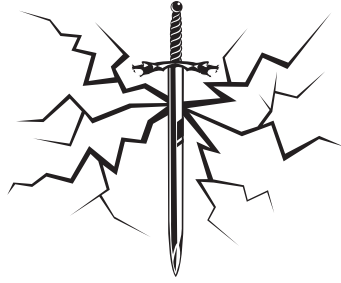


CHAPTER 2



YOU RECKLESS FOOL,' her sister, Elwren, hissed as soon as Thea halted before her in the upstairs halls.

Thea met Wren's glower. She and her sister shared the same eye colour: an unusual shade of celadon; as well as similar dark, strong brows. Wren usually used hers for scowling at Thea. They also shared the same bronze tresses, though more gold threaded Thea's from more time spent outdoors. They were two sides of the same coin, but where Thea was all sharp lines and muscle, Wren was the softer, more beautiful of the two. Two decades of fortress life had only confirmed that fact; fortune looked upon those with pretty smiles and skirts, not broken fingernails and threadbare trousers.

But now, any semblance of Wren's gentle nature was long gone as she yanked Thea out of earshot from the others and pulled off Thea's sopping cloak, brushing away the larger chunks of dried mud.

Thea batted her hand away, already irritated. 'Will you stop? I'm the eldest, it should be—'

Wren snorted. 'Thea, you are one of the few cases that prove older is not always wiser.'

'Then you're lucky I'm here to make you look good. Stop complaining.'

Shaking her head, messy bun bobbing, Wren passed Thea several pieces of parchment, which she took with a grimace. More *women's work*. Poisons and potions, rather than blades and blood. Another reason to curse the laws, to resent the prophecy they'd been taught to fear:

*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.

Twenty years ago, after that deadly prophecy had been uttered, women had been forced to surrender their blades. Thea, only four years of age at the time, had seen bits of it unfold from a grate in the cellar, had watched the women rage as they were stripped of their right to protect the midrealms.

It hadn't stopped Thea carrying her dagger.
Nothing could.

Her attention drifted down the hall to where the trophy room was located. Even as an adult, she longed to visit, to gaze upon the names of champions. Talemir Starling, for one – the Warsword called the Prince of Hearts, who was undefeated in dual sword wielding and, who according to the tales, had carved out more monster hearts than one could count.

Another name had always fascinated Thea. Six years ago, she'd discovered the name of their warden, Audra, there too, under *Knife Throwing Champions of Thezmarr*. The stern-faced librarian had been the only woman warrior to surrender her weapons and stay on at the fortress.

'I covered for you with Farissa, told her you had one of your nosebleeds,' Wren was saying.

Thea grinned. 'Thanks.'

'There's only so many nosebleeds a woman can have before the masters ask harder questions.'

'Good thing you always have the answers then.' Thea slung an arm around her sister's neck. Wren was a revered alchemist of Thezmarr, whereas Thea was more of a drifter. While she worked alongside her sister in the workshop and in the library to earn her keep, her mind was always elsewhere, with the limited years she had left, with her dreams of damning the rules and wielding a blade of her own against the darkness.

Wren clicked her tongue in frustration and shook her off. 'I would sooner hit you than hug you right now.'

'Only because I taught you how.'

'Know when to shut up, Thee.'

Sensing that her sister's annoyance was indeed at its limits, Thea clamped down on the rest of her retorts.

The sharp ring of steel on steel echoed up from the courtyard and she went to the window, nails digging into the damp sill as she looked down.

A new unit of shieldbearers, varying in age from teens to mid-twenties, were making their way towards the gatehouse, some sparring as they went.

The guild honed warriors from the very beginning, training shieldbearers in the art of war until they passed their initiation tests to become Guardians of the midrealms who bore the totem of a pair of crossed swords. From there they could stay faithful mid-level warriors of Thezmarr, or they could work their way up to commanders and masters of a particular field. Then, there were the Warswords.

To be a Warsword . . . was to be a legend incarnate.

But below, there was no sign of the elite warriors, nor could Thea see Esyllt, the weapons master. Thea's chest tightened as she

watched them go, shields slung across their backs, no doubt on their way to drills she'd watched a hundred times before, hidden away in the Bloodwoods.

Her fingers itched to retrieve her dagger from her boot.

'Thea . . .' her sister warned.

Making up her mind, Thea snatched her cloak from Wren's grasp and thrust the papers back at her. 'I feel another nosebleed coming on.'

'Thea, no—'

Thea was already walking away. 'Oh it's going to be a bad one, I can tell. Transcribing Audra's fascinating tomes and re-shelving dusty books will have to wait, I wouldn't want to mar the pages . . .'

Wren attempted to block her. Her eyes, a near perfect match to Thea's, blazed with frustration. 'Gods, you're not a teenager any more.' She glanced back at their friends.

'I've got a blinding headache, too, Wren.'

Her sister flung her hands up in exasperation, shaking her head once more in disbelief. 'You're a damn fool, Althea.'

Thea grinned; she knew exactly what she was. But she would rather live a hundred lives in three years than waste the little time she had left in these realms. She threw a little wave over her shoulder as she started back down the stairs and burst out into the rain once more.



Outside, true dark had fallen around the fortress and Thea passed unnoticed through the gatehouse as usual. She followed the unit of shieldbearers at a distance, knowing precisely where they were going. The Bloodwoods were a dense forest surrounding the territory of Thezmarr, where the trees bled the blood of warriors long dead and whispered ancient secrets with the rustle of their leaves.

Further south was a clearing that the weapons master, Esylt,

favoured for initial drills with smaller units. He would already be there waiting, but Thea kept off the main trail in case there were any late comers, though she doubted even the dimmest of shield-bearers would be that stupid. Esyllt's wrath was not to be trifled with.

Wonder who'd emerge victorious if he was pitted against Audra . . . Thea snorted. Audra could beat him over the head with one of her books easily enough, and she *had* been a knife throwing champion long ago.

Still amused at the thought, Thea delved deeper into the dark glades of the Bloodwoods, relishing the damp smell of the earth and the slide of the leaves beneath her boots. She was close enough to hear the unit bash their way through the forest, could even see the stragglers at the back. *A stealthy bunch to be sure*, she scoffed. Though, she couldn't help but eye the weapons that swung at their belts with envy.

On the night the prophecy had been triggered, the Master Alchemist, Farissa, had evacuated all the children of Thezmarr to a hidden cellar. But after the others had fallen asleep, Thea had found a grate in the stone, giving her a glimpse of the scorched courtyard above. She would never forget the sight of the women surrendering their blades in the dead of night. The steel had sung as the swords were thrown into a pile, their rage palpable.

'The prophecy has begun,' the Guild Master had called over the shouts of fury and the several brawls that broke out. 'We can no longer have women wielding blades. You will find other occupations, or henceforth leave the guild.'

'Osiris you bastard,' someone screamed. 'You would leave Thezmarr so weakened? You would turn your back on all those who have served loyally—'

'It is not how I wanted things to be. But it is the will of the gods,' he replied. 'Surrender your weapons, or they will be taken by force!'

Thea had been too young to understand then, but it had haunted

her ever since. Except for Audra, the warrior women had left that very night, to where, no one knew, for it was a law not only of Thezmarr, but the midrealms in their entirety. No woman would brandish steel again.

For years Thea had tried to get her warden to talk about it, but the librarian refused. Various lessons and all the books Thea read had told her it had been a little girl holding a blade that triggered the prophecy, and the laws that followed were the Guild Master's attempt to protect the midrealms from further *daughters of darkness*.

He'd lost his shit at a child holding a small scythe. If he knew Thea had a weapon, well . . . He'd never find out.

She stopped at a clearing she frequented, well hidden from the training ground below, a perfect viewing platform, and crouched in the leaf litter, straining to hear the speech she'd heard Esyllt give a hundred times before, the speech that made her blood sing.

The lean weapons master paced before the group of bright-eyed recruits, resting his hand on the pommel of his longsword, his chest thrust out as he eyed them with a harsh expression.

Esyllt's voice carried across the clearing, full of authority. 'A month ago you were mere students, boys whose purpose did not extend beyond the ordinary . . . Today, you are shieldbearers of Thezmarr and you have come here to the Bloodwoods hoping to be something far greater.'

Goosebumps rushed across Thea's skin and she hung onto every word, as though they were an elixir she desperately needed.

'The months that follow will be the best and worst of your life,' he continued, letting his words fall upon his captivated audience. 'That's *if* you make it that far. Some of you will give up, a day, a week, or a month in. The rest of you will come to know pain and fear intimately, you will come to know what it means to fight tooth and nail for your place. You will come to know who to trust, and when to sleep with one eye open. Those who fail our tests will be shunned from our ranks. Those with special talents might become apprentices to the commanders. Some of you will be injured. Some of you will die.'

Esyllt paused again as he surveyed the faces before him, as though he could determine then and there who would make it, and who would fail. He cleared his throat. 'And a select few of you' – he gave pointed stares to his chosen shieldbearers – 'will be forged into what many only dream to be: Guardians of the midrealms, warriors of Thezmarr.'

Thea loosed a breath. Gods . . . It didn't matter how many times she had heard Esyllt's orientation, it hit her right in the chest every time. Rooted to the spot, she was as transfixed as the shieldbearers, wishing she could stand alongside them, wishing she could share this with someone, anyone. But she remained hidden, as always.

Esyllt cleared his throat. 'Right, get into your groups. I want to see what you've learnt so far.'

The shieldbearers hesitated.

'Drills,' Esyllt barked. '*Now.*'

The recruits burst into action, splitting up into several smaller groups and drawing their weapons, hoisting their shields up in defensive stances.

Thea watched on, noting those who held their shields too low, those whose footwork was too heavy, and those who might just interest her as opponents. She had studied the theory for years, practised in privacy, but her fingers itched to hold a sword as theirs did and she found her hand creeping to the dagger in her boot.

Carefully, she stepped back, well out of sight, and started going through her own drills. Like all children of Thezmarr, she had gone through years of basic defence training, but that had never been enough for her. Since she was a child, she had spied on every training session she could, learning every scrap of information, every technique from afar. It was hard without a sword of her own. But her dagger was her pride and joy. Six years ago, she had seen it fall from the hand of an injured Warsword as he'd been escorted back to the fortress in a wagon. She'd made the mistake of showing Wren her prize. Her sister had told her it was made of Naarvian steel, before insisting that Thea turn it in. Naarvian steel was for

Warswords and Warswords alone, a gift given upon the completion of the Great Rite.

The steel source in Naarva was created by the Furies themselves, who had struck the land with a star shower. The rare iron ore found there was the strongest in all the midrealms, and held the power of the gods. For a man to bear such a weapon without initiation was forbidden; an insult to the elite warriors who served the midrealms. But for a *woman* to wield a blade, let alone Naarvian steel? That was a unique form of treason.

Thea had refused to return the dagger at first, of course. But her sister had worn her down, spelling out a lengthy list of nasty consequences. Wren had been a pain in Thea's arse, and not long after, Thea had reluctantly trudged up to the infirmary to return it to its injured owner.

Thea had waited until the healers had left to attend other patients before she went to his bedside. He was the most enormous man that she had ever seen, a giant almost. His legs hung off the end of the bed and the mattress sagged beneath his weight. His head was wrapped in dozens of bloodied bandages, his face was so swollen and bruised that the whites of his eyes were red.

He was dying.

Thea had taken in the sight of him, her whole body screaming at her she shouldn't be there. But she dug deep for a sliver of the courage that warrior must have needed on the battlefield, and she held out the dagger to him.

'You dropped this,' she told him. 'Figured you might want it back.'

The man had gasped, his eyes widening with the effort, sounding as though a wagon full of stone bricks sat upon his chest. He'd murmured something that had made no sense to Thea, before his trembling hand rose from the bed, and pushed the dagger back towards her.

No words came when he opened and closed his mouth.

But she understood one thing: he wanted her to have the weapon.

She clutched it to her chest. 'I'll use it well,' she had told him.

Now, she guided herself through a range of movements, holding the dagger as a would-be sword. She knew she moved well, but how she longed to spar with a worthy opponent, someone who challenged her. Sometimes she could convince the odd alchemist to indulge her, or one of the kitchen hands, but it wasn't the same . . .

A gentle breeze rustled the foliage around Thea, and the faintest hint of leather and rosewood tickled her nostrils, stirring a strange yearning within. She sighed, relishing the shouts and clang of steel echoing from below. Still clutching her dagger, she peered over the ledge in the terrain again—

Something whistled through the air.

Thea threw herself to the side, a sharp sting slashed across her cheek.

An arrow embedded itself in the gnarled tree trunk beside her with a thud.

The fletching shivered in the breeze.

Trembling, Thea stared with wide eyes at the still quivering arrow and took one – two, steps back.

And then, she ran.