers aren’t only the sires of the full wraiths, but other half-creatures like this as well. In the Bloodwoods, when the reaper reached into your chest... It was trying to turn you into something like that, or worse.’ He nodded to the poor thing in the blight’s clutches.

‘Gods...’ Thea murmured in horror.

Wilder ended his explanation there. He wasn’t about to tell her of his experiences with half-wraiths – or, as some preferred to be called, the shadow-touched.

Thea hesitated. ‘If it’s part wraith, does that mean I need to carve out its heart? I don’t think I can get to it —’

Wilder shook his head. ‘A stab to the heart should do it. He’s not a full wraith.’ He nodded to the dagger of Naarvian steel at her belt. He didn’t want to make her do this, didn’t want to risk her brushing the vine, but if she was to be a Warsword, she had to learn.

Looking pale, Thea unsheathed her blade.

Wilder bit back further words of warning, forced down the instinct to reach for the dagger and do the deed himself.

Thea examined the blight’s tendrils. ‘I don’t think I can get a clean thrust to the heart,’ she murmured.

Wilder hated his next words. ‘Then cut the creature out of the blight’s grip.’

She raised a brow. ‘Cut it out, then kill it?’

‘Yes.’

Brow furrowed, she went to work, slicing at the vines around the half-wraith, the blight making a high-pitched wailing sound as she did.

Wincing against the noise, Wilder watched her as she kept carving through the first monster to get to the second, careful not to brush against the vine, using her swords to manoeuvre it off the half-wraith.

There was a blur of movement. And a cry of surprise escaped Thea as not a vine, but a whip of shadow suddenly lashed out from the rock, the wraith creature tumbling free from the blight’s grip.

His heart in his throat, Wilder lunged for her as the tendril of shadow wrapped around Thea's neck.

Her blades clattered to the ground, her hands shooting to where the obsidian power threatened to crush her windpipe.

Wilder was there in an instant, but more coils of darkness shot from the half-wraith, who moaned on the ground, sounding more human than monster.

Thea rasped as she was lifted into the air before his eyes.

Wilder yelled.

He'd seen the same thing happen to Malik. He'd seen almost the same thing happen to Talemir. And it had only been three weeks ago that another creature of the darkness had threatened to take Thea from him.

Incensed, he slashed at the tendrils of shadow magic, severing them like limbs from a body. They poured from the monster Thea had freed, as though they knew no master, as though they sought to wreak as much pain and havoc on the realms as they could before they left them.

Wilder sliced and hacked, Thea's legs kicking in mid-air in his peripheral vision.

No – he wouldn't let another person he loved be harmed on his watch. He wouldn't allow it. Because he wouldn't survive it.

Breaking free of the lashing whips of power, Wilder staggered towards the half-wraith and plunged his sword into the human-like chest.

His steel aimed true.

Thea dropped to the ground instantly, her eyes streaming, a ring of red around her throat. She dry-retched on all fours, coughing and spluttering.

Wilder was on his knees beside her, a hand on her back. 'Are you alright? Gods, Thea, talk to me.'

His heart was about to pound straight through his chest. Every moment where he'd ever lost this battle flashed before his eyes, clutching his heart in an unforgiving fist. Too many had been hurt on his watch. If she was —

But at last, Thea sat back, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, blinking back more tears. 'I'm alright,' she rasped, 'I'm alright,' as though trying to convince herself.

Wilder nearly collapsed with relief. It was all he could do not to throw his arms around her and hold her close. If he did that, he'd never let her go.

Blood leaked from the half-wraith corpse, spilling onto the cliff, running in rivers between their boots.

Thea stood, staring curiously at the red dripping from Wilder's blade, brow furrowed. 'Why isn't it black?'

Gods, Wilder would have to report this to Dratos. The blight's prey had been one of his for sure. But there had been no way to save the half-wraith within. He had been too far gone, his mind already infected.

'Hawthorne?' Thea pressed.

A knot formed in his stomach at the use of his surname. He missed those few occasions where she had murmured his given name against his lips, had said it with a smile...

Wilder shook his head. 'Not now,' he told her. He wasn't ready to explore the nuances of wraiths and those who were shadow-touched, and he wasn't sure she was ready to hear it. It had only been a matter of weeks since her own encounter with the reaper, since its dark power had nearly touched her heart.

'You're sure you're alright?' he asked, trying to keep the emotion from his voice.

Thea nodded, though the mark around her throat was bright red. She retrieved her dagger from the ground and sheathed it at her waist.

Wilder squared his shoulders. 'We still need to deal with the blight.'

'Fire?'

Wilder shook his head. 'A sure way to help it spread. Its pollen would easily drift away on the ash and find new hosts elsewhere.'

'How, then?'

'Lightning.'

Thea blinked at him. 'You can't be serious.'

Folding his arms over his chest and fixing her with a cool stare, Wilder shrugged. 'Audra said you should try, that you need an outlet. Here it is. Do your worst.'

'It's not that easy.'

'No? You managed well enough with the reaper.' He didn't mention how she hadn't summoned her magic in her own defence just now.

'That was different.'

The vine blight writhed, a new tendril snaking forth through the fresh blood on the ground.

'Why?'

'Because...' Thea avoided his eyes and clasped her arms around herself.

'Because why?' he pressed. 'Why was it different then?'

‘Because you were in danger. Because I —’ The words came out fast, and hung suspended in time between them. From the way Thea was blushing, it was a truth she hadn’t wanted to admit.

Wilder did the decent thing and pretended he hadn’t heard her. ‘What about after? On the clifftops?’

‘*I don’t know.*’ She snapped the words this time. ‘I don’t know how it works. *Clearly.*’

‘So try.’

‘And what if I shoot a bolt of lightning through you by mistake?’

‘I would have thought you’d find that appealing.’

‘More so by the minute,’ she muttered.

Every part of Wilder longed to pull her close, to reassure her that she could master her magic, that the storms were hers to wield. But that was not the role he’d claimed. No, he had claimed the role of mentor and master, of a hardened teacher.

‘I don’t have all day,’ he said bluntly.

She cut him a furious glare and he did his best not to flinch at the tempest brewing in her eyes. Jaw clenched, his apprentice turned her back to him, her head tilting back to face the sky.

Body tense, Wilder didn’t dare speak, didn’t move as he noted Thea’s fingers flexing at her sides, as he heard her exhale sharply.

He waited for the crack of thunder, for the spark of light at her hands.

But nothing happened.

He waited another beat.

‘Fuck!’ Thea whirled around. ‘I can’t.’

‘I doubt throwing a tantrum helps.’

‘Fuck you,’ she spat.

Wilder raised a brow, irritation prickling. ‘Apprentices don’t speak to their masters like that.’

‘I have no master.’

‘Yes, *you do*,’ he said, voice raised. ‘You made damn sure of it.’

‘You are my *mentor*.’

Wilder *smelt* the incoming storm then, the rich, earthy scent tangling in the briny sea breeze, washing away the stench of the blight. ‘Same difference.’

Thea’s eyes narrowed, before she glanced down at her hands in surprise. Where small sparks had started to surge at her fingertips.

‘Try again,’ Wilder commanded quietly.

His apprentice rolled her shoulders and inhaled deeply, her hands tensing as she tipped her face back to the sky.

Audra had told him to talk her through it, to tell her to breathe and focus, lean into the restlessness within. But Wilder knew in that moment that another word from him would send Thea hurtling over the brink of destruction, which would only serve to make her recoil from her power when she needed it most. And so he said nothing.

And nothing happened.

‘Fuck this,’ Thea muttered eventually, turning back to him with accusation in her eyes. ‘There’s obviously another way to kill that thing. I don’t see any other supposed storm wielders slaying monsters around the midrealms.’

Wilder pulled a vial from his pocket, uncorking it with his teeth and pouring several drops of liquid over the blight. ‘Courtesy of our alchemist friends.’

Ribbons of steam hissed from the vines upon contact, and the monster recoiled, emitting an eerie whistling sound. A faint burning smell filled the air. Wilder didn’t look away until the whole blight had turned to stone, now a mangled addition to the cliff face.

He felt Thea’s incredulous stare boring into him.

‘Is there a problem, Princess?’

‘Why didn’t you just use that to begin with?’ She glared at him, knuckles white around the grip of her dagger.

‘Think you can take me?’ he said flatly.

Thea’s nostrils flared as she sized him up, jaw grinding. ‘Not today...’ she murmured. ‘But one day.’

‘You’d die if you tried.’

Her chest rose and fell then, her fate stone along with it. ‘No, I wouldn’t.’

Wilder closed the gap between them in an instant and disarmed her, snatching the blade from her belt. Twirling his brother’s dagger between his fingers menacingly. ‘However you’ve lived your life until now isn’t good enough,’ he told her coldly. ‘You cannot be some irresponsible fool because you think you won’t die. There are fates worse than death. And a Warsword can and will face them all. Your recklessness is a liability, and I won’t train

someone who flings themselves at danger without a care. It's a waste of my fucking time.'

Thea opened and closed her mouth, and despite his harsh words, Wilder found himself leaning in, desperately wanting to trace the curve of those lips with his tongue, wanting to breathe in the heady scent of her. But he didn't let the mask falter.

'Are we clear?'

His apprentice seemed to war with herself, and he could have sworn he felt a flicker of that storm magic ripple off her again.

'I said, *are we clear?*'

At last, she met his gaze. 'Crystal.'

And then she grabbed him by the shirt and dragged his mouth to hers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THEA



As Wilder Hawthorne met her kiss with a brutal claiming of his own, Thea's knees buckled. She opened her mouth and his tongue swept in, brushing hers, making her stomach dip in anticipation. She knew what that tongue could do between her legs now, and nearly melted at the thought.

She kissed him, almost delirious with the need for him. A soft cry broke from her. Wind whipped along the clifftop around them.

'I knew you'd be my ruin,' Wilder muttered against her lips, his voice thick with lust as he enveloped her with his powerful frame.

Thea pawed at his shirt, tugging at the hem until it was free from his pants, desperate to feel the heat of his skin under her touch. As her fingers trailed along the ridges of his abdomen, he deepened the kiss with a moan, crushing them together.

Thea revelled in the way his body responded to her. She could feel the shape of him pressed against her, straining against his pants. She ran her palm down his hard length, the sensation sending a wicked shiver of pleasure straight to her core.

'I want you inside me,' she said, her voice husky.

He kissed her like a starved man, capturing her lower lip between his teeth, breathless. 'Yes,' he murmured. 'But not here.'

Thea gave a cry of frustration, rubbing him through his pants. 'I don't care where.'

He caught her by the wrists, his gaze hooded as he gave her a dark, delicious smile. 'But I do.' He was moving then, tugging her after him.

He led them down a narrow, winding path, to the mouth of a cave. And then he was on her again, bracing himself behind her, turning her head and

taking her mouth with his, heating her blood with long, luxurious kisses as his fingers found the buttons of her shirt.

The fabric hung open down her middle as she twined her arms around his neck and he pulled down her chest band. The cool cave air teased her bare skin, her breasts aching for contact, for his touch. As he cupped each one, her nipples hardened in his palms, her legs spreading involuntarily beneath her.

He pinched her nipples and she arched back, pressing her backside into his rock-hard cock. He ground it against her, but kept her in place, still palming her breasts, squeezing them from behind.

‘Gods...’ he murmured into her neck, kissing her there as his fingers traced the waistband of her pants before he yanked them down over her legs.

Scorching need blazed through Thea and she pushed back onto his cock, dropping her arms so she could remove his pants. She needed to feel him, she needed to —

He seemed to read her mind. A moment later, his pants were gone and the bare, heated crown of him pressed against her. The pressure of his desire made her heart stutter, made her acutely aware of the ache pulsing between her thighs.

Still behind her, he tilted her head back, one hand wrapped gently around her throat, careful of the red marks the whips of shadow had left there. He claimed her mouth in another bruising kiss.

‘Spread your legs, Princess.’

She hated that heat swelled in her at the name, at the command, every gasping breath amplifying her need to have him inside her. She was already opening for him, but at his words, she splayed her legs wide, grinding back onto his cock.

Wilder dragged a finger down her centre and lightly circled her clit, spreading the wetness he found there.

Thea moaned, the noise echoing off the cave walls. He covered the sound with his mouth, and Thea whimpered as he slid a finger inside her while he kissed her.

Her legs were shaking as slowly, he fucked her with his fingers, sliding another inside and drawing out lazy ripples of pleasure.

It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t nearly enough.

‘Wilder...’ she gasped, as he pinched her nipple and her clit at the same time, pleasure and pain mingling so beautifully she nearly came undone.

‘Tell me.’ His voice rumbled through her, setting her alight. ‘Tell me what you want, Thea.’

‘You,’ she panted. ‘I want you. All of you. Now.’

‘Then you’ll have me.’ It was an echo of what he’d said to her in the woods, and she had dreamt of what had come after that declaration for what felt like a lifetime.

He bent her over a rock and lined his cock up with her entrance, sliding it through the wet heat there.

‘Wilder.’ This time it was a command. She was done playing.

He was too, because he sheathed himself inside her in one glorious, powerful thrust.

Thea cried out as he filled her, inch after inch after inch... He withdrew slowly, only to slam back into her, their bodies slapping together.

‘Fuck,’ he moaned. ‘You feel...’

But Thea didn’t get to hear what she felt like, because she arched her back, giving him more access to her, allowing him deeper, and he swore again.

Wilder fucked her slow and deep from behind, grabbing a fistful of her hair and pulling her back onto him, squeezing her breasts and teasing her clit. His hands were everywhere. The pleasure he wrought upon her was *everywhere*, blurring her senses.

There was no more resolve between them, no more restraint, their desire as unstoppable as a gathering storm. Their moans and cries echoed through the cave, as uninhibited and unapologetic as the sensation spreading in Thea’s chest.

A hot wave took hold of her and she moaned again, teetering on the edge of no return.

But Wilder pulled her back onto him. ‘Not yet, Princess. I want to see your face when you come.’

With that, he pulled out of her and turned her around to face him.

Gods, he was a marvel. She leant in and licked up his sculpted chest, damp with sweat and littered with faint scars, raking her fingernails down the ridges of his abdomen. Every inch of his golden skin was corded with muscle, including that V-shaped dip of sinew that pointed right to his perfect cock.

She nearly came at the sight, for the Furies knew no other man would ever compare to this, to *him*.

She reached between them, her hand wrapping around his shaft, wet with both their desire. His head tipped back as she pumped up and down, letting her other hand cup his balls.

‘Fuck...’ he murmured to the stalactites above.

But then his restraint snapped again and he was pushing her so her back was flush with the cave wall. He lifted one of her legs, setting her foot down on a ledge beside her, so she was spread and open before him.

He shook his head at the sight of her, as though he couldn’t quite believe she was there. ‘You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. There’s no coming back from you, no end to this wanting...’

Thea’s chest fluttered. It wasn’t just her climax on the precipice of no return. It was her heart.

Wilder took her hand then and guided it to her core, helping her circle her clit, working her into a frenzy as he nudged her entrance with the crown of his cock again.

‘I have dreamt of this every night, Thea...’ he breathed, his throat bobbing. ‘Every. Fucking. Night. There is no counting the ways I want you.’

He kissed her and slid home.

Thea arched her hips towards him, taking every brutal thrust he gave her, the pressure building and building.

His silver gaze met hers, clouded with lust. ‘Come for me, Thea.’

Thea didn’t break eye contact as she moved with him, her sweat-slicked brow pressed to his. ‘Not without you,’ she murmured against his lips.

Wilder circled her clit with his thumb, and with that added sensation, she came apart with a cry. The pleasure barrelled through her, one wave cresting as another began, leaving her nearly sobbing with the force of it, of him.

Her Warsword gave a shout and shuddered into her, finding his own release as she clenched around him.

‘I knew you’d be my ruin, too,’ Thea whispered.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WILDER



Althea Zoltaire had destroyed him. And it was the greatest privilege of his life.

His heart threatened to burst from his chest as it pounded, trying to catch up with everything he felt. Eyes closed, Wilder rested his brow against hers, allowing himself a moment to savour her, a brief pocket of time between what they'd shared and the moment reality would come rushing in like an icy wave.

He didn't trust himself to speak, for fear of what might come tumbling out. Each time with Thea was more powerful, more all-consuming than the last, and there was no telling the ways in which she'd wreck him, over and over again. All he knew was that he would never be free of this now, nor did he want to be.

Thea was quiet too, as though she knew whatever words came next would break the spell.

Wilder kissed her slowly and thoroughly, the way he'd kiss her if he'd been granted the time to court her in the way she deserved.

He was so fucked, so well and truly in over his head.

At last, she broke away, still out of breath, eyes wide. 'Wilder...' she murmured, her expression pained as she reached for her discarded clothes. 'What does this mean for us?'

Wilder's chest was tight as he followed her lead, tugging on his pants and shirt, still feeling the phantom touch of her on his skin.

'I don't know,' he replied honestly, his voice raw. 'All I know is that I can't seem to stay away.'

Thea met his gaze, understanding gleaming in her eyes. ‘All those weeks ago, you said —’

‘I know what I said.’ It came out harsher than he intended. ‘I was... I was trying to do the right thing. By you, by the midrealms.’

Thea finished dressing, seeming to steel herself. ‘Then we need to figure this out. We can’t keep going like this. It’s not good for either of us.’

Her words were like a hot lance to the gut. ‘What is it you’re proposing?’

Straightening her clothes and squaring her shoulders, Thea went to the mouth of the cave and looked outward across the seas. ‘We should take some time to think, and then we need to have a conversation. An honest one this time.’

Wilder felt increasingly heavy as he joined her. He fought every instinct that screamed at him to reach out and touch her, to lace his fingers through hers, to reassure her.

‘Alright,’ he heard himself say instead.



‘She’s not progressing,’ Audra told him sharply in the council room that night. ‘Not nearly fast enough.’

‘Well, the magic is your department, Audra,’ Wilder countered, resting his elbows on the back of a chair. ‘And you’re the one who told her that she can’t be a magic-wielding heir *and* a Warsword.’

The librarian glared at him, but continued as if he hadn’t spoken. ‘A reckoning is coming, Hawthorne. And she needs to be ready.’

‘What do you want me to do about it? I’m holding up my end of this wretched agreement. Despite all my objections, I’m her mentor, for better or for worse. I’m training her.’

Guilt lurched in Wilder’s gut. Was that the honest truth? His dealings with Thea since his return had been a mess.

Audra pushed her spectacles to the bridge of her nose and sighed. ‘The Daughter of Darkness sent word to the rulers directly. They have not only been informed of her hunt, but also of her offer to spare those who do her dirty work for her.’

‘Fuck.’ Wilder put his head in his hands. ‘Have the kingdoms agreed to defend the heirs?’

Audra gave a dark laugh. ‘No. They have put bounties on their heads. Anyone showing signs of magic is to be brought in for questioning. Any rumours reported to each kingdom’s officials.’

‘Gods, every man and his dog will be searching for the heirs now.’

‘Indeed. I’d wager there are plenty of common folk who’d step on their own mother to sell them out. There are rewards offered for information, but the subtext is clear: information, their heads – they’ll take anything.’

‘Furies save us.’

‘There’s more.’

‘Of course there is,’ Wilder muttered. It wasn’t enough that they were harbouring two fugitives, not only from his fellow Warswords, but from the rulers of the midrealms themselves.

‘There are reports spreading from across the seas,’ Audra told him, glancing at the closed door. ‘Wild storms that are felt across the realms beyond this one. Monsters unlike any we have ever seen, clawing their way through the Veil with the help of lightning and thunder...’

Only decades of training stopped Wilder from flinching. Storms... The very word made his skin prickle. Thea’s magic, her sister’s...

His voice was hoarse when he spoke again. ‘Storm magic and darkness... If it comes to light that they’re alive, the heirs of Delmira will be blamed for what’s happening.’

‘Yes,’ the librarian said simply.

‘You still think it’s a good idea to keep them at Thezmarr?’ he asked, rubbing his aching temples.

‘Come and watch their next lesson,’ Audra said. ‘Perhaps that will help —’

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’

‘Why not? You’re the only one who has seen Thea’s power in action. More than once, I might add. Perhaps your presence will bring it out in her.’

‘My presence usually inspires unending rage.’ Among other things.

‘Good. That’s how it should be between master and apprentice.’

‘Is it? It wasn’t like that for me.’

‘You could have fooled me, with all your anger for Talemir.’

Wilder stiffened. ‘That wasn’t about the apprenticeship.’

‘What was it about, then?’

‘None of your damn business, Audra.’

The older woman rolled her eyes and straightened her sleeves. ‘You’re right. The petty squabbles of men are no concern of mine. My concern is the pair of *Delmirian princesses* we have in our midst, and the one in particular who can’t control her magic. It’s dangerous, Hawthorne. Now more than ever. Come to the plains. Watch the session,’ Audra demanded. ‘I want to see what happens when you’re there.’

‘Nothing good,’ Wilder assured her.

‘We’ll see about that.’



‘What’s he doing here?’ Thea asked as Wilder reached the hidden spot at the southern end of the Plains of Orax.

He’d spent the night in Torj’s quarters and hadn’t seen Thea since they’d fucked in the caves, since she’d told him they needed to figure things out. This was hardly an ideal first meeting after that. But Audra didn’t miss a beat; she never did.

‘He’s here as an observer.’

‘I’m not an act in a performing troupe,’ Thea replied.

‘No? You’re putting on quite the show right now,’ Audra quipped.

Thea seethed at the librarian, while her sister Wren’s narrow-eyed stare of dislike was aimed directly at Wilder. While he didn’t think Thea would have confided in her sister and friends about the intricacies of their relationship, they weren’t fools. They knew something had happened between master and apprentice, and as a consequence, he was now an object of disdain to them.

Fair enough, he thought as he took up a place against a rock by a patch of brambles. He let his gaze drift towards the dark seas lapping below the cliffs, let the briny air kiss his face. When was the last time he’d felt peace? When was the last time he’d breathed an easy breath and not thought of the million things pressing down on him?

The sisters were looking warily at him. ‘Don’t mind me,’ he told them. ‘As you were.’

‘Ladies, focus.’ Audra’s voice cut through the vitriol. ‘Thea, any progress?’

Thea heaved a sigh. 'I don't know, Audra. I just don't get it. The magic is there when I'm at my worst, but when I'm more stable, it snuffs out. What does that say about me?'

'It says you're afraid,' Wilder heard himself say.

She whirled around to face him. 'I thought you were here as an *observer*.'

'Not much to observe yet,' he replied.

Thea's nostrils flared, but she turned back to Audra and Wren. 'So, what now?'

'We try again,' Wren answered.

Wilder thought Thea was about to snap at her sister, but she said nothing as she turned her back to them all, facing the expanse of sea beyond the Chained Islands. Her shoulders rose and fell as she inhaled deeply.

Wilder's skin prickled. He had seen her lightning carve through the sky, through a *rheguld reaper*... He knew it was something to behold, something to be feared.

But when Thea's fingers flexed at her sides and she tipped her head back to the sky, nothing happened.

Nearby, power crackled at Wren's fingertips, and he heard Thea click her tongue in frustration. 'Show-off,' she muttered.

'You can do it, Thea. We all know you can,' Wren encouraged.

Thea only stiffened at the kindness.

'Find your centre, Thea,' Audra coaxed. 'That pocket of calm within —'

Wilder nearly laughed. Thea didn't have a pocket of calm in her entire body; she was a living storm of chaos.

But to his surprise, Thea listened. Though her back was still to him, he could see the change in her breathing, could see how her body stilled as she tried to do as her warden instructed.

A minute passed, then another.

'Fuck,' Thea cried in frustration. She whirled on her heel to face Wren. 'How are you doing it? I don't understand.'

Wren grimaced in sympathy. 'I've been dealing with it a lot longer than you. It will take time.'

'I don't have fucking time,' Thea snapped. 'If you'd just told me the damn truth —'

'You weren't ready,' Wren said quietly.

‘That wasn’t for you to decide.’

Wren ignored this. ‘Try again.’

It was far less spectacular than Wilder had envisioned. Two young women and Audra all snapping at each other on the plains, punctuated by small bursts of lightning from Wren that only served to fuel Thea’s irritation.

But it became clear that Audra was right. Thea was struggling. And it hurt him to see her hurt. He wished there was something he could do to help her, even if it was just to listen to her fears. For he saw the fear in her, clear as day... The struggle between who she had been born, and who she wanted to be. But he hadn’t created a safe environment for her to express those thoughts to him. He’d left her out in the cold, alone with it all. That was something he’d have to change.

A gust of wind caught in Wilder’s hair and he glanced to his right to see Terrence the hawk closing in on the rock beside him.

Wilder almost didn’t reach for the scroll tied around the bird’s leg. There was no good news to be had of late, and he knew this message would be no different. He knew it was Dratos’ response from Naarva, about the half-wraith he and Thea had found in the clutches of the vine blight.

‘Whose eagle is that?’ Thea asked quietly, her lesson forgotten as she approached, staring at Terrence curiously.

‘He’s a hawk, not an eagle,’ Wilder replied, untying the scroll.

‘Whose *hawk* is he?’

Terrence ruffled his feathers and gave an impatient cry.

‘Go back to your training, Thea,’ he told her, tucking the parchment into his pocket.

Audra wasn’t nearly as patient. ‘Althea!’ she barked. ‘Try *again*. You need to hone that anger you’re clinging to. Once you do that, you’ll —’

Wilder saw something in Thea snap. ‘And how long do you think that will take?’ she cut in, turning back to her warden and wrenching her fate stone from the folds of her shirt. Wilder nearly shuddered at the sight of it, but a tempest still brewed behind her eyes, and he felt her magic simmer. Sensing the discord, Terrence flapped his wings and flew off.

‘Calm yourself,’ Wilder commanded softly.

But Thea’s gaze was trained on Audra, who stood before her, daring her.

‘You’re a danger to yourself and to others,’ Audra pressed. ‘You already proved that with Wren the other day —’

Wilder stiffened. *What is she talking about?*

Wren grimaced. 'Audra, it was nothing —'

'Don't make excuses for her. You were lucky, likely because you share the same magic,' Audra snapped, rounding on Thea again. 'What if you did the same thing in a training session with your friends?'

Bolts of lightning flickered at Thea's fingertips. White and brilliant, full of challenge and power.

'They've already nearly died once because of you, haven't they?' Audra's words were poised to cut and cut deep. She didn't stop. 'Yet you hardly try to train it. You refuse to master your magic, and for what?'

Thea's mouth fell open. 'I —'

'Are you going to throw a storm tantrum every time you don't get what you want? Because life will be full of disappointments, Althea.'

'Stop it.' Thea's voice was low.

'You could hurt them, just like you hurt Wren,' Audra baited, closing in on her ward with predatory grace. 'You could *kill them*, even.'

Both Wilder and Wren eyed the magic sparking at Thea's trembling hands, and the heavy clouds suddenly rolling in overhead. Dread bloomed in the pit of Wilder's stomach.

'Audra...' he cautioned.

But the librarian didn't heed his warning. Instead, she sneered at his apprentice. 'And if you're not concerned about your sister or your friends... What about *him*?' She thrust a finger at Wilder. 'What if one of those bolts found its way to his heart?'

Thea cursed viciously, flinging her hands towards the sea. Two forks of lightning soared outward, hitting the dark waters in the distance, and thunder clapped above them, rattling the ground.

Audra shook her head in disgust, her lip still curled. 'Just a few words and you're losing your temper like a child? What if that hit —'

The looming storm crackled above them. Thea was shaking with rage, with the promise of violence – or was it terror? Wilder took a step towards her.

Audra didn't yield. 'Imagine if you failed to control yourself in front of the Guild Master. Or the rulers of the remaining kingdoms. They'd know... They'd know what you and your sister are. They would blame you for the storms amid the darkness and the monsters crawling forth from the Veil.'

Just like the rest of your family, they'd say. And who knows what new pandemonium would be wrought upon the midrealms —'

In a blur, Wilder forced himself between the older woman and Thea. 'That's *enough*,' he cut in. 'You've said *enough*, Audra.'

Audra froze, before turning her glare on him. 'You forget yourself, Warsword. I'm doing your job for you, it seems.'

More lightning sparked in the distance.

'You're putting her at risk this way,' he argued. Couldn't she see how hurt and fragile Thea was in this moment? How she'd tapped into some of Thea's worst fears? He couldn't stand by and watch —

'You're out of your depth, Hawthorne,' Audra told him, surveying his face coldly.

'I've known that for a long while now.' The words slipped from his mouth without a thought. 'Whatever you're doing up here, it isn't working.'

The flinty librarian crossed her arms. 'Yes, you're an expert on what doesn't work.' She looked from Thea back to him, shaking her head again. 'This is on you, Warsword.'

Then she left, tugging a wide-eyed Wren after her.

Apprentice and master were alone, the clouds closing in around them.

'Does it scare you?' Thea asked softly, staring into the darkening sky. 'That I could split the world in two?'

Wilder went to her, matching the intensity of her gaze. 'Nothing about you scares me.'

A fork of lightning flashed, and below, the waves surged violently. 'I don't believe that for a second.'

Her words were loaded, and hit him like a bolt to the chest. Gods, he wanted to touch her, to hold her, to close his hands around her lightning-tipped fingers and —

'This has taught me something,' Thea ventured, glancing at him and then back to her now retreating storm.

'Tell me.'

'That if you and I are... together... I'll never be a Warsword.'

Wilder's stomach bottomed out.

'You interfered just now,' Thea continued. 'And it was only Audra, only words...'

'And you were losing it.'

‘I’ll lose it many times over between now and when I die, Wilder. I won’t become the best, won’t become worthy of the Great Rite without getting hurt – without withstanding pain, whatever form it takes. And yet you won’t let me. You won’t allow me to face those things, not if... Not if I’m yours.’

‘I —’

‘You care for me,’ she continued. ‘Despite the mess we’re in... I see it in the little things, more than anything else. Leaving tea for me in the cabin, sewing up my torn clothes...’ The sparks at Thea’s fingertips died and she sat down on the cliff edge, dangling her legs carelessly over the side, her gaze scanning the Chained Islands before them. ‘It’s sooner than I wanted, but we need to have that conversation.’

‘I know,’ Wilder said, sitting beside her, resisting the urge to reach for her hand.

‘You as the cold, unflinching master doesn’t work. Do you agree?’ Thea asked, turning to him.

‘Yes.’

‘Nor does you as the lover and mentor. As the situation with Audra just now proved. Do you agree?’

Wilder loosed a trembling breath. ‘I agree.’

‘So we need to find some common ground in between.’

‘I take it you have a suggestion?’ Wilder could feel her body heat and her magic rippling from her, soaking into his side.

Thea nodded. ‘Friends. Mutual respect. Honesty.’

‘Friends...’ Wilder tasted the word.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘We’d have to make a pact, though. We must vow to one another... We cannot have a repeat of yesterday, or the other times we’ve... been together.’

‘No sex?’ Wilder clarified.

Pink tipped Thea’s cheeks and the sight made Wilder’s heart ache anew.

But his apprentice gathered herself. ‘Yes. No sex, of any kind. None of that sort of intimacy. Friendship only. And trust. If it’s going to work, Wilder – if we have any hope of making this dynamic work – there has to be complete honesty between us.’

‘No lies.’

‘No lies,’ Thea echoed. ‘No omissions. Everything out in the open.’

‘That’s a tall order, Alchemist,’ Wilder said, pushing his hair from his face, trying to master the pounding in his chest.

‘It’s the only way.’

Wilder allowed himself a moment to study her, the young woman he’d fallen for: capable of slaying monsters and wielding storms, his apprentice who warred against fate itself. How could he deny her this?

He offered her his callused hand. ‘So be it.’

Thea eyed his palm. ‘You have nothing you wish to tell me? No truths you need to disclose?’

Wilder didn’t look away, didn’t falter, even as everything he hadn’t told her surged to the forefront of his mind. The hunt for the lost heirs, the truth about the half-wraiths, the way he really felt... No, he kept those close, but compromised on another.

‘In the spirit of honesty, I have a thought,’ he said, having come to the conclusion during Audra’s disastrous lesson. He had wanted to keep her safe, but the truth was, nowhere was safe for her now.

‘Just the one?’

Wilder elbowed her gently. ‘I don’t think you will find the key to reaching your potential at Thezmarr.’

Thea’s brow shot up. ‘You don’t?’

Wilder shook his head. ‘Not to mention that Audra has her own agenda.’

‘Which is?’

‘I can’t be sure...’

‘So guess,’ Thea prompted.

He mulled over his next words carefully. ‘If I had to... I’d say she plans to make you a figurehead for women warriors. To bring them all together, out from hiding, united under the first woman Warsword in centuries.’

Thea waited a beat, but her expression betrayed nothing. ‘What’s wrong with that?’

Wilder looked down, tracing the tattoos on his fingers. ‘Nothing. So long as you don’t become collateral in the process.’

‘Audra would never wish me harm.’

‘Perhaps not,’ he allowed. ‘But she has waited over twenty years already...’ He cleared his throat. ‘In any case, whether it’s mastering your warrior abilities or your magic, you won’t find what you’re looking for here.’

‘Where, then?’

‘Where all Warswords find their power,’ he told her. ‘On the road.’

‘The road to where?’ Thea blinked at him, realisation dawning slowly on her face. ‘You want to go to Delmira...’

‘I do.’ Wilder offered his hand again. ‘Do we have a deal, Apprentice?’

For a moment, he watched the thoughts flit across Thea’s beautiful face, watched her war with herself before she made up her mind.

She grasped his hand firmly and a bolt of power surged between them.

‘We have a deal, Warsword,’ she said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THEA



Once Warsword and apprentice had made the decision together, the preparations for the journey took very little time. The next day, Thea found Cal and Kipp in the Great Hall in the midst of first meal.

‘Where are you off to?’ Kipp asked, noting her pack and riding boots.

‘Can’t say,’ Thea replied, taking a sip from Cal’s mug of tea. *Peppermint, thank the gods.* ‘I just wanted to tell you I won’t be around the fortress for a while,’ she told them, weighing up whether or not to explain why she had sought them out.

‘How long will you be gone?’ Kipp asked.

Thea hesitated. She and Wilder hadn’t discussed the details; they’d simply agreed and then gone about making their own arrangements. ‘As long as it takes,’ she said eventually.

Kipp scoffed. ‘That’s frustratingly cryptic.’

Thea had to laugh. ‘Says the king of cryptic with all his strategy meetings and secrets.’

Her friend put his hand on his chest dramatically. ‘I can’t help that I’m very important to the protection of Thezmarr. Also, I like the sound of being king of something.’

Thea gave him a light shove and Cal exhaled a long-suffering sigh.

‘The truth of it is, I don’t actually know how long we’ll be gone for,’ Thea told them.

Kipp nodded knowingly. ‘So you’ve come to tell us how missed we’ll be when you’re on the road with your big surly companion?’

‘Something like that.’ Thea chewed her lip and forged ahead before she could think better of it. ‘Actually, I wanted to ask you a favour.’

Neither of her friends hid their surprise, their brows shooting up as they exchanged a baffled look.

‘Did I hear that correctly?’ Cal asked. ‘The wraith slayer of Thezmarr is asking for help? *Our* help?’

‘I believe you did, Callahan. I also heard something to that effect,’ Kipp replied.

‘Very funny,’ Thea muttered, already halfway to regret.

But Cal and Kipp put their food down, their expressions suddenly serious.

‘What is it you need, Thea?’ Cal asked.

Thea stopped herself from wringing her hands and glancing at the table where the alchemists sat. Instead, she trained her focus on her friends.

‘I was hoping you might look out for Wren while I’m gone?’ she asked quietly.

Kipp’s face brightened. ‘Have you two made up?’

‘No.’

‘But you want us to keep an eye on her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Got it,’ Kipp replied. ‘Will do.’

Thea’s brows furrowed. ‘That’s it?’

‘What d’you mean?’ The words came out garbled; Kipp’s mouth was already around a pastry.

‘No more questions? You’ve both been at me for weeks about her.’

Cal simply shrugged and poured himself more tea. ‘She’s your sister.’

Only then did Thea glance across the hall to where Wren was sitting with Sam and Ida, looking dazed.

‘That she is.’



Before Thea knew it, she was astride her mare with her pack fixed to her back and Wilder riding at her side. They had soon left Thezmarr behind, and as the Mourner’s Trail disappeared in their wake and the crisp morning air hit her lungs, she felt a weight leave her shoulders. At last she could breathe... That pressure that had built and built inside her ever since she’d passed the initiation eased. Something felt right in the world.

She glanced across at Wilder, and he met her gaze, offering a tentative smile, showing a hint of that dimple she loved, his expression making her stomach dip. This was new territory for them. She smiled back, her chest swelling with restrained hope. Perhaps they could make this work. Perhaps when everything was over, they could find their way back to each other.

He looked away first, reaching down to stroke his stallion's neck, the movement gentle, full of appreciation. They drew to a halt at the Wesford Road that forked before them.

'You never told me what your horse's name is,' Thea ventured, unable to take her eyes off the Warsword.

Wilder's cheeks flushed and he outwardly grimaced.

'What?' Thea pressed. 'It can't be worse than Brutus, surely?'

Wilder scoffed at that. 'You tell me...' He gave the stallion another affectionate pat. 'His name is Biscuit.'

Thea blinked. 'Biscuit?'

Wilder was clearly trying to keep a straight face. 'Malik and Talemir's idea of a joke,' he admitted. 'Bastards were there when I claimed him. They jumped in when it came to finalising the poor creature's name. It stuck.'

A laugh bubbled out of her. '*Biscuit*. Your *warhorse*, the gift you received for being one of the most infamous warriors in all the midrealms... is called *Biscuit*.' Thea shook her head in joyful disbelief. 'Gods, I love Malik.'

The tips of his cheeks were still flushed, and something flashed across Wilder's face before he recovered. 'Yes, well...'

Thea watched him, wondering what was going through his mind. She had to suppress the urge to reach across the gap between them and squeeze his hand.

'We should get moving,' he said. 'We've got a lot of ground to cover today.'

Knots twisted slowly in Thea's stomach. She wanted to talk, to know him, to understand him. But deciding it was too soon to push him in this new phase of their relationship – their *friendship* – she ignored the sensation and simply nodded. 'Then lead the way, Warsword.'



The spring day around them was bright as they rode through the morning. The first wildflowers of the season were blossoming at the border of the road, birds chirping in the surrounding woodlands. Here in the heart of the midrealms, nature seemed unaware of the blight that marred the lands at its edges.

Thea took the opportunity to drink in the sights. It had been dark the last time she had ridden to Delmira, when the Thezmarrian forces had battled the reapers amid the ruins. There had been no opportunity to scout the landscape, to note what the road to her homeland looked like. Though, she'd not known what Delmira was to her then. Looking back, she could barely remember the details beyond the pulse of terror she'd felt during that journey.

She had to catch herself. There was no home waiting for her at the end of this ride – only ruins; an echo of what she might once have known, had darkness not descended.

Wilder led her through a narrow pass between the mountains to the north, and she marvelled at how the light filtered down from above, the walls of the fissure glistening. There was still so much of the midrealms she hadn't seen.

Her fate stone knocked against her sternum, a constant reminder that she would *never* see all there was to these lands.

Thea peered at Wilder as he rode ahead, his blades of Naarvian steel strapped to his tapered back. He had seen so much of the world, and the pieces she'd seen herself were pieces he'd shown her. What would it mean for them if she became a Warsword? From what she had gathered, the Warswords rarely worked in teams.

She chastised herself. What had she expected? That after the Great Rite, they could travel the midrealms together, fighting monsters as a pair for the little time she had left?

Pushing the thought aside, she returned her attention to her fate stone and the problem it had posed her whole life.

'Do you know any Warswords who were granted immortality during the Great Rite?' she asked Wilder. She had wanted to ask the question for a long while now, the idea always playing at the frayed edges of her mind. It had never seemed the right time to bring up such a well-guarded legend. But as her fate stone reminded her, she couldn't always afford to wait for the right moment.

Wilder flinched in his saddle. 'What?'

'You heard me.' She noted how his shoulders rose and fell, as though he were inhaling deeply to gather himself.

He didn't look back as he spoke. 'Tell me that's not why you're doing all this? Tell me it's not why you want to become a Warsword? Because you want to live forever?'

His words were like a slice to the gut, sharp with disappointment, disdain.

Thea took a measured breath herself. 'I want to live longer than two and a half more fucking years.'

The silence that followed was crushing. She could almost hear his mind whirring over the top of hers.

He still didn't look back to meet her gaze. 'If immortality is the reason you've put yourself through all of this, then you're out of luck.'

Thea's heart clenched. 'It's a myth?'

'Not a myth, no. But rare. Incredibly rare.'

'Do you know any Warswords who —'

'No.'

The anger she'd fought so hard to put aside in order to embark on this new journey with him spiked. 'You're lying. You told me once that all Warswords know one another.'

'Forget it,' he muttered.

'Forget it? Forget that there's a chance I might somehow beat the fate carved into this wretched stone?' Power flickered at her fingertips as the outrage took hold.

Wilder halted his stallion. 'I can scent the storm on you,' he said quietly, at last twisting in his saddle so she could glimpse his handsome face. 'To call lightning and thunder down upon us here would be a mistake, Princess.'

'Don't call me that.'

'Then don't act like a spoilt brat.'

'You promised,' she heard herself say. 'You promised we would be honest with one another.'

His expression softened. 'How about this... If you master your magic, I'll do better than tell you about the immortal Warswords.'

Thea felt her eyes bulge. 'So you *do* know one? And he's still around?'

'Is that a yes?'

‘You’re bribing me, then?’

A smile tugged at the corner of Wilder’s mouth. ‘Consider it an incentive.’

Thea weighed up her options and priorities, and a moment later, nodded. ‘Fine.’

‘It’s a nice change when you’re agreeable,’ he commented, turning back to the path ahead and urging his horse onward.

‘Don’t expect it to last,’ Thea muttered.

‘Wouldn’t dream of it, Princess.’

Thea swore at him.

‘Be cordial,’ he warned over his shoulder. ‘Or when you become a Warsword I’ll be there to name your Tverrian stallion “Pancake”, or something worse.’

Thea couldn’t help but laugh at that.



By late afternoon, they were through the mountains and out in the open, hilly terrain beyond. The lands were not the rolling green slopes and ridges of southern Harenth, but an almost sunburnt stretch of yellowed plains, the fields bordering the broader territory of Delmira.

‘Did you ever see it before its fall?’ Thea asked Wilder, looking out onto the barren vastness.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘I’m not as old as you think.’

‘My apologies. You should probably know that your less-than-sunny disposition is misleading, then.’

Wilder gave a huff of amusement. ‘Thanks for the honesty.’

Thea shrugged. ‘We made a promise. I’m simply upholding my end of it.’

‘Noble of you.’

‘I’m nothing if not noble.’

The Warsword shook his head in disbelief, then pointed to the foothills below. ‘We make camp there for the night.’

As they rode the final leg of the day’s journey, Thea spotted several flowers that looked familiar, but couldn’t place them. She had a surreal, blurry memory of braiding flower necklaces with Wren, but... Thea had

never braided flowers at Thezmarr, which meant Wren would have been too young for a task that required fine motor skills. Frowning, Thea remembered she'd had the same strange feeling the last time she'd journeyed with Wilder. She'd braided a necklace of flowers for him then. But when had she done such a thing before that?

For a brief moment, she allowed herself to wonder about her mother, Queen Brigh. Had it been with her? It was hard to imagine someone described as a tyrant doing such a quaint task.

An icy shiver raked down Thea's spine as two words echoed in her mind...

Remember me.

The words the seer had spoken to her upon pressing her fate stone into her hand.

Thea hadn't realised she'd muttered a curse of frustration aloud until she met Wilder's concerned gaze.

'You alright?' he asked gently.

Thea opened her mouth to reassure him, but he raised a brow.

'No lies, remember?'

She cursed her former self for insisting on total honesty between them. Taking a measured breath, she sighed. 'Just getting caught up in the past again,' she told him.

Wilder nodded. 'If you want to talk about it... I'm here.'

Warmth bloomed in Thea's chest. 'Thank you.'

'You offered me the same once.'

'That feels like a long time ago now,' Thea admitted as moments from their first journey together flashed before her: teasing him when she'd woken to him holding her, his erection digging into her backside. Him teaching her how shoot game, his strong frame enveloping her. Sharing stories across the campfire...

'A lifetime ago,' Wilder agreed distantly, as though he too were drifting down a river of memories.

As they continued, something else nagged at the back of Thea's mind, and she allowed it to distract her from thoughts of Wilder: Seb and Vernich, and the conversation she'd overheard. Suspicion tugged in her chest when she thought of the darkness encroaching on the realm, of the cursed lands around them. She knew that her friends could very well be right – that just because the Bloodletter and his apprentice were cruel bastards, it didn't

mean they were evil... But even so, she knew something wasn't right. As she and Wilder made their way towards their campsite, she couldn't help but raise the subject again.

'How would one hunt a fallen Warsword?' she said, keeping pace beside him.

'Why are you asking?'

'Cal said you'd know.'

'Your friend has a big mouth.'

'Well?'

'Is this about Vernich again?' Wilder warned. 'He's just a prick, a really horrible prick, but he's no fallen Warsword.'

'Indulge me,' she replied, not bothering to recount what she'd overheard. It didn't seem to matter.

Wilder sighed. 'A fallen Warsword is corrupted from within. They can't handle the powers gifted to them by the Furies. It's... comparable to insanity, I suppose. That corruption leads them all over the midrealms.'

'Where? Why?'

'To the points where the Veil is weakest. So they can get to the darkness on the other side.'

'Where is it weakest?' Thea pressed.

'North of Delmira. South of Naarva. East of everything. Though with what's happening lately, there are more and more tears. I have a map marked with them in my saddlebag.'

'I want to see it.'

'And I want a hot stone massage and a bottle of Valian wine,' Wilder quipped. 'Alas, we can't always get what we want.'

Thea grinned, trying not to picture Wilder naked amid ribbons of steam, and herself tending to his aching muscles. 'I'm sure some poor shieldbearer would happily oblige you.'

'Hilarious,' Wilder said flatly.

Thea tried again. 'You've hunted a fallen Warsword down before, then?'

Wilder pinched the bridge of his nose. 'Once.'

'And it wasn't Talemir?'

'I told you it wasn't. Tal wasn't like that.'

'Then wh—'

'Warswords know how to remain invisible and hidden when they want.'

'But you found them – you brought them to justice. Didn't you?'

He drew a sharp, impatient breath. 'Because I think like a Warsword.'

'Then teach me. Teach me how to think like a Warsword.' She made a mental note to find that map he had mentioned.

They reached the spot Wilder had pointed to and he halted, turning to her in his saddle. 'What in the realms do you think I've been doing?'

Thea laughed. 'That remains to be seen.'

Wilder swung down from his horse effortlessly and retrieved his bow. He held it up to her. 'Then in that case, you're on hunting duty. Let's see if I taught you well enough, Apprentice.'



When Thea returned carrying a dead pheasant, she nearly dropped it in the dirt. For Wilder stood with his back to her by the small stream, completely naked.

Thea's mouth went dry.

Gods, he was glorious. Every inch of sun-kissed muscle on display, water sluicing down the planes of his mighty body as he washed himself, oblivious to her arrival.

Pact or no, arousal coursed through Thea at the sight of him. She remembered the first time she'd glimpsed his bare skin, in a similar situation on the way to Harenth. She'd been just as breathless, just as gobsmacked then, only now... now she knew what that body felt like, what it could do to her —

A stick snapped beneath her boot as she approached.

But Wilder didn't jump. He'd known she was there. 'We're on dangerous ground here, Apprentice,' he said, his voice low.

The deep resonance of the sound vibrated low in her belly and she clenched her thighs together.

'Nothing I haven't seen before,' she forced out. 'Besides, where's your decency?'

He turned to her, holding his hands in front of his cock, but leaving the rest of himself bare, wet and gleaming in the final golden rays of sunlight. 'Apparently non-existent,' he said, his eyes bright with amusement as he took in her open mouth and the way her chest hitched. 'To be fair, I thought you'd be longer.'

Thea licked her lips, trying to ignore the incessant pulse of desire between her legs. 'Well, I'm an excellent shot.'

'So I *did* teach you well.'

'Apparently so.'

Thea turned on her heel and left before she did something stupid.



Later, when night had fallen and the pheasant was roasting over the fire, Wilder caught her eye over the flames. The energy between them was still charged, still full of unresolved want and unspoken words.

'Tired?' he asked lightly.

'Never,' she told him.

'Then on your feet with your sword. I have an exercise for you.' He pulled a small vial from his pocket.

'What's that?'

She didn't miss the slight upward tug of his mouth, nor the hint of dimple the half-smile revealed as he uncorked the glass vessel and positioned a strange wire wand to his lips.

He blew.

A dozen or more bubbles danced between them.

Frowning, Thea popped a few with her index finger. 'What are these for?'

'Training,' he said.

Thea understood immediately. Eagerly, she unsheathed her sword and

He laughed. He actually *laughed at her*. 'You'll be surprised at how hard it is,' he told her, seeming even more amused at the scowl she aimed at him. 'But although it's such a simple drill, it can dramatically increase your precision.'

Thea was already moving on her toes, thrusting her blade at the shining orbs floating around their campsite.

'You did this?' she asked. 'When you were training?'

'Many times. Talemir found it endlessly amusing. Now I see why.'

Thea rolled her shoulders to loosen her muscles and tried again as Wilder blew more bubbles from the vial. 'It helps to hone your ability to

block out details that will distract you or cause you to lose focus,' he added thoughtfully, eyeing her critically as she moved. 'Your lunges need to be more controlled. More control means you recover faster, and can strike again sooner.'

Thea listened, storing the information away in the recesses of her mind. She would take every kernel of wisdom he offered and treat it with reverence. For every piece had a part to play in her plan to become a Warsword of the midrealms. At long last, Wilder was doing exactly as he had promised.

He was training her.



Hours later, Wilder ordered a stop to her efforts. Thea wanted to protest, to tell him that she could keep going, but he silenced her with a look. And as her gaze met his, the exhaustion hit her, down to her very bones. He knew her better than she knew herself, it seemed, and she found that the thought didn't bother her half as much as it might have once.

Her whole body sagged as he went off to check the horses, leaving her to prepare for the night in privacy. At long last, she collapsed onto her bedroll and almost instantly sank into a deep sleep.



She stared at a familiar face.

Anya.

The girl was older this time, perhaps sixteen or so. She stood in a canvas tent before a mirror, parting her hair with her fingers, a bloody patch of her scalp showing through.

Someone had torn a chunk of her copper locks from her head.

Anya scowled at her reflection and adjusted the patch over her right eye before unsheathing a dagger from her belt. She grabbed a fistful of her hair and sawed through it, the unruly tresses floating down to the ground.

Thea watched as the strange girl cut her hair, the uneven lengths swinging by her jawline. Anya seemed removed from the whole process, her one-eyed stare glinting with purpose and determination.

When she was done, copper locks fanned out around her boots, but she stepped over them without a care, brushing any remaining loose strands from her shoulders with cold efficiency.

She stepped outside the tent – and Thea gasped in horror.

For beyond the canvas flaps was a temporary camp amid a rotting field.

And screams pierced the air.

Thea nearly gagged. On the far side of the rows of tents, several creatures were bound together by thick rope. Human bodies disfigured with wings and talons, darkness unfurling with their cries.

Anya strode towards them with an air of authority about her – surreal for someone so young, and in this situation. There were a dozen people being tortured before her and yet her expression was cold, impassive.

Wide eyes and shrieks begging for mercy didn't move her.

Nothing did, it seemed.

Thea's heart hammered in her chest, but she couldn't look away. Someone had to witness their suffering; someone had to see them.

Faceless men surrounded Anya, but she continued to stare, drinking in the agony.

'Should we —' someone started.

But the girl raised her hand. 'No. They need to feel it.'

And the screaming went on and on.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WILDER



Wilder woke with a start, damp with perspiration, to find the fire still crackling and Thea thrashing on her bedroll, faint forks of lightning surging across her writhing body.

Panic gripped him at the sight of her anguish. Gods, he couldn't leave her. Not this time.

He was at her side in a second. 'Thea,' he said gently. 'Thea, wake up.'

She only contorted further, kicking the blanket back, bolts of magic inching down her legs.

Trying to rein in his distress, Wilder spoke louder this time. 'Thea?'

The shirt she was wearing was drenched with sweat. Her hair had come loose from its braid and was plastered to her neck. She kept twisting, a soft cry of pain on her lips.

Wilder didn't think. He reached out, his warm hands closing over her ice-cold, clammy skin. 'Thea, it's me. You have to wake up, you have to —'

Her fingers shot out, clamping around his arm with surprising strength.

Suddenly, the night sky was tipping and Wilder was on his back.

How?

Thea straddled him, eyes brimming with violence as she pressed a blade to the soft skin of his throat, her lip curled in a snarl. She was panting, her hair now loose and wild around her face as she stared down at him, no recognition in her eyes.

He considered disarming her for a second, but as the knife broke the first layer of skin, he wondered if he actually could. Her lightning hadn't hurt him when he'd touched her, but to be on the receiving end of a concentrated bolt would be another thing entirely. He could feel the current

beneath her skin, threatening to crackle into something more devastating. Something that even Furies-given strength might not stand against.

‘*Thea*,’ he murmured softly instead, letting everything he felt for her coat her name on his tongue, hoping she heard those notes in his voice.

His apprentice blinked. Once, twice.

‘*Thea...*’

She loosed a breath and realisation dawned. ‘*Wilder...*’ She scrambled off him, clambering back in horror at the sight of the thin line of blood he could feel trailing down the column of his throat.

‘It’s alright,’ he told her. ‘I’m alright. You didn’t hurt me.’

‘*I...*’ she gasped, her whole body trembling. ‘I didn’t mean —’

Wilder went to her, wrapping his arms around her without hesitation. ‘You’re safe.’

But when she looked at him, her eyes were still filled with terror.

‘*I’m safe*,’ he assured her.

She looked small and vulnerable on her bedroll, her chest still rising and falling in quick succession. Gods, it killed him to see her like that. He hated that he was the source of her anguish.

Gently, he pushed her back down and pulled the blanket up over her, averting his gaze from the thin material of her nightshirt. ‘Rest now.’

It took a long while for *Thea*’s breathing to steady, and all the while *Wilder* sat by her, his thumb stroking the back of her hand in reassuring circles.

Friends. They were *friends*. And friends were there for one another. Friends comforted each other. But the thunderous beat in his chest and the urge to breathe in her scent betrayed him.

He didn’t care. He brought her trembling body to his, hoping that his warmth would help steady her. He’d deal with the consequences of their *friendship* in the morning, but for now – for now he just wanted to be there for her.

And so *Wilder* held his apprentice through the night.



When *Wilder* woke to the watery rays of dawn and the low mist across the plains, *Thea* wasn’t beside him. She hadn’t gone far, though; she was there,

a few yards away, going through her morning drills, drills he'd specified.

Her brows were knitted together in concentration, her eyes fierce with determination as she moved through each exercise with a refined precision that Wilder had never seen before in a Guardian. She never flinched, never hesitated, never gave up, and Wilder couldn't help the swell of pride in his chest at that. But he noted the haunted look in her eyes, and the shadows beneath them. Whatever terrors had dragged her from her sleep last night were still with her now. Wilder wished there was something he could do to help her.

Luckily, there was.

That morning, he trained with her, correcting her form, showing her the best way to protect the more vulnerable parts of her body from strikes that might catch her off guard. For once, Thea didn't ask questions, didn't try to rile him up as they worked. She simply listened and implemented what he said.

It was unnerving.

She was quiet over breakfast as well, pushing her porridge around in her bowl without actually eating it. Distracted, she stood, as though she meant to pack up.

Not a chance. Wilder wasn't having any of that. 'I meant what I said when I first got back to Thezmarr,' he said.

Thea looked up, as though surprised to find him there. 'What?'

'That you need to look after yourself. To keep yourself healthy.'

'I am —'

'You're not eating enough.' Wilder reached across to the pot over the embers and spooned another scoop of porridge into the bowl she'd left on the ground. 'We're not leaving till you eat that.'

'You can't be serious.'

'Oh, I'm deadly serious.'

Thea stared at him for a moment. 'You're insufferable.'

Wilder matched her stare, hardening his expression. 'This is the least of it. Eat up. I don't want to be here all day.'

He held in his sigh of relief as Thea sat back down with a huff and began to eat again.



As the days passed, Wilder realised that the woman riding beside him was not the same shieldbearer who had once travelled with him to and from Harenth, sneaking glances at him, studying the way he moved. Gods, back then she had tested his patience to no end with her stream of questions and her eagerness.

She'd worn him down, though, and eventually, she'd found a weak spot in his armour. She'd seen him – the *real* him.

And what she'd seen hadn't scared her. Instead, Thea had given him a gift... She'd shared herself with him. She'd found her place under his skin and in his heart, and there she'd stayed, despite whatever vows they'd made.

The Thea beside him now was different, distant in a way she hadn't been with him before. It hurt, being shut out. No doubt she still battled with whatever had found her in her dreams, but as the sun grew higher and they rode towards Delmira, Wilder could stand the silence no longer.

'What can I do?' he asked her softly. 'Do you want to talk about the nightmare bothering you?'

Thea's gaze slid to his, sadness lingering there. 'It's not the nightmare that's bothering me.'

'What, then?'

Her trembling intake of breath told him he had no idea how close to tears she was. He'd never seen her cry before... How was that possible after everything they'd been through together?

'I could have hurt you...' she murmured. 'Just like Audra said. My magic was out of my control. I overpowered you. I had a dagger to your —'

'You didn't hurt me.'

She gave the knife scratch on his neck a pointed look. 'Didn't I?'

Wilder couldn't stand the vulnerability in her eyes, couldn't stand the thought of being the one to cause such pain. He did the only thing he could think of. He winked at her, and laughed as he touched a hand to the minor cut. 'This? This is practically foreplay.'

Thea slowly blinked at him. 'You're sick.'

He offered a lazy grin. 'If only you knew.'

Thea shook her head in disbelief, but he could have sworn the shadows behind her gaze retreated a little and a smile played at the corner of her mouth. His heart lifted at that, revelling in the knowledge that he had the power to banish her monsters. That he was the one to make her smile. Then

his thoughts went south. Gods, that mouth... He wanted her to do wicked things with that mouth.

Friends, he reminded himself.

‘The road is a far better training ground for a Warsword than the fortress,’ he heard himself say.

Thea didn’t speak, but he saw her tense with interest at his words.

‘I spent much of my apprenticeship travelling with Talemir,’ he ventured, knowing her curiosity about his mentor was near irrepressible. ‘He taught me everything I know. Well, almost everything.’

He was rambling now – why?

Her gaze slid to his. ‘And will you teach me everything you know?’ There was a glimmer of challenge in those eyes.

He loosed a breath. *There you are, Princess*. ‘Yes.’

‘Then by all means, Warsword, if we’re going to fit your lifetime of lessons into my next two and a half years, you’d best start now.’

Her words were like a deep slice to his gut, and inwardly he cursed that fucking fate stone around her neck and the bitch of a seer who’d given it to her.

But he didn’t let Thea see him falter, didn’t let her see that pain. ‘I hope you’re going to listen for once, *Apprentice*,’ he said.



They didn’t stop to rest as morning bloomed before them. Instead, Wilder embarked on a series of lessons he’d learnt from both Talemir and Malik over the earlier years of his own apprenticeship. He had already taught Thea how to shoot game with a bow and arrow, but as they rode across the plains and ridges, he went over the fundamentals anyway, before moving on to how to hunt and track through various terrains with different weapons. The same rules could be applied for monster hunting.

He had to stop himself from grinning like a fool as they worked their way through the finer points of his lessons. For beyond everything he knew about Thea – her beauty, her sharp tongue, her determination – he thoroughly enjoyed her company. She made him laugh, made him want to participate in the world around him, not just carve out wraith hearts alone in

the dark. Even the silence between them was easy and comfortable; each other's company was more than enough, and words weren't always needed.

When the midday sun was high and hot, they halted their ride to put the lessons into practice while their horses rested. Wilder made sure there were no lingering looks or touches between them as he showed her how to clean and gut a boar, and how to stretch the hide, tan and cure it to be used later. But despite the bloody task at hand, they found themselves laughing, Thea recalling just how much roast boar her friend Kipp had eaten during their visit to the Laughing Fox.

For a moment Wilder entertained the thought that one day he might take her there, that they might laugh together over wine and a game of billiards.

He shook the thought away and returned his attention to the game that needed tending to. Normally, Wilder wouldn't have been so concerned with having such hearty meals on the road; he would have made do with rations, but he was determined to ensure Thea was as nourished and strong as possible for whatever lay ahead.

At his side, Thea drank in the information as though she were parched. His teaching was punctuated by quiet, thoughtful questions from her. They spoke of monsters and politics, of history and home, the words flowing easily between them, as though they had been doing it this way all along.

Wilder shared his knowledge with her, but Furies, did he miss her. There was a new type of closeness forming between them now and it showed him what she had become to him in those months before the initiation test. Every instinct within told him to reach out to her, to lay everything bare.

Thea glanced at him, as though sensing his thoughts. 'You've never told me where you were from... before Thezmarr.'

Wilder hesitated. It had been a long time since he'd spoken of his homeland. 'A little seaside town between Tver and Aveum. A long way from here. It's called Kilgrave.' He could almost taste the briny air on his lips at the mention of its name.

'What's it like?'

'Cold.'

She raised a single brow and waited.

Wilder had to bite back a laugh. He liked that she pushed him, that she didn't take his moody shit. 'What? It *is* cold. The ice winds from Aveum come down through the mountains in the winter. Even the summers are

cold, being so close to the frozen lake. But the views... The views are like nothing else.'

'When's the last time you were back there?'

'A long time ago now,' he replied, getting up to busy himself with readying the horses once more. He wasn't used to talking about himself – wasn't used to anyone *asking*.

Thea seemed to recognise that it was a lot for him and changed tact. 'Are you going to tell me whose hawk that was back at Thezmarr?'

Wilder's gaze shot to hers. 'It was from a source in Naarva. A friend, I suppose.'

'Didn't realise you had those – besides me, obviously.'

'Very funny.'

Thea shrugged, waiting for further explanation.

Wilder heaved a sigh.

'Tell me the whole truth or none at all,' she said.

'And if I said none at all?'

'Then I'd call you a bastard and be done with it.'

Wilder had to hold back his smile. 'Fair enough.'

'So?'

'So... The hawk's name is Terrence.'

Thea blinked. 'Terrence? What sort of a name —'

'Don't even ask.' He adjusted his grip on the reins and checked the positioning of the sun. 'He's become an unofficial envoy of sorts between some of my sources. He often brings me word from a ranger in Naarva called Dratos. Reports from the Veil south of there, how many monsters are getting through...'

'How?'

'How?' Wilder raised a brow. 'I told you I was there when it fell six years ago. And there again for the final conflict. There are a few survivors scattered around the kingdom.'

'But I thought it was covered in shadow... You're saying people still live there?'

'Very few. And to the knowledge of even fewer.' He added that last bit with a note of warning.

'People you care about,' Thea guessed.

'Just people.'

His apprentice gave him a look as if to say she knew better than that. Then she looked to the north, where, beyond their line of sight, Delmira waited. 'I thought Naarva was lost.'

'It was.'

'And yet people remain... Do you think anyone remains in Delmira?'

'You've seen Delmira. It's nothing but ruins.' Wilder shrugged. 'I suppose I don't know for sure.'

'Guess we'll find out soon enough,' she said, reaching for the food. 'What did your friend Dratos have to say?'

Wilder almost winced at the term *friend*. He hadn't actually known Dratos all that well during his time in Naarva. It had only been in the years that followed that they'd stayed in touch. Originally Wilder had suspected it was because the ranger had been ordered to ensure that Wilder spilt no secrets of the fallen kingdom, that he told no one of the plans unfolding there. But over time, a kinship of sorts had developed through their letters and reports. Dratos was one of the few people Wilder knew who was unapologetically himself, always. He begrudgingly admired that.

Remembering himself, he answered Thea. 'Only that things are worsening to the south. That recently, he lost some of his... people. He told me to expect more monsters – wraiths, reapers and the likes of the vine blight we saw up on the cliffs.'

'Great.'

'Welcome to the life of a Warsword.'

The words of warning had the opposite effect to what he'd intended. In fact, it was the most genuine smile he'd seen from Thea in a long while.



Wilder's relief didn't last long. He froze at the edge of the small watering hole where they'd stopped to rest the horses, his whole body suddenly tense.

'What is it?' Thea asked, her hand on the grip of her sword.

Wilder was already wading through the reeds, his grip closing around the limb that floated on the surface.

His chest tightened as he dragged the corpse to dry land, laying it down gently and stepping back. The person hadn't been dead long.

Thea was at his side in an instant, a gasp on her lips. 'Is that...'

Wilder peered down at the young man. Dark, membranous wings sprouted from his back, talons tipping his fingers. 'Another half-wraith,' he finished for Thea, nodding.

She crouched by the creature's head, her eyes scanning what Wilder had already noted – the black vein-like webbing across the remaining human skin; the scars on his chest from when he'd been turned. Wilder had seen it before. There was no telling where this one had come from, or where his allegiance lay... And were it not for the few distinct wraith features, it might have been an ordinary man, perhaps roughly Wilder's own age. The thought didn't sit well with him.

'How common are these monsters?' Thea asked, her gaze trained on the half-wraith's wings now, wings that were limp and caved in at odd angles.

Wilder raked a hand through his hair. 'Hard to say. But it's odd to have found two of them alone in different territories.'

'It definitely doesn't feel like a coincidence.'

He watched as Thea traced the bone-like frame of the creature's wing with her fingertip, a dark expression clouding her face. He couldn't tell her about them, not yet. If he was wrong about the half-wraiths, it would put her in direct danger, and if he was right... Well, fuck – if he was right, he didn't know what it might mean for her, for the midrealms.

But for once, his apprentice wasn't looking to him for explanations or answers. She seemed thoroughly fixated on the half-wraith and his wings.

'What is it?' he asked her.

She didn't look away from the creature. 'I've seen...'

'Seen what?'

'Something like this before,' she said slowly, still not looking up at him.

'Yes,' he replied, dread curdling in his gut. 'On the clifftops with the vine blight.'

But Thea shook her head. 'No. In my dreams, Wilder. The one last night...'

Heart pounding fiercely, Wilder crouched beside her and cupped her chin, drawing her face away from the creature to meet his gaze. 'You saw this exact half-wraith? Like a premonition?'

'No,' Thea whispered, her hands shaking at her sides. 'Not this one. A woman... She was overseeing prisoners like this. Half-wraiths, as you call them. They were being tortured.' She let out a shuddering breath. 'Do you

think... Do you think it's a sort of vision? Do you think I was shown the future?'

'I don't know...' Wilder said slowly.

'Perhaps I'm going mad.'

It was only natural to reach for her. He hugged her to his chest, resting his chin on the top of her head. 'I won't let that happen.'

He felt the tension ease from her shoulders as her body relaxed against his.

Thea sniffed. 'How would you stop something like that?'

Wilder gave her a squeeze, for his own reassurance as much as hers. 'I'm a fucking Warsword, Princess. I can stop whatever I damn well please.'

Thea gave a broken laugh at that. 'I think that might be wishful thinking.'

'Apparently I'm all about that.' Wilder helped her up, regretting the absence of her warmth instantly. 'Let's get out of here?'

His apprentice shivered. 'I thought you'd never ask.'

As they continued the ride, Wilder wondered if he should have asked Torj and Eyllt to permit Thea's friends to join them. No doubt they could have made light of this dire situation; they were always laughing and carrying on like fools. He and Thea could use some of that energy right about now.

'What are you hoping happens when we get to Delmira?' Thea asked him out of nowhere.

Wilder kept his eyes on the trail ahead. 'It's a long shot, but... I'm hoping it might trigger some memories for you, or unlock a part of yourself that you buried long ago.'

'Wouldn't that have happened when we fought the reapers at the ruins?'

He shrugged. 'Not necessarily. You didn't know who you were then.'

'I still don't,' she murmured, the words laced with a vulnerability he was sure she meant to hide.

'You will.'

'How can you be so certain? It took me over twenty-four years to discover a single fragment of the truth.'

'You'll get there.'

'How?'

Gods, he wanted to tell her to trust him, that he could feel it in his bones that she would be something great; something the midrealms had never seen before. But those were not the words of a mentor. They were the words of a lover, and he was that no longer, if he had ever truly been.

Instead, he settled for: 'A hunch, Princess.'

Suddenly, nightmares and half-wraiths were forgotten, because her answering glare at the pet name was searing. 'That's hardly helping me.'

Wilder rolled his eyes. 'What do you think I've been doing all this time? Braiding your hair?'

Thea scoffed. 'I'd like to see you try with those big fingers of yours.'

'You didn't seem to mind these big fingers when —' He cut himself off, instantly horrified. He'd completely forgotten himself. The words had just flown out.

Thea was staring at him, her mouth slightly open.

Heat bloomed in his cheeks and he started to stammer. 'I – I didn't mean —'

But Thea only gaped at him a moment longer before she threw her head back and laughed. The sound was rich and deep. She actually *clutched her stomach*.

'Here I was thinking you'd forgotten what those fingers have done,' she said at last, grinning.

He felt a smile tug at his own lips. 'There's no forgetting anything with you.'

Then, because he couldn't stand to be near her for a moment longer without touching her, without kissing her, he filled his gaze with challenge. 'Race you to the rise?'

Without waiting for her reply, he urged his horse into a gallop, praying that a little distance would quell the roaring within.

He was fucked. Well and truly fucked.

Because the way he burned for her... No vows, no notion of duty – nothing – could stop it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THEA



Thea won the race, by a hair's breadth. But it didn't matter, because on the other side of the rise was Delmira.

She heard Wilder suck in a breath. 'Welcome home.'

Thea exhaled shakily as they rode across the grasslands and the heather, closing the gap between themselves and not only the ruins of Delmira, but the shell atop a plateau of cliffs that had once been Dorinth, the capital city.

The gently sloping hills inclined all the way into Delmirian territory, revealing a great sapphire-blue lake just beyond. She could taste the name of it on the tip of her tongue, but the word wouldn't form. The land around it was sapped of vibrant colours – the grass yellow and faded, the few remaining trees greying, their bark peeling away.

'It's truly cursed, then?' Thea murmured, surveying the lack of wildlife; not even a bird in the sky.

'I don't know if it's a magical curse, but the land remembers what happened here.'

A shiver rolled through Thea. 'What *did* happen here?'

'I was hoping you might be able to tell us that,' Wilder said quietly.

The place smelt familiar, but no memories came rushing back to her – no visions of home, no recollections of a mother or father. 'Audra says my family were tyrants...'

'They're not your family. Just people you're related to.'

'Oh?'

'Wren, Cal and Kipp? They're your true family. The one you chose.'

Thea fought against the heat building behind her eyes. She wanted to ask, *What about you?* But the words wouldn't come.

‘So you’re not worried I’m going to become a power-hungry tyrant?’ she tried to joke.

Wilder raised a single dark brow. ‘Are *you*?’

‘Of all the things to concern myself with, that’s bottom of the ladder.’

They continued around the glimmering lake before heading further north. It wasn’t long before they passed through the outer ruins where only a few months ago they had battled the *rheguld reapers*, where they’d lost Lachin and five other warriors of the guild to the monsters. As they moved through the rubble, a shiver raked down Thea’s spine. She recalled how the reaper’s attention had snagged on her, how it had sniffed the air around her, as though it could sense the power that simmered beneath the surface. She hadn’t known her own secret then, but the monster had. It had recognised her for what she was and had come back for more at Thezmarr...

‘It was a bad day,’ Wilder said beside her. ‘We lost good people.’

Thea nodded. Lachin’s blood had long since washed away; any evidence of the battle that had taken place was gone, like it had never happened. The ruins were an empty relic that told the lie, *Nothing happened here*. But Lachin’s name had been carved upon the stone swords of the Furies in the Great Hall. That was how he would be remembered.

And how will you be remembered? Thea asked herself. *Where will your name be carved after you take your final breath?*

She clenched her jaw, chastising herself for letting those thoughts intrude. They were of no use here. She needed to focus on her future, not her demise, though the two paths were inextricably linked.

‘This is the outer territory?’ she asked Wilder, trying to realign herself with the task at hand.

‘Yes,’ he said, gesturing to the ruined pillars and piles of broken stone. ‘This would have been the outer city wall and watchtowers. Guardhouses too... It stretches all along the cliff’s edge. Once, it would have been a very tactical vantage point for the defence of the kingdom.’

‘Kipp would like that,’ she murmured. ‘But it wasn’t enough to save them...’

‘No. Stone walls and towers do little to keep out the darkness.’ Watching her, Wilder motioned for them to keep moving. ‘Let’s enter the capital. Your parents and ancestors were from Dorinth, after all.’

The route that was part of the Wesford Road was barely discernible through the weeds and grasses that had reclaimed it. Thea was silent, her

skin crawling as they followed the path towards the crumpled pillars of what looked to have been the official city gates, in another lifetime. The entrance to Dorinth was a shell of its former glory, and for no reason she could pinpoint, that made her heart ache. She had never lived within these walls. The city had fallen before her birth. So why did she care? Why this strange grief for something she'd never had?

Thea glanced at Wilder, grateful for his sturdy, stoic presence. For all that had come to pass between them, she knew one thing: when he was with her, he had her back, always. And though she missed him, though she longed to breathe him in and lean into his embrace, to have him at her side in any capacity made her stronger. And that thought, more than anything else, comforted her now.

Past the crumbling walls was the skeleton of a city. Narrow street after narrow street of abandoned homes painted a vivid picture of what Delmira had been like, both in its bustling prime and upon its terrifying demise. Each townhouse had once been a home, a home belonging to a family, and now there was only emptiness. Thea could almost hear the echoing screams of terror as the kingdom was plundered by monsters, as darkness swept in around them all.

'Is this what Naarva is like?' she heard herself ask, jumping down from her horse and peering into the windows.

Wilder shook his head. 'Naarva was like an overgrown jungle in the time after its fall. Whereas this...'

'It's like a ghost city.'

'Yes,' Wilder allowed as he dismounted.

'Where were you when it fell?' she said, scanning the dirt road and the disrepair of the buildings.

'I was only a child, back in my home village. Malik would probably remember us getting word of it, if his long-term memories aren't damaged. It's hard to tell.'

'What do you remember?' she asked.

'I only remember the shift in the midrealms after it happened. The fear that permeated even our little town. People not letting their children out after supper; some people leaving altogether, fleeing further south. There was a feeling in the air that something bad was coming.'

'They weren't wrong.'

'No. They weren't.'

Thea held his gaze for a moment. They both knew what he had described was the same foreboding feeling that loomed over the midrealms now. History was about to repeat itself for a third time.

Taking a breath, Thea wandered down the abandoned street, Wilder close behind her. They walked into the empty town square, towards the giant bell tower at its centre. Heather sprouted amid the stones at its base. Thea's stomach churned at the sight of it. Without thinking, she brushed her fingertips across the blooms, plucking some and curling them around her fingers.

'What is it?' Wilder asked, his brow furrowed.

'I...' But before she spoke, Thea realised she'd never told Wilder what she'd seen when the reaper had reached into her chest. She'd never spoken of Anya as the little girl with the scythe, of the dark tendrils of magic... Of the havoc wrought upon Thezmarr's courtyard, which had smelt of blood – and of heather.

The mossy, woody aroma was familiar to her, from that vision and from a lifetime ago.

'Thea?'

She couldn't recall the last time he'd used her name. It sent a pulse of yearning through her lonely heart. 'I don't know yet,' she said. 'Sorry to disappoint you, Warsword.'

Something flickered in his expression then. His mouth parted as if he would argue, but he clamped it shut, opting to stare at her intensely instead. Gods, she longed for there to be no walls between them, for it to be just the two of them against the world. But perhaps it was too late for that now. Now, they walked a different path.

Dropping the flowers and shoving her hands in her pockets to hide their trembling, Thea followed the perimeter of the town square, looking for something, anything to trigger a memory, a feeling. All the while, Wilder watched her like a hawk.

Weeds sprouted in the cobblestones of the winding streets. The grey of the buildings matched the hue of the ominous clouds above. Thea could feel them looming, could almost hear the call of the rain within as they moved deeper into the city.

White stone and rotten timber held up the remains of various residences and shops. The imposing bell tower in the town square appeared to be the only sturdy piece of architecture left. In layout, Dorinth was similar to what

Thea had seen of Harenth's capital, Hailford: it sprawled outward in circles, growing denser towards the heart, wherein the ruins of a once great castle stood.

It was hard to imagine its former glory from the rubble. Thea pictured towers and thick walls of stone, crenellations with slots for archers, a mighty portcullis and impressive gates flanked by uniformed guards. But the kingdom's capital was in irreparable ruins, just like the rest of its lands.

'I never lived here,' Thea reminded Wilder, pacing atop the debris, entering what she imagined might have been a grand foyer. 'Delmira fell thirty years ago. I wasn't even born.'

'No,' Wilder allowed. 'But your parents, your grandparents, your entire line walked these halls, sat upon the thrones in the throne room.'

'What halls? What throne room?' She gestured around them. 'There's nothing left.'

'That's not true.' Wilder pointed to more heather growing in the ruins. 'There is still life here. And what's more, *you* live. *Wren* lives. You are enough.'

Her sister's name sent a pang through her. 'I wish she were here to see it,' she murmured. 'But I'm still so angry.' It felt surreal to admit it aloud, this thing she had been carrying with her since the initiation, since she'd discovered what and who she was. A handful of lessons with her sister hadn't undone the damage between them.

'Wren was trying to protect you,' Wilder said quietly.

'She lied to me,' Thea replied, the hurt thick in her voice.

'And you've said your piece about that.' The Warsword surveyed the broken castle. 'Do you know what I'd give to argue with Malik again? To have one more conversation where he was himself, free of pain? The man I knew before?' He faltered. 'Life is too short – yours, in particular – to hold grudges against the people you love.'

Thea flinched as that last part hit a nerve. It was the first time someone had ever directly referenced her death, and used it in an argument against her, as though it were a mere fact to be thrown around. And she hadn't expected it, not from him.

'That's rich, coming from you.' The words flew out of her mouth before she could stop them.

'What did you just say?' His voice was low.

Anger flashed in those silver eyes, but Thea could feel the storm in her heart and for once, it steadied her. 'You heard me,' she said boldly. 'You talk of forgiveness, but what of you? What of Talemir? You've held on to that anger for how long? Six years, was it?'

'You don't know what you're talking about.'

'Then what of me?'

He was in front of her in a single stride. His words came out deathly quiet. 'What about you?'

'You won't forgive me. For lying about my fate stone. For getting us into this mess.' Thea hated the waver in her voice, the note of vulnerability.

'It's forgotten.'

'But not *forgiven*. You carry it around on that heavily chipped shoulder of yours.' She hadn't realised how close he was until she was staring up at his handsome face, his breath tickling her skin.

'*That* is not the burden I carry with me.'

'No?' Thea pressed. 'Then what is?'

He seemed to study her, to take in her features as though committing them to memory, doing so with a pained expression. 'We said no lies.'

'We did.'

'Without lying, and without muddying the waters of our pact, I can't tell you this. It's too hard. Leave it be, Thea.'

Thea swallowed the burning desire to demand exactly what plagued him and took a step back. 'Alright,' she said at last. 'I'll respect that.'

'Thank you.' The Warsword's voice was rough. 'It's not because I don't —'

But Thea didn't hear the rest. Her gaze caught on something amid the rubble, and she took one, two steps towards it.

It would have been easy to miss, beneath the piles of broken stone and timber, but once she'd spotted it, there was no mistaking it for what it was.

The remains of a throne.

It was the back part of the chair, elaborate carvings of crowns and lightning bolts all along the arch. Thea kicked more debris out of the way, clearing away the dirt and wreckage.

The throne had been ruined, splintered into pieces, almost beyond recognition. But Thea knew in her bones what it was. Her father, or her mother, had sat upon it once, ordering the downfalls of the other kingdoms, only to have darkness sweep in and take their own.

‘Thea?’ Wilder’s voice jerked her out of her trance.

Her hand shot out, grabbing his muscled forearm. ‘Look...’ she breathed, pointing with her other hand to where a second throne lay upturned in the mess.

Wrapped around its legs was a vine blight.

‘Fuck.’ Wilder’s hands went to his swords in an instant.

But Thea took the sight in. It looked similar to the one they’d disposed of in Thezmarr: dark vines creeping across the broken stones, curling around whatever they could latch onto.

In its grip, Thea spotted the remains of an animal skeleton – but surely that wasn’t enough to sustain the monster?

‘Can you tell what the original host was?’ she asked, unsheathing her own blade and approaching the outer tendrils of the creature cautiously.

‘Not from a safe distance,’ Wilder murmured, not taking his eyes off the thing as he dug through his pocket for that same glass vial he’d used on the cliffs. He handed it to Thea. ‘A few drops are all you need.’

Thea wrapped her fingers around the vial, hiding her surprise.

‘Get as close to the main body as you can, but remember —’

‘Don’t let it touch me, I know,’ Thea finished for him as she inched towards the monster.

Sensing her approach, several of its arm-like limbs unfurled, ready to wrap around her and inflict the unimaginable pain Wilder had described to her. But Thea wasn’t afraid; she was liberated. Her mentor hadn’t hesitated to give her this opportunity. Somewhere along the way, Wilder had understood that she needed to learn for herself – and that to do that, she would need to walk beside danger, and into it, in order to grow stronger.

Ever so carefully, she uncorked the vial with her teeth, her sword in her other hand. She was light on her feet as she avoided the creeping tendrils of vine and reached a clearing of rubble beside the main mass of the blight.

Taking a breath, she poured several drops of liquid onto it.

Steam hissed from the vines and the creature made a strange whistling noise, a burning smell singeing the air —

Thea expected to feel relief, but her nose tickled as she scented something beyond the monster turning to stone before her. She whirled around, tossing aside the vial and unsheathing her dagger.

Burnt hair. That was what she could smell, and it usually only meant one thing.

Wilder was close, poised for violence as well: his mighty swords at the ready, his body coiled to spring into action at any moment, his eyes bright and alert.

Thea scanned the ruins. There was no sign of anything untoward, but the crawling sensation across her skin, the acrid scent in the air, told her that they were out there... Wraiths. Reapers.

‘Can you tell how many?’ she murmured to Wilder.

‘Not from the smell alone.’ He twirled a blade, a muscle twitching in his jaw. ‘The blight was fucking bait.’

Thea’s blood went cold. ‘Surely they —’

An ear-piercing shriek cut through her words and the air around them.

Darkness swept through the ruins. A gale of wind caused by a pair of membranous wings followed.

A shadow wraith.

It landed before Warsword and apprentice, stretching its wings menacingly, flashing its talons as threads of obsidian leaked from its strange, sinewy frame. Snarling, the monster took a step towards them, its leathery skin gleaming in the watery rays of sun that filtered through its power.

Thea dug her heels into the ground, fear clenching around her heart.

It’s a wraith, not a reaper. You’ve faced worse than this, she told herself. She expected Wilder to launch himself at the creature. The Warsword didn’t move. For a second she thought he might be enthralled by the darkness and all the horrors it could drag from one’s mind, but Wilder was completely lucid, just still.

His gaze slid to Thea, and he raised a single brow, as if to say, *Now’s your chance, Apprentice.*

A slow smile spread across his face. That was all it took for Thea to hurl herself at the wraith, her blades blurs of silver as she ducked the slash of its talons and delivered deep cuts to the backs of its legs.

She was already facing it again, stepping carefully amid the rubble, trying to read its next move. The wraith struck out once more, this time with a thick lash of onyx power. She carved clean through it and the creature screamed, thrashing as though the tendrils were an extension of its body. Incensed, it clawed at her with its ragged talons.

Thea was fast, but not fast enough.

Piercing agony lanced through her left arm, snatching the breath from her lungs, the air whistling between her teeth as she hissed in pain.

But she did not stop.

Whips of magic lashed out of the wraith, aiming not only for her, but for Wilder, who was still standing on the outskirts of the skirmish, swords in hands, watching. But he made no move to defend himself, no move to interfere as those coils of darkness came for them both.

She wouldn't allow it. Thea wielded sword and dagger against every vicious attack of power, pausing only to hold her dagger between her teeth as she flung the throwing stars from her boot right at the monster's heart.

The small blades weren't big enough to do serious damage, but they created a window of opportunity, of distraction, so that Thea could duck and weave through the ribbons of darkness and leap upon the wraith with all her might.

For a brief moment, she wondered abstractly what it might be like to have the Furies-given strength of a Warsword behind her blows. But that was neither here nor there – not yet, anyway.

Thea thrust her sword through the tender flesh between the creature's shoulder and clavicle. The force of her strike was enough to send the monster staggering back with a scream. The sound set Thea's teeth on edge, but she wasn't done, not by a long shot.

The wraith landed on its back in the ruins and Thea pinned it to the ground, tearing her sword free from its leathery skin, black blood spurting. She speared her blade through its wings next. It hissed and clawed at her, but she swiped her sword across its flesh again and, with a boot to the monster's throat, palmed her dagger.

Thea didn't hesitate as she carved through its chest with her blade of Naarvian steel. Skin, muscle, tissue and bone all caved beneath its sharp edge.

All the while, the wraith screamed, the sound echoing around the ruins of Delmira.

It seemed fitting to gut it here, amid the graveyard of what had once been the land of her kin. How many screams had its ilk dragged from her people? The thought came to her distantly, like a question from another person, another time.

As the shadow wraith's chest opened up beneath her, Thea didn't hesitate to carve her blade through the rest of its insides, and cut out its

heart.

With a cry of triumph, she tore the hot mass from its chest cavity, its warm, thick blood pouring down her arm as she turned to Wilder, an unstoppable grin on her face.

But Wilder's attention wasn't on her or the wraith heart in her grasp.

It was fixed on the ledge of a nearby stone wall.

On the *rheguld reaper* watching them.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WILDER



Wilder had been so focused on Thea that he'd nearly missed it: the prickle at the back of his neck, the quiet tendrils of darkness testing the air around him.

But then he'd seen it, and without thinking, with terror in his heart for his apprentice, he'd sent one of his blades hurtling for the *rheguld reaper* surveying them from the wall.

With shadows of its own, the reaper had simply batted the flying sword away, as though it were nothing but an inconvenience, as though it didn't have the Furies-given strength of a Warsword behind it, or Naarvian magic imbued in its steel.

It had stared at Wilder, a challenge, a dare.

And then the reaper hadn't moved.

It watched from the top of the wall, drinking in the sight of Thea battling the wraith with its clouded blue eyes, sniffing the blood-drenched air as she carved out its dark heart.

Wilder didn't take his eyes off the reaper, trying to anticipate its next move. He felt it when Thea turned to him, felt it when she saw what he saw.

And he heard the thud of the wraith's heart hitting the ground as she stalked back across the rubble to stand at his side.

'What's it doing?' she murmured.

Wilder flexed his fingers around his remaining sword. 'Spying.'

The reaper blinked at them, which was more unnerving than a swipe of its claws or a lash of its power. Wilder had never seen one *blink* before. It was almost reptilian, a slimy lid swiping slowly across the eye.

Its ominous gaze was trained not on him, but on Thea, full of hunger, as though it could taste her from where it stood atop the wall. Wilder didn't make the conscious decision to step in front of her, but he did it anyway, trying to block the monster's path to her.

But Thea pushed him aside and faced the reaper with her shoulders squared. 'What do you want?' she said, her voice cold and sharp.

The creature tilted its head in interest, a strange noise escaping it. At first, Wilder thought it was a feral hiss, the same racket its rancid species made, but it wasn't a single sound; it was many... A language he didn't understand.

In challenge, Thea lifted her chin, still covered in the wraith's blood.

The reaper spoke again, words not known to any race or kingdom of the midrealms. An ancient tongue from beyond the Veil, its tone low and full of malice.

Then, the darkness lashed out.

One moment, Wilder could see the creature clear as day in the ruins. The next, it was pitch black all around him.

His first thought was of Thea.

Gods, where was she? If it got its talons in her again, he had no Aveum springwater left to save her. Blindly, he reached for her, but his hands only met air, air that shifted in the wake of the power lashing all around him.

A scream caught in his throat as he fell through the darkness.

He landed in Islaton, by the monument to the Furies in Naarva, and he watched in horror as his past, as Malik's and Talemir's past unfolded before him —

Wilder himself was duelling a wraith on the outskirts of the stone circle, the damn creature meeting his blows with strikes of onyx power, nearly sending him sprawling backward. He ignored the panic seizing his chest, ignored the internal scream that he needed to rejoin the unit. If he could kill this fucking monster, perhaps shred its wings for good measure, it was one less the others would have to contend with amid the fray. Somewhere in the near distance, Malik and Talemir were fighting side by side, the most formidable of them all: the Shieldbreaker and the Prince of Hearts.

'Glory in death, immortality in legend,' Malik had said to Wilder before launching himself into the chaos with a manic grin. Those same words were carved into Malik's dagger, were tattooed down Wilder's spine: a vow and motto the brothers had claimed for themselves long ago.

The clang of steel rang out across the circle of white stones, the shouts of his fellow warriors too. The acrid scent of burnt hair tangled with the metallic tang of blood. All around their forces, wraiths shrieked and carved through their Guardian and Warsword brothers, breaking them apart with talons and shadows.

Wilder deflected a slash of already bloodied talons with his great sword, and carved a slice through the wraith's abdomen, the creature screaming and flapping its wings in fury.

'Fuck!' Sharp plain sliced across Wilder's neck and shoulder. The fucking thing had managed to get a blow in.

Ignoring the warm blood soaking through his undershirt and shitty armour, Wilder pushed the wraith back —

Someone yelled in the near distance.

Not someone.

Malik.

Wilder whirled around, already charging towards the sound, only to see his brother being lifted bodily from the ground. A giant creature, perhaps ten feet tall, swept Malik into the air as though he were a rag doll, not an enormous man in his own right.

'Mal —'

But his brother's name died on his lips as Wilder watched in horror. His boots still pounded the earth beneath him, but that brutal sinking in his chest told him he wouldn't make it. He knew he wouldn't make it —

Time unfolded slowly as Malik's huge frame was dwarfed by the leathery creature, as it lifted him unthinkably high into the air and slammed him down into the rocks.

Face first.

A sickening crack sounded upon impact.

Over and over again.

A strangled scream escaped Wilder. There was still so much distance between him and Mal.

His brother's body went limp in the monster's clutches.

His face, an unrecognisable bloody pulp.

Wilder's knees buckled, just as another familiar voice broke through the turmoil. Gasping for air, suddenly frozen in shock, Wilder turned to it.

Talemir.

Wilder couldn't breathe, not as he saw Talemir's legs kicking out underneath him, flailing beneath the death grip of a wraith – no, not a wraith; not like the others.

This thing was different. It had horns atop its grotesque head, it was bigger —

Wilder's shout rang out across the stone circle and he flung himself towards Talemir, just as the monster pinned his mentor to the white rocks and pierced his chest with its talons.

Shadows danced around them as the *rheguld reaper* reached for Talemir's heart —

Lightning carved through Islaton.

And then it was no more.



Wilder opened his eyes to a storm surging through the ruins of Delmira; to Thea, who was wielding forks of lightning against the reaper, driving it back from the rubble, driving it back from *him*.

Wilder was in the dirt, on his knees.

While the lost heir of Delmira defended him against the darkness.

Deep, heavy clouds swallowed the sky and an icy wind whipped through the ruins, the hair on Wilder's arms standing up. Not taking his eyes off Thea, he staggered to his feet as the reaper buckled beneath the onslaught of her magic.

She was a beacon of power, thunder clapping overhead, bolts of brilliant white light pouring from her fingertips and into the sky, raining down upon the reaper.

Its shadows were retreating. *It* was retreating...

Thea cleaved the sky in two.

The canvas of clouds tore apart, as though to reveal a world beyond this one.

Ribbons of darkness surged, before vanishing into thin air.

Thea's shoulders sagged, the magic at her fingertips snuffing out bolt by bolt, the storm raging overhead quietening. She rushed to him, her expression intense and raw.

‘Are you alright?’ she rasped, scanning him, her hands tracing his body for signs of injury.

Her concern nearly broke Wilder. He was still struggling to catch his own breath. ‘It was baiting you,’ he panted, leaning against a collapsed pillar for support.

Thea looked from the vine blight turned to stone in the corner, to the wraith heart she’d discarded in the rubble. ‘It knew to come here...’ she murmured.

‘Yes,’ Wilder managed. What he didn’t say was that the vine blight had been a perfectly positioned trap for an heir, one that he should have seen coming. For a moment, he wanted to tell her everything he knew, wanted to share it all so they could face it together. But doubt crept in like a high tide. What if it was all too much, too soon?

Thea watched the final wisps of shadow fade in the sky. ‘It knows who I am now. What I am.’

‘It’s likely reporting back to the Daughter of Darkness as we speak... It seems that they want to know what you’re capable of,’ Wilder allowed.

‘Good.’ Thea met his gaze with nothing but unflinching steel in her eyes. ‘Now they know to fear me.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THEA



She still felt the storm in her bones, in her heart; still felt the tempest raging within as she helped Wilder to his feet, the Warsword worryingly pale. She had never known such terror, never known horror to run so deep as it had when she'd seen him collapse, the darkness lashing at his mind as well as his body.

It had hurt him. And that had unlocked something inside her, rendering her incapable of conscious thought. She had moved on instinct then, funnelling that fear for Wilder into something more powerful, more deadly – rage.

In rage she found her magic. In rage she summoned the storms and wrought them upon the enemy. There had been no strategy, no caution, only action.

Only lightning in her veins and thunder in her heart.

And she'd unleashed it upon the realm. Had used it without rhyme or reason, to defend the one thing in the world she couldn't live without.

Thea watched Wilder, the fear for him still raw and fragile in her chest. He was visibly shaken, that towering wall of warrior rendered speechless in the wake of what he'd seen, in the wake of what she'd done.

She had never seen him falter, had never questioned whether or not he'd keep fighting. Until that moment.

In her thrall of storm magic, she had seen glimpses of the nightmare the reaper had inflicted upon the Warsword. Not a nightmare, she realised, but a *memory*. The day that Malik had been hurt; Talemir too, from what she had seen. Wilder's helplessness and sorrow had laced each flash of memory

she'd witnessed, had been so poignant it had nearly overcome her at one point.

'You saw?' Wilder asked, voice hoarse with shame. He studied her face, and Thea cursed herself for not masking her emotions. Wren had told her she should be better at that by now.

'Only fragments,' Thea replied, suppressing the urge to reach for him, to comfort him. She wanted to tell him that it was alright, that his pain was her pain, and that —

'You saw me fail them,' the Warsword croaked.

Thea shook her head. 'I saw you fight. I saw you fight until you could fight no more.'

Wilder gave a dark, broken laugh. 'Call it what it is. *Failure*. And because of it, the two people I loved most were changed forever.'

Thea didn't argue. She knew her words wouldn't land, not when he was still in the space between freshly carved-open grief and the present. Instead, she went to their packs and brought him a canteen of water.

'Drink,' she ordered.

'I'm the one who's supposed to look out for you...' he murmured.

'That's not how friendship works.'

'No?'

'Not ours.' She folded her arms over her chest. 'Drink.'

And to her surprise, he did.

Thea left Wilder in the shade of the ruins to find their horses. She knew he needed to process what had happened and that he needed to do it alone. It hurt to leave him there, and she fought every protective instinct that screamed to hold him close. But she wanted to do what was best for him, and right now, she knew he needed to fall apart and rebuild his armour in privacy. They were much the same in that respect.

Thea herself needed to keep moving, lest the shock of what she'd done hit her and render her useless – and she knew that shock was coming.

The combination of her fear for Wilder's life and the tenuous link to her ancestral homeland had sparked that ember of magic to life within her... and now she worried that there was no putting it back in the bottle.

The reaper had dragged the worst of Wilder's memories before him, a loop of pain and suffering and guilt designed to slice over and over, death by a thousand cuts. But it hadn't only been Wilder's memory flashing before her, but her own as well – or what she had guessed to be her own.

A field of flowers. Two pairs of small hands braiding them together to form a necklace.

The smell of heather.

The darkness of being hidden in a wagon, hurtling over uneven terrain, a small body either side of her.

Remember me. Those words over and over, an eerie melody from the past she couldn't bring to the forefront of her mind, except in the fragments the reaper had shown her.

Her mind clawed at itself, demanding the images to form before it, for her to *remember*. But she had been so small, so young and so scared.

Only when Thea came upon the horses did she come back to herself. She checked the beasts over, and when she was sure they were fine, she tied them to a nearby post, something in the corner of her eye snagging her attention.

A sign that had fallen from its iron frame and sat in the dust by a shattered door.

Dorinth Armoury, it read. The place that had once housed all the secrets to the brilliance of Warsword armour. Except for Wilder's... He'd passed the Great Rite after Delmira's fall and had never been gifted the same armour as his predecessors.

Thea found herself walking towards the armoury. It looked like little more than a rundown shopfront, its windows smashed in, only pieces of the door left on its hinges. That didn't stop her peering inside or stepping over the threshold.

The place had been looted or destroyed by wild animals long ago. A thick layer of dust coated all the surfaces, and there wasn't much besides broken furniture and the odd tool scattered around. Thea's boots crunched atop broken glass as she paced the room, imagining how it might have been set up during its prime. A fitting room in the corner, perhaps; a pedestal for the freshly appointed Warsword to stand on while he was measured for each piece of his armour...

Thea felt more connection, more sense of history in this broken little shop than she had amid the ruins of her family's castle.

Funny, that, she mused, running her hands over her own armour as she scanned the shelves behind the counter.

There, she found a stack of yellowed parchment bound in a protective leather sleeve. Frowning, she blew the dust from it and spread the pages on

the workbench.

Sketches. Dozens of sketches depicting various types of armour. She recognised the full-body jacket armour made of quilted linen or wool known as a gambeson; Esyllt wore one of these every winter and then cursed its insulation in the summer months.

Thea turned the page to find a design for armour made with boiled leather – this was what most of the Guardians of Thezmarr wore, as it was the cheapest to produce and could be easily sourced from Harenth. It was what her own set was crafted from. Though Thea knew it wore out quickly, especially if the warrior failed to oil it regularly – which, of course, most of them did. She still needed Wilder to teach her how to take care of her set.

A dripping sound distracted her and she glanced down to find herself bleeding. A nasty gash carved through her left arm. She vaguely remembered it happening in her battle against the wraith, but she couldn't feel a thing now.

Thea continued to sift through the sketches: chain mail, steel plates, brigandine and combinations of them all, until she got to the final page. In the top corner was a symbol she knew well: two crossed swords with a third cutting down the middle, the emblem of the Warsword. And beneath it were several more sketches for armour.

Thea held the parchment by its edges, mindful not to smudge the designs or mar them with her bloody fingers. Her chest was suddenly tight as she thought of the Warsword who had never seen this armour, who, despite passing the perils of the Great Rite, had not been gifted that which those before him had been. Her heart cracked a little, and as it did, she carefully folded the final sketch and slid it into her satchel.

When she emerged from the armoury, she was surprised to find dark clouds still lingering over the ruins. She could taste the storm on her tongue, and again she felt the flicker of magic in her veins, itching at her fingertips.

That restlessness she'd always felt, that pressure, had started to build again.

She knew Wilder was right; the *rheguld reaper* had been on a scouting mission, and it had learnt of Thea's power for its master. It would report that an heir of Delmira lived, and that her magic could summon lightning from nothing. That secret was no longer her own.

But that wasn't the only thing it had gleaned from their skirmish.

Now, it knew not only of her strength...

But of her weakness, too.
Wilder Hawthorne.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WILDER



It took Wilder longer than he cared to admit to recover from the reaper's attack. Though he was no stranger to nightmares, being dropped right back into the fray of the Islaton battle was something else entirely. Even now, he could taste the sorrow and despair on his tongue; he carried the weight of it in his chest.

Malik. Talemir.

Both hurt beyond repair on his watch.

When his hands had stopped shaking, he went to find Thea. He hated that after encounters with three different monsters, she'd taken it upon herself to wander the ruined city alone. Even more so, he hated that he'd been too overcome to go with her. She'd done it for him, he realised. She had recognised that broken piece of him that needed to work through the trauma alone.

Steeling himself against all that warred within, he found her perched on the edge of a dried-up fountain, her pack open at her feet. She was hunched over herself, and wore no shirt, only the band that covered her breasts. Her left arm was streaked with blood, and a needle and thread was poised in her shaking hand.

She cursed quietly to herself, reaching for a flask on the ground. *Fire extract*. He could smell it on the wind. She'd found the stash in his bag, apparently.

Wilder watched silently as she tossed back the liquor and returned her attention to the seeping wound on her bicep, clearly trying to work up the nerve to make the first suture. That was always the worst part.

Every instinct within him roared to go to her, to tend to her and comfort her, to take away the pain. It hurt him to watch her hurt, but this was how a Warsword was made.

‘What happened?’ he said as he approached.

She didn’t even look up. She’d known he was there.

‘A stupid error on my part with the wraith,’ she replied through gritted teeth.

‘You won’t make it again, then, will you?’ His voice was rough as he surveyed the damage himself.

‘Hopefully not.’ She hissed as she put the needle to her skin.

He hid his wince. ‘Thought Farissa taught you battlefield healing?’

‘She did. It’s a little different when you’re treating yourself, Warsword. We don’t all just dump a bunch of liquor on it and call it a day.’ Thea still hadn’t looked at him, but he noted the beads of perspiration on her brow.

‘Here,’ he heard himself say, and reached for the needle.

‘I can do it.’

‘Yes, but I’ll show you how, lest you butcher it and sew your arm to your body or something.’

A half-laugh escaped her. ‘That’s something Kipp would do.’

Wilder merely grunted and accepted the needle from her. ‘I’m assuming you cleaned the wound and your tools?’

‘Obviously. Though I didn’t see you washing your hands...’

Wilder baulked. She was right. Gods, she got his head so twisted that the most basic of tasks seemed difficult.

After he’d washed his hands as best he could with one of their canteens, he returned to her. ‘You need to line up the edges of the wound,’ he told her, moving her hand to hold her flesh in place. ‘Then you want to push the needle through the skin at about a ninety-degree angle, so that you’re not pushing it into the fat.’

Thea cursed as he pushed the needle through her skin. ‘Hurts more than the fucking cut.’

‘You’ll get used to it.’

‘Wonderful.’

‘You twist your hand like this, and pull it through.’ He showed her. ‘So the needle comes out the other side of the wound. You want it directly across from the first puncture.’

He expected her to turn away, but Thea was studying the way his fingers manipulated the needle through her skin, as though she had disassociated from the pain and was now memorising the lesson.

‘You try.’ He passed her the needle. ‘There will come a time where you have to do this alone.’

With a furrowed brow, Thea did as he bid, piercing her flesh with the needle, cursing quietly as she worked.

‘You want the edges of the wound just touching, not too tight. The knot should be lying flat.’ Wilder reached for the flask at her feet and took a swig of fire extract, relishing the burn of the liquor down his throat.

‘That was for medicinal purposes,’ Thea muttered, biting her lip as she reached the end of the wound.

Wilder simply drank again. ‘You know how to tie it off?’

‘In theory. It’s different when it’s your own injury. I can’t use this arm —’

‘It won’t be perfect, but it’ll do the job.’ He showed her how to wrap the thread around the needle to create a path for a knot before offering his dagger for her to sever the remaining thread.

When she did, she sagged on the edge of the fountain with a moan. ‘That was deeply unpleasant.’

‘You need to clean it again, bandage it.’

‘In a minute, Warsword. Let me catch my breath.’

Her hair had fallen in her eyes and he wanted nothing more than to reach across and tuck it behind her ear. He did no such thing. ‘There’s no catching your breath in the heart of a battle, or on the road with no supplies.’

‘How did you learn?’

‘On the road with no supplies.’

‘Figures.’ She scooped up her blood-stained shirt, tearing a strip from its hem with her good hand and her teeth before dousing it in fire extract and applying it to the newly sutured wound with a stream of colourful curses.

‘Thought you didn’t clean wounds that way?’ he said, recalling her reprimands when he’d been injured in the previous battle against the reapers.

‘I learnt from the best, apparently.’

Wilder had no retort for that. He passed a hand over his face, feeling too raw from the reaper's mind whipping, from seeing Thea hurting, from not being able to treat her as he wanted to. 'Don't let it get infected,' he muttered.

'You're incredibly bossy,' she huffed, moving her arm tentatively with a grimace.

'Occupational hazard.'

'You mean it's not just your charming personality?'

'That too.'

She didn't laugh. Instead, she looked to the murky skies. 'Do you think they'll be back?'

Wilder considered it. 'Not anytime soon...' he said slowly.

'But we should move on anyway?'

'Ordinarily I'd say yes, but with you injured and me not quite at my full strength, I think we need to rest.'

'I can manage.'

'Fine, you can manage well enough,' Wilder allowed. 'But with honesty being our policy at the moment... I'm not so sure about me. That reaper messed me up something fierce.' The words were hard for him to say. He'd never admitted such a thing before in any sort of battle or skirmish. But he felt shaky, fragile in a way that made him nervous about being on the open road, about not being able to offer Thea his full protection. Not that she needed it, apparently.

Wilder glanced up to find her studying him. Her expression alone told him that she'd seen more of his memories than she'd admitted. Heat prickled in his face, the shame rising to the surface.

'Has that happened before?' she asked quietly.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. 'Not to that extent... The Furies made me strong. Usually I'm able to keep the shadow visions at bay. Today... today, I was more susceptible.'

'Why?'

Wilder grimaced.

'Why?' Thea demanded again.

He let his gaze fall to her, let her see the pain he'd done his best to keep masked. 'Because you were here. Because I was scared for you. My focus was split.'

'And that made you...'

‘Vulnerable.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Thea said.

At that, Wilder huffed a laugh. ‘Don’t be,’ he told her. ‘It appears my fears for you were severely misplaced.’

She nudged him with her good arm. ‘Something to remember for next time, perhaps.’

‘I’ll be sure to write it down.’

‘Maybe you should tattoo it on your forehead.’

‘Not a chance, Princess. I wouldn’t want to mark this pretty face of mine.’

Thea snorted. ‘*Pretty*’s not the word I’d use for it.’

‘No? What, then?’

Thea met his gaze, considering him with a pained look of regret before she shook her head and got to her feet. ‘Dangerous territory there, my friend.’

‘Isn’t it always?’ Wilder quipped. It was for him. The vow of friendship they’d made hadn’t changed how he felt about her. Nothing could. But before she could answer, before they went down a path they couldn’t retrace, he scanned the ruins. ‘We’ll camp here for tonight. There’s decent shelter from the wind, and we’ve got enough rations and water.’

She gave him a grateful look and he knew he’d made the right choice. Thea would never be the one to hold them back, but she needed the reprieve as much as he did.

‘Do you want me to hunt?’ she asked. ‘You look like you could use a hearty meal.’

‘Nothing around here to hunt,’ he replied.

‘Then what are we going to do?’

He raised a brow. ‘Suppose we could talk, Apprentice.’

‘Talk?’

‘You’re unfamiliar with the concept? It’s when two people exchange words...’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Very funny. Forgive my shock – you’re just not overly known for your scintillating conversation.’

‘You wound me.’ He started back towards the ruins of the castle, Thea in tow.

They tended to the horses, unsaddling them and ensuring they had a patch to graze on. Hauling their packs and tack with them back to the ruins

as the sun lowered on the horizon, they set up a basic camp, with a wall behind them and a small fire crackling amid the rubble.

With the remaining light, Wilder opted to get out his sewing kit. Biscuit's saddle blanket needed patching, as did his spare set of pants. He felt Thea watching him curiously as he threaded the needle and started on the blanket.

'Who taught you?' she asked.

He didn't look up from his work. 'My mother. She always said it'd be a good skill to have. Told me and Mal that if we ever found women willing to put up with us, they weren't there to darn our socks.'

Thea made an appreciative noise. 'I like her already.'

'She was a special woman,' Wilder told her. 'She died a long time ago.'

'I'm sorry.'

Wilder gave a nod of thanks and kept threading the needle through the blanket. A long time ago or not, he thought of his mother whenever he got out his needle and thread. It had been her kit in another lifetime.

'Did she teach Malik how to braid leather?' Thea asked.

'That was my father, actually. He was a tanner when we were younger.'

'What sort of things did he make?'

'Everything, I suppose. He was the only leatherworker for miles. People would bring him animal skins from all over. But he loved making belts with the leftover materials. That's where Malik gets his braiding habit from. Before he was injured, he used to engrave all the Warsword belts.'

He leant back to show her the intricate design his brother had carved into the leather of his own belt.

'He can't do that now?' Thea asked as she admired it.

Wilder shook his head. 'Not with the tremors in his hands. He mainly braids now.' He tied off the knot in his thread and set the blanket aside, peering at Thea over the fire. 'Anything else you need to know?'

Pink stained the tops of her cheeks. 'I want to know everything.'

Wilder found himself smiling as he reached for their supplies. He handed her the canteen of water. 'Drink this.'

'I've already had —'

'It wasn't a request. You don't drink enough water.'

Thea clicked her tongue in frustration, but did as he instructed, and when he handed her a bowl heaped with food, she accepted it without argument.

‘There are things I’d like to know, too,’ he told her. ‘So why don’t we play for answers?’

‘Play what?’ she asked around a mouthful of bread.

He slid a pack of cards from his saddlebag. ‘Knave and Fool?’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Then you can add it to the list of things I’ll teach you.’ Wilder honestly didn’t mean to wink. He just... forgot their agreement, for a moment.

But a smile tugged at Thea’s mouth. ‘That’s becoming quite a list, Warsword.’ She finished eating and brushed her hands off on her thighs. ‘Alright, then. How do you play?’

Wilder made quick work of explaining the rules to her, realising that he himself hadn’t played for years... Not since he and Talemir were on the road together and Tal had convinced a group of women to play for their clothes rather than questions and answers.

He shoved that thought violently aside. He didn’t need to be thinking of Thea without her clothes.

When he’d finished dividing the cards by suit and rank and placed one card face down between them, he looked at her in the glow of the fire. Her messy side braid framed her face, her eyes bright. Gods, she was beautiful.

‘Ready, Apprentice?’

‘I was born ready, Warsword.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THEA



An ache formed in Thea's chest as she tried not to stare at Wilder in the flickering firelight, his usually fierce features softened, a gentle smile lifting his lips.

He turned the first card over. Thea tore her gaze away from him and trained her eyes on her cards, but she could still feel him watching her.

She studied her hand for her highest card and placed it in the middle. Wilder did the same.

They placed cards down in silence for a few moments, waiting until a knave or fool appeared. It seemed to go on forever, and Thea used the time to wrack her mind for what she might ask him, what secrets she could tease from him.

But Wilder won the first round, which meant he took both cards and looked up with a cocky grin. 'I believe I'm allowed a question, Apprentice.'

'Get on with it, then,' she said through clenched teeth. She hated losing. She should have challenged him to a game of Dancing Alchemists instead.

'How did you become friends with Callahan and Kristopher?' he asked.

Of all the things she had expected him to interrogate her about, this hadn't been one of them. Not to mention her friends' given names sounded oddly formal, enough that she laughed.

'That's what you want to know?'

'That's what I want to know.'

Thea shrugged. 'Alright, then... The day you delivered me to Esyllt for shieldbearer training, we got assigned to clean-up duty in the armoury. According to our dear weapons master, we were all as useless as each other. I've been friends with them ever since.'

‘Just like that?’

‘Pretty much. Those two are hard to shake.’

‘So I’ve noticed.’

‘Jealous you don’t have any friends?’ she teased.

Wilder chuckled. ‘Says my self-proclaimed friend.’

‘You saying I’m *not* your friend, Warsword?’

A deep laugh burst from him then. ‘I’d say you’re probably my best friend, Apprentice.’

‘That’s depressing,’ she said, but warmth swelled in her chest.

He gave her a crooked smile. ‘I don’t mind it so much.’

Thea blushed and gestured to the cards. ‘Next round.’

They played again, Thea winning with the highest card this time. She claimed her prize with a shout of victory.

‘Humble, aren’t you?’ Wilder said, amused.

‘It’s hard to be humble when you’re the best,’ she quipped.

He laughed, and Thea didn’t think there was a sound in the entire world she loved more. She sat back, resting on her palms as she considered what she wanted to ask. Of all the things that remained unknown about the Warsword before her, the sapphire from his cabin lingered in her mind. Heat crept up her cheeks again and she cursed herself for being such an idiot.

‘Have you...’

‘Have I what?’

She was already mortified. ‘Have you had many lovers?’

Wilder’s brows shot up. ‘*That’s* what you want to ask?’

‘I...’

‘Ask what you really want to ask, Thea.’

Her toes curled in her boots at her name on his lips, but that sapphire still glinted in her mind. ‘Who was before me?’ She struggled to swallow, unsure if she wanted the next answer. ‘Or after?’

Wilder’s gaze darkened and he placed his cards face down on the ground. ‘There has been no one since I met you. No one else in those three weeks after the Bloodwoods,’ he told her reverently. ‘Nor have I wanted there to be.’

Thea exhaled shakily, only now realising how fast her heart was beating. ‘And before?’

Wilder sighed. ‘Before was a long time ago.’

Thea waited, watching him as he pushed his hair back off his face and met her gaze again.

‘Her name was Adrienne. I... I cared about her a lot. She was good to me.’

Thea’s heart hitched. ‘You deserve that,’ she heard herself say. ‘Someone to be good to you.’

He gave her a sad smile. ‘Do I?’

The cards lay forgotten between them. ‘I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it,’ Thea said. ‘When did it end?’

Wilder hesitated, seemed to war with himself about whether to tell her or not.

Was it so recent that it still hurt? Would it hurt her to know?

‘We said we’d be honest,’ she reminded him.

He sighed. ‘Six years ago. Give or take.’

Thea blinked. ‘Six years?’ she blurted. ‘You haven’t – you didn’t... For *six years*?’

‘I’ll take your state of shock as a compliment, Apprentice,’ Wilder said drily.

‘But —’

‘You’ve had your question. Several, in fact. And if we’re dropping the pretence of this card game, I’ll ask you the same.’

His silver gaze was intense, glimmering with the reflection of the campfire flames.

Thea took a breath. ‘There hasn’t been anyone else since...’ she answered slowly. In the three weeks since they’d first fucked, all she’d thought of was him. With anger and hurt, certainly, but always him.

‘And before?’ he prompted.

‘No one of consequence. No one who meant anything.’ She sounded harsh, but it was the truth.

‘What of the stable master’s apprentice?’

Thea frowned in confusion, before she remembered their brief encounter in the stables and how Evander had practically fled upon seeing the Warsword darken the doorway. ‘He was my first.’

‘And he wasn’t special to you?’

Thea reached for the flask of fire extract resting against the Warsword’s pack and took a swig, grimacing at the burn down her throat. ‘He was what I needed him to be at the time... Until he wasn’t.’

Wilder's voice went low, nearly a growl. 'What do you mean?'

But Thea merely shrugged. 'He thought me ridiculous. Dressed in boys' clothes, trying to be a warrior. He wanted nothing to do with me once he knew what I wanted to do. I think I embarrassed him.'

Wilder shifted, his face completely serious as he said, 'Shall I kill him for you?'

Thea burst out laughing. 'I don't think that's necessary...'

Wilder's nostrils flared. 'I didn't like the look of him.'

Still laughing, Thea wiped the tears from her eyes. 'And that's reason enough to kill a man?'

'I've killed men for lesser reasons.'

Thea stared at him. 'You're joking.'

'Am I?'

Thea couldn't tell, not even when he offered another one of those wicked smiles. The sight made her heart stutter, and her breath catch.

'Do you think all lovers of warriors are doomed from the start?' The words tumbled from her mouth before she could think to hold them back. She knew it was dangerous territory once again, but she couldn't help herself.

Wilder stoked the fire with a stick, coaxing the flames across the logs he'd fed it. 'Jury's still out on that one,' he said finally.

Thea wasn't sure what she'd been hoping he'd say, but she sensed the time for talking of such things was over. Instead, she looked to him in challenge. 'Will you tell me of the Great Rite now?'

Wilder groaned.

'You can't tell me I haven't earned the tale yet. How many others have saved you with bolts of lightning? Twice?'

He lifted his gaze to hers, resigned. 'I'll tell you what I can,' he said. 'If you eat another helping of dinner.'

'Another bribe?'

'Another incentive,' he corrected her, waiting.

She reached for her bowl. 'Fine.'

Wilder took a deep breath. 'There are rules about what I can and cannot tell you.'

'Whose rules?'

'The Furies'? The Rite's? They are not written down, but a Warsword can feel them. The words simply won't form if it's something the Furies

wish to remain secret. Do you understand?’

Thea nodded. ‘But you’ll tell me what you can?’

‘I will.’

Thea handed him the flask of fire extract, not taking her eyes off the warrior before her. He took it gratefully and drank deeply.

At last, he seemed ready. ‘You remember what I told you of the Great Rite when we were in the Bloodwoods?’

Thea nodded. That pocket of time felt like a lifetime ago, but she remembered his words exactly. ‘The Great Rite is not contained to a single location. Nor does it adhere to the seasons, or even time itself...’ she recited back to him.

‘Exactly.’ Wilder took another drink. ‘Over seven years ago, I was in Aveum with Talemir, trying to herd a frost giant back into the mountains —’

‘A *what?*’ Thea couldn’t help herself.

Wilder raised a brow. ‘You heard me.’

‘What’s a frost giant?’ she asked, hardly able to contain her excitement.

‘Pretty much what it sounds like. A giant —’

‘How giant?’

‘Six, seven times the size of Malik?’ Wilder offered with a shrug. ‘Some are even bigger than that. They produce frost and ice... They’re actually why Aveum is a winter kingdom. It’s the frost giants that keep it so.’

‘But you had to kill one?’

Wilder shook his head. ‘No, just herd it back to where it belongs.’

‘How?’

Wilder laughed. ‘Well, what do you think a frost giant hates most? Fire. We used fire.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I thought you wanted to hear about the Great Rite?’

Thea was torn. She wanted to hear all the stories, about every adventure he had ever had. But she had been waiting a lifetime for this tale in particular. The frost giant would have to wait. When it came to the Great Rite, she would listen with bated breath.

He didn’t seem to notice how tense she was. Instead, he wore a far-off expression, as though he were no longer sitting by the fire in Delmira with her, but in the grips of the ancient ritual itself.

‘I felt the call on the frozen banks of the great lake in Aveum,’ he told her. ‘I remember the creak and groan of the shelves of ice around us. I remember Tal was saying something about the giant, but... Everything else faded away. It was like a song without words, a whisper in the wind that murmured my name.’

Thea was hardly breathing.

‘The Great Rite was welcoming me as a challenger. There was an opening not three days’ ride from where I was. So I went. Tal rode alongside me, but I barely remember the journey, only the call. When I reached the foot of a great mountain, Talemir couldn’t follow any further. Later, he told me I disappeared before his eyes, but to me... To me it seemed I simply wandered into a pine forest, and started to climb a mountain. I didn’t look back for him, not once.’

Thea took over stoking the fire, needing to do something with her hands to keep from interrupting. This was Wilder’s tale and he would tell it at his own pace.

His throat bobbed. ‘There was nothing to indicate the Rite had started. No marker of any kind. All I knew was that I was climbing this incredibly steep, perilous mountain. And that I climbed it for weeks.’

Thea gasped. ‘Weeks?’

The Warsword nodded. ‘It was not a simple climb. Each time I reached a plateau, I faced one challenge or another. Things I’m unable to tell you about, save for the fact that they were harrowing – more harrowing than anything I’ve ever encountered, even now. I saw things I wish I could unsee, did things I wish I could undo...’

Thea noted a bead of sweat running from his temple, his hands clasped together as though to hide his trembling. She suppressed the urge to reach for him.

He exhaled shakily. ‘When I emerged, I was where I had started. I held a Warsword totem in my hands. Talemir was there waiting. He’d been there for three days.’

Thea frowned, the question poised on her lips. But Wilder beat her to it.

‘Time works differently in the Great Rite. As does reality itself. All the new scars I had were gone. There was not a trace of the Rite on me, save for the Furies-given strength and magic at my fingertips, and the memory of it all, as crisp and clear as the snow before me.’ He watched her. ‘That’s all I can tell you, Apprentice.’

Thea exhaled, feeling a chill rake down her spine. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Thank you for sharing it with me.’

He gave her a subtle nod. ‘Eat the rest of your food,’ he told her.

With the blanket of infinite stars overhead, they talked quietly into the night, though they kept the subject matter light going forward.

Thea kept stealing glances at Wilder across the fire, at the stoic warrior she was slowly coming to know more deeply, more intricately. It was with a mixture of longing and regret that she savoured these moments with him, realising with a resounding grief that she would never come to know him as deeply as she wished to.

Her hand drifted to her fate stone.

The more she knew about Wilder Hawthorne, the harder she fell. And she would never know enough about him, would never have enough moments with him.

There was not enough time – not for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WILDER



Dawn came too soon for Wilder's liking. When he sat up, he spotted Thea stirring something over the fire, her other hand toying with her fate stone absentmindedly. Gods, he hated that thing. More so, he hated that she clearly hadn't slept. They needed to do something about that.

She seemed deep in thought, and so Wilder left to see to his needs and check on the horses. When he returned, Thea's eyes were on the horizon.

'That's not your friend's hawk...' she said, sounding wary, pointing with her good arm.

Wilder squinted into the sky. 'No,' he murmured, spotting the wings beating in the sky. 'That's a raven.'

The bird made right for them, landing by Thea on the edge of the fountain with a squawk, a scroll tied to its leg.

'It's one of Artos', Wilder said as he removed the message, recognising the metal ring around the raven's other leg. Frowning, he unrolled the parchment and read the script written in the royal scribe's hand.

Warsword Hawthorne,

You are hereby summoned to Hailford.

Your presence is required immediately to handle a threat to the kingdom.

Make haste.

His Majesty, the King of Harenth,

Artos Fairmoore

Thea was peering around his arm, so he handed her the message. She took it eagerly and he watched her scan the note's contents.

'A threat to Harenth?' she murmured, brows knitting together.

Wilder nodded. 'Looks like our time in Delmira is at an end. We need to go.'

But Thea was frowning. 'How did he know we were here?'

'Someone would have passed our plans on from Thezmarr.'

Thea was still staring at the message. 'Do you think he called for aid from the others as well?'

'Your guess is as good as mine. Now get dressed. We ride out in five.'



They rode south at once, and as they did, Wilder pondered. He didn't know what to make of Artos' summons. In his mind, Harenth was the least likely of the three remaining kingdoms to be attacked by the forces from beyond the Veil. It was the most protected with its inland location and distance from the Veil, and also because it bordered Thezmarr. Riders could be dispatched and there within three days, as opposed to the far lengthier journeys to Tver or Aveum. But then... there was no predicting the whims of monsters.

He glanced at Thea, who rode beside him, her determined gaze trained straight ahead. Her torn, blood-stained shirt billowed in the wind behind her, her braid dancing in her wake. The rhythm of constant questions he'd come to expect from her on the road didn't come, nor did she track his every movement as he'd caught her doing before. Instead, she seemed closed off, distant.

He didn't like it.

But perhaps she needed the space to process everything.

And so they rode in silence.



It was six days' hard ride to Harenth and each one passed in a blur. By day they covered as much ground as they could, and during the evenings and early mornings, Wilder trained Thea. She hid her exhaustion beneath the ironclad armour of her determination, and he didn't insult her by trying to insist she take a night off. He showed her everything he knew – how to gut a man with dagger and sword, how to end a man with her bare hands. He taught her how to feint and strike with the utmost precision. He taught her

how to care for a Naarvian steel blade and how to dry out damp boots. Anything she asked, he answered with the full, unflinching knowledge of a Warsword.

Something had shifted, though. Thea had turned inward. She didn't try to rile him up; she didn't rise to his bait, either. No matter how many times he called her *Princess*, she didn't bite. She simply looked to the horizon, as though she knew there was something out there, waiting for her.

Despite her unnervingly quiet demeanour, one thing Wilder refused to compromise on was her wellbeing. He practically force-fed her second helpings of everything they ate and pressed steaming cups of peppermint tea into her cold hands. He was also sure to check her stitches multiple times throughout the days. There was nothing like the sweat and grime of a long ride to make a wound fester.

Thea accepted his fussing in silence, which only served to worry him further. And on the final leg of their journey, Wilder could stand it no longer.

'Thea...' he started, reaching across for her reins and bringing her horse to a halt in the middle of a field.

She looked almost startled to find him there.

'What's going on?' he asked gently. 'You've been... Not yourself since Delmira.'

He sensed her walls coming up instantly.

'It's nothing,' she told him.

'I can't train you if I don't know what's going on up here,' he said, tapping his temple.

Thea took a breath and looked away. 'It's not my head that's the problem.'

But before he could answer, she tugged her reins from his grasp and rode on.



Wilder hated the sinking feeling in his chest, the feeling that told him Thea was drifting away, that he was losing her. She rode as though she were running from something, from him, and it cut deeper than he cared to admit.

It was Thea who set the brutal pace across the last stretch of land, and it was Thea who refused to stop to rest. ‘Monsters wait for no one,’ she claimed.

When at long last, the palace, the Heart of Harenth, glimmered in the distance, Wilder didn’t know what he had been expecting. But there were no shadow wraiths circling the spires, no clouds of darkness looming over the kingdom...

One glance at Thea told him she was scrutinising the same thing. Her gaze flicked to his, sensing his attention. She simply raised a brow as if to say, *Well?*

And so they rode into Harenth.

The capital city of Hailford sat atop a great hill, overlooking its sprawling region. There was no doubt that Artos’ kingdom was the most prosperous of the remaining three. As they entered through the grand gates, the guards all acknowledged Wilder with reverence, pressing three fingers to their shoulders in respect. He nodded in thanks and continued past the elaborate water fountain that boasted a sculpted mountain drake atop a jagged peak. Several commoners surrounded it, tossing in coins for luck, offerings to the water goddess Lamaka and her daughters, Dresmis and Thera. He’d seen it many times before: the public prayers of those desperate for kind seas and gentle rains.

Again, he glanced at Thea, wondering if she knew that she could master such things. But Thea only had eyes for the palace atop the hill, her hand resting on the pommel of her sword as they started the ascent to the king’s residence.

Warsword and apprentice leapt from their horses when they reached the gates, handing them off to the waiting stable hands. Thea made to surge for the grand stairs to the palace, but Wilder grabbed her good arm and dragged her into an alcove just off the guardhouse. He couldn’t stand it another second, and he sure as fuck couldn’t fight with all this worry tugging at his chest.

‘What are you playing at?’ Thea hissed. ‘We need to get to the king —’

‘You need to tell me what’s going on with you,’ he demanded. ‘Right now.’

‘I told you —’

‘Tell me “nothing” again and I’ll —’

‘You’ll *what*, Hawthorne?’ she challenged, eyes bright with anger.

‘I need to know,’ he said slowly, more softly this time. ‘I can’t allow you to throw yourself into harm’s way if your head’s not right. It’s a sure way to get —’

‘Killed?’ She laughed darkly.

Wilder’s throat grew tight and he struggled to swallow. ‘Thea,’ he pleaded. ‘*Talk to me*. Don’t hold back, not with me...’

He felt unhinged, untethered from the fearless warrior he’d carved himself into, so far from the Hand of Death he hardly knew himself. Wilder Hawthorne had never begged for anything in his life, but for her... For her he would beg. He needed her not to disappear into herself. He needed... *her*.

With her back to the wall, Thea was tense before him, so tense her body quaked. But something in her challenging stare softened as he held her gaze.

Slowly, Wilder reached for her, gently tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

He heard her breathing hitch, her chest rising sharply at his touch, her pupils dilating.

‘You and I...’ he breathed, his gaze dipping to the soft curve of her lips as his hand traced the sharp line of her jaw. ‘You and I are a team now. What hurts you, hurts me. And we’ll take it on together. Do you understand?’

‘Wilder...’ Her voice broke as her hand came up to cup his.

‘Tell me you understand, Thea,’ he urged her, gripping her chin gently and tilting her face to his. Apprentice, friend, lover... The titles didn’t matter. Only the tether between them did, drawing them back to one another, over and over again.

‘I...’ She drew a trembling breath. ‘I understand,’ she whispered, clutching a fistful of the front of his shirt, pulling him to her.

Wilder’s whole body caved as he brushed his lips against hers, a surge of need crashing through his entire being. Gods, this woman... She was intoxicating. Even as he breathed her in, it wasn’t enough. Whatever darkness loomed ahead mattered not in this moment, and when it came for them, he knew Thea would light up the sky with her storms.

He was so fixated on her, on the taste of her, on the relief he felt at the warmth of her body and every part of them touching, that he didn’t hear the

scrape of boots on stone; didn't notice the dart whistling through the air until it pierced the soft skin of his neck.

He jolted back, just as another dart hit him.

With a hand already on his sword, he heard Thea slump to the ground, her own weapon clattering across the cobbles.

His Naarvian steel sang as he unsheathed it, but a wave of nausea rolled through him and his vision blurred.

Wilder staggered one step, then two.

He crashed against the wall and slid down it, his extremities numb.

Thea's unconscious body was the last thing he saw before all went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THEA



Thea's mouth tasted like sawdust and an incessant ache throbbed in her temples. When she managed to peel her eyes open, still groggy and disoriented, she started.

For she found herself bound tightly to a metal chair, the cords of rope digging into her flesh and pulling at the stitches in her left arm.

What the fuck had happened? One moment she had been wrapped up in the taste of Wilder, the next she'd been falling... They'd been attacked near the palace's fucking guardhouse, of all places. How was that possible?

Trying to swallow with a dry throat was difficult, so instead, Thea spat out the bitter taste on her tongue. She recalled the sharp sting of the dart as it had pierced her arm, coated in some sort of drug, no doubt. She assessed herself, the sawdust taste, the tingling sensation in her limbs, the headache, wracking her brain for the list of poisons she'd come to know as an alchemist. But without seeing the plant or the extract, without so much as an aroma to go by, it could very well have been anything. Were she describing it to Wren, she knew her sister would have asked her if it was just a hangover.

Thea shook the thoughts of Wren from her mind. She needed to bring herself out of the haze of whatever was in her system. She needed to focus. Looking around, she gathered she was in some sort of storehouse. Huge wooden crates were stacked all around the space, which was about as big as the Great Hall back at Thezmarr. The windows were all boarded up, with only thin streams of light filtering through the cracks, enough to see the dust motes floating through the air and the loose chains hanging from the rafters.

A groan sounded beside her.

Thea craned her neck to see Wilder restrained by thick chains from ankle to chest, two darts still protruding from his neck. He wasn't fully conscious yet, and from what she could see of his face, it was bloodied. She wondered how long he'd managed to stay upright, swinging his fists, after they'd got to him with the darts, or if they'd beaten him while he was unconscious. The thought made her blood boil, power waking from its slumber in her veins. But she couldn't use it, not here. If someone saw her magic and reported it to anyone... Things would get a lot worse for her. She'd have to get out of this predicament the old-fashioned way.

As she started to wriggle, testing her binds for any slack, a laugh sounded.

'You're not going anywhere, girl,' a gravelly voice said. A middle-aged man dressed in a nondescript cloak and tunic came forward, folding his arms over his chest.

'What do you want?' Thea hissed, still pushing against the ropes. They'd taken her sword, her damn dagger too... Of course they had.

'Ah, too many things to count these days,' he replied.

Thea's eyes narrowed as she spotted several other men lurking in the shadows behind him. 'Friends of yours?'

The man waved his companions forward. 'Acquaintances,' he corrected. 'All united by the same goal.'

'Fascinating.' Thea wiggled her toes in her boots. At least they hadn't taken those... 'And pray tell, what's that?'

The leader came forward and kicked Wilder's chair, causing his chains to rattle and Wilder to stir.

'There's a price on the Warsword's head. Yours too.' He offered her a feral grin.

'I didn't realise there'd be someone stupid enough to enact a kill order on a Warsword,' Thea said thoughtfully. 'Though I suppose if there are people stupid enough to give the order, someone will inevitably try.'

The man scoffed. 'He wasn't so hard to catch. Only had to wait until he was about to get his dick wet, then he was just like any other man.'

The bastard reminded her of Seb Barlowe, and what he might become in twenty or thirty years' time. Still the same old bully, but given enough power and influence, he'd become a bigger problem, like the man before her.

Thea studied him and the men leering in the background. There was nothing distinguishable about them – no sigils on their clothes, no distinct accent, no tattoos or fancy weaponry. Who were they? Were they an organised unit? Or simply mercenaries for hire? If so, who had hired them? Thea counted seven in sight, but she suspected there were more in the wings of the storehouse. It wouldn't have been easy to move both her and Wilder unconscious and unseen from the palace grounds.

‘See something you like here, girl?’ the man sneered.

Thea wrinkled her nose in disgust. He definitely reminded her of Seb – as if she needed another reason to hate the spineless prick.

‘Can't say that I do,’ she replied, rolling her ankle subtly, seeking the brush of metal against her skin.

‘You're mouthy for a girl in your position.’

‘And what position is that?’ She loosened her foot in her boot.

‘All tied up and nowhere to go, around a dozen men who haven't seen a pair of decent tits in months.’

A dozen. Interesting. Thea's boot gave a little more. ‘Thought I had a price on my head?’

‘I'm sure we can have some fun with you first.’

Chains rattled. ‘Lay a hand on her, and you'll die a slow, painful death.’ Wilder's deep voice rumbled through the space, full of violence.

‘You're pretty confident for a man in chains, Warsword,’ their captor said. ‘But I don't think we need to worry about the likes of you just now.’

To Thea's surprise, Wilder laughed. ‘I didn't say it was me you had to worry about.’

And that was all the diversion she needed.

She slipped her foot from her boot and kicked it upward, sending her throwing stars flying. They span, a blur of silver.

The men stared. Time seemed to slow while they rotated through the air.

Thea smiled. Catching two stars in her bound hands, she sliced through the ropes in one effortless motion.

In an instant she was on her feet, the stars already flying, spearing through her captor's hand and pinning him to the crate behind him, a wail echoing through the space. Thea kept moving, as quick as a shadow, more of her stars hurtling through the air and finding their marks, shouts of pain sounding all around.

They didn't see her coming.

She was that good, that fast: a deadly whisper in the night.

From a moaning heap of a man nearby, she swiped a sword and a dagger, twirling them deftly. 'Who wants the price on my head?' she taunted. 'Come and get it.'

Three men rushed her, and Thea grinned.

She brought the first opponent down with slices to the backs of his knees and a violent slash across the throat.

He choked on his own blood.

The second man balked at the brutal death of his comrade, presenting Thea with an opening she couldn't resist. Twirling on her toes, she parried, dodging his poorly placed strike and shoving her sword up in between his ribs, enjoying the shock in his eyes. She wrenched the blade away, spraying red everywhere before she cleaved his head from his body.

The third man raised his hands in surrender. Thea considered him with a tilt of her head, before she looped her blade around in a powerful, two-handed cut to his neck.

There was no room for mercy here.

She moved with the grace of a dancer and the speed of a predator, her blade almost too fast to see as she lunged and feinted, slashing through each man as though they were sacks of grain. Her magic hummed within, crackled at her fingertips, but she kept it leashed. Instead, she used the dark corners and shadows of the warehouse to her advantage, taking her opponents unawares and basking in the skills she'd learnt as a dancing alchemist and as a shieldbearer of Thezmarr.

Men were screaming.

And it was a song whose notes she revelled in.

Thea left a trail of blood and bodies in her wake as she made her way around the warehouse, the mercenaries still coming for her. Whether it was pride or desperation that drove them, she didn't care. She simply took them down, one by one, two by two, barely breaking a sweat, barely making a sound.

Not a single one was a match for her, and she relished that new kind of power at her fingertips: the power of violence, not magic.

'Please!' someone called from a dark corner. 'Let us live!'

But she lost herself to the call of death, swinging her blade as an extension of herself. Long gone were the leering expressions and arrogant smirks. In their place was pure, unadulterated terror.

They feared her.

And so they should. She was a weapon of her own making, and she would see them crying out for their mothers before the end —

‘Stop!’ someone shouted.

Thea whirled around to see the leader of the mercenaries behind Wilder, pressing Malik’s dagger of Naarvian steel to his cheek.

Wilder was exactly where he’d been the entire time, bound in chains on his chair.

‘I said stop, girl. Or I’ll slice this bastard’s face off.’

Wilder didn’t move an inch. His face was calm, impassive. Until he winked at her.

The man didn’t even register the movement from her, a blur at her hand, before the dagger she held left her fingertips and carved through the air.

And embedded itself in the soft point between the man’s neck and shoulder.

He screamed. The Naarvian steel he’d been clutching clattered to the ground and he staggered back from Wilder, flailing his arms but not daring to pull the dagger from his flesh.

Thea strode towards Wilder. ‘You didn’t want to lend a hand?’ she asked.

‘You had it under control,’ the Warsword replied with a hint of a smile. Then he braced his body against the chains and they broke apart across his broad chest, no match for his Furies-given strength.

‘You couldn’t have done that sooner?’

The chains dropped from Wilder’s powerful body and he grinned openly at her. ‘Told you, you had it under control.’

Thea warred between pride and annoyance for a moment, but Wilder was already stalking towards the whimpering mercenary leader. The Warsword grabbed him by the front of his shirt with one hand and lifted him up into the air, his legs kicking beneath him.

‘If I pull this out,’ he growled, nudging the dagger still embedded in the man’s neck, ‘you’ll bleed to death in seconds. You understand?’

The man made a pitiful noise.

Wilder looked revolted. ‘Good. Tell us who you’re working for.’

‘I —’

‘Let’s not pretend that you’ll withstand *any* sort of pain out of loyalty. Who are you working for?’

Thea approached, watching the leader with cold disinterest. This man had attacked her and Wilder, had threatened them with death and worse... She would gladly watch him suffer, she decided. What she couldn't make up her mind about was if she wanted to be the one inflicting the damage.

'Please, don't kill me.' The man's legs were still flailing beneath him as Wilder held him up effortlessly. To think that they had imagined the Warsword to be contained by mere chains... Thea almost laughed.

'Tell us what we want to know, then,' she said, taking a step closer, watching as his face turned red.

'Don't know who hired us,' he rasped. 'Someone put out an anonymous bounty. Said the Hand of Death had been sticking his nose in where it don't belong.'

'What was your method of contact?' Wilder demanded.

'Saw a clipping in a tavern window. Went for a meet there. Please —'

'Who did you meet?'

'Man kept his face covered. Big man.'

Thea folded her arms over her chest. 'And what of the rest of your gang? Did they gather at your orders or someone else's?'

'Mine. I saw the flyer. I arranged it all. They were just in it for their cut. Liked the idea of taking a Warsword down.'

Wilder gave a dark laugh. 'Is that so?'

The man made a desperate gurgling sound. 'I don't know no more, I swear it.'

'Are you sure?' Wilder asked it in an unsettling way, like he was asking a child if they'd had enough dinner.

Relief flooded the man's bulging eyes. 'I swear. That's all I know.'

Wilder nodded with understanding as he slowly lowered the mercenary to the ground. 'You remember how I said you'd bleed to death if I removed this?' he said, almost kindly.

The man nodded, confused.

Wilder's hand went to the grip of the blade, and in one clean motion, he pulled it free.

Blood spurted like a fountain, hitting Wilder square in the chest, but from the look on his face, he hardly noticed as he dropped the mercenary carelessly.

The man was dead in seconds.

Thea scanned Wilder critically. 'Are you hurt?'

‘Nothing more than a few scratches,’ he said, surveying the damage around them. ‘You?’

Thea shook her head as he scanned her body in turn, searching for any sign of harm. ‘Tore my stitches. But that’s it.’

Wilder handed her Malik’s dagger. ‘I believe this is yours.’

Blood shone in the engraved words. *Glory in death, immortality in legend.*

She took it and crouched to wipe it on the dead mercenary’s tunic before sheathing it at her belt. For a moment, she stared at the corpse, regretting that she hadn’t left others alive to interrogate. Someone wanted her and Wilder dead.

‘Does it bother you?’ Wilder asked, his voice low as he watched her. ‘How I killed him?’

Thea frowned. ‘I killed eleven more than you.’

‘I killed in cold blood and I enjoyed it,’ Wilder said, his gaze fiery.

Thea just stared at him, seeing the darkness unfurl behind his eyes as he wrestled with whatever toiled inside him.

‘Should I tell you that I didn’t enjoy ending him?’ he asked her. ‘Because I won’t do that. He deserved to die, and I will always relish the swing or pull of a blade when it delivers what a man is owed.’

Thea went to the corner of the storehouse and retrieved Wilder’s Naarvian blades. She waited for him at the doors. When he reached her, she held them out to him. ‘As will I,’ she told him.

Wilder stared at her for a moment, accepting his weapons in a daze, as though he’d never seen her before.

Maybe they’d knocked him on the head a few too many times. Thea elbowed him. ‘Come on. Let’s find the king and find out what the fuck his summons was about.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WILDER



Wilder and Thea stood waiting before the thrones on the dais in their blood-stained, travel-worn clothes.

‘Furies save us, what happened?’ King Artos exclaimed as he entered the throne room, taking in their ragged appearances. But his green eyes lit up when they fell on Thea. Wilder had heard that the King of Harenth had taken a special interest in his apprentice ever since the knife-throwing incident, when Thea had made her case to become a shieldbearer.

Wilder didn’t know how he felt about that.

He cleared his throat. ‘We were attacked upon entering the palace grounds, Your Majesty.’ He didn’t quite manage to keep the terse note from his tone.

‘On my grounds?’ Artos baulked. ‘In *my* kingdom?’

‘Yes, Your Grace.’ Wilder inhaled through his nose, trying to rein in his impatience. ‘But we can discuss that later. We have answered your summons to deal with the threat against the kingdom.’

‘But what of the perpetrators?’ the king demanded.

‘Twelve of them dealt with, Your Majesty.’ He gestured to Thea. ‘My apprentice here saw to that.’

Artos’ demeanour changed completely, to one of awe. ‘Is this true, Althea? You defeated *twelve* attackers?’

‘I had help, Your Majesty,’ Thea replied, cheeks tipping pink with pleasure. But she seemed to remember herself. ‘Your Grace, what of the threat to the kingdom? How can we help?’

This only seemed to make Artos happier. ‘We shall talk more of this incident after. For now, follow me.’ He didn’t wait; he was on his feet and

moving.

Whatever Wilder had been expecting, it hadn't been this – following King Artos and his guard through the lower levels of the palace, to the dungeons. Wilder himself had been down here several times to deal with traitors to the midrealms before they were transported to the Scarlet Tower south of Naarva, but... He'd never seen the cells so full before.

Thea, who he imagined had never stepped foot inside a dungeon, was doing a decent job of masking her emotions.

It wasn't a pleasant place. To be locked in the royal dungeons, a serious crime needed to be committed, and when it came to serious crimes, King Artos was known for serious punishments.

Torches lined the stone walls, illuminating everything from the guard room and the singular cells to the torture chamber, which was thankfully empty. The deeper they moved into the dungeon, the worse the smell became. King Artos gracefully took a kerchief from his breast pocket and placed it over his nose and mouth.

If they were going this far down into the cursed place, whatever they were about to see... Wilder wished he could push Thea behind him, but knew she'd stand for none of that.

'We found them on the outskirts of the city,' King Artos said, stopping before the last cell in the row.

It took every ounce of Wilder's discipline not to flinch at the sight before him.

A pair of half-wraiths lay limp on the stone floor behind the iron bars. Both bore the evidence of torture. Burns to their bodies and wings, the scent of singed flesh acrid in the air, blood trickling from open wounds.

One was more wraith than not, most of his human skin turned that same leathery texture as the many shadow wraiths Wilder had battled in his time. His eyes were like black orbs; talons protruded from his broken fingers. It wouldn't be long until he was a full wraith with no memory of his human life, no proof he'd ever had one. Wilder had seen the change himself, had seen men and women lost to the darkness. But the other figure in the cell... A young human man, broken wings protruding from his back, small claws tipping his fingers... He wasn't lost. Not yet.

'Have you ever seen this before?' King Artos turned to him, motioning to the poor creatures.

'Once or twice,' Wilder managed, still staring at the half-wraiths.

‘Why wasn’t I made aware this could happen?’ the king demanded. ‘And how is it that they’ve managed to infiltrate my kingdom?’

Wilder felt Thea’s eyes on him, but he kept his gaze on the king and chose his next words carefully. ‘I have only seen a few cases like this myself; the other Warswords not at all. To our knowledge they are an anomaly that occurs rarely and never this close to the remaining kingdoms of the midrealms. The reapers usually turn their victims fully. What did your questioning reveal?’

The king looked as though he were about to deny such treatment, but must have realised how pointless that was given the evidence before them. ‘That they are the servants of someone they call the Shadow Prince...’

Wilder’s stomach bottomed out. ‘I see.’

One of the king’s inquisitors stepped forward. His appearance – no, his *jewellery* – distracted Wilder for a moment. He had never seen a man in this line of work sporting a gemstone nasal piercing, or wearing a dozen bronze bangles on each wrist. ‘Have you heard of such a person, Warsword?’

Wilder tore his gaze away from the glittering pieces. ‘I imagine it refers to one of the reapers. Did they say anything else? Did they both talk?’

‘Only that one.’ The inquisitor pointed to the more human of the two, his bangles jangling with the movement. ‘And he only raved about this Shadow Prince and the Daughter of Darkness. She is on the hunt, apparently.’

‘Hunting for what?’ Wilder pressed.

But the inquisitor shrugged. ‘He passed out before I got it out of him. That’ll be our next little session.’ He kicked the bar of the cell menacingly and the poor creature within cowered.

Wilder drew himself up to his full height. ‘I’ll take it from here.’

‘We should kill them,’ Thea murmured beside him, not taking her eyes off the wraiths. ‘What if they can spread this curse like the reapers can?’

Wilder didn’t respond. Instead, he turned to the king. ‘Your Majesty, I think a more expert hand might be needed in this case. Permission to interrogate the prisoners myself?’

King Artos glanced from the monsters back to Wilder and nodded. ‘Yes. A more practised hand might yield better results. The chamber is at your disposal.’

‘You have my thanks, Your Grace, but I do not need its contraptions.’ Wilder laced his next words with malice. ‘I think these monsters will find

that I'm more than enough to loosen their tongues.'

'Very well.' King Artos turned to his entourage. 'Clear this level. Warsword Hawthorne has monsters to break.'

Wilder bowed his head. 'Your Majesty.'

The king nodded. 'I look forward to hearing the results. Give the keys to the Warsword,' he ordered the bejewelled inquisitor, who did as he bid.

Within moments, the lower level of the dungeon was empty, save for Wilder, Thea and the two half-wraiths. But Wilder turned to Thea, his voice firm and unflinching, the voice of a mentor and master, not that of a friend, or anything else. 'You can't be here for this.'

'I'm not going anywhere. If I'm going to be a Warsword, I need to be able to stomach —'

'Have I not been true to my vow?' he asked. 'Have I not taught you what I know? Have I not answered your questions? Have I not allowed you to face perilous dangers alone?'

'Yes, but —'

'Then leave, Thea. I cannot be who I need to be for this with you here.'

'Wilder —'

'I'm not asking,' he said.

Thea stared at him, and he could see that storm brewing once more behind her eyes. He expected her to keep arguing, to cling to her anger as she had many times before, but she didn't. Instead, she eyed the creatures suspiciously before meeting his stare a final time.

'Be safe,' she said before she left.

Wilder palmed his dagger and fitted the key to the lock. 'Alright,' he said slowly. 'Tell me what you know of this Shadow Prince.'



When he was done with his interrogation, Wilder found Thea waiting for him at the entrance to the dungeon, still in her filthy clothes. Either King Artos' hospitality was much exaggerated or Thea had refused to leave. Wilder was willing to wager on the latter. He noted that the cut on her left arm was still oozing blood where the stitches had torn, but one look at Thea's face told him she hadn't noticed.

'What did they say?' she asked, pushing off the wall.

Wilder raked his hair off his face and grimaced at how filthy he felt, not just from the road and the storehouse, but from what he had witnessed in that cell. 'That the southern isle of Naarva is completely covered in impenetrable darkness. Where the kingdom was once a jungle swarming with wraiths, no one can even enter now. Courtesy of a Shadow Prince who rules there.'

'And he is in league with the Daughter of Darkness?'

'So it would seem.'

Thea studied him critically. 'Why do I get the feeling you're not telling me everything?'

Because I'm not and you're too smart for me, Wilder thought, but instead he sighed. 'I tell you what I can,' he told her. 'But you are still an apprentice and I am still a Warsword.'

'I'm also a Guardian of the midrealms. I, too, am tasked with defending it from evil,' Thea argued. 'What do I not understand about these half-wraiths, Wilder? What is coming for us that I am blind to?'

Wilder drew an exhausted breath, glancing around at the guards, who tried to hide their interest. 'Not here.'

Thea looked like she meant to continue arguing, but his weariness must have shown, for she sighed. 'Fine. The king has invited us to dine with him this evening. There's to be an intimate gathering of nobility.'

Wilder didn't hide his cringe. Gods, the last thing he felt like doing was entertaining the gaping stares and moronic questions of Harenth's elite.

'Warsword or not, I think it would be a mistake not to go,' Thea ventured, seeming to read his mind.

'I know,' he said. 'We'll need to wash up and —'

'King Artos offered us rooms,' Thea said hopefully.

'Did he now?'

Wilder never stayed within any royal household if he could help it. Though it technically wasn't supposed to curry favour, he had never shrugged off the feeling that it set certain expectations with some of the kings and queens. Talemir had always warned him of such things; a night's stay might come back to haunt one of their kind further down the road in the form of an innocent favour that wasn't all that innocent. But Wilder found that he couldn't deny Thea a night of luxury, not after everything. It had been a tough road since leaving Delmira, even by his standards.

‘Lead the way, then, Princess.’ He caught the flicker of annoyance in her eyes, but she tugged on his sleeve. Wilder followed, keen to put as much distance between himself and the dungeons as possible.

When they reached the main part of the palace foyer once more, a servant was waiting for them, their packs at his feet. Wilder was glad for that. It meant that their horses had been looked after, despite what had occurred in the alcove by the guardhouse. The chain of events whirled in his mind, as did the list of problems that now chased him, but he swiped his pack from the marble floor and motioned for the servant to guide them to their rooms —

Room.

Singular.

The servant opened the doors to a breathtaking suite. Its design was clear.

There was only one bed.

Either Artos was passionate about Thezmarr’s tradition of masters and apprentices bunking together, or he suspected there was something more between Wilder and Thea. Wilder didn’t like that notion at all.

Thea had killed the mercenaries from the storehouse and Wilder had disposed of their leader, but had there been more of them? Had others seen them in the alcove moments before they’d been drugged and captured? It was possible, and it was just as possible that someone had reported back to Artos...

Thea hadn’t seemed to notice or question these things. Instead, she dropped her pack in the centre of the room and spun around, wide-eyed, drinking in the silks draped from the four-poster bed, the unnecessarily large hearth and the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the whole of Harenth, the city glimmering below.

She let out a low whistle. ‘Have you ever seen anything like it?’

Wilder had to choke back a laugh at the irony. Had she grown up in her own kingdom, she would have been used to such riches and wealth. The guest quarters of a palace might have meant nothing to her, when the palace itself was hers...

The servant cleared his throat from the door. ‘Hot water has been drawn for the bathing chambers, Warsword Hawthorne. A range of clothing has been selected by our top-tier clothier; you’ll find several selections for you both in the wardrobes.’ The servant gestured towards the rich mahogany

armoires on the far side of the room. 'There is a bell just here. Do not hesitate to ring should you require anything else. You are guests of the king. Your comfort is paramount. His Majesty King Artos requests your presence for the evening meal in an hour's time. Shall I have someone come to escort you?'

'We can find our way,' Wilder said gruffly, watching Thea spot the balcony beyond the patio doors and run to it with a shout of glee.

The servant pressed three fingers to his left shoulder and bowed his head before he left, closing the doors with a click behind him.

Outside, Thea was leaning against the parapet, still marvelling at the sprawling city below. Wilder wanted to go to her, to finish what they'd started in the alcove, but he couldn't bring himself to. Shame washed over him. Gods, he was hiding so much from her, after they'd sworn to be honest with one another.

The lost princess of Delmira had no idea that the Daughter of Darkness, the Warswords of Thezmarr and the rulers of the midrealms hunted her and her sister. She had no idea just how fragile everything was right now, and it was his fault. But what good would come of telling her? She was already so volatile, with the power that raged inside her and the piece of jade around her neck that ruled her fate.

No, he couldn't add another thing to that list of burdens.

And so he made for the bathing chamber, hoping to scrub the filth and the guilt from his skin.

The bathing room was nearly the same size as the sleeping quarters. Pristine marble tiles lined the entire space. An elaborate claw-footed tub sat in the centre, with a stupidly wide vanity and mirrors framed with gold filigree set against one of the walls. Hot water steamed in pails by the tub, and a trolley stacked with a range of toiletries had been placed nearby. The scent of lavender filled the air; Wilder spotted a small bowl of oil burning over a candle in the far corner. Plush towels and robes hung from gold hooks on one side of the room, a cart stocked with premium liquor beneath. Wilder even spotted his favourite wine from Marise's cellar, his mouth watering at the sight.

No expense had been spared.

And Wilder wondered who the king was trying to impress more: him or Thea.

Slowly, he started peeling off his travel-worn and blood-stained clothes, grimacing at the stiffness in his shoulders. Those fucking mercenaries had certainly got a few blows in while he was unconscious, the cowards.

‘Wilder?’ Thea’s voice sounded at the door.

‘What is it?’ he replied.

The door opened a crack and she peered in, her gaze instantly heating as it fell upon his bare torso.

‘I... Uh... Is there a medical kit in there?’

Without a word, Wilder opened the door fully and pulled her inside, sitting her on the edge of the great tub and gently rolling up her sleeve, taking her injured arm to examine it.

It was in a state. Her stitches had been completely torn, and the edges of the wound were ragged, bloody and covered in grime.

‘You should have had this tended to right away.’

‘I was a little busy,’ Thea huffed.

Wilder ignored this and fetched a fresh pail of warm water and a clean cloth. He knelt at her side, ignoring how Thea’s pupils dilated at the sight, and started to clean the wound. He was as gentle as possible, dragging the warm rag across her skin, rinsing the cloth and doing the same again until the layer of dirt was gone.

Thea seemed to be holding her breath. ‘I thought I was meant to do this myself?’ she said.

Wilder rummaged for a needle and thread in one of the drawers, finding a small medical pack and returning to Thea’s side. ‘Not this time,’ he replied, threading the needle. ‘It’ll be worse this time...’

Thea clenched her jaw, but gave him a nod.

Wilder made quick work of the wound, knowing how tender it would already be, knowing the sharp sting and pull of the needle was so much worse when stitches had already been torn.

Thea didn’t make a sound. She simply sat on the edge of the tub, accepting his ministrations with gritted teeth. He hated hurting her, hated that there was little he could do to numb the pain.

When he at last tied off the end of the thread, she glanced down at the line of sutures. ‘Let’s hope the second time’s the charm...’ she murmured.

Wilder didn’t know if he was overanalysing, but her words seemed loaded with a different meaning. He cleared his throat. ‘You should bathe, then we can bandage it up properly.’

Not waiting for her response, he started to pour pails of hot water into the tub, checking the temperature as the water level increased.

‘What about you?’ Thea asked, watching him tentatively.

‘There’s enough water for two baths.’

‘But it will get cold.’

Wilder shrugged. ‘Still warmer than a river. I’ll be fine.’

Thea opened her mouth to argue, but Wilder simply raised a brow. She sighed. ‘Thank you.’

He made to leave, to give her privacy —

‘Wilder?’ Thea said, still seated on the edge of the tub. ‘I think I might need your help...’ She gestured to her clothes. ‘It’s nothing you haven’t seen before...’

Wilder’s heart stuttered. Of all the ways he’d imagined undressing Althea Zoltaire again, this hadn’t been at the top of the list. But she needed him.

‘Alright.’

He went to her and started with her sleeve, unrolling it carefully back over her wound, so it was loose once more down her arm. He removed her Guardian totem and placed it carefully to the side. Then he unbuttoned her shirt, trying to keep his hands and breathing steady, wondering if she could hear the hammering in his chest.

Gently, he pushed the fabric from her shoulders and it fell to the tiled floor. Her body was as filthy as his. Blood, a combination of hers and the mercenaries’, was like rust on her skin, while a thick layer of dust from the road covered her as well.

He glanced at her, seeking permission for the next item of clothing, but Thea’s eyes were closed, her expression a mixture of pain and exhaustion as she tilted her head to the ceiling.

Wilder undid her pants, pulling her to her feet and resting her hands on his shoulders as he slid the material down her legs. She stepped out of them and stood before him in her undergarments.

‘I’ve got it from here,’ she whispered.

Again, he made to leave, and again, she stopped him.

‘You may as well tend to your wounds while I wash,’ she told him, gesturing to the vanity and the medical kit he’d left on the basin.

He made a noise of agreement at the back of his throat, mainly because he wanted to be near in case she needed him again.

Wilder turned to the vanity and evaluated his injuries, trying to ignore the splash of water from behind him, trying not to picture Thea naked. Instead, he cleaned several gashes he hadn't realised marred his torso, none of them deep enough to need stitches. He used another cloth to wipe the streaks of dried blood from his face, and poured himself a drink at the cart, each action a deliberate distraction from the woman bathing mere feet away.

But when the splashing stilled and no other sound came from the tub, Wilder didn't hesitate to turn. He found Thea lying there, eyes closed, the water clouded around her. Her head rested against the rim, her hair half covered in suds.

'Are you alright?' he asked softly, not wanting to startle her.

'I just needed to rest a moment,' she replied, not opening her eyes.

Wilder's gaze travelled from the soap in her hair to her injured arm elevated on the edge of the tub. Of course it hurt to wash her hair.

'Let me,' he said.

Wilder knelt at the head of the tub and threaded his fingers through her hair, massaging the soap into her scalp.

Thea moaned, the sound sending a bolt of longing straight to his cock.

But he ignored his desire. Instead, he went about washing Thea's hair, lathering the soap through the ends, trying to ease the tension from her neck with circular strokes of his fingers.

Carefully, he eased her down into the tub, holding her by her nape as he rinsed the suds from her hair, keeping her head tilted back, mindful not to let any trickle into her eyes. He kept his own gaze averted from her body, which he knew was floating above the water line now.

At last, he helped her sit up and she blinked at him, dazed.

Emotion caught in Wilder's throat. He fetched her a towel from one of the gold hooks and held it out to her, turning his head away.

He heard the water pour from her body as she stood and accepted the towel.

'You can look now,' she said quietly.

Wilder wasn't sure he was ready to, but he met her gaze, noting the slight flush to her cheeks and the droplets of water on her bare shoulders, the towel tucked under her arms and across her chest.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I know that wasn't part of your official duties as mentor.'

Wilder forced a casual shrug and helped her step out of the tub, leading her to the vanity. 'Make sure your wound is dry, then you can put some of that salve on it before we bandage it.'

He made the mistake of looking at her in the mirror. She stood in front of his towering frame, so small compared to him, so vulnerable in just a towel, her hair wet, her mouth parted as she, too, caught their reflection.

They stared at each other. She was clean and fresh; he was as filthy as all manner of sins. But both their gazes heated as they looked upon one another.

'Wilder...' Thea murmured, a curse and a plea.

She let her towel fall.

Wilder's mouth nearly fell open at the sight of her, naked but for her fate stone. Every dip, every curve of her perfect body called out to him, and his cock strained against his pants.

'Thea...' he breathed, leaning in and brushing his lips against the hollow of her neck, breathing in the new lavender soap scent. 'We said we wouldn't...'

He couldn't take his eyes off her in the mirror, how her breasts rose and fell with each breath, how hard her nipples looked, how her thighs were slightly parted, and how her backside pressed against him.

'There's no escaping this,' she said, reaching for his hands. 'No matter what we say. And I'm done denying it. I want you, Wilder.'

She put his hands on her, cupping her breasts.

Wilder groaned as his rough palms closed over her soft skin, the sensation sending a current racing through him, gathering at his balls, making his cock throb.

Thea tilted her head back, resting against his chest as he let his hands explore her. He circled her breasts with the lightest touch, he pinched her nipples until she moaned, and all the while, they watched themselves in the mirror, as though their reflections were untethered from them. They were not the same people; they did not have the same worries. Their reflections were free to do as they wished.

And so Wilder let his fingers drift south, tracing Thea's navel and dipping between her legs. She arched her back, pressing her backside against his rock-hard erection, creating enough friction between them that he wondered for a moment if he might just come in his pants like a teenager.

But this wasn't about him.

He let his fingers trail down her centre, finding her wet and wanting.

She whimpered as he circled her clit, her legs shaking against his. He hooked a hand under her thigh and lifted her leg, placing her foot on the vanity so she was spread bare before him, so he could see her, all of her.

His pulse seemed to slow. Gods, he'd never seen a more perfect sight.

'Wilder...' she moaned.

His name on her lips was like a drug.

She cried out as he slipped a finger inside her. Furies save him, she was so wet, so tight as she clenched around him.

Thea reached for him, but he held himself away from her grasp.

'Let me give you this,' he murmured against her skin.

She melted beneath him, moving with his finger as he added another, coaxing that pleasure into being for her.

Everything about Althea Zoltaire was intoxicating: the way she felt, the way she rode his fingers and moaned his name as he circled her clit, the heat of her skin against his bare chest.

His whole body was alight with blazing desire, his erection straining almost painfully against his pants, begging to be freed, begging to slide home into her wet heat. He wanted to kiss her, but he also didn't want to miss a moment of witnessing her pleasure, so he kissed her neck instead, watching as she writhed. Gods, he loved how her body responded to him, so flushed with pleasure, his fingers soaked with her arousal.

She arched into his touch as he squeezed her breast and played with her nipple, her eyes closing in ecstasy.

'Look at me,' he commanded softly, his hand closing gently around her throat and lifting her gaze to meet his in the mirror. 'I want you to look at me as you come undone.'

And at those words, she did.

He could almost feel the wave of pleasure rushing through her, his own need answering in response, his cock twitching against her backside.

Thea's body shuddered against his and she cried out loudly, eyes wide, legs quaking.

'Gods...' She twisted against him and captured his mouth with hers, kissing him fiercely through the rest of her climax. He caught her hands before she could grip the hard length of him.

‘We don’t have time for that,’ he told her, unable to stop himself from pulling her close and deepening the kiss for a moment.

Still naked and flushed, Thea panted as he broke away, trying to keep his smile to himself.

‘Get dressed, Princess... There are clean clothes in the armoire.’

She made a noise of disappointment against his chest, but eventually acquiesced, leaving him to bathe.

As the door clicked closed after her, Wilder had to pour a drink to steady himself, to tame his pounding heart.

The truth of his own words hit him.

Princess.

Thea was a Princess of Delmira.

And he was so deeply in love with her it might just consume him.

Knocking back the drink without even tasting it, Wilder made quick work of washing, opting to empty the tub and simply pour the pails over himself as he scrubbed.

But when he entered the main chamber, Wilder stopped in his tracks.

The gown King Artos had provided for Thea was clever, paying homage to the dream she had for herself. Black and silver entwined, it clung to her waist and curves, falling elegantly to the floor, but the bodice... It was embellished with fine lines of steel.

It was more than a beautiful dress.

It looked like armour.

Wilder swallowed the lump in his throat as that intense green gaze met his.

He’d been wrong. Thea wasn’t a princess.

She was a queen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THEA



No one had ever looked at Thea the way Wilder did. The harsh lines of his handsome face softened as his gaze lingered on her dress and the kohl she'd swept across her eyes.

He cleared his throat. 'You look...'

Warmth bloomed in her chest as she watched him struggle for words. She had chosen the gown for a number of reasons; every one of them had been confirmed when she glimpsed herself in the mirror. It wasn't a dress for hiding or denying who she was. It only amplified her fierceness, her determination. She liked the way it made her feel – almost as powerful as when she carried a sword.

The way Wilder looked at her now made her feel more powerful still.

'You look incredible. Beyond beautiful...' he murmured, shaking his head, his spots of colour appearing on his cheeks.

'So do you,' Thea replied, strapping Malik's dagger to the bejewelled belt at her waist.

The Warsword's brow furrowed and he looked down at his tattooed body, covered only by a towel slung low around his hips.

Thea just smiled. 'Hurry up, or we'll be late.' As the words left her mouth, she almost started. It was such a natural thing to say, so familiar. But then, she supposed they had been as intimate as two people could get.

Wilder seemed to track her movements across the room, before he dropped his towel and went to the armoire, completely naked.

Thea's mouth went dry at the sight of his muscular backside and powerful thighs. She glimpsed his erection too, hard and thick, bobbing as he moved.

Gods, he was a vision. A warrior carved by the Furies themselves, every spectacular inch of him. It took every bit of willpower she had to stop herself from pouncing on him. She had meant what she'd said. He was beautiful. And not just the sun-kissed, scar-flecked skin and powerful muscles that shifted with each movement... Not just the sharp line of his jaw and the gleam in those silver eyes... But something deeper than all of that.

She watched him dress in silence, wondering how someone putting clothes on could be just as erotic as taking them off. But he proved just that, slipping each layer on with military efficiency, buttons and ties bowing to his deft fingers, fingers that had just —

Thea shook the thought from her head, her toes already curling in her slippers as she swallowed hard. If she thought of that now, no amount of willpower would save her.

When he was finished, Wilder was dressed in all black as usual, but this time, no armour, no leathers. His pants and tunic were of a fine make, subtly embellished with silver thread at the seams, only serving to bring out the steel in his gaze.

‘We should go,’ he said at last.

It was Thea's turn to fumble with her words as he opened the door for her.



‘Welcome, welcome, honoured guests from Thezmarr,’ King Artos called as they entered the Great Hall. ‘Althea, you look splendid.’ The king beamed at her and motioned for them to join him. He lowered his voice before addressing her again, lingering by her seat. ‘My spies have uncovered more traitors involved in the attempt on your lives.’

Thea didn't hide her surprise. ‘That was fast, Your Majesty.’

‘I consider what happened a personal insult, dear Althea. Those responsible have been sent to the Scarlet Tower.’

A shiver raked down Thea's spine as she recalled her last conversation about the dreaded prison.

‘*What do you know of the Scarlet Tower?*’ she had asked Wilder long ago, after seeing a man choose execution over exile to such a place.

‘Enough,’ he’d said. *‘Enough to know that I, too, would have chosen death.’*

The king continued as though it were a mere inconvenience. ‘My guards have dealt with the scene at the storehouse. I am told they have never seen such carnage – or such artistry.’

Thea faltered at his words.

But the king spoke again, still under his breath. ‘Don’t worry. They have been sworn to secrecy. No one will know.’

A nobleman drew the king away with a question, and Wilder took his place at her side. ‘The whole midrealms will know of your antics before dawn,’ he murmured.

‘What? He just said they swore —’

‘They’ll be fighting to tell anyone who will listen that they bore witness to the damage you wrought upon those bastards. There’s only one thing in all the midrealms that can elicit secrets from the king’s trained soldiers, more powerful than torture...’

Thea’s heart rate spiked. ‘What?’

‘Two tankards of ale at the Laughing Fox,’ Wilder quipped.

Thea would have laughed if her gaze hadn’t landed on the crowd. There were almost as many nobles seated at the long tables as there had been when Harenth had celebrated the end of the king’s mourning period.

The magic Thea felt in the room wasn’t as strong as it had been in the presence of all the rulers, but she could definitely still feel it pulsing around her. King Artos was one of the most powerful empaths in Harenth’s history, and now, without the presence of the other kings and queens, she could distinguish his magic properly: a pleasant warmth dancing about the room, exploring between the numerous bodies.

Places had been reserved for her and Wilder close to the king, and Thea found herself once again sitting beside his daughter, Princess Jasira. Wilder looked uncomfortable next to a particularly pompously dressed man.

Thea leant in to speak to the princess. ‘A pleasure to see you again, Your Highness.’

Princess Jasira turned to her. ‘And you, Althea. Though I do remember asking you to call me Jasi.’

‘Apologies, Jasi.’ Thea bowed her head.

But the princess waved it off. ‘Things have certainly developed for you since we last spoke. Not only are you a Guardian of Thezmarr as you

wished, but apprentice to the Hand of Death, no less...'

As if he'd heard her, Wilder's gaze flicked across the table to the princess, but he said nothing, opting to look elsewhere and give them the pretence of privacy.

'It has been a challenging few months,' Thea admitted. But when her eyes locked with the princess', a shiver raked down her spine, a strange sensation creeping across her skin. Magic? Thea wasn't sure. The last time she'd seen the princess, Jasira had told her that her magic hadn't yet manifested. It was strange to think that in another life, Thea might have grown up knowing the princess as an equal, perhaps even as a friend and ally... She shrugged the thought off and ignored the prickle across her skin. 'And how have you been, Jasi?'

Princess Jasira's attention was on her father, but she immediately turned back to Thea. 'Well enough,' she allowed. 'The life of a princess is rather dull compared to that of a warrior, I'm afraid...'

Thea's stomach nearly bottomed out at the comparison. 'Even with magic?' she heard herself ask.

'That's right,' Jasira said slowly. 'I forgot you were able to sense it the last time you were here. Is that the case now?'

Something lodged in Thea's throat and she coughed, forcing down some water to buy herself time. She had said as much to the princess during her last visit, unaware of what stalked beneath her own skin, unaware of who she was... Well, she knew enough now to lie.

'Oh, no,' she said quickly, forcing a light note into her voice. 'Must have been some strange anomaly last time. Perhaps I imagined it.'

The magic seemed to sense the lie, thickening in the air around her. Across the table, she saw Wilder stiffen, his silver gaze darting to her.

Thea froze. Was it her magic doing that? Or King Artos'? Or had Jasira come into her own power after all? It was only after a long silence that she realised the princess hadn't actually answered her question.

But before she could say anything else, the food was served.

Tray after tray of incredible fare was brought out by dozens of servants, each dish more lavish than the last. Wine was poured, and as Thea raised her own goblet to her lips, she noticed that King Artos now had two cupbearers in his employ.

She and the princess ate in comfortable silence, watching as the debauchery of the nobles unfolded around them. Thea couldn't help but

steal glimpses across the table at Wilder, who was doing his best not to engage in any of the conversations around him. He masked his discomfort well, potentially with the aid of the wine in his hand, but Thea could tell he would rather be anywhere else. She'd come to learn his little tells around others. He felt her attention and caught her eye, giving her abandoned plate a pointed look.

Thea suppressed a smile. Ever since he'd returned to Thezmarr, his insistence on her eating well had driven her to near madness. But there was also something endearing about it, so she made a point of piercing numerous greens with her fork and forcing them down.

While he didn't smile, there was that hint of a dimple tugging at his cheek before he looked away.

The hall was filled with sounds of merriment: nobles chatting, glasses chiming with various toasts and a pair of fiddlers elevated on a nearby dais. Thea did a double take, recognising them from her brief stint at the Laughing Fox tavern with Cal and Kipp. The sight of the musicians sent a pang of regret through her. She missed her friends.

Thea let the melody sweep her away for a moment, the pair of fiddles building in unison to a powerful crescendo.

'Do you enjoy their music?' Princess Jasira asked, nodding to the fiddlers. 'They're quite well known across the realms.'

Thea watched them, realising she'd been swaying to the music. Flushing, she stilled. 'Yes... Their music is beautiful. Do they have a name?'

Jasira shrugged. 'I can't recall... My father has people who manage these things, you see. But I believe they're brothers.'

The men looked alike, to be sure. 'Where do they hail from? Do you know?'

The princess looked distant for a moment. 'Far away from this place.'

Thea wondered if it was a note of yearning she detected in Jasira's voice, but her attention was drawn across the table, to where the king had addressed Wilder.

'Did you glean any further information from our prisoners, Warsword Hawthorne?' King Artos asked, sipping at his wine.

'None that your men hadn't already gathered, sire,' Wilder replied blandly. 'I'm afraid the monsters didn't live through my interrogation.'

Thea's blood went cold. She was suddenly aware of the fact that the hands that had wrung such pleasure from her had wrought such pain on others only hours before.

'Good,' the king said. 'Two fewer creatures of evil in these realms.'

'I share the same sentiment, Your Majesty.'

King Artos raised his glass to the Warsword and drank deeply. When he was done, he dabbed the corner of his mouth with a linen serviette and turned away, carrying on a conversation about the latest social season as though he hadn't just approved of death by torture.

All around them, the nobles were getting drunker. Plates and cutlery were cleared and Thea felt herself drawn back to the melody drifting towards them. It seemed to coax out her magic, Artos' royal magic too. The air was thick with it, and Thea could feel her own power surging at her fingertips.

Beside her, Jasira fidgeted. She wondered if it affected the princess as well.

In between songs, a herald announced that the ballroom was now open, and the throngs of nobles were directed through grand double doors to the far side of the Great Hall.

'Now would be the time to escape, if you're so inclined,' Princess Jasira murmured, gathering her layered skirts in her hands and eyeing another exit.

But the music drifting in from the next room fascinated Thea, and she found herself taking a step towards the doors the herald had indicated. 'I've never been to a ball,' she told the princess. *And I doubt I'll ever get the opportunity again,* she added mentally.

The princess laughed. 'This isn't a ball, but my father would be pleased to hear you're impressed. He puts a lot of effort into these things.' Jasira herself sounded anything but impressed. 'I'll bid you goodnight, then, Thea. Enjoy the dancing.'

And before Thea could reply, the princess slipped away.

In the flurry of movement, Thea had lost sight of Wilder too, so she headed to the ballroom alone, swept up in the crowd of jewels, silk dresses and fine tunics. In the next room, the fiddlers had been joined by other musicians, forming a seven-piece band that graced a stage at the front.

As Thea moved through the nobles, she realised that many of them were staring at her, others giving her a wide berth. At first she met their gazes in

question, but after several men bowed their heads in reverence to her, she realised: they knew who she was. Not a lost heir of Delmira, not a storm wielder, but...

‘Wraith slayer,’ someone murmured.

‘The next Warsword of Thezmarr,’ another whispered.

‘The Shadow of Death...’

Thea nearly scoffed at that, but as she tried to scan the faces around her, someone blocked her path.

King Artos himself.

She bowed low. ‘Your Majesty, thank you for your generosity this evening,’ she said. ‘The room, the gown, everything —’

He waved a hand, silencing her. ‘Nonsense. You are a defender of the midrealms now, Althea. Not to mention, I owe you a life debt. The least I can do is treat you like an honoured guest in my home.’

‘Sire, I —’

‘No objections, Althea. I came to ask you to dance.’ He held out a hand and smiled kindly.

Thea froze, staring at his outstretched palm. She couldn’t say no to a king, but... she also couldn’t dance – not fit for royalty.

King Artos waited.

‘Your Majesty,’ she said quietly, keenly aware of all the eyes suddenly on her and the King of Harenth. ‘I... I don’t know how, not properly.’ She didn’t elaborate that her sole experience with dancing involved her and her friends throwing knives at each other’s feet.

He took her hand. ‘It’s easy. I helped teach Jasira. I can show you as well.’

Thea swallowed. There was no going back now. Her hand was grasped firmly in his and he was already leading her out into the centre of the ballroom floor, her face aflame.

A new song began. King Artos lifted her hand with his and placed his other hand on her waist. ‘This one is a simple waltz. A matter of counting your steps, like so... One, two, three and one, two, three...’ He moved her with him as he stepped confidently across the floor.

One, two, three, one, two, three, Thea counted in her head. It wasn’t too dissimilar from a footwork pattern Wilder had shown her on the road to Delmira.

The music increased in pace, and King Artos led her around the room, the nobles clearing a path for them and watching on with curiosity. Thea didn't have the capacity to worry about what dancing with the king might imply on a broader scale. She was busy trying to keep up and not step on his feet.

'You're a natural,' he told her kindly, his rich tone matching the warmth that had started to blossom in her chest. Thea flushed with joy.

Once she was sure she wasn't making a fool of herself, or worse, of the king, she felt herself relax into the melody and the pattern of their movements. King Artos spun her around effortlessly, and for a brief moment, Thea wondered if her own parents would have taught her and Wren how to waltz, or if they would have had royal tutors for that.

The thoughts left her head as soon as they appeared, the breathtaking melody sweeping across all her senses, her body becoming lost in the rhythm, her feet following the steps easily.

She wished Wren, Sam and Ida were here to see it, to swirl across the ballroom floor themselves. It had been Ida who had forced them to include an element of dance in Dancing Alchemists, to prepare them in the event that they should ever attend a ball or wedding. Thea had always doubted she'd ever see such a thing, and yet here she was.

The music built and built, and the king spun her around and around. A laugh spilt from her lips —

'May I cut in, Your Majesty?' came a deep, rumbling voice.

And the spinning stopped. The strange warmth blooming in her chest faded.

Wilder Hawthorne had just interrupted the king, and something evaporated around them, like a bubble had burst.

But King Artos didn't miss a beat. 'Of course.' And he passed Thea to the Warsword. Wilder's grip on her was firm and oddly grounding.

Thea knew the smile Wilder offered King Artos was fake. 'Thank you,' he said, leading her away.

'Did you just cut in on *the king*?' she asked in disbelief.

'I did,' Wilder replied casually.

Thea felt suddenly sick.

Wilder seemed to sense the shift in her, because he held her upright when her knees buckled. 'Look at me, Thea...' he murmured.

She did, and gasped at what she found. His silver eyes were aflame with fury.

‘What’s going on?’ she managed, leaning into him.

‘I believe the king just used his empath abilities on you,’ the Warsword told her, placing her hand on his shoulder and drawing her close by the waist.

Thea gaped. ‘What?’

‘Dance with me, Thea... We cannot talk of it here.’

Doing her best to recover herself, Thea straightened and took in the sight of the warrior before her, clad in black finery, poised to dance with her.

‘I thought you didn’t dance?’ she muttered.

‘I don’t. Haven’t for a long time, anyway,’ he replied. ‘Except with you.’ He didn’t wait, just swept her up in a brilliant waltz, the music wrapping around them, leading them through its own form of magic.

Where Wilder touched her, Thea came alive. The warmth she felt in his arms was different. Rather than a blanket over her senses, it came from within, rich and golden, a symphony of feeling. She revelled in his strength and rhythm, in the fact that she was the exception for him. The music, the Warsword, the magic – it enraptured her like nothing else, and she felt her own power simmering, rising inside her —

‘Easy, Princess...’ Wilder murmured. ‘If I can feel that, there’s a good chance the royals can.’

But it was like a drug, like a cyren’s call, and Thea fell to its lure.

Wilder swore under his breath and practically hauled her from the ballroom floor, pulling her out into an abandoned corridor.

If there weren’t rumours about us before, there will be now, Thea thought abstractly, as she swam in Wilder’s quicksilver stare.

‘You need somewhere to blow off some steam,’ he said quietly, looking around, checking that they hadn’t been followed.

Thea’s blood instantly heated, her cheeks burning at the memory of what he’d done to her in front of the mirror earlier.

‘You’ve got a filthy mind, Apprentice...’ Wilder told her, surveying her parted lips with a darkening gaze.

Thea was too tightly wound to laugh.

Wilder’s voice was hoarse when he spoke again. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘Where to?’ she asked, feeling utterly untethered from herself.

‘Where all the Warswords used to go when they needed a night off.
Come with me...’

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THEA



As they stepped out into the crisp night air, Thea came back to herself little by little, finding her throat dry and her hands trembling. She barely noticed where Wilder was taking her until they stood before a familiar sign swinging in the breeze.

The Laughing Fox.

‘I believe you owe me a growler of sour mead, Princess,’ the Warsword said, before pushing the door open.

Thankfully, the low lighting within hid Thea’s blush. Wilder knew she’d stolen liquor from him. She’d done it in anger at the time, but the warrior beside her seemed more amused than anything else.

It felt strange to be walking into the establishment in formal wear, but Thea soon forgot her discomfort. The tavern momentarily quieted as they entered. Some patrons offered Wilder the three-fingered salute to their shoulders, while others simply stared in awe.

‘Warsword Hawthorne,’ the owner of the bar greeted them, offering his hand.

Wilder shook it firmly. ‘Bertie, good to see you.’

‘It’s been a while,’ Albert said, before his gaze landed on Thea. ‘And you... Miss Zoltaire. You’re gaining quite the reputation, aren’t you? First you save our king, then you slay a wraith, and now you’re ridding the midrealms of those mercenary scum...’

Word travels fast indeed, Thea thought, shifting on her feet as she realised the patrons’ eyes weren’t just for Wilder, but for her as well. Her skin crawled under their scrutiny. If this was the attention she was receiving

now, she couldn't imagine what it would be like if they knew of the lightning coursing through her veins.

'Just call me Thea,' she told Albert. The barman gave her a nod.

Wilder was scanning the tables, noting the crowd's feigned lack of interest in them. 'A booth at the back if you have one, Bertie.'

'Right you are,' the barkeep said, already moving towards the rear of the establishment. He showed them to a booth tucked away in a dark corner of the tavern and waited for them to slide into the cushioned benches before he addressed Wilder again.

'Marise heard you were in town. He dropped off a bottle of that wine you like, though he said to tell you he's offended you haven't visited the shop.'

A genuine smile spread across the Warsword's face. The sight of it melted something in Thea's chest.

'He knows me well,' Wilder replied, nodding.

And with that Albert left them to it, a server delivering a bottle and two glasses moments later.

Thea watched as Wilder poured generously and slid a glass across the table to her. 'How are you feeling?' he asked her, his deep voice laced with concern.

'I...' Thea stumbled over her words. In truth, she hadn't had time to process it. 'I don't really understand,' she said.

Wilder swirled and sipped his wine, closing his eyes for a moment in enjoyment. 'Nor do I.'

'Is he allowed to use his magic like that?' Thea asked, recalling how swept up in the music she'd felt – and, upon reflection, how the warmth that had spread in her chest was unnatural, completely unlike the sensation that bloomed when she saw Wilder's smile, or heard his laugh.

Wilder scoffed. 'He's a king. He's allowed to do whatever he likes.'

'But he wouldn't hurt me.' The words sounded stupid, naive as they left Thea's lips, but she still believed them. 'He's only ever been good to me, kind... He's the reason I'm a Guardian.'

Wilder put his glass down with a little too much force. 'You're the reason you're a Guardian, Thea.'

Thea let his words sink in before she spoke again. 'Do you think he's dangerous?'

‘Every man with power like that is dangerous,’ Wilder answered, taking another drink. ‘Never get in debt with one of the rulers.’ He scoffed softly at his own words. ‘I forget myself, Princess. You’re one of them, after all.’

Thea suppressed a shudder. ‘But... what did he want?’

‘What does any powerful man want?’ Wilder asked. ‘More power. Be it in the form of armies and riches, or women and influence. He’s taken an interest in you. Has ever since you threw that fucking dagger at his goblet.’

Thea reached for her glass and took a tentative sip. Her eyes bulged. The wine was leagues above the swill she and the others drank back at the fortress.

Wilder laughed. ‘Don’t get used to it.’ But his eyes betrayed his relaxed demeanour. His gaze was bright and alert, constantly scanning their surroundings.

‘Do you have any idea who hired the mercenaries?’ Thea asked, her own suspicions churning rapidly in her mind.

‘A few. The Daughter of Darkness, for one.’

‘Not Vernich?’ she blurted.

Wilder made a frustrated noise at the back of his throat and shook his head in disbelief. ‘What is your obsession with him?’

‘Well... He’s partly the reason I almost bled to death in a broom closet.’

Wilder’s gaze darkened. ‘He paid dearly for that.’

Thea waved him off. ‘What makes you so sure that he’s not a fallen Warsword? He was the one who let the reaper escape at the ruins. I told you, I overheard him and Seb talking about getting something the enemy wants, about the Veil and how the alchemists’ strategy won’t work. And —’

Wilder’s large hand closed over hers, stilling her frantic gestures beneath it. ‘Slow down.’

‘I want to see the map,’ she heard herself say.

‘What map?’ Wilder frowned.

‘The map you have with all the weak patches of the Veil marked up.’

Thea thought he’d deny her, thought he’d continue to dismiss her concerns about the two bastards back at Thezmarr. But, still frowning, Wilder rummaged through his pockets and produced a crinkled, folded square of parchment. ‘Keep it. If it makes you feel better.’

She was surprised he’d kept it on his person, given their current attire, but she didn’t question it. The parchment was soft between her fingers as she unfolded it and scanned the inked lands before her. ‘You don’t need it?’

‘I know it by heart.’

She traced the wavy lines of the Veil. ‘Where’s the weakest part?’

Wilder didn’t so much as look at the map. ‘Closest to the mainland? It’s to the east. Just beyond the garrison of Ironhelm.’

Thea took a breath. She didn’t know if it was the aftereffects of Artos’ empath meddling, or just the build-up of *everything*, but her chest felt suddenly tight, that restlessness that had plagued her all her life coming back to hit her with full force. Her magic crackled at her fingertips, her heart rate spiking in panic. Not here. This couldn’t happen here. She needed to move, she needed to —

‘Do you play darts?’ Wilder asked, motioning to a board on the wall nearby, as though he sensed she needed the distraction.

Thea exhaled slowly. ‘I play anything.’

Wilder rewarded her with another of those devastating smiles. ‘See all those marks on the wall around the target?’

Thea nodded, the restlessness within fading from a rapid boil to a simmer.

‘Those are from Talemir,’ Wilder told her. ‘He was fucking terrible.’

‘You came here a lot with him?’ she asked tentatively, knowing that Wilder’s former mentor was often a sensitive subject.

‘Him and Malik, yes... Too much.’

‘The three of you must have been good for business,’ Thea quipped, giving a table of eager women nearby a pointed look. They were trying hard to look anywhere but at the Warsword in their midst. They were utterly unconvincing.

Wilder gave a huff of amusement, and that familiar tingling sensation spread in Thea’s chest at the sound. ‘Perhaps,’ he said.

Thea raised a brow, thinking back to the sapphire necklace she’d found in his cabin. Had it been Adrienne’s? The woman Wilder had spoken of in Delmira? She had no doubt it had belonged to a woman from his past, but now was not the time to ask, if there was such a thing. Not when Wilder looked how he looked in this moment... *Happy*.

He grinned and raised his hands in mock surrender. ‘Tal was the worst of us, I promise.’

‘And yet he’s all settled down with a wife somewhere.’

‘So I hear.’ The Warsword studied his glass for a moment. ‘Do you know any toasts?’ he asked, changing the subject.

‘Just one,’ Thea said, clearing her throat. She raised her wine and held Wilder’s gaze. ‘May you walk amid the gardens of the afterlife a whole half hour, before Enovius reads your ledger of deeds.’

She touched her glass to Wilder’s as he stared at her in disbelief.

Then, the Warsword put a hand on his abdomen, tipped his head back and roared with laughter. The sound was rich and melodic and deep, unfurling something within Thea as it rumbled out of the warrior. Had she ever heard him laugh like that?

When his laughter faded, he was still shaking his head. ‘Who told you that?’

‘Kipp,’ Thea said with a smile of her own.

Wilder snorted. ‘I should have known.’

‘Why?’

‘Torj mentioned he grew up around here. I imagine he did a lot of eavesdropping. No doubt he knows more about the midrealms than he lets on.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Wilder sat back in the booth, his shoulders down, his legs stretched out beneath the table, brushing against hers. He looked... relaxed. ‘Because the Laughing Fox is one of many connected sister taverns across the kingdoms.’

‘Oh?’

‘The Laughing Fox, the Blushing Bear in Tver, the Singing Hare in Aveum...’

‘And what of the fallen kingdoms?’

‘There was the Dancing Badger in Naarva...’ Wilder hummed. ‘And I believe it was the Flying Stag in Delmira. Marise still complains that the Stag was his best wholesale client. No kingdom has matched those orders since.’

Thea watched him thoughtfully, struck by the contrast between what she felt for him and how little she knew of his life before her. He was almost a stranger to her in that regard. She looked back to the dartboard.

‘Are you any good?’

He followed her gaze. ‘I was more of a billiards man myself,’ he said, nodding to the table at the other end of the tavern.

‘I’ve never played,’ Thea ventured. There was a lot she hadn’t done, a lot she would never do. Without thinking, she brought her hand to rest on

her fate stone under her dress.

Wilder seemed to sense her unspoken words. 'Shall we?'

Thea grinned. 'I'm game if you are.'

'Oh, I'm always game, Princess.'

The name didn't even bother her this time. In fact, it made her stomach dip pleasantly, as did the challenging gleam in the Warsword's gaze. Thea simply picked up their wine and waited for him to lead the way to the table.

There were two men already playing, but at the sight of Wilder and Thea, they insisted that the table was theirs to enjoy and re-racked the balls for them immediately.

Thea laughed and looked up at the Warsword. 'You make quite the impression, don't you?'

'That wasn't about me,' he replied slowly, watching the men leave. 'By now everyone's heard of the pretty Guardian from Thezmarr who took down a dozen mercenaries in a storehouse.'

The way Wilder said it made Thea blush, but she'd done exactly that.

Wilder was holding out a cue stick. 'Ladies first.'

Thea leant over the table, lining up her stick with the striker.

Wilder chuckled. 'Not like that.'

'Well, don't just laugh. Show me.'

'Show you? That's not exactly a winner's strategy.'

Thea rolled her eyes. 'So be a gentleman.'

Suddenly, Wilder's body was enveloping hers from behind, his arms wrapping around her and guiding her hands across the stick. 'We both know I'm far from a gentleman.'

Thea tensed as the hard plane of his body pressed against hers and he directed her cue across the table, delivering a precise shot to the striker, which in turn broke the triangle of balls at the end.

Thea could feel the eyes of the whole tavern on them, and though she rarely concerned herself with others' perception of her, she did wonder how she and Wilder looked to them. Warsword and apprentice, getting handsy at the billiards table. Was that what they saw?

Wilder took his turn without paying them any heed and sank two balls at once. He was far more accustomed to the attention than she was.

'Do you need me to show you again?' he teased.

Thea's stomach fluttered at that tone and she squeezed her thighs together. Gods, this man... He'd already proven he could reduce her to

pieces. Trying to force the thoughts away, she accepted the cue and positioned herself over the edge of the table.

She could feel Wilder's stare.

'Getting a good look?' she said, her voice surprisingly low and sultry.

Wilder's gaze darkened with desire. 'I want to do more than look,' he half growled. He came to her side once more, under the guise of helping her line her cue up to the striker. 'I'd fuck you right on this table if I could.'

'So do it, Warsword,' Thea said brazenly.

'Didn't realise you liked an audience, Princess.'

'You're big enough and mean enough to make them leave.'

'I am. But I won't.'

Thea straightened, so close to him that she could feel the heat rippling from his body. 'And why's that?' she challenged.

Wilder's gaze dipped to her mouth. 'Because I'm already dangerously close to —' He cut himself off.

'To what?' she demanded.

She saw the internal battle flickering behind his silver gaze. The look he gave her told her he was mere seconds away from throwing her down on the table and taking her then and there, despite the tavern's patrons. She wished he would.

Revellers had started to clear from the nearby tables, as though they could sense the pair were about to fight or fuck, or both.

'We can't,' Wilder murmured against the soft skin of her neck, nearly eliciting a moan of frustration from her, the game of billiards forgotten.

'Why?' The word came out as a breathy demand.

'Because a Warsword has no business feeling the things I feel for a princess.'

'I'm not a princess.'

'But that's exactly what you are.'

Thea lifted her chin in defiance, but that wouldn't be her sticking point, not in this moment. 'Then tell me, what do you feel?' she asked.

The energy surging between them was palpable, a current that formed around them, drawing them together, so powerful that Thea felt it in the soles of her feet.

Wilder was so close that she could feel the tremor of restraint that gripped his body.

'Everything,' he said at last, and then he kissed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WILDER



He'd all but told Althea Zoltaire that he loved her, that she, the lost heir of Delmira, the living storm, owned him mind, body and broken soul. That his cold, weary heart was hers, if she would have it.

But he didn't let those words fall from his lips.

Instead, he tried to capture them in every kiss, every touch as they stumbled back to the palace, tangled in one another like teenagers, consequences be damned. He drank in her sea-salt-and-bergamot scent like it was a drug and he was an addict.

Gods, he could feel the tempest building in her, his own unique magic answering its call with power of its own. There was no end to the wanting of her, the loving her. It was in his blood, etched in his bones, and it burned through him like wildfire.

Neither of them were drunk, but Furies save him, he felt like he was – drunk on her.

They ignored the guards as they rushed through the outer palace grounds and then the corridors, breaking apart only to catch their breath before they got lost in one another again.

Wilder couldn't remember a time where he'd felt so alive, so young and so free. He pushed all thoughts of duty and vows, expectations and honour aside and decided that for tonight, he would live and live hard, with Thea.

When they reached their quarters, they burst in and Wilder swept her up in his arms, kicking the doors closed behind them and taking her straight to the bed.

A bed.

As much as Wilder had loved the Bloodwoods, the cave and the mirror in the bathing chamber, he had longed to take her properly in a bed, as he might do if they were another couple, if they were anyone other than who they truly were.

Her dress was a web of ties and buttons, and he was just about to tear it right down the middle when it fell to the floor around her feet.

She wore nothing underneath.

Wilder's heart skipped. Gods, she was perfect.

He traced the red marks across her ribs from the bodice. He kissed the scar where she'd been stabbed as a shieldbearer. But that was where his restraint ended. He lunged for her, threading his fingers through her hair, her tresses slipping through his fingers like silk. Her mouth opened beneath his, surrendering to him and the desperate strokes of his tongue.

Thea clawed at his shirt, and he broke their kiss to jerk it over his head.

He heard the soft breath that escaped her lips as she dragged her gaze over his bare, tattooed torso and the contours of his abdomen. Her nails scraped down his skin and he hissed at the contact, gripping her by the back of her neck and claiming her mouth again in a brutal kiss.

He nipped at the curve of her lower lip, hard enough to elicit a gasp from her. But she gave as good as she got, kissing him back fiercely. He relished every pass of her mouth over his, exploring her thoroughly with his tongue.

It had never felt like this before. Not with anyone else.

It was as though the Furies had made every inch of Thea just for him.

He dragged his hands down her curves, wanting to memorise every dip and hollow of her beautiful body. Thea arched towards him, silently begging him to touch her.

He kissed her hungrily and obliged her, cupping both breasts in his hands, rolling her nipples between his fingers, finding that sweet spot between pleasure and pain that made her breathless.

There was something utterly unabashed about them now as they devoured one another. Wilder groaned at the feel of her beneath his touch as he pushed her back towards the bed while she fumbled at his belt, and then, the buttons of his pants. He felt as if he'd been rock hard for hours – days, even; weeks. He wanted her always. Gods, had she no idea what she did to him? His erection was damn near painful.

A deep noise sounded from the back of his throat as she freed his cock, her hands wrapping around the throbbing length.

She pumped him up and down, circling the crown of his cock with her thumb where that telltale moisture had gathered. Thea moaned into his mouth and the sound made his balls tighten in anticipation.

He let his hand fall from her breast, trailing down her stomach to ease between her legs, finding her wet and ready for him. As his fingers parted her, she whimpered and he nearly threw her onto the pillows, thinking of nothing else but driving his cock inside her.

Thea seemed to have the same idea, for she dragged him to the bed. Her legs hit the edge of the mattress and she fell backward, taking him with her.

He'd follow her anywhere.

Her legs fell open either side of him and his cock brushed against her as he braced himself on top of her.

'Wait,' he said, tensing suddenly at the realisation, cursing himself for his thoughtlessness, his carelessness. 'We've never talked about protection, about —'

'I've got it covered,' Thea said, reaching for his cock.

'You're sure?' he asked, his breath whistling between his teeth as she lined up the crown of him to her entrance.

Thea fixed him with a challenging stare. 'Trust me. That's the last thing I want. Ever. I've got it covered.'

'Alright.' Satisfied, he leant down to kiss her.

But this time she hesitated. 'You're not going to correct me?'

'About what?'

'About how I might change my mind. About how I might —'

Wilder's brows furrowed as he drew back to peer at her face. 'Why in the realms would I do that? You know your own mind, Thea. I sure as fuck have learnt by now to respect that about you.'

The tips of her cheeks flushed. 'Oh.'

He leant in again, circling her nipple with his tongue before leaving a trail of heated kisses up to her neck, lingering where her pulse fluttered beneath her skin. 'Can I fuck you now?' he murmured into the shell of her ear.

She was already arching into him, already grinding her wet core against his cock. 'Yes,' she breathed. 'Yes.'

Wilder sat back on his knees and looked at her, his mouth going dry at the sight of her flushed breasts and peaked nipples, and then lower, where her legs parted around him, leaving her utterly exposed to him. He dragged a finger down her centre, through the wetness he found there.

‘You ready?’ he asked, his voice thick with desire.

She writhed against him, seeking more friction. ‘Yes.’

Wilder gripped her hips, tilting them towards him, lining himself up to slide home, but not before he lifted her legs high, so that the backs of her thighs pressed against his torso, and her knees hooked over his shoulders.

Thea’s eyes went wide.

Only then did he push inside her, sliding in and in, watching as her mouth parted in a shocked cry of pleasure. He waited a beat for her to adjust to the size of him, knowing that from this angle he was deeper than he’d been before —

Thea jerked her hips against him, demanding more.

A slow, dark smile curved his lips. ‘Use your words, Princess,’ he said. ‘What do you want?’

Thea gave an impatient cry. ‘Harder,’ she panted. ‘Faster. Rougher.’

Wilder gripped her thighs, hard enough to bruise. ‘I can give you that,’ he murmured, sliding out almost completely, before he thrust back inside her, over and over again, exactly how she wanted. Gods, she was tight. So tight he could barely breathe, the sensation utterly overwhelming.

Soon, Thea’s moans echoed off the walls, and it was all Wilder could do to keep the feral beast within him at bay as he fucked her, her feet by his ears, his own pleasure building and building with every thrust. He drank in the sight of her breasts bouncing, of the hand that drifted south, down her body to her clit.

He’d never seen anything so beautiful, so sensual, as watching Thea touch herself while he pumped hard inside her, over and over.

Desire raced through him like a drug, leaving his skin ablaze and his heart near bursting. He craved this – *her* – the heat of her driving him to a new place of madness, making him lightheaded with ecstasy. When he was on the verge of losing it, he flipped her on her side and fucked her from behind, drawing ragged gasps from her.

The decadent sounds she made vibrated down his cock and through his balls, coaxing his own moans of pleasure from the back of his throat, and driving those carnal, savage instincts within.

‘Fuck, Wilder,’ Thea cried.

‘Are you going to come for me, Thea?’ He hardly recognised the low rumble of his own voice, darkened with need. He grabbed her by the inner thigh and hooked her leg back over his, spreading her wide, his fingers finding her clit, pressing down.

With a shout, Thea bucked at the contact and spots swam in his vision he sank even deeper inside her.

She rocked against him, meeting every one of his punishing thrusts.

He kissed her shoulder, scraping his teeth along her skin.

‘Wilder, I’m going to —’

She cried out amid the haze of lust, clenching around him as he fucked her through her climax, drawing out every last drop of pleasure, circling her clit until she was quaking beneath his touch.

‘I’ve got you,’ he whispered into her hair, holding her tight to his chest as a sob escaped her.

For a moment, all he could hear was her ragged breaths. But then Thea moved. Slipping his still aching cock from her, she pushed him onto his back and straddled him.

‘And I’ve got you,’ she said, trailing her nails down his chest, lowering herself onto the length of him.

Wilder’s eyes rolled to the back of his head. ‘Gods...’ he moaned as she took him, every inch. Heat swelled at the base of his spine and in his balls as she rode him, dragging the pleasure from him just as he had with her. A dark fever of desire took hold of him then, and he had to move, had to claim her with everything he had.

In a blur, Wilder gripped her backside and stood, taking her with him and kicking over the bedside table to get better access to the wall, crushing his body to hers.

She cried out as her back hit the cold surface, and he trapped her there, thrusting into her wet heat as her fingers tangled in his hair and his mouth closed over hers.

‘Thea...’ he murmured against her lips, hoping he could capture everything he meant with her name alone.

‘Let go, Wilder,’ she whispered, dragging her teeth up the column of his throat. ‘Let go.’

And so Wilder did.

He erupted, ramming into her with the force of his climax. Release tore through him, wave after wave, his body shuddering beneath hers, completely out of control, every extremity tingling in the aftermath.

Panting, he rested his damp brow against hers, still pinning her to the wall.

Thea traced his lower lip with her thumb. 'I love seeing you come undone like that...'

Wilder drew a ragged breath and kissed her, her mouth as warm and lush as ever, toying with the heat coursing through him.

He carried her back to the bed. 'Then we'd best do it again,' he growled.



For a long time, Wilder had dreamt about what it would be like to wake up next to Thea, to fuck her all night and then share a bed with her properly, to have her in his arms upon waking. He had pictured the joy and peace that would come with it. And it was everything he'd imagined it to be. More. So he allowed himself to savour the moment and the sleepy quiet of the morning to breathe her in, to memorise how she felt pressed against him and how she fit him so perfectly.

He knew he couldn't have it forever, so he had to make it count.

He drew her to his chest, his arms banded around her waist and breasts, her hair tickling his skin, the warmth of her soaking into him.

She stirred, nestling back into him, her grip tightening on his arm.

There was nothing in the midrealms as perfect as this, nothing so full of bliss. He wasn't ready for the reality of the morning to seep in, wasn't ready to confront how brazen they'd been – how by now, all of Harenth would know that Warsword and Guardian were fucking.

Instead, Wilder kissed the soft spot between Thea's neck and shoulder, unable to quite believe he was able to do such an intimate thing, that it came so naturally. He revelled in the luxury of waking her slowly, pride surging in his chest as she sought him out, even in sleep.

She turned to face him, nuzzling her face into his chest, pressing the rest of her naked body against his hardness beneath the sheets.

'Morning,' he murmured into her hair.

She answered him with a kiss to his sternum, and another a little lower. In one swift movement, Thea was astride him, kissing down the plane of his abdomen, reigniting his need for her, fraying his thoughts.

‘I had other plans for you,’ he groaned as she reached between his thighs and wrapped her warm hand around his shaft.

‘You’re not the only one with plans,’ she murmured, continuing her trail down his body, capturing his skin in a gentle bite that made his cock twitch.

She paused at a scar on his side, running a single finger over the pale slash of flesh. ‘What’s that from?’ she asked with another kiss, hovering above the V-shaped dip of sinew above his crotch.

He breathed in deeply, opting for restraint, but distracted beyond measure by the proximity of her wicked mouth to his cock.

Thea gave him a sly smile, as though she knew exactly what he was thinking. She gave him a slow, lazy pump with her hand. ‘I believe I asked you a question, Warsword...’

Gods, he was already leaking for her.

‘Skirmish in Naarva,’ he managed, watching with wide eyes as she continued to stroke him.

‘There you are again with your vivid picture-painting,’ she chastised, slowing her caresses to an agonising pace. The evil woman.

‘Was at a watchtower,’ he breathed heavily. ‘Set upon by shadow wraiths’ – another deliciously torturous slide down his length – ‘one got a swipe in. Thirty-two stitches.’ He bit back a moan.

The glee in Thea’s eyes was nearly enough to make Wilder want to seize control and flip her over, but he froze as she settled herself fully between his legs and lowered her mouth to him.

He nearly bucked off the bed as the warm, wet heat of her lips closed over his cock. Her tongue circled his crown, and the moan that finally escaped him was deep and primal and *loud*. He didn’t give a fuck who heard him. Threading his fingers through her hair, he watched as she swallowed him down.

‘*Fuck...*’ he murmured, his voice hoarse with lust, his eyes almost rolling into the back of his head.

Thea worked him with her lush mouth and tongue, her hand reaching down to cup his swollen balls.

Holy Furies. His blood was on fire, bolts of pleasure shooting through him with each stroke of her tongue, an inferno of need threatening to take

hold. His grip in her hair tightened and she moaned around him, sending a vibration rippling down his length.

‘Thea...’ He said her name without knowing what he was asking. This amount of pleasure was insane, and he didn’t know if he wanted to erupt into that talented mouth of hers, or pull out to bury himself deep inside her. He had to decide soon, because she had him climbing to that point of no return.

She worshipped him with long, luxurious movements, allowing him to hit the back of her throat so that he nearly saw stars.

No, he had to touch her. *Now*.

He hauled her up with him, so that his back rested against the headboard of the stupidly big bed, and Thea was straddling him.

For a second, Wilder froze, his gaze tracing her beautiful, flushed face and her eyes, bright with arousal. Then her breasts, also flushed and swollen, her nipples hard. Gods, there was no end to what he wanted to do to her. He kissed her savagely as his cock pressed against the slick heat between her legs. One shift of his hips and he’d be inside her. One slight movement and —

The doors banged open.

‘Oh, shit,’ a familiar voice sounded.

Wilder scrambled for the sheets and snatched them up around Thea, his heart hammering.

‘What the fuck, Torj?’ he snapped, unable to move without exposing himself or Thea.

Torj stared at them, gaping, before he seemed to remember himself and reached for the door. ‘Uh, shit. Sorry —’

‘What’s going on?’ a voice called from behind him, and Wilder groaned.

‘Fuck’s sake, Torj. Close the fucking door.’

And while the golden-haired Warsword was moving, it wasn’t fast enough. ‘No, don’t —’

Thea swore, too, as her friends Cal and Kipp peered around the frame.

The strangled cry of horror from Kipp might have been funny were the situation not so completely and utterly embarrassing.

‘Get the fuck out,’ Wilder barked, a flush creeping up his neck.

‘Uhh... Meet you at the Fox, then!’ Torj called as he shut the door.

Wilder's face heated and he groaned, burying his face in the crook of Thea's neck as he heard the three of them laughing down the hallway.

'That couldn't have gone any worse,' he muttered.

'Sure it could have,' Thea said lightly, leaning back so she could see him, the sheet slipping from her shoulders.

'How, exactly?' Wilder demanded.

More than anything, Thea looked amused. 'Well... it could have been Audra. Or the king.' A laugh bubbled out of her.

The sound caused a thickness in Wilder's throat, and a prickle at the back of his eyes. His grip tightened on her.

'There's no going back now, Warsword,' she said, brushing her lips against his and rolling her hips.

He groaned. Absolutely no part of him wanted to leave their rooms and deal with Torj. He wanted to stay in bed with Thea all morning, talking and fucking and laughing, holding one another... But as much as he'd wished for a slow, luxurious morning with her, reality had made itself known as it always did, and there was no escaping it. Not as a Warsword of the midrealms.

'Come on, let's get dressed,' he mumbled, placing his hands on her waist to move her.

'Who said I was done with you?' Thea replied, grinding against him.

Wilder closed his eyes and tipped his head to the ceiling in the hopes that the Furies would give him strength. 'Good gods, woman. Are you trying to kill me?'

Thea laughed, trailing her fingers down the plane of his chest. 'That's not what I'd call it, no.'

Wilder's cock was still nestled against her heat, still hard and throbbing. How could it not be with a naked beauty like her astride him?

'We'll have to be quick...' he heard himself say, already skimming her sides with his palms, watching her breasts rise sharply, her hard nipples begging to be taken between his teeth. He licked his lips, and —

Thea swung her legs off him. 'Actually, there's not enough time for all the things I want to do to you... Nor for all the things I want you to do to me.' The brazen woman smirked. 'So you'll have to wait.'

Wilder's mouth fell open as she walked to the bathing chamber naked, her hips swinging and the curve of her backside teasing him before the door closed behind her.

Gods, he had been right in every sense of the word.
Althea Zoltaire would be the end of him.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THEA



As they stood before the door to the Laughing Fox, Thea glanced at the Warsword beside her, who looked infinitely moodier than usual, and couldn't help but smile.

He answered with a scowl that only made her grin harder.

Gods, last night had been... Everything.

She could still feel the imprint of him on her, like a brand on her body, on her soul, and she never wanted it to fade.

'Having second thoughts?' Wilder asked, his hand braced on the tavern door.

Thea pictured what they must have looked like to the patrons last night – and then, with a flush, what Torj, Cal and Kipp had seen back at their room. But the flare of embarrassment waned almost as quickly as it had come. She didn't care what they thought, she realised.

'Not a chance,' she replied, giving Wilder a sultry look before pushing past him and entering the bar.

The Laughing Fox was one of those places that looked the same in the light of day as it did in the heart of night, and for that, Thea loved it.

'— haven't paid the last fucking tab, Kristopher.'

'I assure you, Albert, it's —'

Kipp was arguing with the owner of the tavern, his hands flailing about in front of him. Thea's gaze immediately found Cal, who was gaping at their friend, baffled. Thea guessed he was thinking the same as her: how in the realms had Kipp managed to get back to the Laughing Fox and rack up another bill since the three of them had last been here? Between the battle with the reapers at Delmira, their close call with death in the flooding caves,

the initiation test and their induction into Thezmarr's Guardian ranks, there had barely been a spare moment to breathe, let alone travel to and from Harenth to drink sour mead and cause havoc. Kipp did seem to be an overachiever in that department, though. Thea watched on, fascinated.

'Honestly, Albert, you should be thanking me! Look at all the patrons I've just brought you!' Kipp gestured to Thea and Wilder.

'You've got a pair on you, lad,' Albert said, barely managing to keep the mixed notes of admiration and amusement from his gruff voice. 'But Son of the Fox or not, a bill's a bill, and it has gotta be paid. I won't be serving you today till you've —'

'Here,' Thea said, stepping forward and producing the coin of the king from her pocket. 'Does this cover it, Albert?'

'You shouldn't be cleaning up his messes,' the barkeep replied.

But Kipp had already swept her up in an eager embrace. 'I knew I liked you for a reason —' He dropped her at once and raised his hands in surrender beneath Wilder's towering frame. 'As a friend only, I assure you, Warsword.'

'Kipp!' Thea hissed. Was he determined to piss off every person in the vicinity before mid-meal?

Albert handed the coin back to Thea, shaking his head, incredulous. 'It covers it.'

'I'll pay you back,' Kipp gushed.

'No, he fucking won't,' Albert cut in gruffly, giving her friend a stern look.

Kipp shrugged happily. 'I didn't say *with coin*, did I, Albert? Thea knows I'll repay her with kindness and... discretion.' He wiggled his eyebrows at her suggestively.

'If that's how you're going to be, I'll leave you to your debt, *Kristopher*,' she said pointedly.

'You would never,' Kipp grinned, slinging an arm around her shoulders again. 'Besides, Albert won't allow take-backs.'

To Thea's right, Wilder gave a sigh. 'Bertie, I have a feeling I'm going to need some ale for this.'

The barman gave him a sympathetic nod. 'I'll keep 'em coming.'

'Much obliged,' Wilder replied, already stalking off towards the same booth they'd occupied last night.

Thea elbowed Kipp in the ribs and followed. But she stopped in her tracks when she reached the booth, for not only Torj and Cal occupied the benches...

Celadon eyes that mirrored her own stared back at her.

Wren.

Thea baulked. 'What are you doing here?' she blurted, almost flinching at the sight of her sister. Wren looked different. Her face was gaunt; dark smudges shadowed the skin beneath her eyes, and her lips were pale and cracked. The knot of bronze hair atop her head was half falling out, loose strands of hair curling about her dirt-streaked cheeks and neck, giving her a somewhat unhinged appearance. She was hunched over a list of calculations, charcoal staining her fingers.

'I've been asking myself the same question for three days,' Wren said, with an icy look at Torj.

The Bear Slayer gave a shrug. 'I was just following Audra's orders.'

'Since when does a *librarian* command a *Warsword*?' Wren snapped.

'Since when does an alchemist complain so much?' Torj bit back.

'I had work to do,' Wren protested. '*Important* work. That's the problem with you warriors – you always think your priorities take precedence over everyone else's.'

'Like I said, I was just —'

'Following *orders*, so you've said. Several times.'

By the sound of it, they'd had this argument before, but Thea couldn't believe it. Wren sounded exactly like her. There was no denying that they were cut from the same cloth, and that little detail made Thea's chest ache.

Torj leant in close to her sister. 'Audra seemed to think you were in some kind of danger. I was doing the honourable thing and keeping you safe.'

Thea's skin prickled at that detail. Had something happened at the fortress? She knew Audra well enough to know she wouldn't make a claim like that lightly.

But Wren simply scoffed. 'Oh, spare me. Thezmarr is the safest place in the midrealms. You brought me along to torture me.'

Luckily, Albert saved them all from another round of verbal sparring by sliding a tray of tankards onto the table.

'Thank the gods,' Kipp said, reaching for one.

But Wilder slipped into the booth opposite him and pulled the whole tray to his chest. 'Who said they were for you?'

Thea bit back a laugh as Kipp's jaw nearly hit the table.

Wilder didn't break eye contact as he downed an entire tankard and placed the empty vessel before her friend. 'Are we going to bicker all afternoon, or is someone going to tell us why the fuck you're all here ruining my day?'

Had it not been for Wren's presence jarring the whole experience, Thea would have laughed.

Torj opened his mouth to comment, but Wilder silenced him with a glare. 'Don't even think about it.'

Thea slid into the booth beside Wilder and waited, noting how Cal and Kipp exchanged glances at the sight of her at the Warsword's side.

'Well?' Wilder demanded.

Torj claimed one of the tankards and took a long draught before setting it down on the table. 'Artos sent word to Thezmarr about the threat. Osiris ordered me to answer the call. We had already left by the time we heard you'd arrived. Figured we'd continue on anyway, see it for ourselves. Assist you, if need be.'

'It's been taken care of,' Wilder said.

'That's what I hear,' Torj replied evenly. 'What was the threat?'

'Half-wraiths,' Thea answered. 'And they're not the first we've seen.'

Cal and Kipp were fidgeting, a telltale sign that they were bursting with questions about what she'd seen and done during her travels with the Warsword. But in the presence of their own Warsword, they kept their mouths shut.

Torj traced lines through the condensation on his tankard. 'Is that so?' He didn't keep the note of surprise from his voice. 'Where?'

Thea looked to Wilder for confirmation that she could divulge the information. She knew Torj was as close to a friend as the Warsword had, but she was still learning the intricacies of the politics between the elite warriors. He gave her a subtle nod.

'We found one caught in a vine blight on the outskirts of Thezmarr,' she told Torj. 'And we came upon a half-wraith corpse on the way to Delmira.'

'Half-wraiths...' the warrior murmured, shaking his head. 'I've never seen one myself. But Osiris said that's what this tyrant is building her army with...'

‘Apparently so,’ Wilder agreed.

‘Then the ones you’ve found... What are they? Spies?’

Wilder nodded. ‘That’s what we’re thinking. King Artos had captured two of them when we arrived in Harenth. One was a half-wraith; the other... It was too far gone on the wraith side. Both infected by a reaper.’

‘You interrogated them?’ Torj asked.

‘I did. Servants of evil, the both of them. Courtesy of someone calling themselves the Shadow Prince, and then his master, the supposed Daughter of Darkness.’

Torj got to his feet. ‘I want to see these creatures for myself.’

But Wilder shook his head. ‘They’ve been dealt with.’

‘They’re dead?’ Torj asked, lowering himself back into his seat, rattling the whole table.

‘They are now.’

‘But the king —’

‘The king wanted my expertise. He got it,’ Wilder replied bluntly.

Torj considered Wilder curiously. ‘What were you doing in Delmira?’

Thea’s gaze slipped to Wren, recalling how, upon entering their supposed homeland, she’d wished her sister had been there with her to see the ruins, the heather growing amid the rubble and the bell tower at the heart of it all.

Thea met Torj’s questioning stare. ‘Hunting monsters,’ she told him. ‘We dealt with another vine blight, a shadow wraith and a reaper amid the ruins.’

Torj drained his tankard and reached for another, despite Wilder’s incredulous stare. ‘Fair enough.’ He addressed Wilder next. ‘What’s the plan now, then? Back to Thezmarr?’

Thea tensed. She hadn’t considered what came next. She wasn’t nearly close to mastering her magic, and as much as her warrior reputation suddenly preceded her, she knew she wasn’t ready for the Great Rite either.

Torj and Wilder fell into a steady conversation, their voices low, and Thea’s attention was drawn back to her sister.

Wren watched her warily. ‘I don’t know how you stand it,’ she muttered, looking completely miserable.

‘Stand what?’ Thea asked, frowning.

‘Living and travelling with a bunch of rowdy men.’

Torj stopped mid-sentence. ‘You don’t like men, Elwren?’

To Thea's surprise, her sister sized him up. 'None that I've met, Warsword.'

'What a shame,' Torj said lightly. 'You sure you don't need our protection?'

Thea couldn't help the scoff that escaped her then, nor the smug grin as Wren replied tersely, 'I manage well enough on my own.'

Thea half hoped she'd blow a pile of Widow's Ash on the Warsword for his arrogance. That was how her sister had dealt with Seb Barlowe and his lackeys, rendering them infirmity-bound for days.

Wilder seemed to be fighting a chuckle himself. He looked from Wren back to Thea. 'You're more alike than you realise.'

Thea didn't know why her knee-jerk reaction was to deny this, but Wilder's words from the ruins came back to her: *'Life is too short – yours, in particular – to hold grudges against the people you love.'*

Furies be damned, she hated it when he was right.

She went to say something to Wren – what, exactly, she wasn't sure – but her attention snagged on the fact that Cal and Kipp were unnervingly quiet for a change. And then she saw why. She followed their gazes to another table, where a beautiful raven-haired woman sat.

Thea recognised her instantly. It was Milla, the beauty Kipp was always on about, the one he'd gone off with the last time the trio had been at the Laughing Fox.

Only now she sat in the arms of another man, his tongue halfway down her throat.

Cal seemed to catch on at the same time as her. 'Is that —'

'It's – it's fine,' Kipp stammered, plucking his tattered kerchief from his pocket and picking at the loose stitching. 'We weren't... Uh... It's fine.' A deep blush spread across his cheeks and he trained his focus on the loose threads of the embroidered fox tail.

Cal looked helplessly at Thea. She shifted on the bench. She was sorely tempted to storm across to Milla's booth and give her a piece of her mind —

Kipp grabbed her arm as though he could read her thoughts. 'Honestly. She's not doing anything wrong. We weren't together. Not... not, you know... officially.'

Thea's anger softened, but she didn't know what to say.

It was Wilder who seemed to have the solution. The Warsword slid a tankard towards the strategist without a word.



The unlikely companions sat in the Laughing Fox for some time, with Thea insisting they eat.

‘Wild boar?’ she asked Kipp with a knowing look.

Her friend gave a heavy sigh, still nursing his drink. ‘I don’t think I’m in the mood.’

‘Not even for roast potatoes?’ she pressed, trying to keep a straight face. ‘And sticky toffee pudding?’

Kipp’s gaze slowly slid to hers. ‘Depends...’

‘On what?’

Kipp’s expression was all business. ‘On who’s paying.’

A laugh burst from Thea and she held out her coin.

‘Well, if the king’s paying, better add a few more things,’ Wilder declared.

Everyone stared at the Warsword.

‘What?’ he said defensively. ‘I’m fucking starving.’

Torj laughed loudly before looking pointedly between Wilder and Thea. ‘Oh, I bet you are.’

‘No one asked for your opinion, Bear Slayer,’ Wilder replied gruffly.

‘Long night, was it?’ Torj teased.

‘Furies save me,’ Wilder muttered, shaking his head.

But Thea couldn’t keep her smile at bay now. She loved this, all of them together – and seeing Wilder caught off guard because of her, well... It made her stomach flutter.

They ate and drank, chatting as they did. Thea kept glancing over at Wren, knowing that she and her sister were well overdue for a conversation, but it wasn’t the right time or place for it. Instead, Thea tried to revel in the normality of the meal, in the joy of it.

She hadn’t realised that Cal and Kipp had become so familiar with Torj, but she supposed that was natural with how much time they all spent together. Torj seemed to treat them like younger brothers, with the occasional stern word of a father figure. It suited them.

She looked across at Kipp, whose cheeks were flushed from the liquor. He seemed very much recovered from his heartbreak.

He nudged Wren. 'Wren, what say you and I give it a go, then? We've had something special since the moment we met. Don't you think?'

Thea nearly choked on her ale, but Wren simply raised a brow. 'I'm nobody's second choice, Kristopher.'

Torj let out a low whistle. 'Albert's right. You've got a set on you, Kipp... And perhaps a few screws loose up here.' He tapped the side of his head.

Kipp sighed dramatically. 'You're not the first to say that.'

Cal snorted. 'Nor will he be the last.'

'But did you hear the bit about the big set of balls?'

'I don't think that's what he said.'

'That's what I heard,' Kipp replied with a shrug.

Torj laughed. 'You tend to hear what you want.'

Thea was so busy trying to stop the ale coming out her nose that she almost didn't hear the men's voices carrying from a few tables over.

'— the guild is so desperate they're accepting women now, haven't you heard?'

A cruel laugh followed. 'Only because the whores are spreading their legs for the Warswords. Weren't you in here last night?'

Thea felt Wilder tense beside her, her own body going rigid at their words. She tried to find that pocket of calm Audra was always on about. But all she found within was icy rage. She didn't allow herself to blush, even as her friends and sister registered what was happening, even as the filthy, insulting words penetrated the pleasant time they'd been having.

Regardless of what was between her and Wilder, Thea had earned her place at Thezmarr, had earned the right to wield a blade among the Guardians of the midrealms. She knew that.

'— no amount of cock-sucking is gonna save the kingdom from the tyrant building an army of monsters. The guild should never have let the bitch in. She's cursed us all. And for what? So the warriors can feel better about passing around some whore —'

Wilder moved, but Thea was quicker.

One second her throwing stars were in her hands; the next they were embedded in the patron's table, between each of his five fingers.

‘Call me a whore again,’ she said quietly, lacing the words with threat as she pressed her dagger not to the man’s throat, but to the soft flesh of his groin.

His beady eyes flared in panic. ‘You —’

‘Me,’ she said simply, her magic roaring in her veins along with her fury. She wanted to end him just as she’d ended those leering mercenaries in the storehouse.

The man’s companions didn’t move, each of them staring at her not with scorn or ridicule, but with fear.

They should fear me, Thea thought, shifting the blade slightly so the man winced. ‘Suddenly nothing to say?’ she asked casually.

Outside, thunder cracked, rattling the walls and windows of the tavern.

Thea felt it in her chest.

Lightning followed, illuminating the dimly lit bar in a vibrant flash. Rain sounded on the tin roof before another rumbling shook the ground and a near-deafening crack boomed.

Thea felt its call in her bones, her magic coming alive within her, thrumming in anticipation for what chaos would be unleashed next. She inhaled deeply through her nose, plucking her throwing stars from the table, the lecherous man’s fingers still splayed between them.

Glancing at him, she removed her dagger from his groin, where a wet patch had spread across his lap, the stench of urine filling the air. ‘Talk about me or another woman again like that, and...’ She gave a savage smile and cast a pointed look at his crotch. ‘Well, use your imagination.’

Another fork of lightning speared the sky outside and Thea took a step towards the window, the men and their poisonous words forgotten. She lifted her eyes skyward. Thick, dark clouds had gathered, blocking the sun, another rumble rolling through Harenth as more thunder clapped.

Wilder was at her side. ‘Thea...’ he said, his voice low in warning.

‘It’s not me,’ she whispered.

Her Warsword’s eyes widened. He glanced back at Wren, who was still sitting in the booth with the others, talking quietly with Kipp.

‘Then... it’s just a normal storm?’ he breathed, peering out at the downpour.

‘Doesn’t feel normal.’ Thea couldn’t explain the lure of the bedlam beyond the tavern, only that she recognised a part of herself in it, that it beckoned to her.

Without thinking, she was moving.

‘Thea —’

But Wilder’s voice was distant now, and as Thea left the Laughing Fox, the door swinging in her wake, she was completely untethered from herself, sealed away from the midrealms and locked in the lawlessness of the storm.

Her legs were moving, but she didn’t know where. Thea simply followed the pull of the tempest as it caused a vibration across the realms, offering a symphony of brilliant white light and thunder.

It sang to her, and coaxed her magic to the surface, a strange, primitive power, as old as time itself.

Thea found herself on the top of a small hill, overlooking the lower end of Hailford, which was clouded in the haze of the storm, rattling with the full fury of the gods.

The lightning quartered a tree.

And Thea fell into a vision.



The Veil towered at the edge of the world, a wall of impenetrable mist that hugged the earth before stretching up into the clouds, as though part of the sky had fallen in. It muted whatever lay beyond, and contained whatever lay within, a divider of realms.

A creature stood before it, tall and proud, membranous wings tucked in at its – her – back.

A woman.

Of sorts.

Her hair was shaved close to her skull and she wore simple, boiled leather armour across her lean frame, a hand resting on the pommel of a sword at her hip.

Thea was there, staring at her in wonder.

A brutal scar sliced through her right eye, from above her brow to halfway down her cheek.

Any.

She was the fiercest thing Thea had ever seen, the most terrifying.

Shadows leaked from between her wings, from the hand that hung casually at her side as she turned her back to the Veil, facing the unit of

half-humans and monsters behind her.

‘My people,’ she called, her strong voice projecting to the far lines. ‘We have fought long and hard these many years.’

A ripple of agreement passed through the unit.

‘But now we must fight harder. Now is the time we must come together, stronger than ever before,’ the woman called. ‘Do you know what they have done? To our brothers? To our sisters?’

Angry cries rang out before her, and the beating of weapons upon shields.

It sounded like war drums.

Shadows poured from the woman now, like serpents from a nest, and she turned to face the Veil once more.

‘We will come for them!’ she shouted, thrusting her hands forward, the darkness bowing to her command.

Cords of obsidian lashed at the mist, a vicious assault, wave after wave of shadow magic.

*The Veil shuddered —
Before it split in two.*



Thea staggered as the force of it shook the ground. But she was no longer in that strange land, no longer watching on like a ghost as evil incarnate brought down the shield between the midrealms and the darkness beyond.

She was on the same grassy hill, where she’d chased the storm to the outskirts of Hailford.

Wren was there, clutching her hands, pressing her brow to Thea’s clammy forehead. Around them, the storm had cleared, the afternoon sun high and bright once more, as though nothing had happened. But Thea panted, fighting back a wave of nausea, reeling from all she’d just witnessed, from that power felt across the realms, from the shock she still felt in her bones.

Wren was squeezing her hands hard, painfully hard.

And it was then that Thea looked at her sister, taking in the lack of colour in her cheeks, the tremor in her grip, the tears lining the eyes that mirrored her own.

‘You saw her too...’ Thea said in slow realisation.

Wren’s throat bobbed as she nodded, collapsing into Thea. ‘I saw her... The Daughter of Darkness. She’s been in my dreams, too.’

Thea held her sister, her heart hammering mercilessly, the back of her neck prickling with awareness. She peered over Wren’s head.

Wilder and Torj were waiting at the edge of the hill, stoic as ever.

But Cal and Kipp were staring at her and Wren, their mouths hanging open.

She knew that she and Wren had both been in the heart of the storm, had been tethered to it in such a way that there was no denying what they were.

Storm wielders.

And now their friends knew it too.

The Warswords and Guardians slowly approached her and Wren as they clung to one another by the blackened remains of the lone tree. But just as Thea dug for words of comfort for Wren, movement caught her eye.

And then a blanket of darkness blocked out the sun.

Ribbons of obsidian passed over the sky, tendrils coiling around the clouds as one giant shadow darkened all of Harenth.

‘What the fuck is that?’ Cal whispered as he reached her.

‘An army of darkness,’ Thea heard herself say, dread unfurling in her.

Wilder’s fingers laced through hers. ‘It’s heading straight for Tver.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

WILDER



They had their horses saddled within the half hour, and Wilder only paused at the city gates to talk to the commander of the Harenth army.

‘Tell the king and send word to Thezmarr that Warswords Hawthorne and Elderbrock ride ahead. We’ll send reports to the travelling forces when we can, understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘We’ll have units of Guardians from all over the midrealms joining at Notos,’ he told the bewildered-looking man. ‘Tell the king we’ll need as much support as possible. Tver’s army is small and isolated. Do you have a sea unit stationed at Settlers’ Port?’

‘Yes, sir. Though they won’t be ready to set sail until nightfall with cavalry, supplies and weapons to —’

‘We could buy passage on a trade ship and go ahead of the official forces?’ Kipp cut in. ‘If we can do part of the journey by sea and catch the wind, we’ll get there sooner.’

‘Exactly.’ Wilder was already moving, urging his stallion south, Torj at his side.

‘You want to tell me what the fuck all that was about back on the hill?’ his fellow Warsword said as they pressed into a canter.

‘Depends on what you saw,’ Wilder replied, the wind picking up around them.

‘I saw two women in the eye of a storm. I saw it answer them... Wilder, what the fuck was that?’

Wilder glanced over his shoulder, where Thea, Wren, Cal and Kipp rode a few feet behind, none of them speaking. He turned back to Torj. ‘You

know what it was.'

Torj's eyes widened in understanding. 'The heirs of Delmira... They're alive.'

Wilder gave him a nod.

'And they've been in Thezmarr this whole time?'

'Yes.'

'Gods, Hawthorne. How long have you known? How long have you been hiding this from Osiris? It's fucking *treason*.'

'I know,' Wilder said slowly.

'That's all the explanation I get? You're roping me into this now. I've actively participated in...' Torj looked around warily. 'In removing one of the fucking Delmirian heirs from Thezmarr. Away from the Guild Master, who explicitly told us to bring them to him. What the fuck, Hawthorne?'

'I didn't mean for you to get involved...'

'Well, I am now. At least tell me I'm on the right side of this.'

Wilder braced himself. 'I don't know yet. All I know is that I'm trying to keep Thea safe, trying to get her ready for the Great Rite. We need her.'

Torj shook his head in disbelief. 'You're mad. Raving fucking mad.'

'Very possibly.' He met his fellow Warsword's gaze. 'You won't send word back to Osiris?'

Torj glanced across at the two sisters, his expression softening for a moment. 'No,' he murmured. 'But I'll deny the shit out of everything if it comes to light.'

'Fair,' Wilder allowed.

'And you owe me a much better explanation than this. Once we've figured out getting to Tver, I expect the truth,' the Bear Slayer warned.

Guilt festered in Wilder's gut. 'You'll have it.'

Torj's nostrils flared, as though he could scent the lie on him. 'I assume you trust Cal and Kipp with the information?'

The two male Guardians in tow hadn't said a word about it, yet. Judging from their colour-drained faces, the lads were both in shock.

'Thea trusts them, therefore I trust them,' Wilder replied. 'Was it true there was a threat to Wren at Thezmarr?' he asked.

Torj gave a grim nod. 'Obviously I didn't know what Audra was on about at the time, but it sure seems like that was the case now. She could have bloody told me.'

'The fewer people who knew, the better.'

‘Well, that pool just grew by three... And judging from what I saw, the sun is setting on time for secrecy, fast. There’s no hiding that kind of power for long.’

Wilder didn’t reply, not when he knew Torj was right. Instead, he urged his horse into a gallop. They’d deal with it once they’d found a ship. There would be time enough then.



It was late afternoon by the time they reached the south-east dock of Settlers’ Port. Wilder left the group to buy passage for them and the horses to Tver. The young strategist had all but read his mind: they could sail from Harenth to the next kingdom in a matter of days if the wind was right, and by the gods, Wilder hoped it was right.

The black mass that had swarmed the sky gave no indication of the size of the enemy’s forces. The thought of it ravaging the beautiful lands of Tver was enough to make Wilder’s blood run cold. He hadn’t yet had the chance to speak to Thea, but he got the distinct impression that both she and her sister had seen something in the heart of that storm, something that he needed to know.

Wilder made quick work of obtaining passage, though he had to argue and barter to ensure that the horses remained above deck, rather than in the stuffy confines below. He would never force a Tverrian stallion down into the stocks, nor any horse, for that matter.

The ruddy-faced captain was not impressed. ‘We’re not scheduled to depart for another two hours,’ he said gruffly.

‘You’ll leave when I say so,’ Wilder replied with a pointed glance at his Warsword totem.

He found the others exactly where he’d left them. No one was speaking, but Thea and Wren kept exchanging worried glances, as though they could engage in an entire conversation with a look, a silent language that only siblings could speak.

‘We’re to board *The Furies’ Will* in thirty minutes,’ Wilder told them all. ‘There are markets just by the gates, if you need provisions. Don’t stray too far. Be back with time to spare. If you’re not here, you get left behind.’

He wanted to go to Thea, but she and Wren darted away to the stalls together, leaving the young men looking more bewildered than ever.

Wilder went to the pier, his horse in tow. Resting against a thick post, he looked out at the port, breathing in the briny air, tasting salt on his tongue. He'd been a fool, allowing himself a moment of happiness amid all the chaos. He should have known better than to forget his duty, his sole purpose – fighting the darkness, defeating the monsters. Instead, he'd been swept up in Thea, in the bliss they had shared. For a brief pocket of time, he'd glimpsed what he might have had, were he someone else, were *she* someone else. No cares in the world, just the two of them, laughing, fucking and drinking each other in. He would have spent his whole life getting to know her, her body, her mind, her soul... Even at the Laughing Fox he'd been kidding himself, pretending that sitting with comrades, that *enjoying their company*, was a reality for him. He had even imagined a time where he might call them friends. *Friends*. He'd kept the word at arm's length since Talemir had left the guild.

'I can hear you thinking from over there, brother,' Torj said, coming to stand beside Wilder and following his gaze out to the sapphire waters.

'There's lots to think about,' he replied.

'I'll say.'

Wilder shifted against the post, the swords strapped to his back digging in uncomfortably. 'About what you saw this morning...'

His fellow Warsword offered an amused smile. 'What about it?'

'I...' But Wilder suddenly didn't know what he wanted to say. That it had been a moment of weakness? That it would never happen again? That it meant nothing? He didn't have the energy to lie, and furthermore, Torj would never believe him. The Bear Slayer had known there was something between him and Thea from the beginning, and he had never judged.

Wilder tipped his head to the sky and sighed hard, bracing himself against the roiling sensation in his gut, the tightness in his chest. 'I don't know,' he said at last.

Torj hummed in understanding. 'I always figured you'd struggle with any sort of relationship, but to find out she's a royal... Well, you're fucked, aren't you?'

Wilder gave a dark laugh, passing a hand over his weary face. 'Is that your professional assessment?'

‘Something like that.’ Torj shook his head in disbelief. ‘That’s why you went to Delmira.’

Wilder nodded. ‘I thought it might trigger a memory, a clue as to what happened to her and her sister.’

‘And did it?’

‘Not exactly.’

Torj shifted on his feet. ‘Does she know that the Daughter of Darkness hunts her?’

‘No.’ The word came out clipped and cold.

But Torj was undeterred. ‘Does her sister?’

‘Not to my knowledge.’

‘Are you going to tell them?’

‘I had planned to... At some point.’

‘Oh?’ Torj scoffed. ‘And how do you think that’s going to go down? Keeping a secret like that?’

‘I’m used to keeping secrets.’

‘Of that I have no doubt, brother.’ Torj elbowed him. ‘As I keep telling you... You’re gonna have to open up sometime. Let people in again, you know?’

‘I was doing that, with her. Or starting to, at least.’

‘She’s not the only one around, is she?’

‘I don’t feel that way about you, Torj,’ Wilder quipped.

Torj chuckled. ‘You know what I mean. Talemir is gone. Malik is... Malik. But... I’ve been here. This whole time. Since before you were even a Warsword.’

Wilder ran a hand through his hair. The warrior next to him had been as close to a friend as he’d had over the years. No matter how angry, how unpleasant Wilder had been, he’d never strayed. Wilder had often likened the Bear Slayer to a thorn in his side, but now...

‘You have,’ he allowed.

‘So maybe it’s time to step outside those walls.’

Wilder spotted Thea and Wren returning from the markets, several packages in their hands. What were they up to?

‘Maybe,’ he heard himself say.

Torj was watching him watch Thea, that smile still on his face. ‘Perhaps you understand Talemir’s actions a little better now?’ he said quietly.

‘That was different,’ Wilder replied tersely.

But Torj simply raised a brow. ‘If there’s one thing that transcends time and distance and all else, it’s love.’

Then he strode back to the others, leaving his words to sink deep into Wilder, and settle around his scarred heart.



It was nearing dusk when the company settled aboard *The Furies' Will*. Despite the circumstances that had brought them here, despite all that awaited them in Tver, an ember of joy sparked in Wilder as he watched Thea at the bow of the ship. Her eyes were bright and full of exhilaration as the ropes were thrown back to the pier and the vessel began to pull away from the port, the sea air catching in the tail of her braid.

She caught his gaze from across the deck, and smiled.

That she could smile after everything she’d been through and everything she knew was to come left him in awe. And that she smiled for him...

Wilder went to her, and when she reached for him, he didn’t pull away. Instead, he stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her close for all the world to see.

For as long as she’d have him, Althea Zoltaire was his. And he no longer cared who knew it.

Maybe she should know it too.

‘Are you alright?’ he murmured into her hair, breathing in the familiar scent of her, warmth blooming in his chest.

She stroked the bare skin of his forearm where his sleeves were rolled to the elbow, such a casually intimate gesture. ‘I am now.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘Soon,’ she said quietly, still looking out to the stretch of water before them. ‘How much do you think we should tell the others about me and Wren?’

Wilder tightened his grip around her, so she was pressed flush against his front, protected against the chill of the wind. Gods, he never wanted to let her go, but who she was... He thought back to those moments on the hill, watching the storm carve through the sky, watching it circle Thea and her sister as their minds were transported elsewhere, somewhere Wilder

couldn't reach. He recalled the open-mouthed stares of her friends and Torj's words to him on the dock about letting people in.

'Perhaps it's time you told them everything.'

'Everything?' Thea tensed in his arms. 'Even about my fate stone?'

The mention of the cursed object left a bitter taste in Wilder's mouth and pain throbbing at the back of his throat, but he kept holding her.

'It's your choice, and I'll support whatever you want to do,' he said. 'But answer this... Doesn't it get heavy? Carrying it around with you, on your shoulders, with no one to ease the burden?'

'You have helped ease the burden.'

'I'm one man...' He realised he was echoing Torj's sentiments, and as he did, he saw the stark truth of them.

Thea heaved a sigh in his arms. 'Is there a place we can all talk?'

'I booked us a cabin. It'll be cramped, but no one will overhear.'

Thea twisted, turning to him, her hand reaching up to cup the side of his face and stroke his cheek with her thumb. 'Thank you.'

Tell her how you feel, the voice in his head demanded as he stared into those stormy eyes. *Say the words*.

But the words lodged in his throat, refusing to form on his tongue. If he told her, he'd lose her, just like everyone else.

So instead, Wilder leant down, tucked a strand of bronze hair behind her ear and kissed her. He kissed her soundly, thoroughly, as though with each brush of his lips, he could pour those words into her and she'd know.



The group gathered in the cabin Wilder had acquired, but with two Warswords among them, it was even more cramped than he had anticipated. It was a narrow space, with two bunk beds shoved against either wall. The whole frame creaked as Wilder sat down on the edge of one of the lower ones, Thea taking the place beside him.

Torj sat on the opposite mattress, while Cal rested his back against the door and Kipp sat cross-legged on the floor. Wren joined him there, placing the packages from the markets before her, along with a mortar and pestle. Furies knew where she'd got those.

Wilder had given Thea and her sister a moment before summoning the others, and he was quietly glad the pair had reconciled. Though Thea had tried to hide it, he'd known how much hurt she'd carried with her about what Wren had done, and how much she'd missed the alchemist in the weeks that had followed.

'So,' Kipp said loudly, looking around expectantly. 'I'm assuming someone is going to fill us in... any day now.'

Thea huffed a laugh. 'I don't know where to start...'

Wilder placed a hand on her knee, squeezing gently.

Every one of them noticed. The small gesture clearly banished any notion of something casual between them.

But Wilder didn't remove his hand, and he sagged a little in relief as Thea covered it with her own.

Kipp cleared his throat. 'You might want to start with that storm...?' he suggested carefully.

'Right,' Thea said, drawing a deep breath.

Pride swelled in Wilder as she told them everything. The tale was a harrowing one, punctuated by sorrow and despair, eliciting quiet gasps of shock from the others.

When Thea was done, she looked at him, tired but somehow brighter, and he knew she'd done the right thing, whatever happened next.

Torj had stretched out on the opposite lower bunk, his expression remaining cool the entire time, whereas Cal and Kipp... They looked like stunned fish, their eyes bulging, their mouths agape.

It was Kipp who at last broke the shocked silence with a splutter directed at Wren. 'Gods, I *never* would have spoken to you like that if I'd known you were a fucking – I mean, if I'd know you were a *princess*.'

Wren fixed him with a stern look. 'Maybe you shouldn't speak to any woman like that, you prat.'

'Good gods, a princess just called me a prat,' he breathed.

'I'll call you a lot worse if you don't cut it out.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' Kipp gushed, somehow managing to give a messy bow while still cross-legged on the floor.

Both Wren and Thea groaned.

'If you insist on bowing and scraping, you should direct it to Thea.' Wren waved a hand at her. 'She's the heir.'

Kipp's eyes bulged again and he scrambled to his feet, bowing to Thea. 'My apologies, Majesty.'

A snort sounded from Torj. 'If you want to go down the formal address route, it's actually *Your Highness*, as she's a princess,' he offered helpfully.

Wilder laughed. 'That doesn't go over so well, I've learnt,' he said with a glance at Thea.

She elbowed him. 'You're not helping.'

Wilder looked to Cal, who still hadn't said a word. The poor Guardian seemed to be struggling to process it all. Wilder hardly blamed him. When he'd found out, he'd fucked off for three weeks to hunt monsters.

'Cal?' Thea prompted.

He started to shake his head. 'I just can't believe it...'

'I can't say I was overly thrilled by the news myself,' Thea allowed. 'Nor was someone else, for that matter.' She knocked her knee against Wilder's and heat flushed his neck.

Cal was blinking slowly, his facial muscles still slack. 'All this time... The things we've told you, Thea... What you've seen and heard... You're a *princess*.'

'I'm your friend,' Thea told him firmly. 'And there's no crown here, no kingdom. I'm a Guardian of the midrealms, just like you. Nothing has to change.'

'Whatever you say, Your Highness,' Kipp said from the floor.

Thea's gaze snapped to him, and Wilder tensed, recognising that fiery look —

But Thea relaxed as she, too, spotted the gleam of mischief in Kipp's eyes.

'Prick,' she muttered.

'That's hardly princess-like,' he retorted.

'Good thing I'm not a princess, then.'

'Come to think of it, you are a bit high and mighty sometimes, Thea...' Kipp said thoughtfully.

Wilder had half a mind to kick him, but he knew what the young man was doing in his own irritating way. He was showing Thea that he would treat her just the same as before, and he knew how much that would mean to her.

Cal, on the other hand, looked panicked. 'Gods... I mean, you've seen my cock —'

‘And now you’re saying “cock” to a princess,’ Kipp chastised.

Wilder let his gaze slide to Torj’s apprentice, a hint of threat lacing his words. ‘And *why* has she seen your cock, Callahan?’

Cal went bright red. ‘Not like that, I swear. I – I just...’ he stammered. ‘When you’ve gotta go, you’ve gotta go.’

Wilder knew he was being cruel, but watching the poor bastard squirm was certainly entertaining.

Kipp was shaking his head. ‘And now you’re talking about pissing in front of a princess. *Two* princesses. And to think, she’s seen you waving that dick around —’

‘Kipp! I don’t wave my anything – for fuck’s – for *goodness*’ sake,’ he corrected himself, blushing a deeper crimson. ‘You can’t talk to her like that.’

Kipp folded his arms over his chest and turned to Thea. ‘Your Highness, can I talk to you like that?’

‘Absolutely.’

He whirled back to Cal. ‘See? It’s practically a royal order to be ourselves.’

Cal put his head in his hands and groaned.

Wilder couldn’t help laughing, if only out of sympathy. He addressed Torj. ‘Are they always like this?’

‘Yes,’ Torj, Thea and Wren answered in unison.

As they settled back into a mixture of chatter and bickering, Wilder watched Thea hand her fate stone to Wren, who had concocted a strange paste in that mortar of hers.

‘What’s she doing?’ he asked Thea.

She didn’t take her eyes off her sister, who was coating the piece of jade with a thick layer of the gunk. ‘She’s treating it with the same stuff as before...’

‘You mean to mute your magic?’

‘Yes.’

Wren caught his eye from the floor. ‘I told her I think it’s a stupid idea.’

Beside him, Thea sighed. ‘I can’t control it, Wren. You saw what happened in Harenth. The storm lured me out, like a lamb to the slaughter. I was called to it, somehow linked to its chaos. If you hadn’t been there to pull me back —’

Wilder's gaze snapped to hers. Was *that* what had happened? Thea had succumbed to the lightning's thrall? He knew little of the royal lines, but surely the magic within her was a fair match for any storm of natural means?

'I can't have that happen again,' she continued. 'Not with everything else going on.'

'With enough training, you and I could have struck that army from the sky,' Wren told her.

Thea's hand tightened over Wilder's. 'I know...' she murmured.

It was the first time he'd heard her admit anything about her power and how deep it ran. He'd seen it for himself, of course, on the cliffs of Thezmarr, and amid the ruins of Dorinth as her lightning fought a reaper off *him*. But she'd never spoken about it, never acknowledged just how strong she was...

'That kind of magic could help us,' he said gently.

'It could if I knew how to contain it, control it,' she replied.

'You haven't hurt anyone,' he tried to reassure her. 'You saved me... Twice.'

'I hurt Wren in training,' she argued.

'No, you didn't,' Wren cut in. 'I was fine.'

But Thea continued as though she hadn't heard her sister. 'As for what happened at the ruins... I didn't know what I was doing. I just —'

'Followed your instincts. Perhaps that's all you need to do.' He was aware that the others had grown quiet once more, that they were listening in awe, reminded of who sat among them.

But Thea shook her head. 'I won't risk it.'

Wilder silently cursed Audra, wondering if it was her session of tough love that had instilled such fear in Thea.

Wren, however, seemed to accept her sister's decision. 'This should soak overnight,' she said, motioning to the fate stone in the bowl. 'Then it should work as before.'

'You're sure?'

'As sure as I can be,' the alchemist replied.

'Is there anything to be done about that thing?' Torj asked, nodding to the stone resting in the mortar before letting his gaze settle on Wilder. There was understanding there, and suddenly it was a relief — a relief that someone other than Wilder himself knew of his torment. That he had just

found Thea after all this time, only to learn that he would not have her for long, that she was bound by fate, on top of all else that burdened her.

‘No,’ Thea replied bluntly.

‘There has to be a way,’ Kipp started earnestly.

‘There’s not,’ Thea said, not unkindly. ‘I have read every book I could get my hands on. My death is carved there, as clear as I sit before you now. It will come to pass, no matter how much I fight against it.’ She rubbed her temples. ‘Does anyone else have any life-changing news to share or secrets to confess?’

Wilder’s training alone kept him still and unflinching, though his stomach roiled with unease and he felt Torj’s eyes on him.

Instead, he put an arm around Thea’s shoulders. ‘I think we’ve had enough of that for one night.’

‘Thank the gods,’ she muttered, moving to lie back on the narrow bed.

He stopped her. ‘You’re not sleeping here.’

She frowned. ‘What?’

‘You didn’t think I’d let the lost heir of Delmira sleep with the riff-raff in this shithole, did you?’

Wren cleared her throat from the floor. ‘Uh... what about the *other* lost heir?’

Torj scoffed. ‘So *now* you’re a princess?’

She gave him a withering glare and Wilder had to suppress a laugh. ‘You’ll manage,’ he told her.

‘Maybe lock the door this time,’ Torj supplied.

Kipp laughed loudly at that.

Thea was already on her feet. ‘Lead the way, Warsword,’ she said, a sly gleam in her eye.

And so Wilder did.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THEA



Thea expected a cabin similar to the ones their friends were occupying, and frankly, she was just thankful to have privacy with Wilder, to not have to hide what they had. But when Wilder pushed open the door, she nearly gasped.

While it was compact, the cabin was luxurious. A plush rug greeted them at the foot of a bed big enough for two, with a wooden bathtub placed beneath the window, as well as a bench and basin.

Thea turned to the Warsword, who was shutting the door behind them. ‘How did you manage this?’

He offered a conspirator’s grin before he plucked her king’s coin from his pocket and held it out to her. ‘I figured after that stunt he pulled at the palace, he owed you one. Or several, considering the feast we had at the Fox.’

Stunned, Thea took the coin. ‘I had no idea the Hand of Death was also a cutpurse.’

Wilder gave her a lazy smile as he drew her to him. ‘There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Princess.’

Thea’s pulse fluttered at the insinuation. ‘Perhaps it’s time I got to know you better...’

He ran a knuckle along her jaw and hooked it under her chin, tilting her face to his. ‘That might take some time.’

Thea met his lust-filled stare, her breath hitching. ‘Then you’d best get started.’

Wilder enveloped her, his mouth sweeping across hers in a punishing kiss. She opened for him and his tongue met hers, coaxing a moan from her

as she grabbed a fistful of his shirt, wrenching him down to her.

He captured her lower lip between his teeth, and Thea burned for him. A flash of pain bloomed before he was kissing her again, sending fierce desire rushing through her. His leather-and-rosewood scent wrapped around her senses, stoking the fire within.

She raked her fingernails down his sculpted chest in silent demand and he growled against her lips, tempting a smile from her as he broke away to haul his shirt over his head.

‘This what you want?’ he said, his voice thick with lust.

Thea surveyed that powerful torso, feeling her undergarments dampen as she drank in the broad planes of his chest, the defined ridges of his stomach, and those grooves that she desperately wanted to run her tongue down.

‘Halfway there,’ Thea replied, her hands already at his belt. She could see the thick outline of his cock straining against his pants.

He gave her a dark, delicious smile. ‘Oh, we’re not halfway anywhere. Not by a long shot, Princess.’

Smouldering need pulsed between her legs.

Wilder didn’t waste time with the buttons of her shirt; he dragged it up over her head without undoing it and tossed it aside. His gaze was hungry as he removed the band around her breasts as well, cupping each one in his rough hands and squeezing. Thea arched into him with a soft cry, heat swelling within.

When he rolled her nipple beneath his thumb and she bit back a desperate whimper, the bastard had the audacity to give her a smug smile before stripping her pants and undergarments away.

Naked, she stood before him, her breasts rising and falling with her short, shallow breaths of anticipation.

‘Did you lock the door?’ she managed.

Wilder laughed. ‘I did.’ Then he was moving, shoving a chair beneath the handle for good measure. ‘No one’s fucking interrupting this.’

He picked her up, carrying her not to the bed, but to the bench with the basin. There, he set her down and spread her legs wide, hooking them over his shoulders as he knelt down before her.

He moaned at the sight of her, and Thea’s stomach clenched at being so incredibly exposed. He’d done this before, but... somehow she felt even more naked in this position.

Any thoughts she had disintegrated at the first sweep of his tongue up her centre. Her legs shook either side of him, even as he gripped her thighs.

A loud moan broke free from her as he tasted her, teasing her clit, pleasure uncoiling deep within her. Her entire body turned molten as he worked her with his mouth and slid a finger inside her.

‘Gods,’ she panted, feeling a bead of sweat drip between her shoulder blades.

She tilted her hips towards his face and he smiled against her skin before obliging her silent command.

He added another finger, driving into her with long, luxurious strokes, adding to that intense pressure that had started to build, the very same that was eliciting cries of ecstasy from her.

‘Wilder...’ she murmured, her fingers tangling in his hair, forcing his gaze to hers. ‘I want to taste you too.’

Seeming to understand, he stood, taking a step back to finally remove his pants, his hard length springing free. Kicking the fabric from his ankles, he picked her up again and took her to the rug. There, he lay down on his back and pulled her down with him.

‘Put your knees on either side of my head,’ he told her.

‘What?’ Thea was no maiden, but this...?

‘You heard me.’ He was already reaching for her hips. ‘Face that way.’

Thea’s heart hammered mercilessly, as did the pulse of desire between her legs as her Warsword positioned her over him, so that she faced his cock and the most intimate part of her hovered above him.

A thrill rushed through her as she understood and slid down his body, baring herself to him in the most deliciously vulnerable way while closing her mouth over the crown of him. He was as hard as steel, and the hint of salt on her tongue brought that dark frenzy of desire straight to the surface.

Wilder made a low, rumbling sound of need against her skin and licked her from beneath, gripping her backside hard, spreading her. Her own moan was muffled by his cock as it slid into her mouth. She could take it deeper like this somehow, and she did, allowing the tip to knock against the back of her throat.

Wilder answered her by sliding his tongue inside her.

And holy Furies, she was going to die from the pleasure of it.

She burned for him, her whole body alight with desire and need and something far deeper. A feeling she wasn’t ready to acknowledge. All she

would acknowledge was that doing this with him was unlike anything else, and that she felt tethered to him beyond just their bodies. There was something so intimate, so illicit about the act that had her trembling with longing as she braced herself above the Warsword, as he coaxed that pleasure that unfurled at the base of her spine and started to rise through her whole body.

He replaced his tongue with those two deft fingers, pumping them inside her as he lapped at her clit and she swallowed him down, Wilder bucking beneath her.

She was going to lose her mind like this.

Determined to see him come undone, she moved so she was seated between his thighs, wanting the focus to be solely on him before she fell apart.

Thea slid her mouth over his cock, taking him deep into her throat and finding a steady rhythm.

‘*Fuck,*’ Wilder muttered, his eyes closed, his ridged abdomen tensing.

The sight of him losing control had heat swelling between her legs, desire blazing as she worked down his length and cupped his balls.

His fingers speared through her hair and he jerked involuntarily beneath her, a low rumbling noise escaping him. ‘You keep doing that and I’m going to come.’

Thea smiled against him, holding him steady as she continued those lavishing strokes with her mouth.

Wilder’s grip in her hair tightened and a deep moan broke from his lips, the sound so wanton that Thea vowed to commit it to memory, and to do everything in her power to make sure she heard it again.

‘Thea,’ he murmured, before his hips arched to her, his whole body tensing.

Her Warsword cried out as he climaxed, spilling into her mouth.

Thea took it all, and only when he was trembling beneath her did she slide off his cock and survey him.

His mouth was parted as he tried to catch his breath, his cheeks flushed and beads of sweat dotting his broad chest.

‘Furies save me,’ he whispered, blinking up at her in awe. ‘You’ll be the end of me.’

Thea smiled. ‘I can think of worse ways to go.’

‘I’d die a happy man...’ Wilder reached for her. ‘But I’m not finished with you yet.’

Thea raised a brow, arousal pulsing through her as she saw that he was already hard for her again.

‘Warsword stamina,’ he said with a wicked grin, sitting up and pulling her into his lap.

When she passed the Great Rite, she’d have to thank the Furies herself.

Wilder positioned her so that she straddled him, her back to his chest, his erection pressed between her legs, his muscular thighs tensing under her own.

‘I have to be inside you,’ he rasped, running a hand down her sweat-slicked spine before grasping her hip. ‘Ride me, Thea.’

‘Yes...’ she murmured, shifting her weight so that the crown of him rubbed against her entrance. There, she lingered, lowering herself just over the tip before lifting again, teasing him, and herself.

‘Thea...’ His voice was low and already heavy again with need.

Gods, she loved it when he said her name like that. She thought she had known power when wielding a blade or a storm, but this? He made her feel like a queen.

Wilder reached around and brushed her clit with his fingers, trailing through the wetness with an appreciative groan. Thea cried out at the heat swelling between her thighs as he touched her. He somehow seemed to fill all the space around her. He was everywhere all at once, wrapping her in him.

‘Gods, what are you doing to me?’ he murmured against her shoulder, his beard scraping just enough to cause tiny bursts of pain that mingled with the pleasure.

Thea herself couldn’t bear it any longer. She needed him.

In one smooth glide, she sank down onto the length of him.

‘Fuck,’ Wilder barked, bowing beneath her.

Thea shifted her hips, allowing him even deeper before she rose up on her knees, only to slam back down on him again.

She gasped at the overwhelming sensation. He filled every inch of her, stretching her and hitting a spot deep within her that made stars burst in her vision.

Then his fingers started at her clit again, circling and teasing until her moans grew louder and louder. She was completely uninhibited, her breasts

bouncing as she rode him, her backside slapping against his pelvis as that coil of desire took hold, unravelling her —

And then she was being lifted.

Wilder pulled out of her to flip them around, so that she was on her back in the plush fur of the rug and he was braced above her, his gaze ravenous and intense in the low light of the cabin.

‘Tell me you feel it too,’ he growled, pushing into her.

Thea wrapped her legs around him, giving him better access, drawing him deeper. ‘I —’

‘I need to hear you say it,’ he said, his teeth closing over her nipple.

She gasped. There it was again, that unique blend of pleasure and pain that was so inherently *Wilder*.

‘I feel it,’ she panted, her heart seizing. ‘I feel everything with you.’

Thea didn’t realise her Warsword had been holding back, but at her words, whatever leash he’d kept on himself snapped completely. He grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head, causing her to arch beneath him as he fucked her hard and deep.

Each stroke was more brutal than the last, but Thea met every thrust with a tilt of her hips, begging for more, taking everything he gave her.

And he gave her everything.

She kissed him fiercely, her tongue tangling with his, his beard scraping her jaw. They seemed to breathe and move as one. Completely and utterly joined.

It wasn’t pleasure alone that roared in her veins, but her magic too. It answered him like it answered the call of a storm. She felt him not only inside her body, but inside her soul, inside the very fibre of her being, coursing through her like an unbroken tempest.

Power met power and bound together, two threads entwining, forging something new, something stronger.

Thea writhed beneath his powerful grip, desperate to mark him with her fingernails, to claim him in some visible way, but her arms were still pinned above her.

He didn’t release her. Instead, he thrust into her harder.

‘Wilder,’ she breathed, the intensity of it nearly shattering her.

Wilder’s deep, carnal moan in her ear was her undoing. It unravelled that building pressure, causing her to clench around him as she spiralled out of control. Pleasure climbed higher and higher, and just when she thought

she would crest and fall into oblivion, it reached a new peak, a new level of madness.

And then she was beyond the point of no return, her climax hitting her like a bolt of lightning to a surging wave, one she rode as it crashed through every part of her, breaking her into a million pieces.

Wilder gave a shout, shuddering into her with his own release.

On and on that pleasure went, until Thea was nearly sobbing with the force of it.

Still braced over her, still inside her, Wilder met her gaze, a trembling breath escaping him, his silver eyes glistening.

‘I —’ His voice cracked with emotion.

Thea freed her scar-flecked hands from his and reached up to cup his face. ‘I know,’ she murmured, and kissed him softly.



Thea didn't know how long they lay there, tangled in one another, the sheer intensity of the cord between them rendering her speechless, raw.

In what must have been the early hours of the morning, Wilder finally peeled himself away from her, tugged on some clothes and left the cabin without another word. A short while later, he returned carrying two giant pails of hot water and tipped them into the tub as though they weighed nothing. Thea watched him from where she still lay on the rug. If she didn't know any better, she'd say he was fussing.

He dipped his elbow into the water and hissed at the heat, adding a pail of cold water into the mix. He also set up a small table beside the tub, where he placed a tray of bread and cheese, and a goblet of wine for each of them.

Wilder Hawthorne was definitely fussing. Over her.

‘Should be a good temperature now,’ he told her, offering her a hand up. They were the first words he'd spoken since they'd...

Smiling to herself, Thea let him help her, the blanket she'd been clutching falling to the floor in a puddle at her feet. Wilder's gaze darkened at the sight of her naked body, but he led her to the tub and held her hand as she stepped in.

She sank down into the heat, moaning softly as the tension drained from her muscles.

‘Perhaps you should join me this time...’ she ventured.

Wilder surveyed her. ‘Perhaps I should.’

She watched as he stripped off his clothes and swept his hair back in a knot, his muscles rippling with each movement. Gods, she would never tire of the sight of him, every incredible inch of him... Her gaze fell to the heavy cock between his legs —

‘Don’t get any ideas, Princess,’ he warned as he stepped into the tub with her. He took up the spot at the far end, so they were face to face. He seemed even more enormous confined to the bath, his arms resting against the sides. His long, muscular legs settled either side of her and his gaze trailed over her face and then down to the tops of her breasts.

‘Don’t get any ideas, Warsword,’ she laughed.

He leant back against the tub, a grin spreading across his face, and Furies save her, it melted her heart. She had never seen him like this before... Not really. It made her want to cherish the moment that much more, knowing that not many ever got to see Wilder Hawthorne like this, with his guard down. Gods, he was beautiful, and gods, she was happy. The sheer joy in her chest was barely containable, and the warmth that settled there threatened to overwhelm her. It was as though time had stopped for them, and now...

‘Is this wrong?’ she asked quietly, realising that further east, Tver was likely at the mercy of the darkness and its servants – that somewhere out there, people were dying.

Wilder pinned her with a look of understanding. ‘I learnt long ago to take the small pleasures of life when I can.’

‘But —’

‘What can you do from here, Thea? We are on our way to aid Tver. Tomorrow we will strategise with Torj and the others. But for now, we can do no more. And when we step foot on land again, who knows when we might have a night like this?’ His words were earnest and gentle, yet firm.

Thea fought against the tightness in her chest and nodded. She reached for her drink and took a grateful sip.

‘How do you think the others took the news?’ she asked, placing the goblet back on the table and lathering soap onto a cloth. The conversation

with her friends about heirs and storm wielders seemed like a lifetime ago now.

‘Better than I did.’

Thea laughed. ‘True.’

He sent a splash of water her way and she splashed him back.

When the bath settled again, she began to wash herself. ‘I thought they’d ask if I was going to claim the kingdom, take back the non-existent crown, you know?’

‘It exists, somewhere. Those sorts of things always manage to escape the fire, so to speak.’

Thea tried to picture it: a crown out there somewhere with her name on it. She couldn’t.

‘And the questions will come,’ Wilder added, his fingers circling the surface of the water.

‘I know.’

‘What will you tell them?’

‘That it’s not what I want.’

Wilder pulled her foot into his lap and rubbed the sole with his thumb. She nearly moaned. ‘And what of duty?’ he asked. His words weren’t accusatory, weren’t laced with some ulterior motive, only thoughtfulness.

‘You think I have a duty to a kingdom that no longer exists?’

‘It doesn’t matter what I think. What do *you* think?’

Thea let her head rest against the rim of the tub and closed her eyes as Wilder worked his fingers against the tender parts of her feet. ‘I wonder what’s to gain by trying to raise something from the ashes... By trying to claim something that has been forgotten for over thirty years,’ she admitted. She had barely allowed herself to think of it, and as she spoke now, she realised she still didn’t know what to make of her heritage and who her family had once been.

Wilder was quiet, waiting for her to process, to gather her fears.

‘What if I did reclaim it?’ she asked quietly. ‘What then? For what purpose would I rule?’

Wilder shrugged. ‘To even the playing field in the midrealms? To make a difference? You could see the women warriors of Thezmarr reinstated... You could do a lot of things, Thea.’

But Thea shifted, the water sloshing around them. ‘You spoke of duty... What of a ruler’s true duty?’

‘And what’s that?’

‘To provide an heir.’

Wilder flinched.

‘That’s not something I want,’ she told him. ‘Not ever.’ Again, she waited for him to tell her that she’d change her mind, that all women did when they got older. She’d heard the same patronising notion plenty of times in the fortress. But no such words slipped from his mouth. ‘Does that make me —’

‘It makes you, you. And you are perfect,’ he said.

She raised a sceptical brow, all their arguments, all their tense moments flashing before her. ‘Since when?’

‘Since always,’ he said, smiling softly. ‘I was just too stubborn to see it.’

Tears burned Thea’s eyes, but she didn’t let them fall. ‘I like you like this...’

Wilder wiggled a brow. ‘Wet and naked?’

Thea laughed. ‘Relaxed. Yourself... You’re perfect, too.’

A cloud passed over Wilder’s expression, so quickly Thea thought she’d imagined it.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

He studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. ‘I never thought I would have this.’ He gestured between them.

Thea waited, watching as his brow furrowed and he struggled to find the words.

His throat bobbed. ‘And now I have it... I’m terrified.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of losing it. Of losing you.’

Thea’s heart fractured. She knew he had lost others he’d cared about, and she knew that although her fate stone wasn’t currently around her neck, it would always be between them.

Water sluiced down her as she moved, settling in his lap, straddling him.

Even now, his desire pressed against her and she dipped her head to his, kissing him.

‘You won’t lose me, not until fate itself comes to claim me.’ She shifted her hips, angling herself at the tip of his cock. ‘I promise you that, Warsword.’

He claimed her mouth brutally, his hands tangling in her wet hair, pulling her down onto him. Wilder sheathed himself inside her and Thea cried out.

His teeth scraped along her neck as he began to move beneath her, filling her with everything he had.

‘Don’t make vows you can’t keep, Princess.’

But every thought had emptied from Thea’s head as the intoxicating force of him took hold, and she kissed him again, hard enough to bruise, hard enough to pretend she hadn’t heard those words.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THEA



Thea stood at the bow of *The Furies' Will* and looked out onto the white caps of the water, lapping in the wind. The early morning air was crisp against her skin, a shock after the delicious warmth of being in Wilder's arms all night, but good. She needed something to bring her out of the haze of him; she needed a clear head.

The captain had told her that if the conditions remained favourable, they might see Tver on the horizon before sundown. Which seemed far too soon. Thea wasn't ready to leave the rocking comfort of the sea, or face the darkness that awaited them beyond it.

'There you are,' Wren's voice sounded behind her.

'Here I am,' Thea echoed, greeting her sister with a smile.

Wren's whole body seemed to sag as she came to stand beside her. 'I think that's the first time you've smiled at me since your initiation test.'

'Well... We haven't seen much of one another.'

'You were avoiding me.'

Thea sighed. 'I was.'

Wren nudged her. 'I am sorry, you know. For keeping that from you.'

Thea swallowed. 'I know.'

'I was just trying to do right by you, to protect you.'

'I know, Wren.' Thea touched her sister's arm. 'I forgive you.'

'You do?'

Thea held Wren's hopeful gaze and nodded. 'Life's too short,' she said, echoing Wilder's words. 'Too short to hold grudges against the people you love.'

Wren gave her a sad, knowing smile. 'Here.' She rummaged in her pocket and produced Thea's fate stone.

As soon as the piece of jade hit Thea's palm, it was as though a heavy blanket had been thrown over her senses. Suddenly, she felt off-kilter, like the world had tilted beneath her feet and she wasn't seeing clearly.

'Thee?' Wren prompted.

'Is it stronger than it was?' she asked, gripping the rail of the ship to steady herself.

Wren looked at her strangely. 'No. I treated it exactly as I always have...'

Thea frowned, taking the fate stone between her fingers to examine it. The number *twenty-seven* had grown darker, but it had been doing that for some time now. Enovius was coming for her, slow and steady.

'Thea,' Wren said, forcing her to look up. 'It's not the alchemy that's stronger. It's *you*. That's why it feels so different. You've never had this much power to suppress before.'

'Oh.'

'How do you feel?'

'Queasy... Like a piece of me is missing.'

'Because it is. Do you really think this —'

'Wren, please,' Thea cut in. She thought her sister would continue to argue, but she seemed to understand that Thea needed to do this her own way, in her own time.

Wren simply rested her elbows against the railing and looked out across the sapphire sea. 'We haven't talked about her...' she ventured quietly.

Thea knew who her sister meant.

The Daughter of Darkness. The winged woman who had shattered a part of the Veil. *Anya*.

'Do you think it was real?' Wren asked.

Thea followed her gaze across the water as the morning sun crept a little higher. 'We both know it was.'

'They had wings, Thee...'

'I almost did too,' she admitted, recalling the searing pain of the reaper's talons piercing her flesh in the Bloodwoods. 'I could have been one of them, could have been sucked into that army of darkness...'

'But you weren't.'

‘No.’ Thea took a breath. ‘But this woman... She’s the fiercest thing I’ve ever seen. She scares me.’

Wren rested her hand atop Thea’s. ‘Then consider me terrified.’

Thea gave her a questioning look.

Wren chewed her lip for a moment. ‘You’re the one person I know who doesn’t get scared.’

‘What?’ Thea baulked. ‘I get scared, Wren. I’m scared every fucking day.’

‘Then you hide it well.’ Her sister’s fingers laced through hers. ‘We’ll get through this.’

Thea squeezed her hand in answer.



Later, their group sat around a small table on deck, the midday sun beating down on them, warm despite the sea breeze whipping about them. Wilder was showing her how to oil her armour to keep it in good condition as they talked.

‘By now, the whole of the midrealms will have been alerted about the invaders,’ Torj was saying. ‘To attack one of the three kingdoms is an act of war.’

‘But there was no warning, no chance to prepare,’ Kipp said, flattening his palms over the map spread out before them. ‘With the distance between Tver and the other two territories, no one will get there in time, save for the Guardians stationed nearby. No royal armies —’

‘We don’t need royal armies. The best warriors are with the guild,’ Wilder said, pointing to a patch on Thea’s armour she’d missed with the oil. ‘We just have to hope that there were some decent units stationed throughout Notos.’ He turned to Thea and Wren. ‘You have no idea of the numbers she had?’

Thea had told him of the woman they’d both seen, and how she’d rallied an army of monsters, just as the rumours told. She shook her head, still tending to her leather vest. ‘No, and what’s to say the numbers we saw are the only ones? It might be a portion of her forces.’

Torj let out a heavy sigh. ‘We should have listened to Audra. Warswords or not, we need more Naarvian steel.’

‘Will Vernich be heading to Tver?’ Thea asked.

‘Of course,’ Torj replied. ‘But whether or not he’ll get there in time is another story.’

Kipp pressed his hands together in front of him. ‘It depends on how these forces attack. If they’re heading there with a mind to use the element of surprise...’

‘Then Tver is fucked,’ Thea finished for him.

‘Correct. However, Wren said that this woman wants something – something about brothers and sisters?’

Thea recalled the winged woman’s words... ‘*We will come for them!*’ she had shouted as the darkness bowed to her command.

Finished with oiling her armour, she frowned and glanced at the Warswords. ‘How do we find out if King Leiko has half-wraith prisoners?’

‘Once we’re back on the mainland, we can send a raven... Though we might get to Notos before we receive the reply,’ Wilder answered. ‘Are you thinking it’s a rescue mission?’

‘Anything I say is just speculation. Wren and I saw a fraction of a much bigger picture. All I can say for certain is that she has the power of the wraiths behind her. She can manipulate shadow. And it’s strong enough to tear the Veil.’

Kipp traced the lines of the map again. ‘Well, I suppose we need to hope that it’s a retrieval operation as much as it is an attack. It will mean they won’t go in heavy-handed, that there’s planning involved: setup, camps... An escape route.’

‘If they can travel like they did across Harenth, then they’re lost in the wind to us,’ Wilder said.

‘We won’t know until we’re there,’ Torj replied.

They sat there strategising for hours, the Warswords and Kipp leading the discussion. But the more outcomes and possibilities they prepared for, the less in control Thea felt. There was no coming back from this; she knew it in her bones. Whatever waited for them in Tver would change the course of history, would change all their lives.

With the strange blanket over her senses, and the impending doom, Thea felt that familiar instinct to turn inward, to shy away from those around her and revert to the quiet within, its silence louder than ever without the thrum of magic in her veins.

But Wilder was there, Wren was there, her friends were there with her, and they wouldn't allow her to do such a thing.

As though sensing her unease, Wilder put an arm around her shoulders and tugged her to his side. Just the sheer presence of him was enough to settle the urge to run.

Noting the Warsword's movement, Kipp exchanged a glance with Cal. 'That's still taking some getting used to.'

Torj snorted. 'I thought walking in on them mid-fuck might have shocked it out of you already.'

Thea groaned, reaching for the flask she knew Wilder kept in his pocket. 'It wasn't —'

'Must we have this conversation?' Wren exclaimed.

'Too vulgar for your delicate sensibilities, Your Highness?' Torj teased.

Thea could practically feel her sister's temper spike.

'Keep your voice down,' Wren hissed. 'And for your information, Warsword, I can talk about fucking as much as the next person —'

Thea nearly sent a spray of fire extract over the table.

'But she's my *sister*. And judging from the sounds we heard echoing down the halls last night, we've all got a pretty clear picture of what's going on between them.' She whirled to Kipp and Cal, who shrank back. 'They're together. Deal with it.'

To Thea's surprise, a deep laugh bellowed from Wilder, his whole body shaking as he tried to get a hold on himself.

'In all my years of knowing Elderbrock, I've never seen him look so shocked. And I was there when he got the name Bear Slayer.' He wiped his eyes. 'Thank you, Elwren.'

Wren's brows shot up and she folded her arms over her chest. 'I didn't say I approved.'

Thea stared at her sister, recognising the storm in her gaze.

But Wilder just shook his head, laughter still in his eyes. 'Noted.'



The rest of the day passed in a similar fashion, and before Thea knew it, the sun was dipping and Tver was on the horizon. They sat on deck, their

belongings packed and their horses ready, as the evening breeze billowed in the sails above.

A pang of regret curdled in her gut. She'd liked being out at sea, and there was no way she and Wilder had made the most of having their own private cabin. As she glanced across at him now, desire flared. His shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbow, revealing those tanned, muscular forearms. His hair was swept back in a knot, his beard trimmed to follow the sharp line of his jaw. He looked as fierce and as beautiful as ever, the wind catching in the back of his shirt, making it billow slightly. She had half a mind to drag him down to the cabin, the others be damned.

'How long would it have taken us to get here if we'd gone over land?' Wren asked the group.

Kipp, who seemed to know far more than Thea had realised about the midrealms, hummed for a moment. 'Hard to say exactly, but I'd say three to five days just to cross the border, then there's a long stretch of Tverrian territory before we'd even be close to Notos.'

'And now?' Thea chimed in.

'Depending on where we dock, and on the weather and the horses?'

'That's a lot of variables...'

'That's life, Highness.'

Thea smacked his arm. 'Alright, depending on all those things, how long?'

'Well, depending on —'

She punched his arm. 'For fuck's sake, Kipp!'

'You'll make an awful princess. Mouth like a sailor, *violent* and —'

'It's a wonder no one's thrown you overboard yet,' Torj commented drily from nearby.

'I'm about to,' Thea said.

Torj chuckled. 'Should be about three days' ride from the port to Tver.'

Thea groaned. 'That long? How can there not be an easier way to travel around the midrealms?'

'That's where shadow magic would come in handy,' Wilder muttered, resting against the rail and watching the shore.

'What do you mean?' Cal asked, looking up from where he was attaching fletching to the shafts of his arrows.

For a moment, Wilder looked as though he wished he hadn't spoken, but after rubbing the back of his neck, he told them. 'The wraiths can fly, as

you know. The reapers too, by manipulating shadow. The half-wraiths transport themselves with the cloak of darkness. I've seen it.'

'How?' Cal pressed, eyes wide.

'I don't know exactly. But one minute they're in one place, the next they're in another, black swirling all around them.'

'When did you see this?' Torj frowned.

'Years ago.'

Thea noticed his voice going distant, as though he wasn't still standing there with them but was somewhere else, somewhere far darker.

'Gods, I'd rather spend a week at the Scarlet Tower than get swept up in their shadow magic,' Kipp declared.

'No, you wouldn't,' Wilder and Torj said in unison.

Kipp baulked. 'I was only —'

'The Scarlet Tower is nothing to joke about,' Torj warned him. 'I don't *ever* want to hear you say something so stupid again.'

Wilder made a noise of agreement. 'That place is every imaginable horror incarnate. A sane man would wish for death before he set foot on that island.' He and Torj exchanged a dark look.

'I apologise,' Kipp said, flushing. 'Has anyone ever returned from there?'

'No,' Wilder answered with a note of dismissal.

The group was quiet for a moment, the unexpected tension almost palpable.

'What was Thezmarr like before you left?' Thea asked the others, changing tact, hoping to ease the strain between them.

Kipp shrugged, his embarrassment forgotten instantly. 'The same as it always is.'

'Any news about Seb or Vernich? They still there?'

Cal groaned, Wilder too.

'Not this again, Thea,' Kipp said.

'I've got a bad feeling about them,' she argued. And she did. Every time she thought of the two bastards, her skin crawled. She hated the thought of them in Thezmarr, particularly without Torj and Wilder to hold Vernich accountable. Who knew what punishments he might inflict upon young, innocent shieldbearers? But she also hated the idea of them being set loose on the midrealms...

'Well?' she pressed.

Cal pinched the bridge of his nose, as though the very thought of Seb caused him physical pain. ‘Seb hasn’t been coming to training. In fact, we’ve barely seen him at all. Makes a damn fine change, if you ask me.’

‘He’s skipped training?’ Thea’s eyes widened. ‘That’s unusual.’

‘It’s not for an apprentice, Thea,’ Torj said gently. ‘He has other duties now. Much like you and Cal. And Vernich’s no doubt on his way to Tver to join our fight. He might be scum, but he’s still a Warsword. When a kingdom of the midrealms calls for aid, he comes.’

Thea felt as though she’d heard that a hundred times before. But the others hadn’t seen Vernich and Seb conspiring, hadn’t heard their hushed whispers in the corridor. There was no point denying the grudge she held against them, but her suspicions went deeper than that. There was something inherently *wrong* about them. If her friends didn’t want to believe her, then fine. She’d be on guard for all of them.

She was so caught up in her thoughts of foul play and betrayal that she jumped when something huge landed on the rail beside her, a gust of wind whipping through her braid.

‘What the —’

It was the hawk that Wilder had been using for correspondence. *Terrence* – the ill-fitting name came back to her suddenly. The bird bore a scroll tied to its leg and a tattooed hand was already reaching for it. Thea watched as Wilder retrieved the missive and stepped back, holding the parchment out of her sight.

Her skin prickled. ‘What does it say?’

Wilder didn’t look up from the message, his eyes scanning down the page once, twice, before he crumpled the parchment in his fist. ‘Nothing good.’

She closed the gap between them, her heart rate suddenly spiking. ‘That’s not an answer.’

‘Thea...’

‘We promised,’ she said slowly, searching his face for that openness she’d glimpsed time and time again, only to have it close up before her eyes. ‘We vowed we would be honest with one another. Always.’

‘We did.’

She steeled herself as she met his silver eyes, noting the shadow behind them. ‘I know a lie when I see one. I just didn’t expect one from you, not now.’

The Warsword didn't deny it. A mask of indifference seemed to slide over his handsome features.

'Tell me,' she said quietly. 'We can face it together.'

He didn't so much as reach for her. Only his eyes shifted, to where she had absentmindedly started to toy with the fate stone around her neck. A force of habit, seeking comfort in the one thing she knew to be true.

'That thing does not make you invincible,' he told her, voice low.

Thea gave a dark laugh, her mood darkening along with it. 'No shit,' she said coldly. 'I'd say it's the opposite, wouldn't you?'

'Thea —'

'But it gives me an edge,' she cut in. 'It allows me to take risks when others shouldn't.'

'It allows you no such thing.'

'Who are you to tell me what a fate stone does and doesn't allow?' she countered, anger lacing her words. She hadn't mentioned to anyone that the number had grown darker over the past few months, as though signalling the time passing, and the little time remaining...

Her fingers sought what she'd kept hidden in her pocket. A patch of leather that she'd painstakingly crafted after studying the designs she'd stolen from the Delmirian armoury. A stupid gift, created by a stupid girl, for a Warsword who'd rather stay surly and silent than share his burdens with her. She'd made it to help ease the discomfort of his shoddy armour, as a means for added protection where she knew he was vulnerable.

Thea glanced at him again, giving him one final chance to come clean, to tell her what his friend from Naarva had disclosed about the affairs of monsters and men.

Wilder's face was unreadable.

So Thea shoved the piece of leather down to the depths of her pocket and left it there. 'If you're so desperate to keep your secrets, keep them.'

She let her anger burn, for it was easier to feel than the ache that lay beneath it. Turning on her heel, she headed for the bow of the ship, where Cal and Kipp were.

'Trouble in paradise, Highness?' Kipp said by way of greeting.

'Don't start,' she muttered, taking a place beside him and looking at the golden land ahead.

While Harenth was verdant and lush with sweeping plains and farmlands, the hills and valleys of Tver appeared gilded and wild, even

from the ship as it docked at long last in the quiet port.

Thea's heart seized as she spotted a cloud of dust drifting along the horizon. 'What's that?' she breathed.

Cal nudged her. 'That might cheer you up, actually...'

Thea gave him a baffled look.

'*That* is a herd of Tverrian thoroughbreds on the move.'

'You mean the herd that Warswords pick their stallions from?'

'The very one.'

Warmth flooded Thea's chest, her row with Wilder suddenly far from her mind as she imagined herself claiming a stallion from the herd, a Warsword totem strapped to her arm.

Her stallion was out there somewhere, amid the billowing clouds of dust.

She only needed the Great Rite to open.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

WILDER



Wilder burned the message from Dratos. It warranted no reply, only offered a warning, and that warning had come too late. He snuck a glance at Thea as they disembarked from *The Furies' Will*. She hadn't spoken so much as a word to him since their argument. Heaviness settled in the pit of his stomach at the thought. He should have known their bubble of happiness was bound to burst. Wilder was incapable of not fucking things up; he'd lived long enough to know that about himself. Every relationship he'd ever had, friendship or otherwise, had come to an end because of his own shortcomings. Tal, Adrienne, even Malik... He couldn't help but hold himself at arm's length, and now he'd dragged Thea into his mess.

In the privacy of their cabin, with his head between her thighs or his cock seated deep inside her, it was easy to forget who she was to the world. But as he watched her check her saddle on the dock, her gaze clouded with endless storms, there was no denying it.

Here among them was the heir of Delmira.

A princess. A would-be queen.

He'd allowed himself to pretend otherwise for a time, but now... As they headed to war on the home front of a ruling kingdom, the time to pretend was over.

He led Biscuit out onto the dock, waiting for the beast to settle now that he was back on dry land. But the stallion shifted uneasily, his nostrils flaring and his neck braced. Wilder rubbed his forelock reassuringly.

'Thought you'd be happy to be home,' he murmured, scanning the port around them for any sign of danger. Biscuit usually had fine instincts for

such things, but Wilder supposed that a few days at sea might have muddled the stallion's senses.

Tver's main port was half the size of Harenth's and not nearly as commercialised. There were no stalls or traders flogging their wares, only fishermen and a few travellers looking to book passage on the next ship out. It was a simpler life here, one that Wilder had always admired.

'Ready?' Torj was already in his saddle.

Wilder mounted, reaching down to stroke Biscuit's neck. 'Got the supplies?'

Torj nodded. 'I sent Cal and Kipp to the market and told them to meet us at the northern entrance to the village.'

Wilder's eyes fell to where Thea and Wren lingered by the port gates. The sisters sat straight-backed in their own saddles, Wren looking slightly uncomfortable, while Thea was perched with the ease of a warrior. He waited for her to sense him, to meet his gaze across the way with those piercing eyes that promised all manner of storms.

But she didn't.

She didn't acknowledge him at all.

The cold shoulder from her made his chest ache, but that little voice inside him told him that perhaps it was for the best. It was the same voice that had told him to treat her as nothing more than an apprentice. Perhaps he should have listened.

But as much as he wished he could, Wilder couldn't bring himself to regret one minute with her.

'Hawthorne?' Torj called. 'We moving or what?'

Wilder tried to shake the thoughts of Thea from his head. 'We're moving.'

They left the port behind and rode through the surrounding village. The townsfolk who spotted Wilder and Torj lifted three fingers to their left shoulders in respect, bowing their heads as they passed. Wilder wondered if they'd seen the mass of shadow moving across the sky, headed for their capital. He wondered if they knew what awaited him and his companions, what evil they rode towards.

They passed a raucous tavern, a handful of drunk patrons spilling out onto the street, tankards still in hand. With a pang of regret, Wilder realised just how long ago that afternoon in the Laughing Fox suddenly seemed. His

life had been punctuated by so few moments of joy that the spaces between them had stretched on into indiscernible periods of time. Until Thea.

He rubbed his sternum, as though the movement might ease the ache there.

It didn't.

And so he simply rode on, for that was all he had ever done in the face of such pain.

Torj's apprentice Cal and the troublemaker Kipp were waiting for them by the gates of the village, saddlebags full to bursting.

'Sure you got enough?' Thea said as she approached.

Kipp rolled his eyes. 'In case you haven't noticed, there's six of us. And two of us look like that.' He jutted his chin in Wilder and Torj's direction.

'We'll hunt on the way,' Wilder said, urging his horse past them and onto the main road.

'More for me, then,' he heard the strategist quip.



Wilder led the company inland from the seaside village, already missing the fresh briny wind on his skin. They had been riding for some time already, following the lay of the golden valleys before them. But try as he might to soothe his stallion, the creature was on edge.

Torj noticed him fussing and gestured to his own horse. 'Tucker isn't himself either,' he said with a wary scan of the lands ahead. 'Teerah panthers, do you think?'

Wilder shook his head. 'Not this far south of the mountains.'

Teerah panthers were enormous, predatory wild cats that were rumoured to have entered the midrealms through a tear in the Veil long ago. A pride of them were known to hunt through the mountains south-west of Notos, but as far as Wilder knew, they kept mostly to themselves, unless set upon. He'd only ever seen one from a distance, its silvery-black fur a stark contrast against the golden mountainside. It had locked eyes with him, staring him down until it realised he had no cause to attack. Then, it had turned with a flick of its tail and disappeared into the rugged terrain.

Torj's stallion gave a loud snort and skidded to a stop, pawing the earth beneath its hoof.

Wilder frowned. 'Something's not right —'

Wren gave a shriek as her horse reared up.

Thea was a blur as she lunged for her sister's reins. 'Hold on!' she shouted, half out of her own saddle, trying to wrangle Wren's horse back onto its front legs.

Somehow, Wren managed to keep her feet in the stirrups, and Thea brought the terrified creature to heel, still clutching the reins, giving Wren a worried look as the horse whinnied loudly, a tremor passing through its shoulders.

Wilder turned his gaze skyward, his heart seizing at the shadow he found circling above. 'Torj —'

'On it.' The creak of a longbow sounded and an arrow whistled as it tore through the air.

A scream pierced the sky and a pair of membranous wings flapped wildly as the projectile found its mark.

'Cal!' Torj yelled. 'Your turn!'

His apprentice had already nocked an arrow to his own bow and was taking aim. The bow twanged upon release, the arrow soaring.

It was Cal's shot that brought the monster down, a precise shot that went clean through one of its wings. An agonised cry sounded, one that seemed all too human to Wilder, his insides turning to lead at the realisation.

The creature came crashing towards them, landing on the hard ground with a thud. Wilder flinched.

Steel sang as it was unsheathed from various scabbards and the Guardians and Warswords of Thezmarr leapt forward, blades in hand as they surrounded the monster.

'It's one of them...' breathed Cal, his eyes wide in disbelief.

'A half-wraith,' Thea murmured, her gaze tracking across the still-human body and the wings spearing from the monster's back.

The half-wraith's eyes were screwed shut in pain, a trail of blood leaking from the corner of his mouth, one wing in tatters.

Wilder stared, resisting the urge to crouch beside him. He looked familiar.

'We should question it,' Torj said, palming a dagger and surveying the creature's body for the best place to start.

At that, the half-wraith's eyes flew open with a gasp. For a moment, he looked feral, black veins fracturing his otherwise smooth, human face, claws protruding from his fingertips.

'Ladies,' Torj was saying. 'You may want to walk away from this.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' Thea replied, her words hard.

Wren cleared her throat. 'What are you going to do?' There was no mistaking the fear in her voice, or the disgust.

'Interrogate the bastard,' Torj told her matter-of-factly.

The monster recoiled, his broken body twitching on the ground. He rasped, choking on his own blood while he scanned their faces madly. When his wide-eyed gaze met Wilder's, his expression flared in recognition.

'Please —' he groaned.

And Wilder thrust his sword through the monster's heart.

The creature rasped a final breath and looked at Wilder, not with pain or shock, but with relief.

'What the fuck, Hawthorne?' Torj shouted, shoving him away.

Wilder didn't budge, staring at the poor creature before them. 'He had nothing to tell us.'

'Horseshit,' Torj snapped. 'He could have given us information on the unit heading for Tver, he could have —'

'No, he couldn't have.'

'How do you know that? You speak to two of them at Harenth and now you're suddenly a fucking expert?'

'Yes,' Wilder said simply, withdrawing his sword from the half-wraith's corpse and wiping the red blood on the grass.

All the while, he could feel Thea's eyes on him.

She'd noticed him flinch as the creature hit the ground. He wondered if she'd seen the recognition between them too...

'Do you think someone is sending them after us?' she asked, brows knitted together.

'It certainly looked like it,' Torj replied thoughtfully. 'It was heading right for us.'

'Burn it,' Wilder said to no one in particular, sheathing his sword at his back and leading Biscuit away from the corpse. His stallion had been unsettled since leaving the ship... Was that how long the creature had followed them? How hadn't Wilder seen him? Had he been trying to relay a

message? Wilder had been so wrapped up in thoughts of Thea that he'd let his guard down, his keen observation skills lost in worry for her. It wasn't the first time...

He passed a hand over his face with a quiet groan of frustration. There was no way he'd heard the end of this from Torj, and he knew Thea was simply biding her time before she attempted to corner him. She knew he was keeping things from her. And if there was one thing he knew about Thea, it was that she didn't give up easily.

He rode ahead, putting some much-needed distance between himself and the others, his mind aflame with everything he knew and didn't know. He felt sick, the gratitude in the half-wraith's eyes flashing before him. He had known he wasn't going to make it, his body too broken to put back together, the pain too great. Wilder couldn't bear the thought of more agony inflicted upon him before he drifted off with Enovius. Had the wraith been quicker, he might have escaped with his life, and Wilder still wasn't sure what that would have meant.

The acrid scent of burning flesh tickled his nostrils and he glanced back to see a thick column of smoke drifting up into the afternoon sky. The others had done as he'd bid, at least.

Wilder waited on the crest of a ridge for them to catch up. No one spoke to him as they did. *Probably for the best*, he tried to convince himself.

'We ride till nightfall,' he commanded.

Though Torj was the more senior of the two Warswords, he didn't object. Perhaps he didn't trust himself to speak after Wilder had already undermined his authority.

The company rode in silence for what felt like the longest time. Usually, Wilder liked the silence; preferred it, in fact. But these past few months, with Thea by his side, with Torj and now the rest of their crew slowly weaselling their way between the cracks in his armour... All the silence did now was remind him of his failings. And there were many.

Malik, Talemir, Thea... Perhaps the midrealms themselves... All suffering because of him. When the quiet grew too loud, he was transported back there, to each one of those moments he'd failed the people he loved most. Malik thrown against the rocks at Islaton, talons piercing Talemir's flesh and reaching for his heart, the same happening to Thea in the Bloodwoods...

'Stop!'

Wren's urgent voice pulled him from the spiral of flashbacks and he almost sighed with relief. She was jumping down from her saddle without so much as an ounce of her sister's grace.

'What is it?' Thea called, halting her own horse alongside the other, frowning.

'If she needs to relieve herself, how about we give her some privacy?' Wilder said, starting away.

'I don't need to do that,' Wren snapped, dropping to her knees in the brush, rummaging through her satchel and retrieving a knife.

'What in the realms *are* you doing, then?' Torj asked, stopping his own horse right by where the alchemist was sawing at something in the undergrowth, her cheeks turning pink with the effort.

Wren shot him a look of annoyance. 'If you'd give me a minute, I'd tell you.'

'We really can't afford to delay —' Wilder started, but Thea cut him off.

'We'll be glad for this at some point down the line,' she said quietly, watching her sister work.

The four men and Thea waited until at last, Wren got to her feet, dusting herself off, her eyes bright with passion. 'Do you know how rare it is to find these?' she said, holding up a handful of ugly weeds for them to see.

Kipp's nose wrinkled. 'I hope you don't expect us to eat them.'

Thea shook her head. 'Not everything is for eating, you prat.'

Wren laughed. 'Especially not this. Unless you want to explode into a million messy Kipp pieces...'

Wilder's stomach lurched at that. 'What is it?'

'Bitter hellebore,' Wren answered. 'When used correctly, they're explosive florets that can be —'

'Used in battle,' Kipp finished for her, suddenly eager. 'I've read about that plant. Apparently it was used in another realm to murder an entire council of people, or cyrens — I can't remember —'

'Exactly,' Wren said, wrapping the florets carefully in a scrap of fabric and placing them in her satchel. 'Might come in handy where we're going?' She gave Wilder a pointed look.

He held his hands up in surrender. 'My apologies.'

Everyone glanced at him in surprise at that. Wilder tried not to think about what it meant.

The company continued on across the valleys of Tver, with Wren calling to stop every so often when she spotted something useful amid the foliage around them. Elwren was a master alchemist in training, that was for sure. She wielded her secateurs and gloves with the same confidence and precision with which he and Thea wielded their swords. Over the course of their ride, she managed to harvest not only bitter hellebore, but wild draketail and silver boxweed as well – a dangerous assortment of plants.

‘I’ve heard that wild draketail can be taken for... fun,’ Cal ventured as their horses crested another ridge.

Wren and Thea looked at each other and burst out laughing.

‘Go on then, Cal... Wren will give you a leaf,’ Thea said, shaking her head at her sister, the pair clearly enjoying some private joke.

‘I was just saying,’ Cal replied defensively.

‘Not sure a journey on the way to battle is the ideal time to be experimenting with plants that make you think the sky is melting,’ Wilder offered.

‘What?’

‘That stuff can make you hallucinate something fierce,’ Torj joined in, nodding knowingly.

‘Gods, what I’d pay to see a bunch of Warswords out of their minds on draketail,’ Thea muttered to Wren, loud enough for Wilder to hear.

‘Malik and Talemir would have had no problem granting that wish,’ Wilder replied. ‘You might have regretted it, though...’

Thea’s brows shot up and she twisted in her saddle. ‘Malik? And Talemir?’ She gaped, her anger at him suddenly forgotten.

Wilder chuckled. ‘They were the worst.’

Torj made a noise of agreement. ‘Malik liked to think he was the toughest of our kind, the Shieldbreaker... But a few leaves of draketail and he’d be giggling till he cried.’

Wilder huffed a laugh. ‘That was the least of it.’

The three Guardians and the alchemist were staring at them in disbelief.

‘Err... perhaps forget we told you that,’ Torj muttered.

‘Un-fucking-likely,’ Kipp said with a grin.



At long last, evening fell, and the group stopped to make camp in one of the many golden valleys. Wilder watched with a tinge of regret as Thea left with Cal to hunt game in the nearby woods, leaving the rest of them to sort the horses and the fire.

Wilder ventured off to find some thicker logs, but Torj's heavy footsteps followed.

'You gonna tell me what in the realms that was about with that creature back there?' the Bear Slayer demanded, starting to bundle branches in his arms.

'No,' Wilder replied gruffly. He was surprised Torj had lasted this long without bringing it up.

'You don't think I deserve to know what the fuck is going on?'

'It's not about what you deserve.'

Torj muttered a curse. 'You used to hate it when Talemir did this to you. I assume I don't need to remind you of that?'

Wilder sighed heavily. 'No reminder necessary.'

'So?'

'So what, Torj?'

'So tell me. This is not just your burden to bear. I've been a Warsword longer than you —'

'Not by much,' Wilder snapped.

'Long enough to know that one man can't carry the world alone.'

'I'm not doing this, Torj. Not now.'

'Then when?' his fellow Warsword bit back. 'Because there is a reckoning lying in wait for us, brother.'

'I know,' Wilder admitted, reaching for another log and settling it in his arms before turning to Torj. 'I know what's waiting for us, better than most. There are things from the past, from my time in Naarva, that make me question what I've seen, that make me wonder if I've got it all wrong, or if I've just scratched the surface of the truth...'

'Which is?'

'Beyond treasonous if I'm wrong.'

'And if you're right?'

Wilder took a breath and glanced back towards camp, where Wren and Kipp had managed to get the fire roaring, sparks drifting up into the darkening sky. 'Then the midrealms will never be the same again.'

Torj considered him. 'So then they will change. Sometimes change is good.'

'Only time will tell.'

Torj grunted at that before nodding to where Thea and Cal had emerged from the woods, a goat strung up between them. 'You fucked it up with her already, then?' he asked, his gaze trained on Thea.

'Something like that,' Wilder muttered.

'Didn't take long.'

'No shit.'

Torj scoffed. 'You gonna fix it?'

'If it were that easy, I would have done it already.'

A mild punch hit his bicep. 'If it were that easy, it wouldn't be worth it, brother.'

'Oh? Since when did you become an expert?'

But Torj wasn't listening anymore. His attention was elsewhere.

On the alchemist tending to the fire.

Wilder shook his head. 'Furies save us all.'



They ate and drank their fill, chatting quietly across the fire. But Wilder dreaded the moment the talk would quieten and they would retreat to their bedrolls. For several nights now, he'd slept soundly with his arms wrapped around Thea, the rest of the world fading away to nothing. No night terrors, no flashbacks, only Thea and the comfort of her steady breaths against his body, her hair tickling the crook of his neck.

No sleep would come to him now without her. He knew that much.

All the same, when Torj stamped out the larger flames of the fire and the others rolled out their bedding with loud yawns, Wilder once again opted to put a little more distance between himself and the rest. He listened to them all readying themselves for sleep, and finally, he lay back on his bedroll in the dark, staring up at the infinity of stars canvassing the inky night.

Footsteps sounded across the camp and a bedroll was dropped unceremoniously next to his. Wilder didn't dare move as Thea lay down beside him, curling up on her side against him, her head resting in the dip

between his shoulder and chest. She was warm from the fire, and smelt like smoke, but the shape of her fitted against him perfectly, as she always did.

When he couldn't bear the silence any longer, he peered down at her. 'What are you doing?'

'Sleeping.'

'Here?'

'Where else would I sleep?' she asked.

'I just... I thought...'

'That I was angry at you?' Thea raised a brow.

Wilder braced himself. 'Aren't you?'

'Furious.'

'And yet...'

'And yet here I am. I thought by now you'd know I'm harder to shake than that, Warsword.'

The corner of his mouth twitched. 'I —'

'I'm still furious,' Thea assured him sharply. 'And believe me, I'll have the truth from you, one way or another. But for now... why should I lose sleep?'

Wilder couldn't help the breathy laugh of relief that escaped him. 'Why indeed,' he muttered.

They were quiet for a moment. Wilder breathed in her presence like it was a drug he'd been craving. Every fibre of his being wanted to haul her on top of him, to fuck her senseless until they both forgot all that stood between them – not just the secrets he kept, but the fate stone resting between her breasts and the world on fire around them.

But he didn't move. There was a time for secret campsite debauchery, but this wasn't it.

After a time, Thea nestled into him, tugging her blanket up over them both. 'This is where I belong,' she murmured.

'I couldn't agree more.'

Wilder's arms tightened around her, and throughout the night, he didn't once let go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THEA



They were up before dawn and on the move again. As they rode for Tver, Thea knew something had shifted in them all. Though no one had commented, their pace increased, as though the closer they drew to Notos, the thicker the sense of urgency became.

Wilder and Torj had barely spoken all morning, and though she knew Wilder had a tendency for surly silence, the Bear Slayer was usually full of conversation. It made Thea nervous.

Ever since they'd left Thezmarr, she had managed to convince herself, by clinging to the happier moments, that there was not a war waiting for them on the other side of this journey... But there was.

There always had been.

The Daughter of Darkness and her army flashed before Thea, fierce and brimming with onyx power, ready to cast it across the midrealms in one great wave...

Something pulsed within Thea then, as if in answer to a question she hadn't yet had the courage to ask.

As they rode hard through the valleys, Thea could tell by the tension in Cal's shoulders that they were approaching his homeland. His mare cantered as close to the lead as Wilder would allow, and Cal's eyes scanned the surrounding territory eagerly, ready for any sign of home.

But when they crested a rise in the land, Cal drew his horse up short with a gasp. For below, in a would-be sleepy hollow, was a village.

And it had been burned to the ground.

A strangled cry escaped her friend and he surged forward on his horse, ignoring the shouts of the Warswords he left in his wake.

Thea didn't think about what dangers might lie ahead in the ashes. She simply went after him.

She heard Wilder yell her name, but she would not leave Cal to face this alone. The thundering sound of hooves behind her told her that Kipp wouldn't either. But Warswords rode Tverrian stallions for a reason, and within seconds, both Torj and Wilder were ahead, streaks of black against the gilded land, aiming straight for the rubble that still smouldered in the near distance.

When Thea and the others reached them, they were already stalking across the ground, swords out. Thea leapt from her mare, unsheathing her own sword and surveying the ruined village. From the scorched framework that remained, she could just make out what would have been the town square and its surrounding shops.

Cal ran through the smoking ruins, kicking aside debris, clutching fistfuls of his hair as he stopped on the outskirts of the village before a pile of blackened stone.

Thea went to him, finding no words of comfort to offer.

He stared at the pile of stones. 'That was our well...' he said, voice distant. 'We're... we're standing on our cabin.'

Thea looked at her boots. There was only ash beneath them.

'There's no one here,' Wilder said, his voice stripped of emotion. 'No remains.'

Cal stared at the ruined village, his lips moving, but omitting no sound.

'I'm trying to tell you that there was no one here when this happened,' the Warsword said, grasping the Guardian's shoulder firmly. 'Look at me.'

Cal did.

'Do you understand what I'm saying?' Wilder asked.

'They weren't here...' Cal repeated.

'No. They weren't.'

Cal blinked slowly. 'They got out.'

'Escaped, evacuated... Whatever they did, they did it before whatever happened here. Torj is looking for tracks now.'

A sob broke free from Cal and he collapsed to his knees in the rubble.

Thea dropped down before him and threw her arms around him. 'It's alright, Cal,' she murmured. Her friend sagged against her, his shoulders shaking as he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

Kipp crouched beside them, placing a comforting hand on Cal's back. 'You heard them. Your family, your sisters... They weren't here for this shit. And Torj will figure out what happened to them, you hear?'

Cal pulled away from Thea, palming the tears from his eyes, his face flushing with shame as he glanced up at Wilder.

'Sorry —'

'Don't ever apologise for caring about your family,' Wilder said, offering his hand.

Cal took it gratefully, and got to his feet.

Thea looked away to give him a moment, spotting Torj on the blackened edge of the village, brow furrowed. When they reached him, he pointed out several deep lines in the dirt.

'They evacuated. Apparently with enough time to take supplies. See that?' He traced the indentation with the tip of his boot. 'That's from a supply cart. That there is another. They had time enough to gather what they could and flee.'

'Someone tipped them off, then?' Wilder said.

Torj nodded. 'Looks that way.'

'Where were they headed?'

'Notos.'

'How long ago?'

'Could have been days ago...'

'But the ruins are still smoking,' Cal said, his whole body rigid.

'Embers can stay hot for days,' Torj said gently. 'All it takes is a bit of wind to set them alight again in a place like this.'

Cal sniffed. 'So you're saying they escaped one attack, only to run straight towards another.'

Thea gasped, smoke catching at the back of her throat.

The Bear Slayer simply bowed his head. 'I'm sorry, Cal...'

Cal nodded, seeming to steel himself once more. 'All the more reason to get there sooner.'

Thea's heart fractured for him and she couldn't stop herself from looking at Wren. Her sister was a few feet away, sifting through the ashes, her expression as pained as Thea felt. Thea couldn't imagine what it would be like if they were torn apart.

But Wilder seemed to understand. 'You heard the Guardian,' he said, voice booming. 'Mount up.'



As they rode, Thea kept stealing glances at Cal. The reaper attack in the ruins, the water torture he'd endured in the caves of the black mountains and the initiation test hadn't broken him, but this...

His eyes were still red-rimmed, his face pale, but his jaw was set in grim determination. Kipp rode silently beside him, the two of them taking up the rear of the party, staying slightly back from the rest. Thea wanted to be with them, to show her support, but she also understood that Cal was trying to hold himself together. She knew that during times like these, sometimes it helped more to say nothing, to hold back those gentle words lest they tip the scales of emotion.

So she rode beside Wilder, the Warsword as quiet and stoic as ever by her side. He'd held her all through the night, as though she were something precious he couldn't let go. Thea didn't understand him. He could be so sweet and tender, and yet... there was a wall between them she couldn't bring down, try as she might. And then there had been that business with the half-wraith the day before... She'd seen Wilder flinch as Torj and Cal had speared the creature from the sky and the recognition in the monster's eyes as it spotted Wilder among them.

'Is it alive?' she had asked during their first encounter with one of its kind back in Thezmarr.

And Wilder had corrected her. *'He. It's a he.'*

She had never known the Warsword to be merciful when it came to creatures of darkness. Thea had seen with her own eyes what the wraiths and reapers had done to Malik and Talemir. She knew enough to understand that Wilder blamed himself for their suffering, that he would *never* let a wraith live to draw breath in his presence, or anyone else's. So why show mercy to the half-creatures?

'I can hear you thinking from here,' he said gruffly.

'I wouldn't have to think so much if you'd just tell me the truth of things,' she said.

'I doubt that,' Wilder replied with a huff. Then, he was twisting in his saddle, pointing to a narrow valley to the north. *'You see that fissure? And how the trees darken over there?'*

Thea followed his gesture to a patch of the distant valley that was discernible from the rest. *'Yes.'*

She heard his deep intake of breath. 'The immortal Warsword I mentioned on the way to Delmira... He lives up there.'

Thea frowned, dread prickling in her gut. 'I thought you were going to take me? When I mastered my magic. I haven't done that.'

'No, you haven't.'

'Then why are you telling me?'

'So you know, just in case.'

'Just in case what, Wilder?' She bit out the words, her chest suddenly tight. What did he know that she didn't?

Wilder didn't respond. Stubborn bastard.

Thea heaved a frustrated sigh. 'This immortal, he won't fight with us? He won't answer Tver's call for aid?'

Wilder shook his head. 'He's no longer an active Warsword. There are only three of us left, remember?'

'Not for long,' Thea said.

'No, not for long.'

'But in the meantime, he won't do anything? He won't help us?'

'No.'

Thea shook her head in disbelief. 'He took a vow...'

'We all take vows, Thea.'

Her heart hammered. 'Are you saying they're worth nothing? That the word of a Warsword is fickle? That *your* word is fickle?'

'That's not what I said.'

Thea's eyes narrowed as she took in the warrior, fierce and unflinching in his saddle. Gods, she had never intended for him to mean so much to her, but he did. Wilder understood something deep within her, and somewhere along the way, he had become a part of her. But he had grown distant again, his gaze trained forward. It made her chest ache. How could he not see what he was doing to her, to *them*? She preferred the furious fighting and fucking to this.

Wren joined her with a frustrated sigh of her own and Thea felt the first patter of rain break from the clouds above.

She looked from the greying sky to her sister. 'This you?'

'Yes,' Wren said between clenched teeth.

'Well, would you mind? I'd rather not arrive in Tver looking like a drowned rat.'

'I was trying to open it up just on the Bear Slayer.'

Thea's brows shot up in surprise. 'Your control is that good?'

'I managed it in Thezmarr.'

'And now?'

'Well, as you've so acutely pointed out: now it's just raining on all of us, isn't it?'

Thea was sure she heard a huff of laughter from behind them, but she didn't dare look back, lest it infuriate her sister further.

'Are all Warswords this aggravating?' Wren hissed.

'Yes,' Thea said without hesitation.

That earned her another chuckle from Torj.

Wren ignored it. 'You know, if you took off that fate stone, you might be able to draw the rain away.'

'Nice try,' Thea replied. 'I told you, I can't.'

'You *won't*. There's a difference.'

'Semantics, sister.'

But an awed breath escaped Wren as her eyes drifted past Thea. 'Look...'

Thea followed her gaze to the ravine below.

Where over a hundred Tverrian thoroughbreds grazed.

Thea's own gasp caught in her throat. With their heads bowed to the grass, the horses' coats gleamed in the sun, shifting over lean muscle, long manes dancing in the breeze. Some of them looked up to where their company had paused on the ridge, their long necks poised, their tails swishing. But they didn't bolt; they simply watched.

She had never seen a more majestic sight.

Both Warsword stallions nickered softly in recognition.

Wilder was once again beside Thea. 'When you pass the Great Rite, you come here immediately,' he told her, his voice low.

When. Not if.

'You come to claim your stallion straight away. The horses will sense the Rite on you. They will feel the call of the Furies. Remember that.'

Thea held his gaze, that breathtaking silver stare. 'I will.'



The further inland they rode, the more the kingdom of Tver mesmerised Thea. There was a rugged beauty to the landscape that she had never experienced before. Where Thezmarr was all cold, sharp lines, Harenth was verdant and manicured, and Delmira was scorched earth and ruins, Tver... Tver's mountains were carpets of gold and sage, with sweeping, richly textured valleys and hollows. Its rivers were crystal blue, topped with white foam as they coursed through the gorges. It was stunning, even as they rode at full pelt across the terrain.

What felt like a lifetime ago, Wilder had told her he was originally from a port town between Tver and Aveum, and as Thea drank in the coarse charm of the land, she realised it suited him.

‘Not long now,’ Torj called, pointing to the horizon.

Nestled amid the gilded hills was a castle of yellow stone. Notos, the capital of Tver. Villages and woodlands surrounded it, and to Thea's eye, there was no sign of the impending devastation they had all expected to find. Not a shadow in the sky, not a flicker of darkness in sight.

There was only the kiss of a breeze on a windless day.

She scanned their surroundings, suddenly on edge, hand on the hilt of her sword.

Her nostrils itched, the acrid scent of burnt hair filling them.

A unified, ear-piercing shriek filled the air.

And a swarm of shadow wraiths descended.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

WILDER



In a blur of membranous wings, they were surrounded.

Wilder's thundering heart threatened to burst through his chest. Nearly choking on the overpowering scent of burnt hair, he unsheathed his swords, and heard the others do the same as the looming wraiths closed in.

There were too many. A dozen at least, compared to their six.

Wren couldn't fight. And two of the three Guardians had no Naarvian steel.

He glanced at Torj, who held his war hammer in one hand and a sword in the other. Their party backed away from the advancing wraiths until they formed a tight circle at the centre of the attack.

Wren let out a muffled cry of horror. Wilder realised she was the only one in their company who had yet to see a wraith, but there was no time to pity her. Thea was ready at her side, her own sword poised to strike, her other hand grasping Malik's dagger of Naarvian steel.

Wilder subtly moved his stallion in front of hers.

The creatures that crept towards them hissed, black shadow leaking from their elongated, sinewy frames, from the brutal talons at their fingertips. There was nothing half human about these monsters. These were pure servants of darkness, evil incarnate intent on spreading poison across the world.

'We have to get to the woods,' Wilder murmured under his breath, praying to the Furies that Thea could hear him. 'We make a break for it. They'll follow, but we can use the close quarters of the forest against their numbers, against their wings.'

He heard her shift in her saddle. 'Say when.'

Wilder flexed his fingers around the grips of his swords. 'When.'

He led the charge through the circle of wraiths, slicing and whirling his blades to carve an opening for their unit. Torj followed suit, and with screams of rage and pain, the wraiths' formation broke apart, enough for Thea to lead Wren, Cal and Kipp through the gap and straight for the woods.

Shadow magic lashed at Wilder, but he deflected the whips with his great swords, managing to slit the throat of one wraith and sever the hand of another. Darkness swept in to heal the wounds.

'To the woods!' he shouted to Torj.

The two Warswords surged after their charges on horseback, their stallions' hooves like thunder against the earth as they sought to put as much distance between them and the monsters as possible.

Coils of darkness struck out like vipers, but Wilder severed them just as he had the creature's hand, allowing the woodlands to close in around him and Torj. Thea and the others weren't far ahead.

'We use the tight space against them,' Wilder said when he reached them, scanning Thea for any sign of injury. She seemed unharmed. So far. He felt himself slip into the cold, calm commander's role. 'Set the horses free. They'll only get injured here. Cal, you use your bow to pin them down with arrows in any way you can so Torj and I can slay them with Naarvian steel. Kipp, you be our eyes from above. You have our backs, at all times, do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.' Kipp was already reaching for one of the trees, seeking a better vantage point.

They all dismounted, coaxing their horses deeper into the forest. Wilder felt Biscuit's hesitation, but he gave him a slap on the rump and sent him off with the rest before turning back to their party.

'Wren, you stay hidden,' he said. '*No magic*, you hear?'

'But —'

'It will only attract them,' Thea cut in. 'You have to listen.'

Wilder nodded. 'Thea?'

'Yes?'

'You move as my shadow and carve out any hearts in my wake with your dagger. Are we clear?'

Thea palmed her blade, a feral glint in her eyes. 'We're clear.'

A crashing sound in the nearby trees told Wilder that the wraiths had nearly caught up. 'Everyone in position!' he bellowed.

There was a flurry of movement, and then the wraiths were upon them again.

Wilder found that deep, dark place within where he knew no fear, where instinct ruled every movement, where he became the Hand of Death. As the monsters advanced, so did he.

He cleaved through the creatures at the vanguard, slicing tendons at the backs of their legs, slitting throats so that Cal could pin them with arrows and Thea could carve their black hearts from their grotesque chests. He heard their shrieks, felt the blistering lance of pain as their shadows whipped at him, but he didn't stop.

Wilder became one with his swords.

He surged from wraith to wraith, losing himself to the rhythm of death and chaos. He might not understand the world around him, he might not understand how to process all that raged within, but this? This he understood.

Black blood splattered across the forest floor.

The gust of an arrow kissed Wilder's cheek.

Still he didn't stop. And he didn't look back.

He lit his swords ablaze and fought darkness with fire, not caring if he set the whole damn forest alight.

'Hawthorne, to your left!' Kipp's voice sounded from above.

Wilder moved without question and thrust his left sword through the throat of a wraith with enough force that it came out the back of its neck. Hot blood spurted across Wilder's face and chest, and he spat the putrid taste into the dirt.

Behind him, he could hear the brutal sound of Thea slicing through flesh, bone and tendons to wrench hearts from chest cavities —

'Left again, Hawthorne!'

He blocked an incoming slash of bloody talons with both his blades and then decapitated the wraith with a double cross-swipe to the neck, the creature's clouded blue eyes widening in shock before its head toppled from its body. Darkness swept in and the beginnings of a new head started to take shape, the sight utterly gruesome, no matter how many times Wilder had seen such a thing before.

It leaked shadows, regenerating where it needed to, until Thea leapt upon it to carve the rest of it up.

Wilder didn't look at her. He couldn't, or else he might lose his focus, his edge against these fucking monsters.

Somewhere nearby he could hear the wet, sickening thud of Torj's hammer pummelling a creature to a pulp —

A scream sounded.

A human scream.

Wren.

Wilder whirled around in time to see Kipp throw himself from the canopy onto a wraith's back. The monster had its claws around Wren's throat, her hands clutching and scratching at its grip, her legs kicking out underneath her —

Wilder readied to throw his sword, but Torj's spear soared through the air, piercing the wraith from the back of its skull through its face, the tip nearly kissing Wren's nose.

The wraith, Wren and Kipp all collapsed to the ground, Kipp scrambling for Wren. She was already on her feet, panting, her pretty face splattered with black blood.

But onyx threads of power surged from the wraith's unmoving body, coiling around Wren and Kipp like vicious snakes. Both alchemist and Guardian's eyes bulged as they gasped for air, darkness lashing at them.

'Wren!' Thea's panic was like a knife to the heart.

Wilder was already sprinting for them, but Wren's hand shot out of the magic's grasp, a lone flash of skin in a swirling black mass.

Thunder cracked.

Wilder's heart squeezed painfully.

'Wren, no!' Thea screamed.

But Wren was beyond listening.

The second lost heir of Delmira called the storms down upon them all.

Lightning hit the forest floor in a brilliant flash of white. Wilder felt it vibrate through his bones. He scanned the woods for Torj, who was battering a wraith into the ground with his hammer, while another moved towards him.

There were more than a dozen of them now. Wilder didn't know if Wren's magic had attracted them, or if they had been lying in wait all along.

It didn't matter.

What mattered was that they needed to finish this.

‘Thea!’ Wilder shouted. ‘We need you.’

Thea leapt between the trees and wraiths, twirling her dagger menacingly as she approached the monster beneath Torj’s punishing blows. The Warsword left her to her carving as he took on another.

Wilder swore as a lash of dark power burned through his sleeve, setting his skin on fire with pain. Ignoring it, he started to duel another pair of wraiths, both larger than the rest. They weren’t reapers, but they were definitely leaders. They hissed and circled him as though he were prey.

He was anything but prey.

Wilder threw himself at them, his swords a blur of silver as the blades met and cleaved through the tough, leathery flesh.

More lightning lit up the forest, and the wraiths shrieked in unison, as though celebrating the power that pulsed around them.

Wren screamed, but Wilder couldn’t see her.

His gaze shot to Thea, who stood before a huge wraith, her dagger lodged in its chest, out of her reach. The monster batted her away as though she were a ragdoll.

A scream caught in Wilder’s throat and he flung himself towards her as her back hit a tree. But Thea scrambled to her feet, her attention snapping from the monster who held her dagger captive in its chest to where her sister’s scream had come from.

She didn’t even notice Wilder coming towards her. Her attention was singular, focused beyond a line of trees, her jaw working as her hand reached for her fate stone. She ripped it from her neck and cast it aside.

‘I don’t fucking think so,’ she growled, lightning dancing at her fingertips as she ran to her sister.

‘Thea!’ Wilder bellowed.

All that killing calm was gone, and in its place was pure terror. The same terror he’d felt when he’d watched the reaper pierce Thea’s chest with its talons. He vaulted towards the wraith that had thrown Thea, catching it by the dagger that protruded from its sternum. Flesh and bone tore beneath Wilder’s weight and he wrenched the Naarvian steel from its body, only to deliver a criss-cross of slashes that left its skin hanging and its heart exposed for the taking.

Wilder obliged.

And then a crack of thunder shook the whole forest.

Wilder ran for Thea. ‘Thea, stop!’ he shouted. ‘You’re like a fucking beacon to them!’

But then he saw why she had acted.

Both Wren and Kipp were hanging in mid-air, in a swirling mass of obsidian power. Wren’s lightning was fading, as though the darkness were suffocating it.

Wilder watched in horror as Thea threw herself into the fray, drawing lightning from the sky, which had opened up and unleashed a downpour upon them all.

Whips of shadow magic came for her, and she threw her lightning at it with full force. All Wilder could do was keep fighting the wraiths surging across the forest floor around them, Torj at his back, Cal shooting his dwindling supply of arrows into their wings and limbs, pinning them down for the slaughter.

With all his Warsword strength and agility, Wilder cut them down, tore their hearts from their chests and fought his way to Thea, who wielded lightning at her trembling fingertips, her eyes mirroring the storm around her.

The assault she summoned was unlike anything he had seen before. Multiple forks of lightning speared down to the earth, leaving woodland and wraith alike in cinders, no Naarvian steel needed. Wind ripped through the woods, stripping trees of their bark and leaves, tearing at the shadows whipping around them all.

The ground trembled.

Several strikes of blinding light hit the forest.

Wilder’s hand shot up to shield his eyes against the force of it.

Suddenly, there was a quiet breath in the storm and Wilder blinked until the spots left his vision, lowering his arm and taking in the destruction before them.

Where the largest wraiths had stood, scorched hearts lay steaming in the dirt. Wilder loosed a trembling breath, unable to quite believe what he was seeing.

Thea had burned out their hearts with her lightning.

Any remaining wraiths spread their wings and shot through the canopy, leaving a shower of leaves in their wake.

Both Wren and Kipp were released. They crouched on all fours, dry heaving into the dirt, sheens of sweat coating their brows, their faces drawn

and pale.

And Thea stood at the heart of it all, panting, lightning still adorning her fingers.

She didn't hear him when he called.

Wilder staggered to her, dropping his bloodied blades in the leaf litter and gripping her gently by the arms. 'Thea...'

The storm in her eyes quietened and her gaze locked onto his, as though she were seeing him for the first time. She drew a ragged breath, her magic winking out.

'There you are,' he said softly.

Still dazed, she scanned him from head to toe, taking in the blood and gore that coated him before searching for the others. He watched as she assessed Wren, Kipp, Cal and Torj one by one, no doubt looking for signs of injury, signs that she'd failed them.

Wilder let her see that everyone was alright, safe and whole. Then he turned to Torj as he approached with Cal, both as filthy and battered as Wilder, but otherwise unharmed. 'We need to find the horses,' Wilder said, his voice a low rumble that left no room for argument. 'We'll look this way.'

Without another word, he took Thea by the hand and dragged her through the woods, away from the others, his chest tightening with each step, every ounce of fear he'd beaten down in the heart of the battle now surging to the surface.

She followed him without objection as he wove them between the trees, as he took them deeper and deeper into the forest until he heard the sound of rushing water and then the roar of a waterfall. Beside it was a spring, ribbons of steam rippling from glassy water.

The missing horses were the furthest thing from Wilder's mind.

When he was sure they were alone, he whirled around to face her. The gates that had kept everything at bay sprung apart and suddenly, he was yelling.

'How could you have been so senseless? So foolish? So careless with your own fucking life, Thea?' His chest hurt as the words tumbled from his lips, as he struggled to get air into his lungs.

Thea blinked at him, and it only served as fuel to the fire of terror raging within.

‘I have told you that fate stone doesn’t make you invincible. I have told you not to throw yourself into danger without a thought. I have told you there are fates far fucking worse than death.’ He rattled off everything he had ever said to her, part reprimand, part plea. All the while, that fracture in his chest deepened.

Thea stared at him, shaking beneath his grip.

He kept his gaze locked on her, his own body trembling just as much as hers. ‘It doesn’t fucking matter if you’re a shieldbearer, a Guardian, a fucking storm wielder or a Warsword. You cannot keep doing this. I won’t allow it.’

‘You won’t allow it?’ Her first words to him were as sharp as a blade. ‘You won’t *allow it*?’

That tempest in her eyes was back, surging right for him. But Wilder was done. He hadn’t allowed the darkness to take her back in the Bloodwoods and he sure as fuck wouldn’t let her own darkness consume her now.

‘No,’ he ground out. ‘I won’t allow it.’

She took a step towards him, closing what little space remained between them, staring up at him with fire in her gaze. ‘Why?’ she snarled.

Wilder couldn’t stand the inferno within for a second longer – couldn’t take the strain on his heart, on his soul, for a moment more.

‘Because I fucking love you,’ he said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

THEA



Time slowed, stilled entirely.

Because I fucking love you.

The rough words hung between them, seizing Thea's heart in an unforgiving fist.

The only truth she needed to hear from him.

'You... you love me?' she murmured, her chest caving in.

Wilder gazed down at her, still covered in blood and gore, his silver stare unwavering. 'You know I do.' He pressed the flat of his palm to her chest gently. 'You feel it, here.'

She did.

In her heart, in her bones, she felt it.

And the way he looked at her... Everything he felt shone in his eyes, but there was no expectation, no weight on her with the uttering of those words from his lips.

Only truth. Only love.

Her fingers curled in the fabric of his shirt. 'Why didn't you tell me before?'

'Because I love just as I fight. Hard, with everything I have. And I was afraid to lose it all. To lose you.'

'And now?'

Wilder was still as stone beneath her touch, as though he didn't believe that she was still standing there, that they were here having this conversation.

'Now?' he breathed, wrapping his hand around hers, pressing it to his chest so she could feel his heart hammering beneath. 'I'm terrified.'

Thea's voice was raw when she asked: 'Is that what it means to love me? To be terrified?'

'I think that is what it means to love at all,' he said, brushing his lips over hers, the whisper of a kiss. 'But it's more than that, Thea. To love you... is to be free.'

He claimed her mouth with his then, his kiss tender and thorough, causing a ripple of longing to move through her. But there was something else, something beyond desire that had settled deep in her chest.

She broke away, swiping at the tears that stung her eyes. 'I wish we had met when we were younger, so we could have had more time together.'

Wilder smiled as he ran his thumb along the line of her jaw and seemed to stare into her soul. 'When I was younger I didn't know what it was to look at a woman and want to fall to my knees,' he told her. 'When I was younger I didn't know a woman could make me feel powerful and powerless in the same breath. When I was younger, I didn't know a woman could bring me back from the darkness.'

Thea exhaled shakily. 'A woman can do all of that?'

'Not any woman. There is only one. There has only ever been one.'

And then Wilder kissed her, fiercely this time. His hands slid down her back, cupping her backside as he lifted her to him, her thighs parting around him. Her Warsword carried her to the nearby spring. He didn't break their kiss, not even as he stepped down into the spring, fully clothed.

Warm water surged around them and still they didn't break apart.

Thea couldn't get enough of him, couldn't kiss or breathe him in fast enough. She was torn between wanting to devour him and wanting to savour this beautiful thing between them, her body turning to liquid beneath his touch.

Wilder was so hard against her, the pressure of his erection causing her heart to stutter as he ground against her.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and scraped her nails down the muscles of his tapered back, where beneath his shirt, the ancient language of the Furies spelt in ink: *Glory in death, immortality in legend*. A vow; a motto to live by.

Thea answered every stroke of his tongue with her own, moaning against his lips.

He lowered them both into the water, finding a ledge somewhere beneath the surface. The heat of the spring swallowed them, their messy

clothes billowing around them before Wilder seized the hem of her shirt and peeled it over her head, tossing it onto the rocks beside them. His own followed.

‘We couldn’t have taken these off before getting in?’ she joked.

But Wilder’s eyes darkened at the sight of her hard nipples through the band around her chest. ‘Clothes needed washing anyway,’ he said roughly, and pulled the band down.

Cool air kissed her breasts, teasing her already aching nipples, and Wilder groaned at the sight before lowering his mouth, biting the soft flesh above and then taking one between his teeth.

Thea cried out, grinding her core against his cock through the layers of fabric between them. Wilder rose suddenly from the water, still clutching her to him as he stripped his pants down, holding her as though she weighed nothing.

The granite length of him sprang free.

‘Take off your pants,’ he told her, at last setting her down so they could remove the last of their clothes. He didn’t need to ask her twice, but she didn’t take her eyes off him as she rid herself of those final layers, and he did the same.

When he stood naked before her, the water surging around his thighs, Thea stared at him, her breasts heaving.

He looked like a war god, still smeared with dirt and blood, his wet muscles gleaming as he reached for her again.

Thea bit her lip, watching his cock bob as he moved towards her. She needed to feel it inside her. She needed him. It was impossible not to gravitate towards him, those silver eyes hooded with desire, that sculpted body glistening with water.

She remembered their situation with a start. In the face of everything else, her own needs suddenly seemed so miniscule. ‘What about Tver? What about the —’

‘Fuck everything else. Nothing else exists but us in this moment, Thea,’ he said. ‘And I mean to have you now, here in this spring. For as long as I can.’

His hand wrapped around her waist, following her curves to the small of her back, just as his other hand slipped between her legs, right down her centre.

‘Fuck everything else,’ she heard herself mutter, her voice husky with need.

‘Yes,’ he murmured, his mouth closing over hers as his fingers teased her clit. ‘Spread your legs for me, Thea...’

The words alone sent a thrill right to her core.

She did as he asked, the water of the spring rippling around their naked bodies. A soft cry broke from her as he slid a finger inside her. His rigid shaft twitched against her and she wrapped a hand around it, stroking up and down, taking her time.

Wilder groaned into their kiss, the sound sending a vibration shuddering through her, causing more heat to swell between her thighs as he fucked her with his fingers. It wasn’t enough – it wasn’t nearly enough to express the storm roiling inside her. Thea released his cock to lead Wilder to a deeper section of the spring, where the water rose to her ribs, and there was a slight ledge for her to perch herself on. She did exactly that, wrapping her legs around the Warsword and drawing his body to hers.

‘I need you,’ she told him breathlessly.

‘You have me,’ he said, his voice raw. ‘You’ve always had me.’

She reached for him, lining up the crown of his cock to her entrance. ‘You’re mine?’ she asked.

He tensed as she sank down onto him, his eyes glazed not just with desire, but with deep, unending love. ‘Beyond reason.’

‘Then I’m yours.’ She lifted herself, only to sink down on him once more, harder this time, allowing him more of her.

‘I asked for nothing in return.’ He tried and failed to stifle a moan as she moved against him again.

‘No, you didn’t,’ Thea allowed. ‘But you have me all the same...’

His throat bobbed, and he stilled them. ‘What are you saying, Thea?’

Emotion threatened to overwhelm her, to drown out the words she had wanted to say for weeks, the words she had wanted to echo back to him the second he’d said them to her.

‘I’m saying I love you, too,’ she told him, kissing him roughly.

Wilder’s body shuddered around her – and then, he became a man unleashed.

He thrust into her, hard and deep. Thea cried out, heat blooming in her chest, flushing her face, her breasts.

Wilder sank deeper still, making a low, rumbling sound of desire as he did.

Gods, she would never get enough of the sounds he made, or the feel of him inside her. She was no maiden; she had been with other men before, but it had never been like this. The force of Wilder was all-consuming, her longing for him so insatiable that the rest of the world and its threats fell away.

Leaving only them.

Each made for the other by the Furies themselves.

Wilder's fingers closed around the base of her skull, grabbing a fistful of her hair and drawing her close, sharp pinpricks of pain sparking and fading.

He devoured her in every sense of the word, the spring water splashing as he fucked her. She arched into him, desperate for more, relishing how every part of them fitted so perfectly together, how he somehow grounded her amid all the chaos.

'Touch yourself,' he demanded, leaning back, his silver eyes darkening with need.

Thea looked down at his sculpted chest, the rippling contours of his abdomen, and the V that pointed like an arrow to where they were joined.

Heart hammering, a thrill racing along her bones, Thea reached between them. Her fingers slid down her centre until she found her clit, circling the sensitive spot. She moaned at the contact, at the bolt of pleasure that shot through her.

'Furies save me,' Wilder muttered in a guttural voice, watching. 'I've never seen a more beautiful sight.'

His words emboldened her and Thea allowed her head to tip back as she worked herself, her other hand sliding back up her body to squeeze her breast and roll her nipple between her fingers.

'Fuck...' Wilder's hand left her hip and closed around her other breast, mirroring her actions. 'I could come undone watching you.'

Pleasure and power entwined, and she could barely handle the pressure building within.

'So come undone.'

'Not without you,' he groaned, replacing her fingers at her clit with his own, as though he couldn't stand the thought of not touching her himself. 'Never without you.'

At the first brush of his fingers against her centre, Thea's vision went white.

And then there was only him, as she climbed that ladder of pleasure, higher and higher. Gods, she wasn't sure she would survive this, survive him.

Her body begged for release, and her heart yearned to lose herself in him. She didn't hold back, letting her cries of passion echo through the spring, letting the tears spill and track down her face.

Wilder paused inside her, his expression softening. 'Are you —'

'I'm alright,' she murmured against his lips. 'More than alright. It's just...' She struggled to find the words for the shift that had occurred deep in her chest, so she placed his hand there, so her heart beat beneath his touch.

He met her gaze with understanding. 'I know.'

Thea gathered herself and kissed him. 'Don't stop.'

He claimed her mouth, kissing her back, the dark frenzy they had always shared taking hold once more.

Her Warsword radiated power and strength as he moved inside her, as he strummed her clit, coaxing endless spirals of desire into a shattering climax that had her clawing at him, marking him with her fingernails and crying out in a near-sob.

'Wilder...'

'Thea,' he breathed. Then, he was coming too. He erupted inside her with a loud, carnal moan that sent another shiver of pleasure across her skin. The cadence of his strokes changed, becoming longer and more deliberate, as though he were trying to wring out every last ounce of their releases.

He panted against the crook of her neck, resting his brow there as they both tried to piece themselves back together.

'I knew you'd be the end of me, Althea Zoltaire,' he murmured.

'If this is the end, is it so bad?' she asked, bringing his mouth to hers in a tender, gentler kiss.

'No.' He smiled against her lips. 'It's not bad at all.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

WILDER



They wrung out their clothes as best they could and dressed quietly, stealing glances at one another as they did.

Wilder's breath caught in his throat at the sight of Thea.

She was his.

And he was hers.

All the threads between them had been pulled taut, and there was no undoing what had been done, what had been said.

They had claimed one another.

They walked back the way they had come, hand in hand.

When they reached the battle site, black hearts and wraith corpses scattered all around, Torj looked up from where he was perched on a fallen log, surveying their damp clothes. 'You fall in a river?'

Wilder couldn't help but laugh. 'Something like that.'

Thea released his hand as her sister nearly bowled her over. 'You're alright!'

Wilder watched as Thea returned Wren's embrace. He was glad for them, glad that they had one another, that they'd moved past their differences. But as Wren placed Thea's fate stone back around her neck, his gut tightened with unease.

Torj got to his feet with a groan. 'We've got a castle to get to, if you're done fucking each other's brains out...'

Wilder's blood roared at the mere thought of what he'd done to Thea in the hot spring. 'For now,' he told his friend.

The Bear Slayer shook his head. 'Fucking insufferable.'

‘Are we finally leaving?’ Kipp asked, appearing from the bushes, Cal in tow with the horses. ‘I can’t stand the sight of these things.’ He gave a wraith corpse a nudge with his boot for emphasis.

‘If you finally found the horses, then we’re *finally* leaving,’ Torj said.

‘You try finding six horses that have fled the scene of a wraith massacre,’ Kipp muttered.

Torj whistled, and his stallion trotted forth from behind the two Guardians. Wilder did the same, and Biscuit emerged from the brush and came to stand at his side.

‘Fucking Warswords...’ Kipp muttered, shaking his head.

Wilder mounted his stallion in a single smooth swing up from the stirrup. He wished he could have stayed in the hot spring with Thea. He wished that nothing else in the world existed for them. But darkness loomed on the horizon, and it was their duty to greet it.

Moments later, he was leading the party from the forest, towards Tver.



The golden stone castle of Notos glimmered in the final rays of sun as the yellow orb dipped below the horizon. The sky was streaked with soft hues of pink and lilac, gilding the sweeping hills in which the great structure was nestled.

They met no resistance, saw no inkling of shadow magic, but Wilder knew it was somewhere out there, lying in wait.

When they reached the gates, the guards in the watchtowers waved them through, the thick timber doors swinging inward, allowing them direct passage to the castle. The royal sigil of a rearing horse graced the banners dancing in the wind.

Wilder led the others through the outer perimeter of the grounds. It had been a long time since he had been in Tver’s capital, but it was unchanged. Still the sturdy, practical citadel it had always been, with none of the fanfare of Harenth, nor the unforgiving nature of Thezmarr.

When he reached the castle steps, he dismounted and handed his reins off to a waiting stable boy. Torj was already at his side doing the same, both of them moving with a renewed sense of urgency.

He and Torj guided the party inside the castle foyer, through to King Leiko's hall. Inside it was warm, with fires blazing in the hearths, horses carved in stone around each fireplace. Rich tapestries hung from the walls in the Stallard royal colours of claret and bronze, while thick oak tables ran the length of the hall and timber beams reached across the vaulted ceiling.

'Where is the rest of your army?' King Leiko's voice sounded from the throne atop the dais at the apex of the hall. Panic laced his words.

Wilder strode towards him, stopping at the foot of the stairs and bowing swiftly. 'We came ahead of the Thezmarrian forces, Your Grace,' he said. 'Has no one else answered the call?'

King Leiko surveyed them critically. 'Several units of Guardians arrived the day before last. They're stationed at the edge of the citadel. I suppose you wish to see them?'

'At once, if possible, Your Majesty,' Torj replied, sketching a quick bow of his own.

The King of Tver craned his neck, trying to peer around the towering frames of the Warswords. 'Who have you brought with you?'

Wilder shifted so King Leiko could see who stood in his shadow. 'Our apprentices, and a master alchemist in training, sire.'

King Leiko grunted, not bothering to hide his disappointment – until his eyes landed on Thea. 'You...' he murmured. 'You're the girl who saved Artos at his own feast.'

Thea stepped forward, head held high, then gave a messy bow. 'I am, Your Majesty. I'm now apprentice to Warsword Hawthorne.'

The king looked between the two of them curiously, before nodding to Thea. 'If anyone tries to poison me, you throw as many damn knives as you want.'

'Of course, Majesty.'

'Good,' he said gruffly, getting to his feet. 'Let's show you to this war camp, then.'



It had been a long time since Wilder had seen a true war camp, and he appreciated the sight even less than he remembered. On fresh horses, King Leiko and his guard accompanied them to the outskirts of his citadel, where

a hundred or more canvas tents had been pitched, the ground muddy around them, stinking of horses and shit.

Wilder surveyed the Guardians who passed, all of them touching three fingers to their shoulders in respect to him and Torj. They looked weary.

‘They only got here the day before last?’

‘Yes,’ King Leiko replied. ‘But between where they were stationed and here, they were set upon by monsters several times. Their numbers aren’t what they were.’

Wilder’s stomach hardened. ‘We were set upon not too far from here as well.’

‘Out where that nasty storm was?’ the king’s commander asked.

Wilder saw Thea flinch from the corner of his eye.

‘Yes,’ he replied evenly. ‘More than a dozen, but we fought them off. Killed a good many, too.’

King Leiko didn’t seem to hear him. The ruler was staring northward.

Wilder followed his gaze. The war camp was stationed in the foothills, stretching out to where the terrain flattened. Beyond, villages were peppered in the distance. But that was not what caught Wilder’s attention.

It was the Veil.

They were close enough to the coast that the Veil was easily discernible as it towered over the sea. But where Wilder expected to see a white wall of impenetrable mist, he saw a black fissure in its facade: a gaping hole that leaked darkness.

‘They came through that several days ago,’ King Leiko murmured, the shock still evident in his voice.

‘How many?’ Torj asked.

‘We couldn’t count, couldn’t discern one from the next. There was so much of that damn shadow magic cloaking them...’

‘Was it just wraiths?’ Wilder pressed. ‘Or reapers too?’

‘It was every nightmare you could imagine, Warsword,’ the king said, not taking his eyes from the torn Veil.

Wilder’s blood ran cold. ‘They attacked?’

‘That’s the thing... They vanished. As soon as they were through, they were gone.’

‘And you’ve seen no sign of them?’

‘There have been attacks,’ the king allowed. ‘But not worthy of that force. However... there is something.’

‘What?’ Wilder demanded before he remembered to add, ‘Your Majesty.’

King Leiko nodded to his commander, who spoke stiffly. ‘One of His Majesty’s army units has gone missing, Warsword Hawthorne.’

‘Missing?’ Torj echoed.

‘Yes, sir,’ the commander replied, his voice sombre. ‘Vanished into thin air, it seems.’

‘Fuck,’ Wilder muttered.

‘That about sums it up, sir.’

‘Have we received word from Osiris? Or Aveum’s forces?’ he asked, scanning the war camp once more before his eyes fell back to the Veil. It was a gruesome sight to behold. The tear was like a gaping wound in the wall, bleeding black shadow into the midrealms.

‘Queen Reyna sent word that they’re on their way,’ King Leiko answered. ‘We’ve not heard from Osiris.’

Wilder exchanged a worried glance with Torj. It was unlike Osiris to go without communication, but with what both Warswords had seen on the road, who knew what he and the rest of the Thezmarrian forces had faced?

Scanning the surrounding lands, Wilder suppressed the urge to reach for his flask. There was no doubt in his mind that the shadow forces were there, but there was no sign of an impending attack yet.

‘What are they waiting for?’ he murmured.

‘Can’t say I’m all too keen to find out,’ Torj replied under his breath.

Wilder made a noise of agreement.

‘Your Majesty?’ Thea’s voice cut through his thoughts.

Everyone turned to her, but she didn’t falter under their scrutiny. Instead, she stood tall, her hand resting on the hilt of Malik’s dagger at her belt.

‘Have any refugees come this way?’ she asked. ‘There was an attack on a small village to the south-west of here and it looked like they might have sought help —’

‘Yes, actually.’ King Leiko was frowning. ‘They have set up camp in the northernmost village of Notos. We have given them as much aid as we could manage, but our resources are currently stretched...’

Thea was already gripping Cal’s shoulders. ‘You hear that? They’re safe!’

‘You know them, lad?’ King Leiko addressed Cal now.

Cal looked stunned. Thea had to nudge him before he remembered to speak. ‘Yes, Your Grace... It’s where my family is from. We came across the ruins of their village on the way here.’

The king nodded. ‘Then you have my leave to visit them.’

Cal bowed. ‘Thank you, sire.’

The king had started moving away, his mind clearly elsewhere. Cal turned to Torj, but the Warsword was already waving him on. ‘Go,’ he said simply.

And Cal bolted away, leaving Thea and Kipp staring after him.

‘Should we —’

Torj shook his head. ‘Let him find them first.’

The king had started back towards the castle, but his commander lingered.

‘His Majesty has had rooms prepared for you. He knows you must be weary from your travels. A light supper will be served after you’ve had time to bathe.’ He gave Torj’s filthy appearance a pointed look before riding off after the King of Tver.

Torj snorted, pulling a clump of dirt from his gold hair. ‘Not all of us had the chance to frolic in the hot springs.’

‘Careful, Bear Slayer,’ Thea warned. ‘You’re starting to sound sulky.’

Despite the weight of the midrealms on his shoulders, Wilder bit back a chuckle.

But his fellow Warsword gave a heavy sigh. ‘I’ve got wraith guts and muck in places I didn’t even know existed, Thea. You’d be sulking too.’

‘Charming,’ Wren scoffed, bringing her horse up beside her sister’s.

Torj gave her a wink, his ice-blue eyes bright. ‘Glad you think so, Highness.’

Wren stared daggers at him. It was enough to get Wilder moving back towards the castle, where at least a hot meal was waiting, and perhaps a bed to share with Thea.



Wilder was given a north-facing chamber with a balcony and a cot for his ‘apprentice’, which he immediately shoved to one side of the room. He

imagined, with some satisfaction, King Leiko's horror if he discovered he'd just offered a cot to a Delmirian princess.

Thea had gone to make sure Wren had the privacy she'd been craving since leaving Thezmarr, though Wilder's hopes weren't high for the poor alchemist. Somehow she'd been lumped in with Torj and the Guardians, though Wilder had a feeling that the Bear Slayer didn't mind in the least.

Night had fallen by the time Thea joined in him in his quarters, and the smile she offered when she met his gaze from across the room had his knees buckling. Never in all of his life had he imagined someone would look at him the way she looked at him now.

He'd do it all again, every wretched second of his existence, to wind up right here, with her.

She came to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. The simple gesture formed a lump in Wilder's throat as he held her, the most natural response in the world.

'There's more waiting than I expected,' she said into his chest.

'In battle, you mean?'

She nodded.

He kissed the top of her head. 'That's half of it,' he told her. 'You wait to fight, wait to find out if you live, wait to find out if you die...'

Thea huffed a laugh. 'What a happy thought.'

'In spite of everything... For the first time in my life, I am.' Wilder swallowed. 'Happy.'

'Good,' Thea replied, peering up at him. 'You deserve to be.'

Wilder didn't believe her, but it didn't matter. There was something darker flickering behind those keen eyes. He tucked her hair behind her ear and lifted her chin. 'What is it? What's wrong?'

Thea gave him a sad smile. 'Only everything you already know,' she said. 'Darkness is coming for us all, and when it does... I feel like nothing will be the same again.'

'Perhaps not,' he allowed, taking in every devastating feature of her beautiful face. 'What can I do?'

'Fuck me till the sun rises, Wilder. Until I can't remember the war at our doorstep, the magic coursing through me, or even my own damn name.'

His blood ran hotter at her words. 'I can do that, Princess.'

Without another word, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed.

And did exactly as she asked.



As the first rays of a blood-red dawn kissed the horizon, Wilder stood on the balcony, holding Thea. Together, strapped into their armour, they looked out onto the villages below, and the torn Veil across the stretch of sea. He knew they both needed words of comfort, that the thing that loomed before them would test them to the very fibre of their beings. And even if they emerged victorious... there was still fate itself to contend with.

‘Tell me about Talemir,’ Thea asked, her words hopeful. ‘About him and his wife?’

Wilder pulled her closer, so her back was flush with his chest and his arm banded around her breasts. Sunlight caught in the gold streaks of her hair, cascading down into her side braid. Not too long ago, the mere mention of his former mentor’s name would have sent a pulse of fury through him. Now... now he understood their past for what it was: complicated. But he could give Thea this.

‘He was sent to kill her, at first,’ he told Thea, who twisted in his arms to glance up in shock.

‘What? Why?’

‘For breaking the laws of the midrealms, not unlike someone else I know...’ he answered, smiling softly.

‘What happened?’

‘She won his heart instead.’

‘Just like that?’

Wilder laughed, recalling how Drue had tried to duel the Warsword the moment they’d met. ‘Definitely not just like that, but it was the end result all the same.’

‘And they’re still together?’ He could hear the fear between her words.

‘Yes.’

‘How do you know, if you haven’t seen or heard from him in all this time?’

‘Because... Not even Enovius himself could tear them apart.’

He didn’t miss Thea’s hand moving to her fate stone beneath her shirt, and the way her body tensed as she inhaled deeply. ‘I hope the same for us.’

His heart ached in that moment, so raw from everything he'd finally allowed it to feel and fear. He covered her hand with his. 'As do I.'

She shifted beneath him, turning to gaze into his face. Wilder leant in to kiss her – but as he did, the horns of Notos sounded, blasting out across the entire citadel.

Armed forces had arrived at Tver.

But it was too soon to tell if they were allies or enemies.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THEA



Allies. Their allies had arrived, and King Leiko's hall was a flurry of movement, a hub of activity as King Artos of Harenth and Queen Reyna of Aveum strode forth, their army commanders in tow. Wilder had rushed off to find Torj, and so Thea stood alone at the edge of the hall, watching as the madness unfolded before her.

Her heart leapt at the sight of Osiris as well. The Guild Master had brought the Guardians of Thezmarr.

But Osiris wasn't the only familiar face.

Thea's chest swelled as she spotted Audra, Farissa, Sam and Ida in the throngs of people – and then, someone who couldn't be missed, even amid the sea of warriors.

Malik, with Dax standing alert at his feet.

Thea had to suppress the urge to run to them, for King Leiko's herald was ringing a bell from the dais.

'The King of Tver wishes to make an address,' he called, his voice expertly projecting to the far reaches of the hall.

The commotion settled as King Leiko took to the platform, his face grave. 'People of the midrealms,' he called. 'Aveum brings word of what we face ahead. Queen Reyna's scouts report that the enemy forces are preparing to make their move on Notos. They will be here by nightfall, using the cover of darkness to their advantage...' He took a breath. 'We must be ready. Rulers, Warswords, commanders and masters, if you'll join me in the war room?'

The herald was already showing them to a door leading off from the hall. Thea watched as Wilder disappeared with the rest, a strange tug

pulling at her chest.

‘The rest of you will await instructions for the siege preparations,’ King Leiko told them, before following his fellow rulers.

Thea found herself with Kipp and Wren almost immediately, their backs to the wall, still looking out over the crowd. ‘Where’s Cal?’ she asked, craning her neck.

‘He’s trying to convince his family to evacuate,’ Kipp said, voice low. ‘I suspect it won’t be long until the word goes out to the outer towns now... It’ll be an order to flee or get to the castle before sundown.’

‘Or what?’ Wren asked.

Thea clenched her fists at her sides. ‘Or they’ll be left to fend for themselves.’

‘You can’t be serious...’ Wren murmured, looking around at their forces in disbelief.

But Kipp grimaced as he spoke. ‘Our forces, though they’re stronger now, can’t defend from both the north and the south. The attack is coming from the south, according to the scouts. They’re aiming directly for the castle.’

‘How do you know this already?’

‘Esyllt told me at the gates. I’m to meet him after their council meeting. We’re to organise the defence of Notos together.’

‘Then shouldn’t you be in there with them?’ Thea pressed.

‘Too many bodies in that room already,’ Kipp replied quietly.

Thea could only imagine the number of arguments that were about to explode within those walls.

Kipp nudged Wren. ‘Farissa was in attendance,’ he told her. ‘I expect you and your fellow alchemists will be needed before long as well.’

Thea frowned. ‘What —’

But Wren fixed her with a challenging stare. ‘You know very well that alchemy has its uses in warfare. Farissa will be advising in that regard and I’ll do whatever I can to help her.’

Thea found herself nodding. Of course she already knew that, and there was no way Wren would leave the alchemists without her assistance. Just as she was about to say as much, her attention snagged on something else.

Vernich the Bloodletter. The older Warsword had appeared from the door the rest had exited through, and he motioned to someone across the hall.

Seb.

Thea's stomach bottomed out at the sight of the pair.

They were here.

Her hatred for both men ran hot, as did her suspicions. Were they here as spies? Did they mean to destroy the midrealms' forces from the inside out? Had Vernich found what he was looking for?

Her thoughts must have been plain as day on her face, because Kipp elbowed her. 'What did you expect? That they'd hang back at Thezmarr by themselves?'

Thea ground her teeth. 'I don't like it...'

'I'd rather them channel their particular brand of cruelty at the enemy than at us,' Kipp replied. 'Don't you agree?'

Thea merely grunted in reply. She had thought long and hard about Vernich the Bloodletter and his pathetic excuse for an apprentice. The only conclusion she came to time and time again was that Vernich was a fallen Warsword and he was using the slimy bastard Seb to do his dark bidding.

But she didn't verbalise any of this to Kipp and Wren, not when Audra had caught her gaze and was prowling towards her. No matter how much time passed or how many monsters Thea fought and slayed, there was still something utterly terrifying about the librarian.

When she reached them, Audra peered over her spectacles. 'Kristopher, I believe your presence is required in the war room,' she said to Kipp, waiting expectantly.

Kipp was no fool, at least not in this moment. He sprang into action, giving Thea and Wren a pitying grimace before he raced from the hall.

'Did you find anything of note in Delmira, Althea?' Audra asked quietly, her gaze darting from Thea and Wren to the horde of people around them.

'Only more monsters and ruins,' Thea replied. 'Do you know much more about what's happening?' she asked, a chill rushing over her skin.

'Some. I suppose you'll hear it soon enough,' Audra allowed. 'It is as we feared before you left Thezmarr... It is not simply an army of monsters, but of men too. Men from this realm and others, who long for power and darkness.'

'The half-wraiths?' Thea pressed.

But Audra frowned. 'I don't know of half-wraiths. These are men, rallied together by a united hatred of all things good.' She pushed her

glasses up to the bridge of her nose. 'It would seem now, more than ever, the line between man and monster has blurred.'

Thea opened her mouth to ask more, only to see Esysllt and Kipp emerge from the side door and take to the dais.

'We ready the castle for siege at once,' Esysllt barked. 'We need to reinforce all gates and castle walls. We need as many arrows and long-range weapons as possible. The catapults need to be stationed and readied as well. Less experienced soldiers will be assigned to tending the fires, hot oil and boiling water. Look to your assigned commander for direct orders.' Esysllt took a heavy breath. 'We've sent word to the villages. They are to flee Notos or seek refuge within the castle walls. Gates are to close by sundown, no exceptions.'

Thea tensed. Kipp had been right. They were to leave those who couldn't get to the castle undefended against the monsters, ready for slaughter, or worse. Esysllt's mere mention of the weapons and tactics they were to use against the enemy had her stomach churning. She had read of battle and war; she had fought the monsters herself. But these were men they were fighting as well.

Thea found herself swept up in the wave of the crowd as orders were shouted out across the ranks. She was separated from Wren and Audra, but up ahead she could see Kipp and Esysllt leading the way towards the war camp, and so she followed. As she did, she was struck by the memory of the mock battle they'd practised with Torj back in Thezmarr. How they had spattered their enemy with paint, not blood, how they'd laughed afterwards...

Torj's warning came back to her. *'When you're out on a real battlefield, it will not be so luxurious. Start taking this seriously. Their paint means death. Do you want to die today?'*

No, Thea didn't want to die today, nor would she. The fates had made it so. But many *would* die – that much was obvious from the pale faces around her and the gruesome tactics they were preparing.

More of Torj's speech echoed in her mind. *'A true warrior of Thezmarr is brutal, yes, but efficient – quick, merciful. We do not draw out the suffering of our fellow man...'* Thea bit the inside of her cheek. That was not the case for this battle. There would be much suffering. Hot oil, boiling water... Fire... All of it designed to maim and agonise.

The castle was bustling with movement as she passed through its corridors, watching the Tverrian guards run quivers full of arrows up to the walls. Thea could still make out the top of Kipp's head at the front of the throng, and she followed him and Eyllt all the way from the castle grounds to the war camp beyond, where the forces were adding fletching to arrows and treating sword blades with a fire accelerant. Carts were being loaded with supplies to be taken back to the castle. She spotted Malik moving huge timber logs onto a wagon, the back of his shirt drenched with sweat.

'We'll use those to fortify the main castle gates,' Eyllt said, as though checking something off a mental list, while Kipp nodded enthusiastically at his side.

Malik didn't acknowledge them; the gentle giant simply carried on lifting. Eyllt seemed to prefer it that way.

But that didn't stop Thea approaching her friend. 'Hello, Shieldbreaker,' she said quietly, careful not to startle Malik.

The former Warsword kept working, but his expression softened as he heard her voice.

'I didn't expect to see you here,' she told him, lifting some smaller freshly cut planks of timber and placing them in the cart. 'Must have been a long journey for you.'

Thea glanced around in search of Dax, finding the enormous dog lying on his belly, panting in the shade of a nearby tree.

'He's got the right idea...' she murmured, and Malik made a sound that could have been a laugh.

She turned back to her friend, wondering if he'd been forced to join their ranks, or if he'd wanted to come. Chewing on her lower lip, she hoped someone had kept an eye on him throughout the ride, but one glance at his arms and she knew that he'd been left to fend for himself. Dozens of little cuts littered his forearms, too precise to be scratches... No, a blade had done those.

'Mal...' she said slowly, her fists clenching at her sides.

But the Shieldbreaker didn't look up from his task.

'Not much of a talker, is he, stray?'

That familiar sneering voice ignited the pit of fury in Thea's gut. Her fingers coiled around the grip of the dagger at her waist as she turned to face Seb Barlowe, who wore the same smug expression on his face as always.

‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’ she asked. ‘How could you treat him like this?’ She gestured to the cuts on Malik’s arms. ‘I know it was you.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’ But the gleam in his eyes said otherwise. Seb took a step towards her, darkness flashing in his gaze. ‘He’s a disgrace to Thezmarr. No wonder you spread your legs for the simple bastard – you’re a perfect match.’

Thea didn’t flinch, nor did she yield a step back. She’d fought monsters far bigger and stronger than Sebastos Barlowe. She’d carved them up, ended them. Seb was nothing. Less than nothing.

‘Did that single punch I landed over six years ago really damage your ego so thoroughly?’ she asked, rage flaring in her chest. She could feel that they’d drawn attention to themselves, but she kept her gaze trained on Seb.

‘You did no such thing,’ he said.

Thea laughed darkly. ‘Saying something doesn’t make it so,’ she replied. ‘And there are plenty of people left in Thezmarr who witnessed that little defeat of yours.’

He started to circle her, as though he were a predator and she were his prey. ‘I’m going to make you wish you’d stayed in that little workshop, mixing potions.’

Thea stood tall. She didn’t move an inch.

She was no one’s prey.

But nor was she about to start a brawl with another Warsword’s apprentice on the eve of battle... unless he swung first.

A long shadow cast across the golden grass, and Seb halted.

Wilder appeared, as if from nowhere, and came not to Thea’s side, but to Malik’s. Wilder’s brother had frozen to the spot, staring at both apprentices, his hands trembling. Wilder didn’t comfort him or even address him. Instead, the Warsword leant against the cart, crossing his feet at the ankles and folding his arms over his chest, watching Seb with the promise of violence in his silver eyes.

Thea still didn’t move.

‘I was just teaching your apprentice a lesson,’ Seb had the gall to say, though there was a slight quake in his voice as he addressed Wilder.

‘My apprentice needs no lessons from you.’ He unsheathed one of his great swords and offered it to Thea. ‘Perhaps it’s time you showed this prick what you’ve learnt.’

Seb baulked at that, unable to hide his shock.

How many times had Wilder pulled her back from the brink of fighting him? How many times had Seb managed to get the better of the situation?

Thea's fingers itched to close around the Naarvian weapon, to use it to drive Seb Barlowe into the ground so he never got back up. But a glance at the sun creeping lower to the horizon told her that the real battle was nearly upon them, and bastard or not, Seb was one more soldier in their arsenal against a much greater threat.

Thea squared her shoulders and slowly pushed Wilder's sword away. 'I don't need that,' she said, raising her fists.

Surprise and approval flickered in Wilder's gaze, and he sheathed his sword.

Seb's nostrils flared. He didn't lower his weapon. Instead, he gave a cry of outrage – a rookie mistake – before he lurched towards Thea, blade swinging.

But Thea had fought far worse opponents than the likes of him. She became the wind, her form blurring as she ducked and dodged Seb's powerful strikes. He didn't mean to humiliate her; he didn't mean to put her in her place.

He meant to maim. To kill.

Unarmed by choice, Thea swept under his blows, pivoted around the bold thrusts of his sword. She could have been playing Dancing Alchemists back at Thezmarr for all the fear she felt. None. Just a thrill as the slash of the blade didn't land, as Seb's face grew redder and redder with his failed efforts.

'Fight back, you bitch,' he grunted, eyes wild with rage.

'As you wish,' Thea replied.

He didn't see her fist coming.

One perfectly placed jab, her knuckles colliding with the bridge of his nose, a satisfying crack sounding.

A garbled noise escaped Seb as he staggered, dropping his sword to clutch his face, blood streaming.

Thea surveyed him dispassionately. 'That shouldn't stop you fighting. You're needed in the battle.'

Spluttering, Seb lunged for his sword.

Only to have Wilder kick it out of reach.

The Warsword looked down on the pitiful sight and grabbed a fistful of the Guardian's shirt, lifting him bodily from the ground.

'When this skirmish is done, I'll see to it that you don't step foot back in Thezmarr,' he growled. 'Your days there are over.'

Seb's legs kicked out in the air, his hand clawing at Wilder's grip.

But Wilder held firm. 'I dare you to lay another finger on my brother,' he said, his voice deadly calm, in stark contrast to the violence of his actions and the threat gleaming in his eyes.

'Your brother...?' Seb faltered. 'I didn't know —'

'Now you do.' And Wilder flung Seb across the camp with his Furies-given strength, sending him sprawling in the mud with a loud slap.

That shattered the silence around the camp, the men breaking out into hushed whispers. No one tried to help the Guardian up.

Thea turned on her heel, already walking away, back towards the castle. She'd seen enough here.

Wilder was at her side in a matter of quick strides. 'You... you did well,' he told her, his words choked.

'Did I?'

'You controlled your temper, for once.'

'Then I did better than you,' she quipped.

Wilder huffed. 'That *was* me controlling my temper.'

A smile tugged at Thea's mouth. 'I told him when I next fought him, he wouldn't get back up,' she said. 'But I figured killing off our own warriors before a battle was probably a misstep.'

'Very wise.'

'That's me.' She rubbed her thumb over her tender knuckles. 'Do you think Vernich will really give him up?'

'He'd better.'

Thea sighed, knowing things were never that simple. 'Seb's got ties with the guild. An uncle, Cal told us.'

'I don't give a shit. He's as good as gone.'

Thea huffed a laugh. 'If you say so.'

When they reached the castle, Wren was waiting for Thea in the hall, her face a mixture of fear and excitement, her eyes trained on the rulers seated at a table on the dais.

'What is it?' Thea asked with trepidation. Usually when her sister wore an expression like that, it meant bad news for her.

Sure enough, Wren turned to her eagerly. ‘Thee...’ she said under her breath, staring at the kings and queen in awe. ‘If there were ever a time to announce yourself —’

‘Wren...’ Thea warned, glancing up at Wilder for backup, but he raised his hands in surrender and took a step back. She shot him a glare, but Wren was too impassioned to notice.

‘If there were ever a time to announce yourself as heir of Delmira, now would be it. In front of the existing rulers. It’s possible that they already sense your – our – magic...’

Thea touched her fate stone. ‘Not mine,’ she said, jaw clenching. ‘Please don’t do this now. The last thing anyone needs on the precipice of battle is another crown thrown into the ring.’

‘But Thea —’

‘Wren, why don’t *you* be the heir, then? I want to be a Warsword. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.’

‘It’s not always about what we want, Thee.’

‘Not always,’ she replied. ‘But this is. And I will be a Warsword before my time is done.’

Wren sighed. ‘I’m going to the Veil,’ she said quietly.

A fist closed over Thea’s heart and squeezed. ‘You’re what?’

‘Going to the Veil. When the battle starts and the enemy is engaged, Farissa and I will be rowed out to the Veil, where we’ll attempt to patch that tear.’

‘Not a chance,’ Thea hissed.

Her sister met her angry glare with one of her own. ‘Try and stop me,’ Wren challenged.

‘Wren, you’re not trained for battle. You’re not —’

‘I know I’m not. I am trained for something else entirely. Alchemy. Fixing the Veil is alchemy, Thea. Farissa and I are the only ones skilled enough to attempt it.’

‘But —’

‘Tell me, sister: why are your ambitions more important? More worthy?’

It was the age-old argument they’d always had. ‘I’m not saying that —’

‘Then you’ll watch me go, and do so with pride in your heart. As I do every time you go off to slay a monster.’

Thea faltered. And Wren took the advantage.

‘For so long you wanted to walk your own path... Let me walk mine.’

‘She has a point,’ Wilder’s voice sounded.

Thea whipped around. ‘So now you’re speaking?’

Wilder shrugged. ‘We all have a part to play.’

Thea turned back to her sister and saw victory in her eyes, though it did nothing to ease the tightness in her chest. For Wren to leave in the heart of a battle and go to the one place that might prove even more dangerous...

‘I don’t know if I can bear it,’ she croaked, gripping her sister’s hands.

Wren smiled and squeezed her fingers reassuringly. ‘You can. And you will.’ She winked, and patted the satchel hanging at her side. ‘Besides... I’m not without my own defences.’

Thea forced herself to take a breath, knowing the decision had already been made. ‘Then I pity whoever stands against you, man or monster.’

Wren wrapped her arms around her, and Thea held on to her sister, burying her face in Wren’s neck and steeling herself against the tears that threatened to spill.

‘Be safe,’ Wren murmured into her hair before pulling back.

‘And you,’ Thea told her, and watched her go.

All was quiet for a moment, before Wilder leant in. ‘I want to show you something,’ he said, his voice low.

Thea didn’t question him. She simply followed her Warsword back to their quarters. She realised that her hands were shaking, that her legs buckled with each step.

She didn’t mention it to him, working hard instead to hide the effect of the looming battle. She was a warrior, a Guardian of Thezmarr. She did not quake in the face of a fight.

Wilder took her out onto the balcony where they’d watched the sunrise that morning. It already felt like a lifetime ago. Now, the sun was dangerously close to the horizon, the promise of war at their doorstep. She could see ribbons of darkness dancing where the lowering yellow orb of the sun kissed the sea, where the Veil shivered in the distance.

The view before them was like the quiet intake of breath before chaos descended.

Thea’s fingernails dug into her palms, but Wilder drew her to him, his warmth enveloping her with a quiet, sturdy comfort. He held her close, pressing her to his broad chest, dropping a gentle kiss to the top of her head. But that was not the sort of comfort Thea needed right now.

She reached between them, for the buttons of his pants, finding him already straining against the fabric.

‘What are you doing?’ he murmured, his body tensing.

Thea went up on her tiptoes, brushing a kiss against his lips. ‘On the brink of so much carnage, I need to do something that makes me feel alive. I need... *you*.’

‘Who am I to deny you?’ His warm, strong fingers gripped her chin and kept her gaze on his. ‘I’m yours,’ he told her, his voice deep with reverence.

She kissed him, her lips sweeping over his, his mouth opening for her, warm and lush, tasting of home. The buttons of his pants came apart at her fingers and she wrapped her hand around his thick, hard length, freeing him from his pants and lavishing him with firm strokes.

He moaned against her lips, the sound sending a shiver running through her.

She revelled in the way he responded to her, so instant, so all-consuming.

Thea shoved his pants down past his muscular thighs, her heart skipping at the sight of him; so much strength, so much power.

But he tilted her face back to his, not to kiss her this time, but to scrape his teeth down the column of her throat, biting her hard enough to cause a brief spark of pain, followed by a lick of pleasure.

Heat swelled between her legs, and she felt herself growing damp with need.

‘Wilder...’ she murmured, gripping his shaft and pumping him hard and fast.

The frenzy took hold. He snapped, tearing at her pants, wrenching them down her legs and turning her around so that her back was flush with his chest and the hot crown of his cock pressed against her bare backside.

‘Hold on to the rail,’ he told her, pressing a palm to the small of her back and bending her over.

They were out in the open. Anyone below could look up and see them.

But Thea didn’t care.

She needed his cock inside her. Needed to feel the raw, hungry power of him slamming into her. With a whimper, she pressed back against him, her entrance already slick.

‘Holy gods, Thea...’ he muttered, his tip brushing against the need he found there.

She was still half dressed, her breasts aching for contact in the confines of her shirt, and so she freed them herself, squeezing hard, toying with her nipples, arching her back in invitation.

A moan sounded from behind her. 'That's the most erotic thing I've ever seen...' Wilder's voice was hoarse with desire, and he rubbed himself through her wetness.

'So do something about it.'

The crown of his cock breached her, stretching her, teasing her. Wilder applied pressure, enough to make her moan, but he didn't seat himself fully. He seemed intent on torturing her, sliding over exactly where she wanted him, again and again.

A gasp escaped her and she bucked her hips impatiently.

'Play with yourself,' Wilder growled in her ear. 'Between your legs. Now.'

His muscular thighs shifted behind her and her hand trailed from her nipple to her clit, circling the pulsing heat she found there. Her body tensed at the delicious sensation, just as Wilder sheathed himself inside her in one rough thrust.

She cried out as he hit that spot deep within, gripping the rail with her free hand.

Wilder's hands dug into her hips, pulling her back onto each one of his brutal strokes. Thea's entire body went taut. She tried to spread her legs wider, but her pants around her knees restricted her. She was entirely at his mercy, and the thought made her toes curl.

Wilder fucked her hard, exactly how she wanted. Every time he sank his cock into her, more of the world faded away, leaving only them, moving as one.

Warmth bloomed in her chest, flushing her skin as that intoxicating pressure began to build at the base of her spine, spreading outward. Wilder moaned with her, driving himself into her as though it would never be enough.

His hand closed over hers, guiding her fingers across her clit, increasing their pace.

'Gods, I love you,' he murmured desperately into the damp crook of her neck, strumming her mercilessly. 'This thing between us is endless. Nothing will stop me loving you.'

The cadence of his breathing shifted and his movements became more urgent, his thrusts driving them to the edge of release, as though with each glide of his cock his words would sink deeper.

‘I love you, too.’ Thea gasped as he hit that spot inside her again and pinched her clit, the unexpected sensation sending her barrelling over the precipice of desire, towards her climax.

Thea gave herself over to it, moaning and pushing back onto Wilder, writhing against him as her pleasure crested and she forgot everything except his name, crying for him again and again as he wrung every last ounce of her orgasm from her.

He erupted, driving into her as he found his own release, spilling inside her, collapsing against her back, his whole body trembling.

Panting and raw with emotion, they held each other while they waited for the call of battle.

CHAPTER FORTY

WILDER



The Tverrian battle horns blasted across the golden valleys, and in the fading light, the frontlines of the enemy forces crested a ridge, marching straight for Notos.

Steeling himself, Wilder kissed Thea hard before strapping his swords to his back. ‘I’ll see you at the wall,’ he said.

He met Torj and Vernich on the southern rampart and surveyed the incoming attack. It was still light enough to see that their enemy had come prepared. They carried ladders for the walls and several battering rams.

‘No catapults,’ Torj observed.

‘They won’t need them, not if the wraiths attack from the skies,’ Wilder said. ‘We need to rethink our plan...’

The others looked at him warily.

‘Hawthorne... Bit late for that, isn’t it?’ Vernich muttered, shaking his head.

‘No.’ Wilder scraped the loose hair back from his face and tucked it into the knot at the back of his head. ‘We should divide and conquer.’

‘We agreed we’d work as a unit,’ Torj argued.

‘Neither the wraiths nor the reapers will attack as a single unit. We need to be able to meet them from as many angles as we can.’ He looked to Torj. ‘Similar tactic to when we were attacked in the woods. Gather a small unit of the best Guardians, and our apprentices. They can bring the wraiths down and we’ll slay them. The regular forces from Harenth, Tver and Aveum can handle the ordinary soldiers.’

The sound of war drums began to echo across the valley and the dark mass of soldiers crept closer.

‘Fuck it,’ Torj said. ‘Let’s do it your way, Hawthorne.’

Vernich at last grunted his agreement and the three Warswords split up. Torj was to lead the main archers and defend them from the initial skybound attacks; Vernich was to take the northern wall and Wilder to command from the south.

As he walked the perimeter, checking on the commanders and their units, Wilder could feel King Artos’ magic sweeping through their forces, boosting the morale of their own soldiers. It was both a clever and dangerous tactic, but one he didn’t question at this late stage. He only hoped it didn’t result in warriors trying to be stupidly heroic in the face of their newfound fearlessness. Sometimes, fear was an asset.

A glance at the land before them told him there wasn’t much time until impact. While the fortified castle was protected to the west by forest and mountains, it was all that stood between the enemy and the villages that lay beyond.

Screams for mercy sounded at the gate – townsfolk threw themselves at the reinforced timber, begging to be let in. But the deadline had passed. The sun was down and now they had to take their chances with the monsters.

It was a part of war that Wilder had never grown accustomed to: that in the mess of it all, it was always the innocents who suffered most, those who’d never asked for the fight.

There was nothing he could do for them now, so he checked that the gates had been reinforced. A wave of conflicted emotion washed over him again as he saw Malik there, helping another man place a final thick timber plank across the breadth of the secondary gates.

Malik shouldn’t be here. He had given enough, had suffered enough, and what awaited them beyond the thick stone walls was more than Wilder wanted his brother to bear.

Glory in death, immortality in legend had been Malik’s motto once.

Wilder couldn’t linger. His brother had made his choice, and now Wilder had to make his.

He ran to the heart of the southern wall, where his own unit of Guardians waited. A third of them manned several catapults along the length of the wall, while the rest made up two rows of archers at the ready.

Thea waited, her own bow and arrow in hand.

His heartbeat faltered.

She had lined her eyes with kohl, as the women warriors of distant realms did for battle. Her beautiful face was a veil of calm, hiding the storm beneath.

But he couldn't think of her now.

Instead, he accepted a longbow from a nearby Guardian and looked out onto what would become their battlefield.

The sun had dipped below the horizon, bathing the land in a midnight-blue hue. Across the expanse of enemy forces, torches dotted their ranks.

Wilder scanned their own legion, poised for attack. Along the wall their own torches blazed, as well as fire pits to light their arrows, oil barrels and projectiles.

The noise of their adversaries' march drew nearer, the rhythm of heavy footfalls and the clink of armour sounding more and more like war drums, the promise of violence and death and suffering.

Wilder gathered himself and looked to the enemy.

There was always a moment like this: the intake of breath before the battle, the calm before the storm. The stilling of time where the two sides waited to see who dared to draw first blood.

Wilder's forces looked to him expectantly. Now was the time for heroic words and rallying cries. He fucking hated war speeches. But they were not for him, but for the men, to steel them against the terror that threatened to loosen their bladders and see them flee.

'Warriors of Thezmarr, soldiers of Tver, Aveum and Harenth, hear me. We have prepared for this, all day here in Notos, and before that – for all our lives. We have done the work. We have endured the training, fought the faces of darkness... Now, here we stand, and that all falls away. Now, it is far more simple. Us, or them.'

He paused, letting his words sink in, knowing they had just as much power as any sword.

'So I ask you: what is the measure of a Guardian? A warrior of the midrealms? I say it is to taste death and stand tall in the face of it. To defend those who cannot defend themselves. The measure of a true warrior is that they fight when others will not. And that they fight until the end.'

Wilder drew a sharp breath, lifting his bow, noting the heavy silence that had settled across his forces. 'Death finds us all in the end,' he called. 'And whether it's today, tomorrow, or fifty years from now, ask yourself: what will your death mean?'

‘The Hand of Death guides us,’ someone shouted, a bow lifting at the back of the unit. ‘Until the end!’

More bows lifted in solidarity. ‘Until the end!’ came the echo.

Wilder heard Thea’s voice chime through the rest. ‘Until the end!’

And with that, he nocked an arrow to his bow, turning back to the waiting enemy. ‘Archers!’ he shouted. ‘Nock!’

He heard the flurry of movement all around as fletching brushed quivers, as arrows tapped against timber and were fitted to strings.

‘Draw!’ he ordered, pulling his own string back and taking aim.

Again he heard his command being heeded.

‘Loose!’ he cried.

A hundred arrows rained down on the frontline of the enemy. Many fell to the ground before they’d even had the chance to raise their shields.

‘Again!’ Wilder called. ‘Nock —’

An ear-splitting shriek sounded from above and Wilder whirled around, his arrow still drawn. He shot it into the first wraith he saw flapping overhead. It lurched in the sky, his arrow protruding from its leg.

‘Archers! To the wraiths!’ Wilder shouted, already unloading a second and third arrow into his target, surging for it as it fell, unsheathing his sword, ready to claim its heart.

Thea was already there, slicing through its chest and tearing the black organ from the cavity.

Another wraith fell from above, then another, brought down by the Guardian archers, Wilder and Thea making quick work of carving through flesh and bone. The men cheered as they did, but Wilder knew it was only the beginning —

‘Ladders!’ sounded Torj’s voice from nearby. ‘Stop the ladders!’

The walls were madness as Wilder’s unit scrambled to push the ladders from the castle. Men who had once seemed squeamish at the idea of boiling water and oil were readily throwing buckets over the side, their bodies sagging with relief when they heard the screams of agony from the other side.

‘Archers! Hold the line!’ Torj called, while Wilder cut an enemy soldier in two, the torso toppling back over the parapet.

Scanning the wall, he saw that several more ladders had found purchase, and that a number of attackers had breached their defences already.

Too soon, Wilder thought. It was too soon for breaches to be happening. He signalled to Torj to man his archers as well, before spearing another wraith from the sky and ending it.

There was no sign of King Leiko's missing army unit, nor was there any sign of the *rheguld reapers*. The realisation made Wilder's stomach churn. They were holding back... but why?

'Ready the catapults!' he commanded, glimpsing Thea bringing down another winged monster, her light armour already smeared with black and red blood. It looked good on her.

The Guardians of Thezmarr rallied to his call, the catapults groaning as they were loaded with stones and balls of oil-soaked twine.

'Fire!' Wilder yelled.

Projectiles soared over the ramparts and barrelled towards the enemy. Their lines broke upon impact, bodies and earth flying.

'Again!' Wilder shoved a struggling trio of men aside to load a weapon himself, his Furies-given strength assisting him. 'Fire!' He loosed the mechanism and the catapult sent a boulder straight into the frontlines again. But the enemy were quick to reclaim their formations.

Wilder assessed their own units. The Guardians of Thezmarr stood strong, deploying efficient attacks in unified waves. The soldiers from the royal forces, however, were chaotic in their fear. King Artos' empath magic had worn off and now they wore glazed expressions of shock.

'The ladders!' Wilder surged for one that had hit the wall, enemies spilling over the top, brandishing their swords.

Wilder kicked the ladder from the edge, sending it careening back into the battlefield, crushing a line of soldiers beneath with a crash. But it had been one ladder out of many, and the enemy was on the wall. Guardians and royal soldiers alike engaged, the width of the wall crammed with whirling blades and cries of pain, bodies already strewn across the stone floor.

Wilder cleaved through enemy after enemy, all the while scanning the skies for more wraiths, and reapers —

A booming crack sounded from below.

Wilder surged to the edge of the wall, looking over to see a unit of enemy soldiers heaving a battering ram back, preparing for another blow to the castle gates.

'Torj!' Wilder shouted over the pandemonium. 'We need archers to the gates!'

‘You heard the man,’ Torj bellowed, pointing to Wilder. ‘Archers to the gates!’

Within moments, Torj was there, this time hurling a spear towards the attackers. He pierced two at once, the lance skewering the second man through the first.

‘We need more arrows,’ he said.

‘They’ve not sent a volley our way yet?’ Wilder asked, thrusting his sword through a man’s belly.

‘Not yet.’ Torj threw another spear at the men holding the battering ram below, his archers raining arrows down on them. The Bear Slayer noted Wilder’s furrowed brow. ‘What is it?’

Wilder hauled an attacker off one of their men and threw him over the wall. ‘There’s nowhere near the number of wraiths I expected. There were more attacking us in the woods...’

‘This is just the first wave,’ Torj ventured.

‘It is. But how much of their forces are they holding back —’

He was answered by an explosion to the north.

The entire castle rumbled beneath their feet, huge chunks of stone soaring through the air from the rear of the fortress.

‘Fuck,’ Wilder muttered.

‘Did they just blow a hole in our defence?’

‘Looks like it.’ Wilder gripped Torj’s shoulder. ‘You good to take the lead?’

‘I was born to lead, brother.’

‘Just as well,’ Wilder replied, already surging for the northern ramparts. ‘Swordsmen, Thea, you’re with me!’ he called over his shoulder, not bothering to see who obeyed.

He slayed as many enemy soldiers as he could while he ran, beheading them, shoving them from the wall, slicing at their vulnerable tendons and leaving them screaming on the ground, ready for someone else to finish off.

This was the brutality of battle.

Already the stone steps were slippery with blood.

‘Shit,’ he muttered, skidding to a stop as he reached the northern perimeter.

The wall was gone. Or half of it, at least.

Torchlight and fires illuminated the dust billowing into the air and the masses of rubble crushing countless men, ally and enemy alike. Attackers

spilt into the castle courtyard through the maimed wall.

And at the heart of it was Audra, her expression formidable, her knives carving through the madness and bringing down their foes.

‘To the breach!’ Wilder heard himself shout, already halfway down the stairs to defend the inner walls of Notos.

The Warsword didn’t think; he simply moved through the utter bedlam, slicing, cutting and thrusting his mighty blades through the weak joints of armour, into exposed sides and necks. With his prowess on the battlefield, he rallied his own forces behind him, inspiring a fearlessness in them, for they fought with the Hand of Death.

Wilder barked orders at several commanders to secure the kings and queen, to ensure their safety at all costs, before throwing himself back into the fray.

He found himself shoulder to shoulder with Audra, who shot him a challenging glare. ‘Tell me to go back to my books, Hawthorne, I dare you.’

In spite of himself, Wilder laughed, a madman’s laugh. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ he replied, cutting down an opponent. ‘Glad to have you. Sometimes I forget the warrior you were.’

Audra slayed one man, then another, blood spraying. ‘There’s no forgetting who we truly are, Warsword.’

And then she was off in another direction, leaving soldiers begging for death in her wake.

Shaking his head in awe, Wilder carried on swinging his swords, his Furies-given gifts guiding him. In his peripheral vision, he could see Thea fighting with the same brutal efficiency as he did. He had taught her well. She was exceptional; more than exceptional.

His apprentice, his Guardian, his love, didn’t hesitate, didn’t hold back as she slayed enemy after enemy, moving like a dancer of death through the chaos, becoming chaos herself as she whirled her sword and dagger.

She met his gaze across the fray, a manic grin splitting her blood-smeared face. He’d been right when he’d said to her long ago: *‘You’re beautiful as you are. And I’d wager even more so with steel in your hand and the blood of your enemies splattered across your face...’*

They came together across the battlefield, fighting side by side and back to back. The more distant sounds of the assault faded into nothing, until it was just Wilder and Thea, the clang of steel ringing out between them and their enemies, cries for mercy echoing in their wake. Attackers surrounded

them, but they moved as a single, powerful unit, cutting down anyone in their path.

A shriek sounded and the scent of burnt hair penetrated the stench of battle, the taste of it clogging in the back of Wilder's throat.

A reaper landed in the heart of the courtyard.

Loose rubble fell all around, and the ground quaked. Men screamed as tendrils of obsidian uncurled from its unnaturally elongated frame, its horns casting shadows in the torchlight. It was the biggest reaper Wilder had ever seen, rivalling the ones that had hurt Malik and Tal during the battle at Islaton.

And it had eyes only for Thea, sniffing at her as though it could scent what she truly was, and the power that coursed through her veins.

Wilder's heart stuttered as visions of Malik and Talemir flashed before him, of Thea too, limp and bleeding back in the Bloodwoods.

His gasp for breath was ragged. What was happening? Usually he could keep the nightmares the monsters inflicted at bay, enough to carve into that sinewy flesh, enough to end them.

The creature hissed, an ancient language spilling from its rotten mouth, words he couldn't understand beyond the fact that they promised pain and despair. The reaper's clouded blue eyes seemed to gleam as it took in Thea, the only figure standing before it, her dagger clutched in one hand, her sword in the other as she watched the darkness streaming from its talons.

Wilder scrambled towards her, but onyx power lashed at him, sending him sprawling across the pile of bodies that had gathered atop the blood-soaked stone.

The reaper kept its piercing gaze on Thea, a hair-raising hiss of anticipation escaping its mouth.

Thea didn't flinch. She merely twirled her blade, an invitation.

Wilder chewed the inside of his cheek. He could have leapt to his feet, he could have surged towards her and planted himself between her and the monster. But this was not his fight, not anymore. As much as it caused his chest to seize and her name to catch on his lips, he gripped his sword beneath its hilt.

'Thea!' he shouted across the ruins.

He threw his blade of Naarvian steel to her.

Thea's hand shot out, casting her own sword aside and catching his by the grip. Her arm didn't buckle beneath its weight, nor did she so much as

glance at him.

All around, the skirmish fell quiet but for the faraway sounds of the fighting on the southern front. Here, in the rear courtyard of the castle, not a soul moved besides the reaper circling Thea.

As it did, she didn't move, either. She let it circle her, let it believe she was prey to be snatched up and devoured by the darkness.

But as soon as it lunged, talons slashing, Thea pivoted on nimble feet. Naarvian steel gleamed in the flickering torchlight as she sliced those blades through the air with the force of a seasons-honed warrior. Ribbons of darkness manifested, extensions of the monster before her, threatening to bind her limbs and pull her taut, ready for slaughter, for sacrifice.

But Thea whirled and parried with the fluidity and grace of water, and the unflinching strength of a Warsword.

Then she struck a piece of flint and lit her blades aflame.

The reaper hissed in rage, surging for her again with both talons and coils of magic.

Wilder watched on, utterly transfixed as Thea delivered a glancing blow to the monster's outstretched arm, black and red blood slapping against the cobblestones. She didn't stop. Thea took the opening, pressing the advantage as the creature bled, as its tendrils of power recoiled momentarily in pain. Stepping past another swipe of claws, she threw a crooked cut to the reaper's torso, delivering a precise stab to its ribs with her dagger, causing it to stagger back with a shriek.

Enraged now, the monster advanced with a vengeance.

But Thea met its rage with her own. Even with her fate stone around her neck suppressing that mighty power of hers, Wilder could see the storm brewing behind her eyes.

The reaper licked its lips, as though it could taste the tempest on her. But Thea kept her cool, taking a long, almost lazy step to the outside with her leading foot, her slow pace taunting the creature, baiting it. The movement added momentum to the expert twist of her hips as she brought the great sword around in a rising angle, thrusting it up between the reaper's ribs.

Darkness exploded.

Wilder didn't pray to the Furies, didn't plead with the unknown forces of the realms for Thea's safety, as the shadows dispersed and revealed the

warrior within. He simply held his breath and watched as his apprentice danced on the precipice of legend.

Thea wrenched the sword from the reaper's torso, blood spraying. She flung herself at it while it staggered, bringing it to the ground with a crash amid the rubble and corpses.

There, she slit its throat and stuck her dagger deep into its chest, sawing through those tough layers of flesh and bone.

The creature thrashed, choking on its own blood.

But its flailing limbs stilled as Thea reached into the front of its torso and tore its heart from its chest.

Cheers erupted all around her, men surging forth to lift her up on their shoulders, to carry her across the ruins in a stirring, much-needed moment of victory for them all.

Wilder allowed himself time to watch Thea in her triumph from the edges, to see her for the warrior she was from afar. Until he spotted a familiar hawk circling overhead, his heart sinking at the sight.

Across the courtyard, Thea was already barking orders at the men to reform the lines, to rejoin the fight beyond the wall, where Vernich led his own unit. They did as she commanded, in awe, in fear. And so Wilder took the opportunity to slip away, to follow Terrence beyond the western wings of the castle.

But there, Seb, Vernich's pathetic excuse for an apprentice, was shoving young shieldbearers between himself and a shadow wraith, sacrificing their lives for his.

Fucking coward.

The wraith screeched as it swiped at the less experienced soldiers with its talons, cleaving through flesh and bone.

Wilder surged forward. How the spineless bastard had passed the initiation test, he'd never know. He advanced on the monster, and with three practised slashes, divested the wraith of its black heart.

The poor shieldbearers scattered, but Seb remained panting, his eyes wide with shock. Disgust soured on Wilder's tongue as he surveyed the Guardian, if one could call him that.

'I told you you'd never set foot back in Thezmarr.' Wilder twirled his blade and Seb's eyes bulged.

But a blade was too quick for the likes of him.

Wilder's hand shot out, gripping Seb by the throat and lifting him from the ground. 'I've never understood why you were there. You're decent enough with a sword,' he murmured thoughtfully, squeezing hard enough to feel the tendons in Seb's neck strain, to see his face reddening. 'But you've got no courage, no fucking backbone.' He applied more pressure. Seb's kicks were weakening. 'Your uncle has ties to the guild, but you... To what end are you part of the plan?'

He softened his grip, feeling Seb's throat bob against his palm.

'Well?'

Seb rasped for air, clawing at Wilder's hand. 'He...'

'He what?'

'Wants eyes at Thezmarr. Wants me to —' He took another ragged breath. 'To climb the ladder. To be... Guild Master one day.'

Wilder couldn't help it. He laughed darkly before tightening his grip again.

'I'd be doing the world a favour if I killed you now,' Wilder told him, relishing the desperation in the prick's bloodshot eyes. He imagined squeezing Seb's windpipe until the light left those eyes, until his feet stopped kicking. It was what he deserved. 'But your death isn't mine to claim.'

Wilder dropped him like a sack of wheat and Seb passed out in the dirt.

'Prick,' Wilder muttered, and left him there, spotting Terrence once more overhead.

The battle had bled to the outskirts of the grounds, but the fighting was thin and half-hearted, the humans on both sides already exhausted and weary. It was the way of war.

Terrence swooped beneath the stars, leading Wilder further and further from the rapid pulse of the fray, towards an encampment on the fringes.

Under the cover of trees and darkness, Wilder's heart nearly stopped.

For just beyond the first line of pine trees was a steel cage.

Guards were posted all around it; by the looks of things, some of Tver's best. Wilder's jaw clenched at that. Soldiers stationed to oversee prisoners rather than defend the lives of their own people.

Wilder's eyes narrowed as he glimpsed what gripped the bars of the cage.

Half-wraiths.

Dozens of them. They were cramped together, bruised and bloodied, some unable to stand. His heart sped up as he scanned the faces, looking for one in particular, one he knew as well as he knew himself. But it was too dark.

All he knew was that the souls within the cage had already been condemned – to torture, to death.

A rumble sounded in the distance.

Wilder turned back to the battlefield, his skin crawling, his heart in his throat.

The missing Tverrian unit had made itself known. And they were now one with the enemy.

Nothing remained of the human soldiers who had left their city to protect it. In their place were mutilated monsters of darkness, foaming at the mouth to get their claws into the men who now defended Notos, the men who had once been their comrades.

At last, Wilder saw what he'd known in his bones since they'd stepped foot in the capital. That the forces of evil had waited, day and night, for the armies of the midrealms to gather in one place.

Rife for extermination.

Sitting ducks, waiting for a wave of darkness to descend.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

THEA



The rumble in the distance shuddered through the earth beneath Thea's boots, rattling her bones. She fought in the muddied fields at the northern perimeter of the castle, leading a small unit of her own through the turmoil. Wilder was nowhere in sight, but Vernich the Bloodletter was bleeding the enemy dry at the vanguard. He might have been a bastard through and through, but the Warsword cleaved through his opponents with a viciousness Thea had never witnessed before.

Another rumbling sound echoed across the battlefield and Thea looked up, squinting across the darkened sky and sea, trying to make out the Veil in the night. But there was nothing but inky black – and Wren was somewhere out there, trying to patch the tear in the wall of mist with Farissa.

Thea blocked a blow to her side with Wilder's sword and gutted her attacker with her dagger. Where was her Warsword? It wasn't like him to hang back from the thick of the fighting.

She scanned her surroundings. In the light of various fires and torches, the lawlessness of war ensued. The air smelt of blood and vomit and shit, and men lay dying in their own filth. Soldiers with severed limbs or their entrails hanging out sat in the mud, shaking and looking dazed as the ongoing ringing of steel sounded all around them.

Another pair of wraiths landed and Vernich surged for them.

Thea was right behind him.

He merely grunted in surprise at her presence and carried on fighting.

Every lesson she'd learnt from Wilder coursed through her and she moved as Vernich moved: like a warrior, like a Warsword. Together they drove the wraiths back from their forces.

Vernich went feral, hacking away at their limbs, even going so far as to bite the flesh from a wraith's shoulder as it tried to clamp down on him with its talons. The older Warsword spat black blood into the dirt and kept slashing —

Until an unnatural stillness blanketed the battle.

And Thea saw why.

From the uniforms they wore, it appeared the missing Tverrian force had returned.

But they were much changed.

They were neither wraiths nor half-wraiths, but some mutilated, warped form of the two. Their bodies were twisted and leathered beneath their armour, reminding Thea of the vine blights she'd seen.

Suddenly, Wilder appeared in the stretch of land between the midrealms' legion and the advancing unit of monsters. He raised his single sword, welcoming their impending violence, a lone figure ready to take the full force of the enemy.

'No,' Thea gasped, her heart lodging in her throat. She whirled around to their own units. 'Reform the lines,' she yelled. 'Reform the fucking lines!'

The monsters surging for Wilder roared, and even from a distance Thea could see the spittle foaming at their mouths and the savagery in their eyes.

'Thea!' a familiar voice shouted. 'Thea!'

She looked around frantically and found Kipp racing towards her. 'Shouldn't you be at the wall?'

'Yes, but I saw an opportunity.'

'Talk fast, Kipp,' she demanded, watching the stretch of space between her Warsword and the enemy grow shorter and shorter.

'Lure them towards us,' he said breathlessly, motioning to a handful of horses held in place by shieldbearers on the wings of the field. 'Then get the fuck out of the way.'

'Kipp, I need more detail than that.'

'Just trust me.'

'Kipp —'

'There's no time. Take five men, ten at most, and lure those fucking things this way. Out into the open. Esvllt and I will do the rest.'

Thea took a deep breath, swallowing the knot of fear at the back of her throat. 'Alright. I'll do it.'

Kipp was already gone.

The wave of monsters descended upon Wilder.

Torj's words from the mock battle on the Plains of Orax returned to her once more. *'You are what stands between them and our world, so remember this: being a true Guardian of the midrealms is not about hating the evil before you, but loving the land and its people behind you. Remember that glory will not be found in failing to fall, but in rising from the chaos when you do.'*

Thea kept her panic squashed in the pit of her stomach as she rallied a small group of warriors to her cause, mounting the horses Kipp had gestured to. They charged for the mangled creatures.

Guttural screeches filled the air as the monsters clapped eyes on their attack, the beasts instantly surging towards them.

But Thea rode for Wilder.

It was impossible to discern what blood was his and what belonged to the enemy. He swung himself up on her mare, sliding into the saddle behind her, his powerful frame enveloping her as it always did.

'What's going on?' he rasped.

'Kipp's idea. Hang on,' Thea replied, turning her horse back to the pandemonium unfolding around her unit. 'Back!' she yelled. 'Pull back!'

Her horse surged beneath her and Wilder, kicking up mud and veering to the edge of the battlefield as she directed. She prayed the others were behind her.

'Now!' she heard Kipp's voice echo.

She whipped her head around to see two enormous workhorses galloping on either side of the battlefield, a thick chain strung up between them. They moved at full pelt towards the enemy.

Somehow the chain went through the monsters like a hot knife through butter.

Thea recognised the results of alchemy when she saw it. The chain had been treated with something of Wren's making, no doubt. Pride swelled in her chest at the thought of her sister's ingenuity.

Thea startled as a volley of arrows followed, slaughtering a great many of the now cursed Tverrian unit.

'Not fucking bad at all,' Wilder muttered behind her.

Thea's pride swelled higher at that. It was high praise indeed coming from a Warsword, and even in the midst of all the bloodshed, she made a

mental note to tell Kipp.

But the reprieve didn't last long.

They were hit with a powerful gust of wind, one that had Thea struggling to maintain control of her horse. Wilder reached around and grasped the reins just in time, keeping them both in the saddle as the poor beast reared up onto its hind legs.

Shadows swept across the battlefield.

Everywhere, men were on their knees, screaming. They were facing their worst fears, the nightmares that haunted their sleeping hours, and there was no telling reality from dream. Thea had seen it in Wilder in the ruins of Delmira. On and on the men shrieked, some clawing at their faces, some hitting their heads against the ground in the hopes of ending the agony.

It was then that three reapers stalked forth from the swirling black mass at the centre of all the suffering.

Thea tried to direct her horse with her knees and thighs, but it wouldn't budge – it was no Tverrian stallion. And so she leapt from its back, sprinting towards the closest reaper.

The monster was reaching for a soldier cowering before it, its talons poised to pierce armour and flesh, as another had once done to her. She had incapacitated that beast with her magic, but she wasn't willing to risk that now. What if she obliterated the entire field? Along with everyone – man and monster – on it?

Instead, she whirled Wilder's great sword of Naarvian steel, and the reaper seemed to sense her.

Slowly, it turned to face her. Sniffing, just as its brethren had done, as though it could scent the magic coursing through her even though she wore the alchemy-treated fate stone.

'Sniff all you want,' she said between gritted teeth. 'I'll gut you just as I gutted your friend.'

A lash of darkness came for her, but she was ready.

She sliced at it as though severing a limb —

Only to have Cal and Kipp leap in front of her.

'What the fuck?' she shouted, shoving her two friends out of the way. 'You don't even have Naarvian steel.'

'So give us yours,' Cal said, eyes wide as the reaper stared them all down.

Kipp placed himself between her and the monster. ‘You’re a princess of Delmira, Thea. It’s our duty to protect you.’

‘I don’t need protection.’ She pivoted around her friends, just in time to block the whip of another dark coil. ‘And I’m no fucking princess.’

Thea launched herself at the reaper.

The monster sent out a blast of darkness that sent all of them sprawling across the mud.

‘Now’s not the time for this shit,’ Wilder growled, the heart of another reaper clutched in his fist. He tossed it aside and helped Thea to her feet, his hands slick with blood. ‘Cal and Kipp, a noble effort from you both, but your strengths lie elsewhere. The *princess* can handle herself.’

Thea could have kissed him then and there.

‘He’s right,’ Torj grunted. ‘Cal, you see to the archers. They need to regroup. See what you can do about retrieving arrows from the dead. Kipp, for fuck’s sake, go to Esvllt. He needs your head on your damn shoulders.’

If it weren’t for the reaper advancing towards them, Thea would have laughed at the sight of her friends saluting her sheepishly before scrambling back towards the castle. Their hearts were in the right place, but their concerns were misplaced.

Now, she turned to face the monster, squaring her shoulders once more. How many more hearts would she carve out before the battle was done? How many had Talemir Starling claimed before the midrealms had dubbed him the Prince of Hearts?

A whip of darkness came for her.

Thea dodged it as Torj cleaved through it with his sword and Wilder attacked the reaper itself.

For a moment, Thea’s vision blurred, and she saw the Daughter of Darkness, her one good eye piercing Thea’s, staring into her soul as though she were right there in front of her. A wave of indescribable grief washed over Thea, almost knocking the air from her lungs. She didn’t understand what she grieved, only that she felt it in the deepest part of her chest.

And then the Daughter of Darkness was gone, and Thea was launching herself at the reaper, half climbing up its sinewy frame like an incensed animal, ignoring the lashing of onyx power and the pain that seared her exposed skin. She clung to the reaper’s grotesque torso, forgetting the Warswords in the heat of the skirmish as she clutched her dagger in her fist, stabbing the monster over and over in the neck, its blood spurting like a

fountain. She knew it wouldn't kill it, but in that moment, she didn't want to give it the gift of death. She wanted it to suffer, to scream beneath her punishment.

Torj and Wilder cut its legs out from underneath it and she fell with the creature to the muddied earth. She hacked at its already gory body until its chest caved beneath her hands and she tore flesh and muscle and cartilage to get to that throbbing black mass within. She tore its heart from its body, panting.

As the adrenaline ebbed away, she hardly recognised herself.

She scanned their surroundings, spotting a wraith creeping up on Wilder, who had moved on to deal with another reaper. She snatched a spear from a nearby corpse and threw it with all her might, pinning the lesser monster to the ground before she pounced upon it and took its heart too.

She could feel the eyes of their forces on her, and she knew she must look like a feral creature, covered in blood and gore, throwing herself at monsters with wild abandon. She didn't care. This was what she had been born to do, and as she looked around, she realised that they were winning, at least on the northern front.

As she sliced through another wraith, a cheer rose from the battlements.

Thea looked around to see what heroics Wilder and Torj had managed, but when she met their gaze, it was her they looked at.

The cries of victory from the warriors above were for her.

Thea almost shook her head in disbelief. From a piss-poor alchemist to this...? They were calling something from the wall, but she couldn't make out the phrase and she didn't care. Instead, she raised her tired sword arm, and another cheer erupted from them.

Wilder reached her. 'You're alright?' he asked, his silver eyes bright and alert as they roved over the much quieter battlefield.

Thea knew she'd been cut and bruised in several places, but the shock of it all was so great that she couldn't yet feel a thing. 'Fine. You?'

'Fine,' he said, gripping her by the shoulders so he could survey her critically. 'I have to go to the southern wall —'

'I'll go with you.'

Wilder was already shaking his head. 'No. You're best utilised here — the men listen to you. We need someone defending this wall, and Torj needs to see to the archers with Cal.'

‘What about Vernich —’

‘He’s checking on the rulers.’

Thea’s chest heaved. ‘You’re sure?’

‘About Vernich or you manning the north?’

‘Both.’

‘I’m sure.’ He said it softly, but firmly, his gaze lowering to her lips.

Thea’s heart stuttered. ‘You can’t kiss me here...’ It was almost a dare.

‘I know.’

She made to return his sword to him at last, but he pushed it back to her. ‘I love you,’ he told her.

Tears burned her eyes and she wondered if the shock of everything was at last wearing off. ‘I love you, too.’

Her Warsword started for the castle, but he hesitated, half turning back to her. ‘You’re ready, you know.’

‘Ready?’

‘For the Great Rite. When you feel its call, you go. Drop everything and go. You will emerge a Warsword. The very best of us.’

Thea’s mouth fell open.

But by the time anything resembling words was on her tongue, he had gone.

Thea gathered herself, her lungs expanding to their fullest as she breathed deeply. She felt taller somehow. Wiping the muck from her blade in the grass, she surveyed the men awaiting her command, thinking fast. It made sense to reform defensive lines around the breached perimeter, and perhaps send a handful of scouts further south if she could find any brave enough – that was what Kipp would do.

‘Someone get me a spyglass,’ she shouted.

To her surprise, a shieldbearer pressed one into her waiting hand almost instantly. But before further orders could leave her lips, an almighty crack of thunder ripped through the air and a bolt of brilliant white lightning flashed in the sky.

The Veil shuddered.

A second fork of lightning carved through it, illuminating the swarm of shadow wraiths bursting through the semi-patched tear in the wall of mist.

Thea’s knees buckled. ‘*Wren* —’

Hands shaking, she pressed the spyglass to her eye just in time to see another round of lightning light up the base of the Veil, showing a tiny boat

rocking in the dark, wild waters.

The boat was empty.

Wren was gone.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

THEA



Someone was screaming. A loud and piercing wail shredding through the night.

Thea realised the sound was coming from her.

And that she was running, her boots pounding against the earth, her breaths short and shallow.

Dropping the spyglass, Thea ran into the dark, brief flashes from the storm revealing what she already knew... She was too far away. Wren was already gone. But she sprinted for the sea, for the Veil anyway, refusing to recognise the fist of panic clenching around her heart, and the sickening weight of dread.

The world blurred. At first she thought she was running so fast that her eyes were streaming with tears, the wind whipping around her, stinging her cheeks, but...

No. Those were shadows swirling around her.

Tendrils of dark power cloaked her, tugged her through wisps of obsidian and a pulsing nest of chaotic magic. She tried to scream, realising that she was falling, travelling through space and distance, that the earth was no longer solid beneath her feet.

She clutched Wilder's sword and Malik's dagger, slicing at the ribbons of darkness to no avail. These shadows were whispers, barely tangible. Heart hammering, she swore to herself that when she hit the ground, she would slay every last fucking monster – she'd tear out their hearts with her fucking teeth if she had to.

The fall took both all the time in the world and no time at all, toying with Thea's grasp on reality. When at last she collapsed on solid ground,

she didn't know how many hours or minutes had passed.

She expected to breathe in the acrid scent of burnt hair, to feel the lash of onyx whips of power against her skin. But instead, she smelt pine. Gasping for breath, she staggered to her feet, looking around wildly.

For a moment, Thea's attention snagged on a familiar hawk perched on the bough of a tree. *What the fuck is Terrence doing here? He's supposed to be an ally...*

She couldn't dwell on that now. Her fingers flexed around her blades. *What the fuck happened? Where am I —*

She was in a clearing in the woods, but there was no telling how far from the battlefield she was. The shadows had swept her up mid-sprint and brought her here, wherever here was.

And suddenly where *here* was stopped mattering.

A torch protruded from the ground, illuminating three figures standing at the treeline, watching her.

Anya. The girl – woman she'd seen in her vision: the Daughter of Darkness, her wings tucked behind her back. A winged general standing at her side. And Wren, held in place between them by bonds of shadow magic.

Darkness leaked from Anya, and Wren's magic crackled weakly, a feeble attempt to fight it off. Her eyes were full of apology, and they implored Thea to run.

Instead, she sized up the Daughter of Darkness. The woman was even more fierce in the flesh, perhaps a few years older than Thea. Her shaved head made the angles of her face that much sharper, made the ragged scar that ran through her right eye all the more stark against her skin. Blood dripped from her armour and splattered the wings at her back. Her weapons were sheathed at her sides, but with all that power at her fingertips, it didn't look as though she needed them.

'What are you waiting for?' Anya said, her rough voice sounding strangely familiar. 'Come and claim her.'

Thea's heart stuttered at the challenge. The thought of Wren caught in the middle of this made her sick, but she raised her sword and took a step towards the enemy. It had to be a trap. Why else would they take Wren and lure her out here?

Trap or not, they were all here now, and she would end it one way or another. She flipped her blade menacingly.

The woman gave a huff of amusement. 'Oh, no, not with that.' With a flick of her wrist, darkness lashed for Thea, stronger than any reaper's power, stronger than anything she had ever felt before. The whip of onyx magic disarmed her, sending both her sword and her dagger flying out of reach. They hit the forest floor with a thud.

'You have a far greater weapon at your disposal, don't you, Althea?' the woman said, waiting.

Thea swallowed. 'What's it to you?'

'I'm surprised your Warsword didn't tell you,' the Daughter of Darkness answered.

In that comment alone, the woman told her she knew more than Thea could possibly imagine. *Your Warsword.*

'I have been seeking you and your sister for months,' the woman continued. 'I made no secret of it.'

Thea let those words sink in, trying not to buckle under the weight of a secret withheld, trying not to let her shock show.

'I've been looking for you for a long time.' As she spoke those final words, the darkness around her intensified, seeming to gather its strength, rallying around Wren.

A soft cry of terror broke from Wren's lips, and it was all Thea needed to hear.

She wrenched her alchemy-treated fate stone from her neck, tossing it aside into the dirt.

Her magic barrelled into her like a tidal wave, threatening to drown her. It flooded her whole body, brutal and overwhelming, to the point where she staggered beneath its weight.

Am I more powerful than before? she wondered abstractly as the lightning filled her veins and crackled at her fingertips.

She didn't know what she looked like to the enemy, but Wren's awed expression told her enough. They could feel the current of her magic from where they stood. They could feel the surge of an incoming storm.

Thea looked at the forks of lightning dancing between her fingers, then to the Daughter of Darkness, who stood with her ribbons of shadow, smiling.

Thea launched her lightning at Anya, sending a bolt straight for the bitch's chest.

The brilliant white light was swallowed by darkness.

But that didn't stop Thea. She threw bolt after bolt at both the woman and her general – a distraction, while she sank deep into herself, rallying that kernel within. She found a thread of that power, the very one that called to the skies above, not just to the magic she already possessed.

She may not have been trained, she might only hold power in its rawest form, but it didn't have to be perfect. Rage had guided it before. And it would do so again. She just had to free Wren from those bonds.

Wind whipped around Thea, and above, thunder cracked, the forest floor rumbling beneath them in answer. It vibrated in Thea's chest, coaxing more magic from her being, one form of chaos recognising another.

It empowered her, liberated her, brought that final piece of herself to the surface, the piece she'd been hiding for nearly twenty-five years.

The skies opened up and rain lashed down upon them all, and Thea's lightning carved through the air, striking those ribbons of obsidian. She didn't hold back.

The enemy already knew who she was, who Wren was. But it didn't matter. Not now. What mattered was the power surging from Thea, and that it stood between the Daughter of Darkness and her sister. Thea would not let them take her.

She delivered a world-shattering strike of lightning.

But there was no fear on Anya's face – only triumph as the storm raged around her.

'Now we know for certain,' she said.

'Know what?' Thea snarled, sending another bolt of power straight for the woman's face.

Darkness surged into the shape of a shield and took the brunt of the blow.

'That the storm magic runs deep through the Delmirian line,' Anya replied, with a knowing look to her general. 'It is just as powerful in each of us.'

Us. The word hit Thea in the chest like a blow.

Anya's general gave a nod, reaching for Wren —

A flaming arrow soared through the air.

A surprised cry of pain escaped the half-wraith's lips and he looked down, gazing at the arrow protruding from his chest.

Thea whirled around, expecting to see Wilder charging towards them, but it was Cal, another arrow already nocked to his bow.

The general swayed on his feet, his hands reaching for the shaft of the arrow.

‘Leave it, you fool,’ the Daughter of Darkness cursed, shoving Wren aside to get to him. The binds around Wren dissipated, fading into the night like ash in a breeze. Wren scrambled for Thea – no; for her weapons.

Lightning still snapped at Thea’s fingers and she aimed another bolt at the woman, to end her once and for all.

But Anya seemed to sense her intentions.

She looked up, the half-wraith’s arm hauled around her neck, her good eye piercing Thea’s gaze. There was something about that eye, something that made the hair on Thea’s nap stand on edge —

Another flaming arrow shot towards her, but this one was swallowed by a cloud of darkness gathering around the two half-wraiths. As the power thrummed around their bodies, Anya still held Thea’s stare.

‘Don’t you remember me?’ she asked, reaching for something Thea hadn’t noticed hanging around her neck.

A flower necklace.

Her hand brushed the petals there, before intricate bolts of lightning danced at her fingertips.

Thea loosed a breath, not realising that she had taken a step towards that familiar power that called to her.

‘I thought you would recognise your own blood, *sister*,’ Anya said.

Sister. The ground seemed to quake beneath her, the word somehow cleaving through the walls she had built around herself, shattering all notions of the past and ringing with an undeniable note of truth.

‘*Sister?*’ Thea choked. An icy shiver raked down her spine, her magic winking out around her, the storm circling above ebbing away into the distance.

Thea’s gaze shifted from Anya to Wren, the three of them staring hard at one another, like bolts of lightning meeting to strike the same point.

Shadows deepened and swirled, caught in the current of a windstorm.

‘*Beware the fury of a patient Delmirian...*’ the Daughter of Darkness murmured, before taking her general and vanishing into darkness.

A soft cry wrenched Thea from her trance and she threw herself towards Wren, who was kneeling in the mud. Thea skidded to a stop beside her, Cal there instantly as well.

Thea's skin crawled at the sight of her sister, pale and shaking, soaked to the bone. Wren reached for her. There were no signs of blackened veins or leaking shadow. The half-wraiths hadn't got their talons in her. Wren was herself, but clearly in shock. Thea realised that she probably was, too.

She wrapped her arm around her sister's shoulder, needing to reassure herself that Wren was truly there, truly whole.

Teeth chattering, Wren started to babble. 'I... Farissa and I... We had nearly fixed the tear, but there was a swarm of wraiths on the other side trying to force their magic through. Farissa got knocked overboard, and without her help, I... I couldn't hold them off.' She sniffed.

'It's not your fault,' Thea told her.

Cal looked on, horrified.

'But it is, Thee... I couldn't hold them off, couldn't fix the rest of the tear. And when they burst through, I used my magic. I didn't mean to. I remember Hawthorne saying it attracts them, but —'

'It was your only option, Wren. You were defending yourself.'

'That doesn't make it alright. I should have let them have me, rather than let them through.'

'No. That was never an option, do you hear me?' Thea spoke fiercely, fury pulsing alongside her uncontained magic now. 'They can't have you. They never will.'

Cal stepped back, fear etched on his face.

But Wren looked at Thea, the horrific truth dawning there. 'Thea... What she said... What she called you...'

The term echoed in Thea's mind, but she wouldn't – couldn't – say it aloud. Instead, she tasted another phrase on her tongue.

'*Beware the fury of a patient Delmirian...*' Bile burned the back of her throat. 'It was never me,' she rasped. 'It was her.'

Flower necklaces in small hands.

The whisper of a storm in the wind.

'You can feel it in your bones, can't you?' Wren said quietly, her voice quaking. 'That what she said was true.'

Thea didn't want to. But she knew the Daughter of Darkness. She *knew* Anya. Not just from her visions. But from life before.

In the shadow of a fallen kingdom, in the eye of the storm

A daughter of darkness will wield a blade in one hand

And rule death with the other

*When the skies are blackened, in the end of days
The Veil will fall.*

The grief and despair on Wren's face tugged on that thread of recognition that had started to unravel within Thea since she'd first seen the Daughter of Darkness.

And her unmarred eye – which was a unique shade of green that matched both Thea's and Wren's.

'Don't you remember me?'

Thea did.

They were linked by blood and storms.

It was Anya's magic that had lured Thea and Wren out of the Laughing Fox in Harenth. It was Anya's lightning that had called to them.

Anya, the Daughter of Darkness, the enemy to end them all... was the true heir of Delmira.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

WILDER



The aftermath of battle always tasted like ash on Wilder's tongue, no matter the outcome. As he walked the blood-drenched fields and heard the cries of the wounded, the fact that the midrealms' forces had won felt hollow. They had secured a victory, but only just, and the price to be paid was steep.

In the wake of war, there was always a jarring contrast between the joy of the survivors and the reality of the dead. That thick, putrid stench of death, of blood, shit and vomit, soured the air, all while kegs of ale were being split open and shared among the living.

Wilder was used to the blood and gore, but it had been a long while since he'd seen it on such a grand scale in terms of human losses. There was always an element of disassociation when it came to slaying monsters, but when it was fellow soldiers screaming in agony, when it was their blood coating the fields, it was hard to maintain that same level of detachment, even as a Warsword.

He scanned the grounds for Thea, but there was no sign of her. His chest tightened as he thought of his last words to her, of how he'd been unable to kiss her when he wanted to. He steeled himself against the thought. He'd see her soon enough, and when he did, he'd do a lot more than kiss her.

But for now, there was work to be done. He set about finishing off those who lay dying in the fields with cold efficiency. There was nothing to be done for them, and a swift death was a mercy he'd gift to any fellow man.

The various units of the midrealms joined together to gather and burn the dead. Wilder watched the thick columns of smoke drift into the gold hues of early dawn.

The battle had lasted most of the night, and now a red sunrise bloomed on the horizon. A medical tent had been set up at the edge of the war camp; Wilder headed there to see what he might do to help.

He was alarmed to find Farissa there. The poor alchemist was half drowned, attended to by a fussing Audra. Wilder's brows shot up. He'd never seen Audra *fuss* before. But when it came to Farissa, apparently she was willing to make an exception.

'What happened?' he asked, pushing aside the tent flap and entering the cramped quarters.

Both women shot him looks of surprise.

'You don't know?' Audra demanded, surveying him critically.

A pit of dread opened up inside him at her words. 'What happened?' he repeated.

Frowning, Audra made quick work of explaining what had happened out by the Veil – how Farissa had been thrown from the boat, leaving Wren at the mercy of the swarm of shadow wraiths. Wilder's breathing went shallow. He'd been the one to encourage Thea to let her sister go out into the madness. He'd told her that everyone had a part to play.

'Another unit of alchemists is already being rowed out to patch the rest of the Veil,' Audra said.

But Wilder didn't care about the alchemists at that moment.

'Have you seen them? Thea? Wren?' he asked, unable to keep the edge from his voice.

Audra blinked at him for a moment. 'Not in the flesh,' she said at last, lowering her voice. 'But their storms have graced the skies.'

His knees almost buckled. 'I —'

'If you don't mind, Hawthorne. I'm trying to make sure Farissa doesn't die.' And with that, she pushed him from the tent, the flap falling down in place between them.

Wilder paced the war camp, searching for any sign of Thea. But he couldn't find her amid the pandemonium. Audra's blasé attitude told him not to worry. If there was something to fear, the librarian would be the first to let him know. Of that he was certain.

He continued to search the grounds, and while he couldn't find Thea in person, she was there, in the tales of the surviving warriors...

'She must have slayed at least five reapers,' one man was saying across a campfire.

‘I saw her carve out a dozen hearts,’ said another.

‘She was fearless. She could hold her own beside the Warswords. Saw it with my own eyes.’

Pride pricked in Wilder’s chest. He had seen Thea in action himself, but it was another thing entirely to hear her becoming a legend in the eyes of hardened warriors and Guardians.

Their conversations faded to whispers before a heavy blanket of awed silence fell across the camp – and Althea Zoltaire herself walked among them.

She moved with her chin held high, her shoulders pushed back, blood still dripping from her blade – his blade. She was covered in the filth of battle, but it only made her look more formidable.

Every warrior who was able stood to attention.

And to Wilder’s shock, they raised three fingers to their left shoulders.

He’d never seen anything like it in his life.

She was not a Warsword, not yet... But she had the respect of one.

Behind her, Cal and Wren followed, both looking shaken and overwhelmed. But Thea... Thea took it all in her stride, as though she was exactly where she belonged.

‘Where walks death, so does Althea Zoltaire,’ someone called.

Murmurs broke out across the camp. And it was only as Thea’s gaze met Wilder’s that he realised what they were calling her...

The Shadow of Death.

When at last she reached him, it took every ounce of willpower not to gather her in his arms and hold her tightly to him. Upon closer inspection, she was bruised and battered, red welts and cuts peppering her exposed skin where wraiths had managed to lash her with their darkness. But there was a fierce tempest in her eyes, and Wilder was willing to bet that were it not for the fate stone around her neck, there would be no hiding the power that surged through her now.

‘Are you alright?’ he asked, his voice suddenly raw. He knew there was no way they could talk privately here, and there was little chance of getting back up to the castle to their rooms.

Thea nodded, but there was a questioning gleam to her eyes, and the prickle at the back of Wilder’s neck told him there was something she knew that he didn’t.

Despite her obvious exhaustion, Thea joined in the celebrations around the war camp, seeming to realise that this was her chance to solidify the respect she had gained in the heat of the battle. She drank and joked and commiserated with the men, soon joined by Cal and Kipp, with Wren having left to check on Farissa. Wilder still didn't know what had happened after Farissa was thrown overboard. Where Wren had ended up or what had happened to cause those violent storms over the forest.

Wilder himself stayed on the outskirts of the festivities, noting that Terrence was circling overhead once more, reminding him of the half-wraiths captured to the west of the castle and the horrific fate that awaited them all. He knew Artos and the other rulers well enough to understand that an example would be made of the poor creatures, no matter the part they had played in the attack.

Nearby, a keg groaned as the last of its contents was emptied into an overly large tankard. Wilder expected to see Torj, but it was Vernich who came to stand at his side.

'That's some apprentice you've got, Hawthorne,' the Bloodletter muttered somewhat begrudgingly before he took a long draught of his ale.

'Oh?' Wilder said.

'I might be a bastard, but I'm not so short-sighted as to deny when someone has talent...' Vernich sighed. 'She had my back out there.'

'She would have anyone's back.'

'So I realised.' The words were tinged with a note of regret, though the older Warsword said nothing of the sort; that wasn't his style.

'My own apprentice, however, is gravely injured,' he said instead.

'Shame.'

'Osiris is calling for witnesses. So we can explain to his uncle what happened.'

'Tell him it was a battle. People get hurt,' Wilder said.

'He's a silent benefactor of the guild. He'll need a bit more detail than that.'

Wilder didn't reply, merely followed Vernich's gaze to where Thea was telling a group of captivated warriors some heroic tale that involved Cal. It wasn't long before men all around them were raising their cups, toasting to Callahan, the Flaming Arrow.

With his chest still heavy, Wilder forced himself to his feet and went to find the rulers of the midrealms. For the war was not over when the battle

was done.



The celebrations lasted well into the evening, and it felt like a lifetime before Wilder found Thea again, swaying on her feet.

‘You need to rest,’ he told her, his voice low, positioning himself to catch her should she fall.

He expected her to argue, as she so often did. But it seemed his apprentice, his love, had learnt when to accept defeat. She nodded, gazing up at him blearily, and that was all he needed to see to show her to the tent he’d snagged on the outer perimeter of the camp.

She stumbled inside, the shock of the day finally wearing off, leaving her shaking and cold. Wilder followed her into the tent, which seemed too small with him inside it as well, but he didn’t mind. He wanted to be close to her, wanted to hold her through the night. They still hadn’t exchanged more than a few words, but perhaps that was for the best, given what he knew. Given what he had to do next.

But first, he would allow them this comfort.

They didn’t speak. They simply wiped the dirt and blood from their bodies and curled up on the bedroll together, Wilder enveloping her body with his, waiting for her tremors to subside.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, because he woke to Thea tracing the contours of his face, her lips brushing against his.

‘I need you,’ she whispered.

‘You have me. Every part of me belongs to you,’ he told her, seizing the kiss, her mouth parting beneath his, allowing his tongue to slip inside and brush against hers. He drew back for a moment. ‘But tell me exactly what you need, Thea, and it’s yours.’

‘Remind me that we’re alive. Promise me that as long as we’re together, and our friends are unharmed, that’s all that truly matters.’

A chasm opened in Wilder’s heart as the words washed over him. Somewhere deep inside, he knew it wasn’t just the battle that had her shaken. There was something more, something she hadn’t yet told him. But he wouldn’t push her – not when she needed him most, not when she asked this of him.

The reassurances wouldn't come from his mouth, but from his body. With his body he could offer her comfort.

With the rest of the camp around them, Wilder was mindful to peel their clothes away in silence, to clap his hand over her mouth as his teeth closed over a nipple, as he dragged a finger down her centre.

In the blue-tinted light within the canvas, he could see the bruises marring her skin. He kissed every one of them with reverence, along her collarbone, her ribs, and beneath him, Thea arched into his touch.

He exhaled shakily.

This woman... My woman... He had fallen for her long ago, but what he'd failed to realise was that when it came to love, it wasn't a single fall, but many, over and over. It was there in the grander gestures: slaying monsters, fighting furiously and making heartfelt declarations. But it was in the smaller, quieter moments that he felt it the most deeply – that shift at the very heart of him, where he fell for her beyond reason.

His throat closed up as it hit him. He would forever be falling for Thea.

And so, in the dim light of the tent, their breaths mingling together, her fingers gentle in his hair, Wilder sat upright and pulled her into his lap, her thighs either side of him.

He kissed her, long and slow and thorough.

Only when they were both breathless did they break apart.

Celadon eyes met silver as Thea slowly, torturously, slid down the length of his cock.

It was her hand that clamped over his mouth this time to stifle his guttural moan.

The smile tugging at the corner of her mouth nearly broke him.

Then her lips were on his as she rode him, rolling her hips against his. Wilder met her movements from beneath, driving himself into her, trying to put everything he felt into each thrust.

Thea gasped as he hit that deep spot inside her, and he reached between them to circle her clit how she liked. Her head tipped back in pleasure, and he kissed her breasts and dragged his teeth over her nipples.

She burned so bright for him, and he burned with her, fucking her, loving her with all he could give her.

'Wilder,' she moaned, a curse, a prayer, a warning.

The taste of his name on her lips would forever be the end of him, and as he sent her beyond the point of no return, her climax reaching its crest,

he hurtled over the edge with her.



Wilder woke before dawn, before the rest of the world. For a moment, time stilled as he watched Thea, as he studied her fierce beauty, softened by sleep. He memorised the way her lashes kissed the tops of her cheeks, the way her lips parted slightly and her chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm.

Then he dressed in silence, steeling himself with each piece of clothing, each piece of armour.

He looked at Thea one last time. 'I love you,' he whispered, knowing that there was no going back from what he was about to do.

He forced one foot in front of the other and left the tent while he still had the strength. Tears stung his eyes, but he kept walking.

No matter where he went, he would carry Thea with him. She was a part of him now, always.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

THEA



Thea woke to voices outside the tent. It was cold on Wilder's side of the bedroll.

'He was the one to change tactics at the last moment. He was the one to tell Farissa to take the young alchemist with her.' It was Vernich. 'He knew the elder would go after the younger. He created the fucking opening for them.'

'He would never —' That was Torj.

Thea's scalp prickled and she realised she was clutching her fate stone. Cal had found it for her in the forest. She propped herself up, letting the stone fall back between her breasts as she listened to the commotion. Who were they talking about? And where was Wilder? She scanned the tent in the weak light of dawn.

His armour, his swords – everything was gone.

'He left a fucking apprentice in charge of the northern perimeter,' another voice chimed in. Esylt.

'She had it handled.'

'She didn't, though, did she? She was captured by *them*,' Esylt replied with a growl. 'Who the fuck knows what they did to her, to her sister?'

Audra's voice cut through the deep timbres. 'Perhaps you should ask the young women before jumping to conclusions.'

Thea was barely breathing. What was she listening to? As quietly as she could, she began to dress, their words filtering through the canvas all the while.

'There's more,' Vernich murmured. 'One of the commanders is investigating the attack on Sebastos Barlowe —'

Thea baulked. Attack? Surely they didn't mean the brawl in the camp before the battle? Who cared about some mundane scrapping in the midst of all this?

'Witnesses say Hawthorne attacked him on the battlefield,' Vernich continued. 'Strangled him without provocation. Barlowe still hasn't regained consciousness.'

'No. He would never,' Torj snapped.

But Thea was done listening. No longer able to stand the growing lurch of dread in her gut, she strapped on her armour once more. Wilder had been right – it fit like a second skin now. She crept out the back of the tent and slipped through the war camp unnoticed. Her former life in Thezmarr had made her an expert on remaining invisible when she needed to, and she used that to her advantage now as she wove between the tents, searching for any sign of her Warsword. She needed to find him, and fast, before the stories about him took on a life of their own.

There was little movement or noise, only the distant moans of the injured still clinging to life in the medic tent.

And the cry of a hawk overhead.

The roiling in Thea's stomach only intensified at the sight. Snatching a bow and a quiver of arrows from a nearby supply cart, she moved through the rest of the camp like a shadow, following the hawk.

It led her west of the castle, across the blood-stained fields, where crows and scavengers were already feasting on the dead who hadn't yet been gathered for the pyres. It smelt like death and despair, a far cry from the glory she had once imagined.

She saw no one as she crossed the open land, keeping her gaze trained on the bird of prey as it dipped and soared above. No one stopped her; no guards, no scouts.

Despite the ache of her battle-worn body, it was her chest that felt the heaviest. For she knew in her bones this was the same hawk that had brought Wilder messages from Naarva, where the Veil was supposedly the weakest. It was also the same hawk that had watched as Anya, the Daughter of Darkness, held Wren captive in her onyx binds.

A sour taste filled Thea's mouth as she spotted the western treeline, a dull throb of pain forming at the back of her throat.

She slowed her approach, her heart rate spiking.

For at the foot of the trees, she could see a handful of midrealms soldiers – all unconscious, tied to the thick trunks, gagged.

Longing for the weight of Wilder's Naarvian steel in her hands, Thea nocked an arrow to her bow and crept towards the treeline. When she reached the nearest warrior, she saw a Guardian totem on his arm and prayed he'd know who she was. Searching the forest floor, she snatched up the weed she was looking for and brought it under the man's nose, waving it so the bitter aroma would waft from its leaves. Peppered broadleaf – another neat trick all those years of alchemy had taught her.

At her ministrations, the man jolted and she had to hold him down with all her strength, grateful that at least for this initial meeting, he was sufficiently gagged. But as soon as the panic settled and he noted the Guardian totem on her own arm, as well as the single finger she raised to her lips, he stilled.

Thea unsheathed her dagger and cut the ropes that bound him to the tree. As soon as his hands were free they flew to the gag, and he tore the scrap of material from his mouth with a grimace of disgust.

'What happened here?' she whispered, peering into the woods behind him, unable to see through the densely packed trees.

'Don't know exactly,' he murmured. 'We were assigned to guard the prisoners. I was stationed out here, with half of them.' He motioned to the other Guardians bound to the trees. 'I don't remember how I wound up here, like this.'

'What prisoners?' Thea asked.

'The monsters.'

'Where?'

'Just inside the forest there.'

Thea's skin was crawling. She turned back to the warrior. 'I need you to free one of them to help the rest, while you run to the castle. And I mean run. Bring the Warswords and commanders.'

'What will you do?' he asked, glancing from her to the shadowy woods beyond.

'Worry about yourself,' was all she said before she slipped into the forest.

She didn't have to go far. Only a few yards into the wooded area, she saw it.

A steel cage.

Only it didn't contain prisoners, monsters or otherwise. Not anymore.

A ragged gasp escaped her as she spotted dozens of half-wraiths dotted around the trees, newly freed from captivity. They were bruised and bloodied, some using each other as support to stand. But they were no longer contained within the bars of the cage. They had escaped.

Thea's gaze darted back to the steel box, where the door hung ajar.

They hadn't escaped.

Someone had freed them.

Thea's heart hammered, her fingers flexing around her bow as she scanned the scene before her. And then her heart stopped.

Standing together at the heart of it all were Anya, the Daughter of Darkness; the winged man Cal had shot...

And Wilder Hawthorne.

Thea couldn't breathe as she watched Wilder slice through the binds of a monster, freeing it, his handsome face a mask of cool calm.

This can't be happening. Thea blinked rapidly, convinced that she was hallucinating, that the next time she opened her eyes, she would see something different.

But it was as plain as day before her.

All this time she had thought Vernich was the fallen Warsword.

But it wasn't him letting the darkness in. There was no denying who had cut the bonds of the monsters before her.

It was Wilder.

Thea felt as if her chest was caving in. Wilder Hawthorne was in league with the Daughter of Darkness. With that realisation, all the other smaller pieces of the puzzle fell into place. The hawk from Naarva, where the Veil was weakest. Hiding his sources' updates from her. Flinching when the others shot the half-wraith from the sky. Calling the monster on the clifftops of Thezmarr 'he' rather than 'it'.

All this time he'd been aiding them. All this time he'd been lying.

She had been such a fool.

Vernich's words echoed in her mind: *'He was the one to change tactics at the last moment. He was the one to tell Farissa to take the young alchemist with her... He created the fucking opening for them.'*

Were she not seeing it with her own eyes, Thea wouldn't have believed it, not after everything they had been through together.

He had told her that he *loved* her.

He had made her love him back.

And now... now he was with the enemy. He *was* the enemy.

He had taken everything Thezmarr stood for, everything the Warswords fought for, and broken it so thoroughly it was no more than dust in the wind.

She expected anger, she expected violence, and she knew that would come. What she did not expect was the blow of grief that hit her in the chest, manifesting in waves of physical pain.

Someone had died.

The Wilder she knew was gone. Had he ever existed?

In the distance, an alarm bell sounded.

Thea grimaced, her grip around her bow tightening. The fucking castle fools may as well have just announced their arrival.

‘One of the guards must have escaped,’ the winged general said to Anya and Wilder. ‘We need to leave, *now*.’

Gone was Cal’s arrow in his chest. He moved as though he’d never been shot at all. Thea’s skin crawled as she wondered what evil shadow magic could seal a wound like that.

‘Dratos, you see to the injured,’ Anya told him, her voice full of command.

Dratos.

‘*He often brings me word from a ranger in Naarva called Dratos...*’ The words Wilder had spoken were like a punch to the gut. He had been in on all of this since the very beginning.

Thea tasted the bitterness of bile rising up. She had been such a fool.

No more.

There was a flurry of movement as the monsters readied themselves, preparing to depart —

Thea pointed her arrow through the trees, straight at Anya’s heart. It didn’t matter who she might once have been. Anya was the Daughter of Darkness, the enemy who was poisoning the midrealms. No blood ties or storms would stop Thea now.

‘You’re no sister of mine,’ she murmured, taking aim —

‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you,’ sounded a deep, familiar voice, one that wrapped an unforgiving fist around her heart and squeezed.

Thea jolted, training her arrow on Wilder, who stepped in front of her. ‘You...’

She didn't know what to expect – denial, reassurance, regret? But he offered none of those things as he stood between her and the enemy, blocking her shot, stopping her from bringing down the person responsible for all the rot in their world.

Behind him, shadows were pouring from the monsters, some already vanishing into thin air with their whips of darkness.

'I won't let you get away with this,' she vowed, unable to hide the shake of her hands.

In the distance, she could hear the cavalry coming.

'You let the guard go,' Wilder said. 'You sent him back for aid.'

'And you? You let those monsters go. You —'

'Yes,' he said plainly, taking a step back as the sounds of the incoming forces grew louder.

It was all true. Everything she'd heard was true. She knew it in her bones.

'How could you?' The words came out as a whisper. As the fracture settled in her heart, she let that fury in, let the rage fuel her. Only someone who had burrowed deeply inside a heart could shatter it from within.

'I did what I had to, Thea.'

'Don't say my name,' she hissed. 'Don't ever say my name again.'

Behind him, the enemy forces were getting away, the forest filling with shadow magic —

'Hawthorne,' Dratos called. 'We have to go —'

Thea heard figures crashing through the forest undergrowth as the midrealms forces arrived.

She couldn't read the expression on the Warsword's face. He took another step back, protecting the monsters behind him even now.

'Hawthorne?' Torj's voice sounded behind her, unsure.

But Wilder's face was cold, indifferent, as though he hadn't just betrayed everything he had ever stood for, everything he had ever vowed to protect.

Violent shadows swirled around him, the forest behind empty but for Anya and her winged general. Wilder went to them, letting the shadows whip around him, as though he didn't fear the darkness, as though it were a part of him.

He met Thea's gaze.

With that one brutal look, whatever had been between them severed.

Thea's love for him died an agonising death then and there, shedding their every moment, every touch from her body like a skin until nothing was left.

She surveyed him icily, spying the one spot where he was weak. In the armour that had never been made to Warsword standards.

She let her arrow fly, aiming straight for the ill-fitting joint.

She didn't see if it found its mark. For the onyx lashes of power intensified, creating a churning mass around the three enemy figures until they were obscured from view, until they were gone.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

THEA



‘What the fuck just happened?’ Torj said at her side, staring at the empty cage and empty clearing before them, the final wisps of shadow vanishing.

Thea lowered her bow, her whole body trembling. ‘He’s one of them...’ she heard herself croak. ‘He helped them escape. I saw it.’

Torj screwed his eyes shut before opening them again, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘As did I...’

‘What in the realms is going on?’ Osiris’ voice cut through the shocked silence. When he reached them, his gaze fell upon the empty cage and the discarded ropes on the forest floor. ‘Who did this?’ he demanded, his neck flushing.

‘Wilder Hawthorne,’ Thea told him, her heart shattering anew as she said his name. She never wanted to utter it again. More than anything, she wanted to crumble. She wanted to slip away and wake up from this nightmare. Perhaps she’d find she was still on the battlefield, at the mercy of a reaper’s dark magic. She wished she was.

But the roar of rage that ripped from Osiris rid her of such notions.

This was happening. It was all real. Wilder had betrayed the guild, betrayed the midrealms, betrayed *her*.

‘We need to get this under control,’ Torj was saying to the Guild Master. ‘We can’t let word of this spread, not before we get a handle on it.’

The Warsword’s words spurred them into action, and before Thea knew it, she was at their side, heading towards the castle and the war room.

There was no trace of the victory they’d shared the night before as she was ushered into the chamber. A rich oak table stood at its centre, the rulers

of the three kingdoms sitting at its head.

‘What is the meaning of this summons, Osiris?’ King Artos demanded as soon as the Guild Master sank into a chair.

Osiris didn’t answer immediately. The back of Thea’s neck prickled as he looked not to the king, but to her.

‘Althea?’ King Artos prompted, brow furrowed in confusion.

Heart seizing, Thea cleared her throat and rested her hand on the pommel of Malik’s dagger, trying to keep her head high as she spoke. The words on the tip of her tongue threatened to break her.

‘Wilder Hawthorne has deserted, Your Majesty.’

The king blinked. ‘Deserted?’

She drew a sharp breath. ‘Yes, sire. He committed treason of the highest order, releasing your half-wraith prisoners, along with the monsters’ leaders. He fled with them, wrapped in darkness, Your Grace.’

Her voice sounded like it belonged to a stranger, calm and detached, in stark contrast to the utter turmoil that raged within. She hadn’t taken note of who else stood in the room with her, but she could feel their stares boring into her, searing.

The world suddenly grew close and sharp as she relived her most intimate moments with Wilder in excruciating detail. His laugh and smile. Her name whispered against her skin. The feel of him inside her.

Thea swayed, suddenly nauseous. She forced herself to inhale steadily through her nose, ignoring the attention of those around the room and focusing solely on King Artos, using him as an anchor to the present.

Artos was conferring with Queen Reyna and King Leiko, all three of them wearing the same expression, a mixture of horror and dread.

At last King Artos looked up and addressed Osiris. ‘You saw his treason for yourself?’

‘Torj Elderbrock did, Your Majesty. I was there at the end. It was as Guardian Zoltaire said. He was right there in the shadows with them. It has also come to light that he attacked Guardian Sebastos Barlowe without provocation on the battlefield.’ Osiris’ voice was trembling with fury. His lips had gone white. In all her years at Thezmarr, Thea had never seen the Guild Master so full of rage.

It was then that Seb limped forward, horrific violet bruising colouring his throat, his eyes blood-red. ‘He tried to kill me, sire,’ he rasped, his voice broken.

‘If he was trying to kill you, you’d be dead,’ Osiris said coldly. ‘But the fact remains... Hawthorne committed treason.’ His gaze fell to the three rulers. ‘Do I have your permission to deal with this?’

King Artos exchanged looks with Queen Reyna and King Leiko. The royals nodded in agreement and the King of Harenth turned back to Osiris.

‘You do,’ he said.

The Guild Master’s jaw clenched before he turned to face the rest of the war room. It was only then that Thea scanned the faces around them. Torj and Vernich stood shoulder to shoulder, their faces etched with fury of their own. Beside the Warswords and Esyllt, Thea spotted Cal and Kipp. Both of their expressions softened as she met their gazes.

Pity. They *pitied* her.

Thea didn’t blame them. She’d been a fool. All this time she’d worried about Vernich and Seb being the treacherous warriors in their midst, the ones she would have to track down across the realms in the end. But she’d been wrong. So completely and utterly wrong. It had been the Warsword in her bed, the Warsword who’d burrowed into her heart.

More faces stared back at her: Farissa, Audra, Wren... All of them looking at her as though she was something fragile, as though she were about to break.

But no. This would not be the end of her.

She would make herself a legend from the ruins.

Osiris cleared his throat before he addressed the room. ‘It pains me to make this announcement on the heels of our victory, but it must be done...’ He seemed to gather himself. ‘From this day henceforth, Wilder Hawthorne of Thezmarr has been declared a fallen Warsword. Many of us bore witness to his betrayal. We watched as his Furies-given power corrupted him from within. As of now, the midrealms has two enemies. The forces of darkness who seek to wipe us from these realms, and the former Warsword who once swore to protect them.’

Angry murmurs broke out across the chamber. Thea could feel the rage in the air, washing over her like a wave.

‘We need to track him,’ Vernich growled. ‘Need to finish him before —’

‘He’s mine.’ The words left Thea’s mouth without her thinking, barely more than a whisper, but with enough weight and threat to silence the entire war room.

It was an echo of what they’d said to each other in the hot spring.

'You're mine?' she'd asked.

'Beyond reason.'

'Then I'm yours.'

It meant something else now – something far darker, full of poison.

'He's mine,' she said again, loud enough for all to hear, letting them see the rage churning beneath the surface.

She waited for the cries of outrage, for the men to object, for them to turn on her as they had at so many other points in her life.

But a silent deliberation seemed to course through the chamber before Torj and Vernich stepped forward.

'If anyone can get to him...' Vernich's voice was like gravel. 'It's her.'

Torj's face was grave. 'She knows his weaknesses better than all of us,' he added, giving Thea a sombre nod.

Osiris met her gaze across the table, his expression hardening. 'You want him?' he said, seething. 'He's yours. Hunt him down. Bring him Thezmarr's justice.' Each word was clipped and cold, sharp with fresh betrayal. 'Do that, Althea Zoltaire, and his swords are yours.'

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

THEA



Thea stood in the chamber she had shared with Wilder, packing her bag in the deafening silence.

Her heart might have been in pieces, but she vowed to forge it anew, using rage as the binding to solder those cracks back together, so that she would be stronger than before. Untouchable. Impenetrable.

Bring him Thezmarr's justice. Do that... and his swords are yours.

Osiris' words echoed in her mind, refusing to let her lose herself in the task at hand.

On the bed, the bed they'd shared, was the map Wilder had given her. The very one that marked the weakest parts of the Veil, the places to search for fallen Warswords.

Hunt him down.

She intended to.

Briefly, she wondered if that arrow she'd shot had found its mark. Her fate stone swayed against her chest as she moved about the room, taking stock of the supplies she'd need. Thea had limited days left to walk the midrealms, but she would spend them well. She would spend them hunting Wilder Hawthorne. She would spend them becoming a Warsword and bringing him to justice.

Her failures demanded to be seen and heard before she could right them. Regret coiled like a serpent in her gut. She had failed Thezmarr, failed the guild and aided a traitor in their midst. Thea had let him into her world, and he had wrought ruin upon the midrealms and her heart. She would not give way to an inch of weakness, not anymore.

It was the end, and it was the beginning.

Her gaze flicked to the balcony, where she saw the ravens being released from the aviary. She watched as they carried the news of Wilder's treason out into the world. The rulers and Osiris had promised that word would spread to every corner of the midrealms and beyond. To the influential houses of all the kingdoms, to any resource the former Warsword might seek out.

There was a price on his head now.

And Thea had vowed to claim it.

From the balcony where they'd fucked, she watched the black wings beat against the sky, disappearing beyond the clouds, her mind invaded by thoughts of war. A war she had lost. The most devastating kind. A war of hearts. A war that left only a dark void within. A war that called for vengeance as its only form of payment, of retribution.

The day outside was bright and clear, the sun intensifying on the golden hills of Tver. It only served to fuel Thea's misery. For how could she feel so broken while there was still so much light in the world?

Thea shook the thought from her head and went to finish packing. It hurt to move Wilder's things as she searched for her own. He'd left everything as though he were only heading out for a meeting, as though he had fully intended to return to her.

She shifted a pile of his clothes and heard a soft thud on the carpet. Crouching, she picked up a heavy blue gem. It was the sapphire she'd found in his cabin back in Thezmarr. The jewel she'd never had the courage to ask about. She ran her thumb over its multi-faceted face, the simple action reminding her that she hadn't known Wilder, not wholly. And now, she never would know him, not as anything other than her enemy.

She stared at the glimmering gem, dazed. And though she told herself it didn't matter now, she slipped it into her pocket anyway.

Just as she finished securing her pack and scanning the list of items she'd need to pick up, a knock sounded at her door.

It was Wren.

Thea's sister closed the door behind her, dropped her bag on a chair and surveyed the mess of the room. 'You're truly going, then?' she asked, not sounding the least bit surprised.

'Yes.'

The sisters hadn't had a moment alone since they'd faced the Daughter of Darkness in those woods, since they'd discovered who she truly was.

Now, the revelation hung heavy between them.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ Thea admitted.

‘Nor I,’ Wren replied. ‘Someone had to have known...’ she ventured.

‘My coin is on Audra,’ Thea huffed, stuffing a final spare shirt into her pack with a little too much force. *And Wilder*, she added silently.

‘You’re probably right.’ Wren sighed. ‘I don’t know what to do from here, Thee. Who to tell, what to ask...’

‘Tell no one,’ Thea told her, her heart hardening. ‘We trust no one until we know more.’

‘No one?’

Thea redid her braid and faced her sister. The betrayal she carried with her was so raw and tender. ‘Cal and Kipp can be trusted. And... despite his brother, I trust Malik with my life. Torj too.’

‘Then I trust them as well.’

Thea nodded. She was glad to be leaving Wren with people who would support her.

‘You and I must remain united,’ Wren warned her. ‘At least in spirit and cause.’

‘I agree,’ Thea said. ‘What will you do while I’m gone?’

‘While our people are here, I’ll make use of Notos’ library. It’s meant to be one of the best ones in the midrealms. Perhaps I can learn more of our enemy...’

‘And then?’

‘When I’m no longer needed here, I’ll return to Thezmarr. When I know as much about... *her* as possible, then I’ll do what I can to prepare for what comes next. Alchemy, magic, whatever it takes.’

Her... Their sister.

Thea found herself nodding again, understanding the responsibility her sister was taking on for the both of them. ‘There’s one more thing I need to ask of you, Wren.’

‘Ask it.’

Thea’s hand went to her fate stone. She pulled it from her neck and held it out to the best alchemist she knew. ‘I need you to remove the treatment on this.’

Wren’s gaze snapped up to hers, her eyes wide with surprise. ‘You’re sure?’

Thea pressed it into her sister's palm. 'No. But I need everything I have in my arsenal to find him, to beat him.'

Wren seemed to understand, her fingers closing around the stone. 'Consider it done.'

To Thea's surprise, Wren took the piece of jade to the small fire crackling in the hearth and dropped it into the flames. She watched on, fascinated, as the flames turned green for a second, burning the alchemy from the stone.

As she watched, she felt her magic seize inside her, flaring to life, feeding off the turmoil within, stronger than ever before.

Moments later, Wren removed the fate stone from the fire and set it aside to cool before she went to the bag she'd set down and rummaged through its contents. She produced a package wrapped in cloth and bound by twine, holding it out to Thea.

'Audra said to give this to you.'

Frowning, Thea took it, turning it over in her hands. 'What is it?'

'She called it a name day present, for a week's time. It's something to help you with your power on the road. Now that there's another one of us out there, Audra's more determined than ever to see us master our storms.'

Thea stiffened at those words, but decided not to open the parcel then and there. Instead she packed it away with the rest of her belongings, hesitating before she spoke again. 'How do you do it?'

'Do what?'

'Master the magic?' she asked, her chest tight.

Her sister smiled then. 'I have far from mastered it, Thee, but when I manage to make it work...'

'Yes?' Thea pressed, her stomach fluttering.

'Let go. Stop trying to control it. *You are the storm.* What does your lightning and thunder tell you?'

Thea stared at her sister, her magic seeming to respond to the words alone.

'I am the storm,' she echoed firmly, inhaling her first easy breath in days.



When Thea got to the stables, she saw instantly that Wilder's stallion was gone. It was another knife to the heart, knowing that he'd planned his betrayal far enough in advance to ensure his horse would remain with him.

She set about saddling her mare, the stable hands keeping far away from her as she worked.

The Shadow of Death, she heard them murmur in awe.

Thea hadn't bothered with farewells. She wasn't sure she could stand the pitying looks, the question on everyone's lips.

How did she not know?

She was asking herself the same fucking thing, over and over again.

Gritting her teeth, she tried to ignore the ache in her chest as she mounted up and rode from the stables, through the gates of Notos.

It was the first time she'd ridden alone. The first time she'd had a mission of her own as a Guardian of the midrealms.

The thought left her feeling hollow.

Consulting the map Wilder had left her, she decided on her first stop.

Ironhelm. A Guardian garrison closest to the eastern wall of the Veil, where numerous tears had been reported.

Thea rode to the edge of Notos' citadel and looked out onto the golden lands beyond.

'Not leaving without us, are you?' a familiar voice sounded just behind her.

Thea turned to find Kipp and Cal on her heels, their horses loaded with supplies, weapons strapped to their backs.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, frowning.

'Writing a fucking sonnet, Your Highness,' Kipp replied. 'What's it look like?'

Thea shifted in her saddle. 'I told Wren you'd be there for her.'

'Who d'you think told us where you'd be?' Cal said.

Kipp nudged his horse up alongside hers. 'She's going to stick with Malik. She promised.'

'And we're going to stick with you,' Cal added.

'What about Torj? And your apprenticeship?'

Kipp snorted. 'We love you, Thea, but it's not like we don't cherish having our balls attached to our bodies as well. We got leave from Osiris, Torj and Esyllt to join you. So just deal with it. You're stuck with us.'

Thea felt a tiny piece of her heart fall back into place, and a smile ghosted across her lips. 'Is that right?'

Kipp grinned. 'Afraid so.'

Thea turned to Cal. 'And what of your family? Are they alright? Are they safe?'

Cal grinned. 'More than alright. My sisters told me if I don't ride at your side, they'll disown me. They've got it into their heads that they're going to be warriors like you when they grow up. My mother's not overly pleased.'

Thea's eyes prickled. 'Is that so...'

Kipp clapped her on the shoulder. 'Face it, wraith slayer. There are going to be little girls knocking at Thezmarr's gates, demanding to be trained, before the day is done.'

'Good,' Thea said. 'We need all the help we can get.'

'I'll drink to that,' Kipp replied with a wink.

Thea surveyed her friends, her grip tightening on her reins. 'So, you're really going to help me hunt down the most powerful Warsword in Thezmarr's history?'

'Former Warsword,' Cal corrected her.

'Course we are,' Kipp declared. 'But that doesn't mean we're not gonna have some fun on the way. The Fox has sister taverns all over the midrealms.' He winked. 'So... where to first?'

Warmth swelled in Thea's chest for a brief moment. 'East,' she said, turning her horse to the sweeping gilded valleys.

'East it is. And I assure you, the Blushing Bear is on the way,' Kipp said grandly, before kicking Cal's leg. 'Last one to the treeline buys the first round.'

'Wait a minute —'

But Kipp was already off, and Cal surged after him with a curse.

Thea knew they'd done it to give her space, to let her say goodbye to what she thought she'd known. Thoughts of the man who'd meant something — *everything* — to her consumed her. Silver eyes meeting hers. The rich timbre of his voice as they whispered secrets to each other in the night. The taste of him. His arms wrapped around her.

Because I fucking love you.

She had thought those words would be imprinted on her soul forever, but she shoved them away, letting them fade from her like shadows swept

away by the wind.

Thea steeled herself, her armour sliding into place around her. Taking a breath, she silently thanked him for all he'd done.

He had shaped her from a shieldbearer to a Guardian, to a true warrior of the realm. To someone worthy of the Great Rite.

Yes, she thanked him from the bottom of her cold, wretched heart.

For he had forged her into the warrior she needed to be to slay her enemies.

And Wilder Hawthorne was now one of them.

With lightning sharp in her veins and her heart full of fire, Thea set out across the midrealms, the wind tearing at her braid as she rode east, the taste of vengeance on her lips.

And so the hunt began.



Want to know what happens next? Pre-order [*Fate & Furies*](#), Book 3 in *The Legends of Thezmarr* now.



Remember that deliciously steamy scene on the ship? Want to read it from Wilder's point of view for free? [Download your spicy bonus scene here.](#)



And if you need a more substantial Warsword fix to tide you over until *Fate & Furies*, try [*Slaying the Shadow Prince*](#) - a standalone fantasy romance featuring Wilder's mentor, Talemir Starling. It can be read as a prequel to *The Legends of Thezmarr*. And yes, you'll even get to see a younger Wilder Hawthorne ;)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Scheuerer is the bestselling fantasy author of the series: *The Oremere Chronicles*, *Curse of the Cyren Queen* and *The Legends of Thezmarr*. Her work has been highly praised for its strong, flawed female characters and its action-packed plots.

Helen's love of writing and books led her to pursue a creative writing degree and a Masters of Publishing. She has been a full-time author since 2018 and now lives amidst the mountains in New Zealand where she is constantly dreaming up new stories.

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