

HELEN SCHEUERER

BLOOD
&
STEEL

AN EPIC ROMANTIC FANTASY

THE LEGENDS OF THEZMARR
BOOK I

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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 my partner in wine and crime, Gary.
With you, every day is an adventure.*



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



Althea Zoltaire's death had been carved in stone since she was a child. That was how she knew, as she crept through a realm on the brink of darkness, that the world was not ending. Not yet.

Lightning split the sky, chased by the crack of thunder. Thea inched along the bluff, savouring the rich scent of the incoming storm, revelling in the chaos it threatened to unleash. She shouldn't be up here, but she had learnt long ago to take destiny into her own hands.

Heart pounding, Thea scoured the rocks for a hiding spot. The meet was due to happen at any moment, here on the black cliffs, hemmed in by jagged mountains and savage seas, where giant waves barrelled through the clouds. An unnerving territory to most, the wild landscapes and the cold, sharp lines of Thezmarr was the only home she'd ever known. She had next to no memories of what had come before she and her sister, Elwren, had been left beneath the maw of the fortress portcullis.

Thea turned her attention back to the rendezvous point. There was no sign of them, not a whisper in the wind. With an impatient sigh, she toyed with the fate stone around her neck, running her thumb over the number engraved there, the number she was bound by in this life.

Twenty-seven.

The age she would die. Just three more years until her death would come to pass; a future she didn't fear, but resented. For three short years was no time at all for a woman to become what she wanted.

A legend.

She squinted into the sky, searching for the watery orb of the sun amidst the grey. In a realm cloaked in darkness, it was often hard to tell the hour of the day, but if she was a betting woman, and she generally was, she'd say that the warriors were late. A bad sign to be sure.

The skies opened up and the downpour began, turning the ground into a muddy river beneath her boots and another bolt of lightning flashed, illuminating that which lay beyond the lashing waters: the Veil. An enormous wall of impenetrable white mist, reaching for the gods, wrapping the midrealms in its protective embrace. For hundreds of years it had shielded their realm from the monsters, until one day it hadn't.

The thought made Thea check that her most prized – and forbidden – possession, her dagger, was snug in her boot beneath the hem of her trousers as it always was.

Hooves suddenly sounded on the rocks and Thea threw herself behind a cluster of brambles, hiding herself in the shadows as two great stallions came into view.

Her pulse quickened; her source had been correct. Those gleaming black horses belonged to only one kind of rider.

Heavy boots hit the muddied ground with a splash, and low voices danced along the cliff.

They were here.

The Warswords of Thezmarr.

Thea peeked around the rocks, desperate to see the legendary warriors up close.

A pair of men strode into the clearing, armed to the teeth, clad in black armour with their totems displayed proudly on their armbands: a steel design of two crossed swords with a third cutting down the middle.

Thea's hand went to her own sleeve absent-mindedly, willing there to be a totem secured there.

A Warsword answered to no one but the guild master.

Ballads were sung about their power, about how upon completing the Great Rite, they became stronger, faster, more agile than the most formidable men. Some were much rumoured to be immortal. It was said they were not born, but forged with blood and steel. There were only three of them left.

Now, two of them stood mere feet away from Thea in the rain. She had been trying for over a year to get this close to them, to get a better sense of what was coming for the midrealms – for she would not be caught unawares when darkness came for them all.

She had seen the pair many times before in the Great Hall: Torj the Bear Slayer, the hammer-wielding hero with golden hair who had supposedly fought off two cursed bears in the forests of Tver; and Vernich the Bloodletter, the older warrior who had spilt *rivers* of enemy blood in the countless battles he'd led, chiefly at the fall of Delmira.

The latter looked around the cliff, a deep crease in his brow. 'He said he'd be here.'

'Probably got lost, it's been so long since he's been home,' Torj declared with a note of amusement.

'I'm too thirsty for your piss-poor jokes,' Vernich all but growled. 'I want to get out of this fucking rain. I haven't had dry boots for a week.'

'His letter said to wait here —'

'I *know* what it said,' Vernich snapped. 'Or I'd already be three ales deep by the fire.'

'Well, by all means, go pamper yourself. I can always fill you in,' Torj replied, a hand resting on the head of the war hammer at his belt.

Thea chewed her lip, her heart still pounding wildly.

Vernich paced. 'We haven't seen the bastard in years, as if I'd —'

Another set of hooves thundered against the mountain and a spray of water showered the clearing amidst the rain.

A thick silence fell as a third rider joined the others. Dismounting from his great stallion, subtle notes of rosewood and leather tangled with the scent of rain in his wake.

As he came into view, Thea didn't know what detail to take in first. His towering build was a wall of muscle wrapped in black armour, giant twin blades peeking out from behind him. Wet, dark hair was swept up in a knot at the back of his head, a neat beard lined his fierce jaw...

The nape of Thea's neck prickled. She knew *of* him, of course.

Although he had been gone for years, there were few who hadn't heard of Wilder Hawthorne, the youngest Warsword of Thezmarr, the last of his kind to have passed the Great Rite.

The one they called the Hand of Death.

Power rippled from him in waves.

Thea froze as it thrummed outward, the force of it strange, unexpected... She'd never been this close to *true* magic before, not many common folk had. Magic in the midrealms had become unpredictable over the centuries. It had faded from the people and was now a gift only possessed by those in the royal families and bestowed upon Warswords during the Great Rite. But it manifested in other ways, in places, in spells, in monsters.

Thea could only imagine what it was like to have that sort of force at one's fingertips, to revel in that kind of strength —

The Hand of Death's power pulsed from him now, calling out to her.

Hawthorne turned to his fellow warriors, surveying them critically.

Neither spoke.

'Good,' he said at last, his voice rich and deep. 'You're here.'

'Not that I appreciated the summons,' Vernich replied tersely.

Hawthorne ignored this. 'We have much to discuss.'

For the first time, Thea's gaze went to what he held in his right hand. A hessian sack. A sack that dripped red.

Torj noticed it too. 'Grim news?'

A muscle tensed in Hawthorne's jaw. 'It's always grim news.'

'Tell us then.'

‘I’ve come from the Broken Isles,’ he said, his voice low and deep. ‘I slayed a new swarm of shadow wraiths there. I planned to return to the fortress immediately with the report, but a reef dweller stalked my ship all the way to our coast, so I led it further west, towards the Veil. Until...’

He thrust the bloodied sack at Torj. ‘I came upon a wraith far too fucking close to Thezmarr for comfort.’

With a noise of disgust, Torj pulled something black and dripping from the bag.

Thea nearly gagged.

A heart.

‘Where there is one, there are many.’ Hawthorne warned. ‘I have two more of those in another pack. There are more tears in the Veil. More breaches every day by this scum and worse.’

‘Furies save us,’ Torj murmured.

Hawthorne laughed darkly. ‘The Furies don’t save anyone.’

As the words left his lips, he looked up – a thrill raced down Thea’s spine, a quiet bolt of lightning surging through her veins.

Through the brush, her celadon eyes met the silver gaze of the infamous Warsword.

Her heart seized, her entire body tensed.

His stare pierced her very soul.

Slowly, Hawthorne blinked and he turned back to his companions. ‘There’s more, but I won’t discuss it here.’

‘What do you mean, not here?’ Vernich snapped. ‘I thought that was the whole fucking point —’

‘Not here.’ Hawthorne snatched up his reins and without another glance in Thea’s direction, led the others away into the black mountains.

Thea’s legs went completely liquid, her hands trembling at her sides. He’d *seen* her. Hawthorne had seen her and hadn’t said anything... *Why?*

Her mind still churning, she forced herself to her feet. When she was sure the Warswords were gone, she darted towards the narrow, rocky path that led back to the fortress. Her fate stone beat against her chest like a war drum

as she scrambled across the cliffs and down the rugged mountainside, past the thick walls and the gatehouse, to the doors of the north tower. Panting, she threw herself inside, at last out of the wind and rain. Wringing the water from her bronze and gold-streaked hair, she gave herself a moment to process what had happened; what she'd seen and heard.

It was true.

After years of absence, Wilder Hawthorne had returned to Thezmarr, and he carried the hearts of monsters with him.

CHAPTER TWO



‘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 anymore.' 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, Eyllt, 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 shieldbearers would be that stupid. Eyllt'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.