CHAPTER 1

Wren

'A good alchemist understands patience.
A better alchemist masters it'

– *Alchemy Unbound*

'YOUR BEAR SLAYER is dying.'

Lord Lucian Devereux's words still echoed in Wren's mind. The private study room in the archives had suddenly felt too small, as though the walls were closing in around her as the nobleman continued.

'It's a slow-releasing poison . . . How's that for irony?'

Fear had spiked through her, but she refused to let it show to the bastard before her. 'When did this happen?'

'When Elderbrock rescued Queen Reyna. My spies within the People's Vanguard tell me Silas the Kingsbane targeted your Warsword specifically. A toxin made just for him as he was fighting to save the winter queen . . .'

Heart pounding, Wren had lifted her chin in defiance. 'Poisons are my specialty,' she replied coolly. 'I can analyse any toxin; I can make any antidote. I thought I'd proven as much to the masters of this academy.'

'Perhaps, Your Highness,' Darian's father drawled. 'But with what

time? How do you hope to save him when you have the dark alchemy cure to produce for the midrealms? An army to raise? And a kingdom to defend?'

Wren's eyes narrowed. 'Say whatever you came here to say, Lord Lucian.'

'Marry my son.'

'What?' Wren blurted, almost laughing. It had to be a joke, some sort of sick prank. Her? With Darian – the Lord of Larkwood Valley? A sour taste spread across her tongue.

'Marry Darian and the poison's ingredients and methods are yours,' Lord Lucian continued, undeterred. 'I have alchemists in my employ too, Elwren. They are quite certain of its composition, but you'll never break it down in time yourself. The Warsword will die before you find an antidote.'

Wren scoffed. 'You're lying.'

'If you want to take that risk, it's the Bear Slayer's life you gamble. But if you want proof, ask your former mentor. Farissa Tremaine can vouch for my findings.'

Wren's blood ran cold. 'Farissa . . . ?'

Lord Lucian dipped his head in confirmation. 'Marry my son, and when you do, I will provide you with what you need to save Torj Elderbrock. A marriage to an influential man is a small price to pay for that, surely? Not to mention all the resources that the Devereux name will afford you. You have an hour to decide.'

Wren's throat constricted. 'I . . .'

'Your affair with the Bear Slayer is over, Elwren,' he told her. 'Make my son look the fool, and Torj Elderbrock's life will be forfeit.'

Now the sight of the Warsword on his knees was almost enough to bring Wren to hers. She still wore the gold dress she'd been forced into for the public announcement of her engagement to

Darian, and it was stealing the breath from her lungs, as was the warrior before her.

'Then tell me how to serve you, my queen.' Torj said the words with reverence. On his lips, the title didn't make her want to shrink away – it made her want to rise from the ashes. It made her want to *fight*. With Lord Lucian's threats still ringing in her ears, she was all the more determined.

'You stand at my side,' she told him, her fingers closing over Torj's, a tether of gold and lightning linking them. 'And we destroy them all. Together.'

The Bear Slayer dipped his head, his silver hair gleaming in the last rays of the sun. 'This is yours now.' He pressed the dagger he was holding into her hands.

It was familiar, and it was not. Wren recognized Naarvian steel, but it was lighter, daintier than the weapon she often borrowed from him. And there was an inscription down the blade: *Iron & Embers*.

'I had it altered,' he explained. 'It's the right weight and balance for you now. A queen needs a blade as much as any warrior.'

A lump formed in Wren's throat. She knew they had only minutes to spare as she traced the hilt, noting the silvertide roses that had been engraved there. 'It's . . .'

Torj looked pained. 'Too much?'

'Perfect,' she finished, her eyes burning. 'Thank you. I love it.'

He nodded, satisfied. 'Good.'

Wren wished she could savour the moment. She wished there was more *time*. But she was taking a risk simply by being here, after the deal she'd made with Lord Lucian. She had agreed to his terms, a fact that still made her insides churn. But Torj had been *poisoned* by the enemy. Even as they spoke, a toxin coursed through his blood, threatening to take him from her, piece by piece.

To Wren, it stood to reason that if she had mastered one cure, she could master another. She had discovered the might of the silvertide rose, amplified by her own storm magic, and she suspected

that the plant could be the key not only to saving the midrealms, but to saving Torj as well. She just needed time.

The difference between poison and cure is simply a matter of dose, she told herself.

Wren sheathed the blade in her belt of potions and tugged on his hands. 'I'm going to save you,' she vowed.

'If anyone can, it's you.' Torj reached for her, cupping her face, his fingers trailing down to her throat, tracing the scar there.

Wren's heart seized as she pulled back sharply, scanning the grounds in a panic. 'Don't—'

Torj flinched, his gaze dropping to her hand, where his touch lingered on the diamond adorning her fourth finger. *Darian's* ring.

'Are you going to tell me how this happened?' the Warsword said quietly, his eyes fixed on the glimmering stone.

Wren pulled her hand away completely, hating herself. His pain was so raw she could feel it pulsing in her own breast.

'There was no time,' she told him. 'And you were too close to it, too emotionally connected. I had to make calculated decisions, and I had to make them fast.'

The Bear Slayer made a noise of disbelief, his eyes dipping back down to the ring on her finger. 'It wasn't all that long ago you were pretending to be *my* wife . . .'

Despite the rising panic in her chest that they'd be seen – that the ruse would be over before it had truly begun – Wren turned to Torj, full of anguish. 'Perhaps a day will come when I'm not pretending.'

Gods, she wanted to believe it, with every desperate fibre of her being, but first . . . they had to survive. *Torj* had to survive.

His silence told her he heard the doubt in her voice.

'Kipp or Dessa will explain everything,' she said. 'But for now, I have to keep my distance. I *must* act the part. Your life depends on it—'

Torj shook his head. 'That *can't* be the only way, Embers.'

'Trust me,' she pleaded, turning back to the academy, her anxiety peaking in waves of nausea. '*Please*.'

Kipp was waiting for her at the foot of the academy stairs, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. 'Hurry up,' he hissed. 'For this to work, you need to enter *with* your betrothed.'

Wren suppressed a wince at the term, and she didn't dare look back to see the expression on Torj's face. She knew he had followed. She could feel his presence behind her, his gaze boring holes in her back. He deserved answers, but right now she could not be the one to give them to him, especially as they rounded a corner and saw who was waiting.

Lord Darian Devereux looked as stately as ever. The fine clothes, the regal posture, the well-practised smile on his lips . . . All a stark contrast to the rugged warrior at her heels.

'Thanks for keeping her company for me,' Darian said to Torj with a smirk, reaching for her hand.

'Furies save us,' Kipp muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Wren tensed, on edge. Everything she'd precariously built was poised to come crashing down around her. Darian's touch, his kiss on the back of her hand, felt *wrong*. And all she could think of was the Warsword now beside her, who was practically vibrating with rage, magic rolling off him in waves – *her* magic.

'Torj, please,' she implored at a whisper, but Darian pulled her towards the door to the hall—

'You gave my father your word that you were done with the brute,' Darian said, loud enough for anyone to hear. 'Now *smile*, my love.' He gave a dazzling grin of his own. 'You're about to gain access to everything you need to be a queen of the midrealms.'