

THEA
GUANZON

THE
HURRICANE
WARS

One lone light
will stand against
an empire

THE HURRICANE WARS

Thea Guanzon



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Dedication

I did this for the rats.

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Map



Prologue

He heard the girl before he saw her, a high and golden hum that cut through the chaos of battle like the first flare of sunrise.

Sheets of floating ice seasawed and creaked under his boots as he ran across the frozen lake, making his way toward the sound. It beckoned to him amidst the other noises piercing the winter air—the screaming, the rattle of crossbows, the roar of cannons, all from the burning city that lay behind the ancient forest at the water’s edge. The fanned gaps between the longleaf pines offered glimpses of destruction in veins of red-gold embers, their needle-pricked canopy silhouetted against a crown of smoke beneath the seven moons.

There was smoke out here on the ice as well, but it was the smoke of aetherspace, not inferno. Shadow bloomed over frost in shivering rings, trapping everyone trying to escape the city, everyone except him and his legionnaires. With a wave of his gauntleted hand, each dark barrier parted before him, until—finally—

There she was.

Loose strands of bedraggled chestnut hair streamed in the montane wind, escaping her braid to frame an oval face with freckled, olive-skinned features. She was coltish on the bobbing ice, light blazing in her hands against the swirling darkness, the twitching body of one of his men crumpled at her feet. He hurtled forward, a weapon of his own blocking what would have been her killing blow to his erstwhile legionnaire, and as she staggered back her eyes met his, her magic reflected in shards of gold setting fire to

brown irises, and perhaps this, too, was how a war began. In the space between heartbeats. In the room of night.

He lunged at her.

PART I







CHAPTER ONE

Wartime weddings were all the rage in a land where every single day threatened, quite emphatically, to be one's last, but the skies could rain stones for seven nights without ever hitting an available officiant. Most clerics were at the front lines, singing to Sardovian troops of Mahagir the Saber-heart's courage and guiding the souls of dying soldiers to the eternal twilight of Adapa the Harvester's willow groves. By some rare stroke of good fortune, however, there was *one* cleric remaining in the mountain city of Frostplum, where Talasyn's regiment was stationed and where her fellow helmsmen Khaede and Sol had decided to pledge their troth.

Not that it's any great mystery as to why they left this grandfather behind, Talasyn mused, watching from a dim corner of the thatched longhouse as the stooped, elderly cleric in pale yellow robes struggled to lift a large pewter goblet over the crackling fire that was reflecting off his marble-ball scalp. In reed-thin and quavering tones, he meandered haphazardly through the closing words of the marriage rite while the bride glared at him.

Khaede had a glare that could cut through metalglass. It was a miracle that the frail little man wasn't sliced into ribbons on the spot. He eventually managed to hold the smoke-warmed goblet to the groom's lips and then to Khaede's, so that the couple could drink of the golden lychee wine consecrated to Thonba, goddess of home and hearth.

From where she hung back at the edge of the crowd, Talasyn applauded along with the other soldiers when the cleric tremulously pronounced Khaede and Sol bonded for life. Sol flashed a shy grin, one that Khaede was quick to press her lips against, her ire at the bumbling officiant a thing of the past. The raucous cheers from their comrades echoed off the thick limestone walls.

"Think you might be next, helmsman?"

The jovial quip came from a point over Talasyn's shoulder and she rolled her eyes. "Nitwit." As Khaede's closest friend, she'd been on the receiving end of similar wisecracks all evening and it had left her feeling rather defensive. "Why would that even be on my list of priorities—" Her brain caught up to her tongue as she turned around, and she snapped to attention upon realizing who the jester was. "Respectfully speaking, sir."

"At ease," said Darius, an amused smile lurking underneath his bushy beard. When Talasyn joined up five years ago, the coxswain's hair had been salt-and-pepper; now, it was mostly just salt. He lowered his voice so as not to be overheard by the people around them. "The Amirante would like a word."

Talasyn's gaze darted to where she'd spotted Ideth Vela in the crowd earlier. The woman who held supreme command over the entirety of Sardovia's armed forces was now in the process of disappearing into a side room, accompanied by a portly officer sporting a black horseshoe mustache. "General Bieshimma's back from Nenavar already?"

"Just arrived," said Darius. "As I understand it, the mission went belly-up and he had to pull out. He and the Amirante need to discuss a crucial matter with you, so—go."

Talasyn made her way through the crowd. She didn't hesitate to use her elbows, her sights fixed on the door at the other end of the longhouse behind which Bieshimma and the Amirante had vanished. She was so curious that it *burned*. And it had only partly to do with the fact that she'd been summoned.

The embittered league of nation-states known as the Sardovian Allfold had sent General Bieshimma southeast of the Continent to the mysterious islands of the Nenavar Dominion, in an attempt to form an alliance. Perhaps even rekindle one, if the old stories were to be believed. The general was a former political adviser who'd swapped his badge of office for sword and shield, and he had been expected to utilize all his diplomatic prowess in convincing the Nenavarene queen to help Sardovia defeat the Night Empire.

Things had clearly not gone according to plan, given his swift return, but still —Bieshimma had been to *Nenavar*.

Talasin's stomach fluttered with the blend of intrigue and unease that thoughts of the Nenavar Dominion always, without fail, evoked in her. She'd never been there, had never so much as strayed from Sardovia's dwindling borders, but the slightest mention of that reclusive archipelago across the Eversea always left some part of her oddly hollow, as though she'd forgotten something very important, and she was desperate to find out what it was.

In all her twenty years, she had yet to tell a soul about the strange connection she felt to Nenavar. It was a secret, too fragile to be spoken out loud. But talking to someone who had just returned from there seemed as good a step in the right direction as any.

Despite her eagerness, Talasin slowed down when she passed by one of the lance corporals who had escorted General Bieshimma on his diplomatic mission. The boy was pink-cheeked from the cold outside, snowflakes melting on the upright collar of his uniform as he recounted the adventure to a small circle of raptly attentive wedding guests.

Everyone else was in uniform as well, including Talasin. Wool breeches, thick boots, and padded coats the color of orange peels. There was no time for pretty dresses or an elaborate ceremony. This wedding was a stolen moment in between skirmishes.

"It went as badly as it did when we *last* sent an envoy to the Nenavar Dominion," the lance corporal was saying. "Remember, a couple of years back? Although I'll grant that this time they let us make landfall instead of turning us away at the harbor again, it was only so we could rest and resupply. Their queen, the Zahiya-lachis, still refused to see us. Bieshimma gave the harbor guards the slip and set out for the capital on horseback, but he wasn't even allowed into the royal palace, apparently. The concerns of outsiders are not the concerns of the Dominion—that's what the harbor guards told us when we tried to state our case."

A bowman leaned forward with a conspiratorial twinkle in his eyes. "See any dragons while you were there, then?"

Talasn stopped walking altogether and other conversations happening nearby petered out as several soldiers craned their necks in interest.

“No,” said the lance corporal. “But I never left the docks, and the skies were overcast.”

“I don’t even think they’re real,” said an infantryman, sniffing. “All we have to go on are rumors. If you ask me, it’s smart what the Nenavarene are doing, letting the rest of Lir believe that their dragons exist. People won’t bother you if you’ve supposedly got an army of giant fire-breathing worms at your disposal.”

“I’d kill for a giant fire-breathing worm,” the bowman said wistfully. “We’d win the war with even just one.”

The group started bickering over whether a dragon could bring down a stormship. Talasn left them to it.

A surfeit of vague images rushed through her head as she stepped away: from nowhere, so sudden, in the space of only a moment’s breath. She could barely make sense of them before they darted out of reach. A coil of slick scales undulating in the sunlight, and maybe a crown as sharp as diamond, as clear as ice. Something inside her, awakened by the soldiers’ conversation, tried to fight its way out.

What on *earth*—

She blinked. And the images were gone.

It was likely an effect of the pine-scented smoke from various firepits suffusing the longhouse, not to mention the sheer heat radiating from so many bodies crammed into one narrow structure. Sol was kind and charming and much loved, and it showed in how nearly a quarter of the regiment had turned up for his wedding.

They were definitely not here for his bride—rude, prickly, caustic Khaede—but Sol adored her enough for a hundred people, anyway.

As she reached the closed door of the side room, Talasn glanced back at the newlyweds. They were surrounded by effusive well-wishers clutching mugs of hot ale while the regiment’s field band struck up a lively tune on fife, bugle, and goatskin drum. A beaming Sol pressed kisses to the back of

Khaede's hand and she tried to frown in annoyance but failed miserably, the two of them looking as radiant as it was possible to look in helmsmen's winter uniforms, the garlands of dried flowers around their necks serving as the only nod to their status as bride and groom. Once in a while, Khaede's free hand would come to rest on her still-flat stomach and Sol's blue-black eyes would shine like the Eversea on a summer day against his oak-brown skin.

Talasynd had no idea how these two planned on caring for a baby in the midst of a war that had spread throughout the whole Continent, but she was happy for them. And she wasn't *jealous*, exactly, but the sight of the newlyweds stirred in her the same old yearning that she'd lived with for twenty years as an orphan. A yearning for somewhere she could belong, and for someone she could belong to.

What would it be like, Talasynd wondered as Sol chuckled at something Khaede said and leaned in to hide his face in the slope of her neck, his arm looped around her waist, *to laugh like that with someone? To be touched like that?* An ache shivered through her as she let herself imagine it, just a little bit, reaching for a phantom of an embrace.

A nearby drunken soldier stumbled forward, splashing ale all over the floor by Talasynd's boots. The sour odor assailed her nostrils and she flinched, briefly overcome by childhood memories of caretakers stinking of steeped grains and curdled milk, those men of harsh words and heavy hands.

Years ago, now. Long gone. The orphanage in the slums had been destroyed along with the rest of Hornbill's Head, and all of its vicious caretakers had probably been crushed underneath the rubble. And she couldn't discuss a *crucial matter* with her superiors while in the throes of despair over some spilled ale.

Talasynd straightened her spine and steadied her breathing; then she rapped smartly on the door of the side room.

As though in response, the deep, brassy tones of warning gongs pierced through the limestone facade of the building, cutting across the merriment like knives.

All music and chatter ceased. Talasyn and her comrades looked around as the watchtowers continued their urgent hymn. They were stunned at first, disbelieving, but gradually a tidal wave of movement swept through the firelit longhouse as the wedding guests sprang to action.

The Night Empire was attacking.

Talasyn ran into the silver night, adrenaline coursing through her veins, a numbing layer against the freezing cold air that bit at her exposed face. Lights were winking out all across Frostplum, window-squares of cheerful gold fading into blackness. It was a precaution to avoid becoming an easy target for air raids, but it wouldn't do much good. All seven of Lir's moons hung in the sky in their various phases of waxing and waning, shedding a stark brilliance over the snowy mountains.

And, if Kesathese troops had brought in a stormship, the whole city might as well be a dandelion puff in a stiff breeze. Its houses were erected from stone and mortar and covered in wooden roof trusses and multilayered thatch, built strongly enough to withstand the harsh elements, but nothing could withstand the Night Empire's lightning cannons.

Due to its remote location, all the way up in the Sardovian Highlands, Frostplum had always been a peaceful settlement, drowsing in evergreen blankets of longleaf pine. Tonight, however, it was plunged into mayhem, fur-clad cityfolk stampeding to the shelters and shouting frantically for one another amidst a whirlwind of military activity. It was finally happening, what everyone had feared, why Talasyn's regiment had been sent here in the first place.

While bowmen took up their positions on the walls and infantrymen assembled barricades in the streets and helmsmen hurried to the grid, Talasyn squinted up at the starry heavens. There probably *wasn't* a stormship, she conceded—she'd have spotted its hulking silhouette by now.

She quickened her pace and joined the scramble toward the grid, dozens of army-issued boots trampling snow into mud. It seemed to take ages before they reached the outskirts of the city, where slender coracles bearing Allfold