

CATHERINE DOYLE



A TWIN CROWNS NOVEL

KING
F
BEASTS





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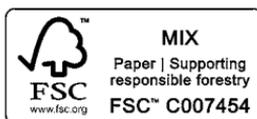
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*For Katie Webber,
Friend, Sister, Co-Conspirator, Queen*



Carrig

Vask



Hunter's
Pass

Fox Hollow

Fredegast's
Keep

Greyclaw
Mountains

Death's Crevasse

White Rust
River

Frosthaven

Crystal
Falls

Whale's
Rest

The Sunless Sea





Halgard

Blackspire Mountains

The Valewood

Fovarr Mountains

White Fang Mountains

Bear Maw

Turcah Valley

Grinstad Palace

Obsidiane River

Sundvik Shore

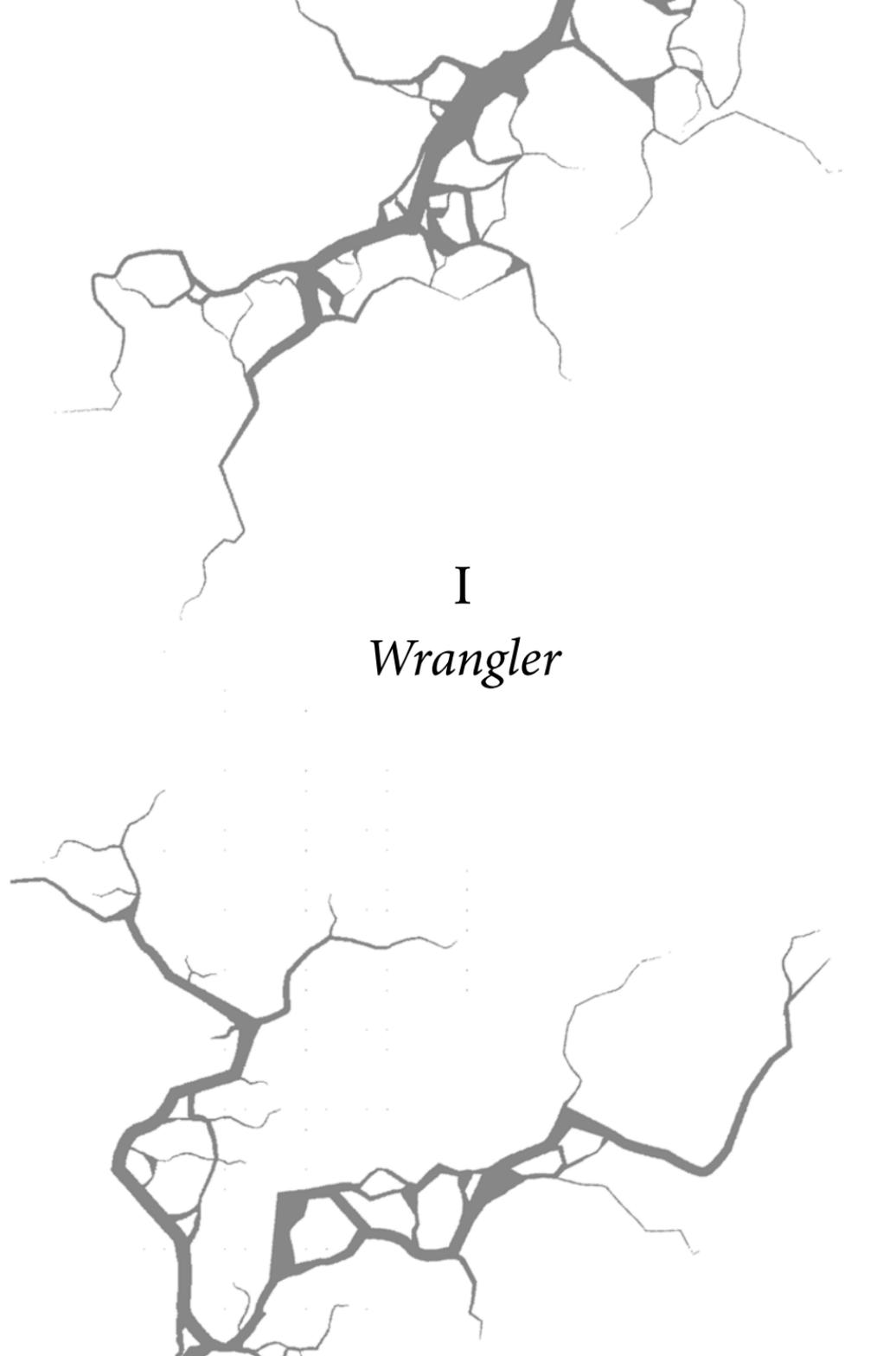
Wolveride

GEVRA



*No beast is so far gone,
that they cannot be tamed.
That they cannot be loved.*





I
Wrangler



CHAPTER 1

Alarik



Deep in the icy heart of the kingdom of Gevra, where a towering palace of glass and stone speared up from an ancient mountainside, a young king awoke, restless from his slumber. Though the air swirled with the beginnings of a blizzard and the ground glittered with new frost, Alarik Felsing went barefoot to his balcony.

He scowled up at the night sky. The full moon was far too bright, its determined silvered shards slipping through the gap in his drapes and jostling him from sleep. *Again*. At least that's what he told himself as he stood alone at the balustrade, cursing the stars. It was better than entertaining the alternative – that those awful nightmares, blood-soaked visions of battles long past and ones yet to come, were becoming more frequent. That the king of Gevra, ruler of the fiercest kingdom on the northern continent, was anxious.

And he didn't know why.

Attuned to the shift in his mood, the king's wolves stirred from their place at the end of his bed and followed him outside. Nova, the eldest of the two and black as a starless

night, paced the length of the balustrade, guarding his master. Luna, soft and silver as moonlight, came to sit by Alarik, her bushy tail settling across his feet to warm them.

Scratching the sweet spot behind Luna's ears, Alarik huffed a frustrated sigh, watching his breath cloud in the air. Though his chest was as bare as his feet, the cold didn't bother him. Winter was a constant gnawing presence here. He sought comfort in the bite of the wind on his skin as he looked out over his moonlit kingdom. Before him, a spill of frostbitten mountains fell away like waves in an endless grey ocean, reaching towards the curling woodsmoke and flickering lamplight of faraway towns, and beyond them, the meandering fjords and vast stillness of the Sunless Sea.

Gevra was beautiful in its bleakness, but it was not for the faint of heart.

Nor was its king.

A north gust blew, bringing a nighthawk with it. The bird swooped low over the mountains, catching moonlight on its wings. Nova stilled, raising his snout as if to scent it. A low growl rumbled in his throat, echoing the rumble of unease inside Alarik. As the bird drew closer, he noted the metallic glint of its feathers and realized his mistake. Its wings were the colour of steel, longer and slimmer than that of a nighthawk. Its large beak possessed the same shine and was curved at the end, as sharp and foreboding as any man-made blade.

It was not a Gevran bird at all. Rather, a silvertip, a hunting eagle from Vask, one of only two kingdoms that shared a border with Gevra. The same kingdom whose spies had been caught trekking through the Blackspire Mountains barely a week ago. A pair of plain-clothed men who claimed

they had got lost on a hike, only to surrender a litany of weapons between them when searched, as well as a partially drawn map of the northern mines of Gevra.

And now this – a silvertip, hundreds of miles south of its territory, circling the palace of the king.

Frost kissed Alarik's forearms as he leaned across the balustrade, his gaze glued to the bird. It was on the hunt, scouring the snowcapped Fovarr mountains that clustered around Grinstad. It floated on a slip of wind, wings barely beating as it watched the terrain. Minutes passed, the midnight moon glowing brighter as though it was watching, too.

At a flash of movement from below, the silvertip shot down like an arrow, spearing the snow and disappearing entirely. Alarik sucked in a breath, holding it until the bird emerged with a shriek of triumph. The sound raked down the king's spine. There was a hare in the bird's talons, neck snapped, its white fur mottled with blood. Alarik watched the eagle as it came to perch high on the mountainside. In one fluid movement, it threw its head back and swallowed its prey whole.

A shudder rippled through the king. Sensing his master's discomfort, Nova's hackles rose. Even Luna, such a gentle creature, surrendered a low growl. Ordinarily, Alarik wouldn't have glanced twice at a bird feeding itself in the night, but he couldn't stomach the sight of a predator of Vask trawling his mountains, gorging on Gevran spoils.

He peeled his lips back, wishing he was as skilled with a bow as he was with his sword. He would have shot that bird out of the sky and sent its carcass back to Queen Regna as a warning.

Keep your predators out of my kingdom.

And yet, as he turned from the mountains, Alarik's unease gave way to a cool prickle of fear. He thought of the rapacious queen of Vask, steel-eyed and ever clawing too close to that northern border they shared, and had the sudden creeping sense that if he were to send her that message, it would already be too late.

This time, when he climbed back into bed, Alarik's wolves curled up on either side of him, as though they had the same disquieting feeling.



After breakfast the following morning, Alarik stalked through Grinstad Palace like an ice bear on the hunt. His bad mood swirled around him, turning the air as bitter as the three cups of coffee he had just downed. Servants lowered their gaze as he passed, some slinking into the alcoves to avoid his ire. They knew their king well enough to steer clear of him in foul humours. And in good ones. Not that there had been many of those lately.

Captain Astrid Vine, head of the royal guard and Alarik's second in command, was waiting for him at the top of the stairwell on the first floor. At six foot, Vine was almost as tall as the king himself, her body a study of hard lines and lithe muscles honed from years of training. She had warm brown skin and keen dark eyes, her cropped black hair better revealing her strong cheekbones and squared jaw. She was wearing her military uniform, a pristine frock coat of midnight blue and silver, black trousers and sturdy boots made for sparring. And winning.

She looked the king over as he stomped up the stairs, her frown pressing a dent between her slender brows. ‘You look like hell.’

Alarik offered her his most fearsome scowl. Vine was one of only a handful of people he allowed to speak to him in such a manner. He might have taken her sword for that kind of comment once, but she had proven herself an invaluable soldier and strategist over the last year, and a worthy replacement for her predecessor, Captain Tor Iversen. Tor had left Grinstad over a year ago, following his heart south to the kingdom of Eana, where he had fallen in love with one of its witch queens, Wren Greenrock, a woman Alarik had once thought to seek for himself. A stirring if fleeting notion, which had swept in alongside an ancient curse that had bound Wren and Alarik together, leading them to combine their armies and fight a war against the ancient witch who had cast it.

A war that had decimated his army.

Following a punishing battle on the west coast of Eana, Queen Wren and her sister, Queen Rose, had emerged victorious, though the losses on all sides had been many. The war had cost Alarik a third of his own soldiers and as many beasts. It had cost him his second in command and prized wrangler, too. For Tor Iversen had been the only soldier at Grinstad who could train the king’s beasts for battle, controlling them in their droves with little more than a whistle. That was the way of the wrangler – a rare and mercurial ability that, for centuries, had led the Gevran army to victory in one vicious battle after another.

A year on, Alarik was still rebuilding his army, intent on maintaining his reputation as the fearless king in the north,

a dauntless ruler who would destroy anyone who dared to threaten his kingdom. Captain Astrid Vine, an ambitious, battle-honed soldier, who had risen through the ranks of his own surviving army, was helping him do that.

So, he let her needle him every once in a while.

‘I have no need of your frank assessment today, Vine,’ he said, a bite in his voice.

Her brows lifted. ‘Then you are already aware of the dark circles under your eyes.’

‘Take care not to miss the warning flashing inside them,’ he said, pointedly. ‘I have not slept well.’

She pressed her curving lips together, drawing her arms behind her back as they walked along the upper glass corridor, which provided ample views of the courtyard below. Ordinarily, Alarik looked down on the stone arena within with simmering fondness – the place where he had spent countless hours sparring with soldiers and beasts alike, first as a young boy eager to please his father, the late King Soren, and then as a young king, eager to prove himself to his soldiers. To his beasts.

This morning, the arena was a far cry from the bravery and skill that often graced it. A group of quivering soldiers were attempting to corral a snow tiger and two leopards – a mere fraction of the regiment Alarik had been replenishing all year – and yet the twelve soldiers chosen to train them were all cowering against the walls.

Not a damned wrangler among them.

‘Give them time, Majesty,’ said Captain Vine, as though reading his thoughts.

He curled his lip. ‘The one on the end is openly weeping.’

‘No, he’s— Oh, *Garvin*.’ She muttered a curse. ‘He

promised me he was ready.’

‘Let’s see how ready he is when that tiger makes a toothpick of him.’

‘That’s not funny.’

‘No,’ muttered Alarik, folding his arms as he looked down at his trembling soldiers, at the beasts snapping and growling like they owned the arena. Owned the palace. ‘This is far from funny.’

Vine chewed on her lip, her silence a reluctant agreement.

‘I watched a Vaskan eagle hunt in my mountains last night,’ said Alarik, after a moment.

Vine stiffened. ‘If Regna’s birds are here, her falconers cannot be far behind.’

Alarik frowned. His thoughts exactly. Word had clearly spread of the war in Eana, and the losses the king’s army had sustained. ‘She thinks I’m weak.’

Outside, a soldier screamed as the tiger began to circle him. He turned and scabbled up the arena wall, losing his left boot and longsword in the process. Alarik swallowed a growl of annoyance.

‘We are weak,’ said Vine.

He glared sidelong at her. ‘That is not what I want to hear from my war captain.’

‘Our soldiers are well-trained,’ Vine went on, tempering her criticism. ‘But they are still fewer than they were last year. And as for the beasts . . . without regular training, the older ones have gone half wild. And the new ones are not trained at all. If we took them to war, they would likely devour as many of our own soldiers as our opposition.’

‘Contain your optimism, Vine.’

The kingdom of Gevra was long known for the might of

its war beasts, just as it was for the strength and skill of its soldiers. The combination of both was why the northern kingdom hadn't lost a war in over eight hundred years. Alarik did not intend to start losing now, but he could not deny the sorry state of his army as another soldier's scream rang out. A young leopard had pounced, pinning him with a large, snowy paw. It took five flailing soldiers to beat the beast back, and not one of them seemed to realize the creature was simply playing.

Alarik pinched the bridge of his nose. 'We have to do better than this.'

Vine gripped her sword, a frown tugging at her jaw. 'I'm no wrangler, Majesty. I have tried with the beasts these past months, but it takes a certain skill. A certain type of soldier . . .' She trailed off, the rest of her sentence hanging unsaid between them.

A type of soldier they no longer had. Not since the departure of Captain Tor Iversen. Yes, what Alarik needed now – and sorely – was a true wrangler. Someone who possessed that crucial inborn connection that allowed them to read the shift in a beast's mood, to cajole and coax them, to train them. Wrangling was the closest thing to magic that existed in Gevra, but Captain Iversen's talent, while exceedingly rare, was not entirely unheard of. At least not on the small rock of an island, Carrig, where he hailed from. A blot of grey in the middle of the Sunless Sea, as cold and unforgiving as the scythe of mountains that surrounded Grinstad Palace. Perhaps even more so. And yet the king hoped that Carrig might offer them a solution to their worsening problem. 'It's time to find a wrangler, Vine.'

She stepped back from the window. ‘As far as I’m aware, Tor Iversen is the only soldier capable of wrangling your beasts.’

‘I don’t want a soldier.’ He had plenty of those. ‘And anyway, Tor is long gone.’ The words were crisp, final. Alarik would not drag his former captain – and more importantly his oldest friend – away from the woman he loved, and the peace he had found in her kingdom, only to return to the blood-soaked battles of his past. No, Captain Vine had missed his meaning entirely. ‘Send word to Carrig,’ he clarified. ‘Get me one of Tor’s sisters.’

Vine blinked away her surprise. ‘Which one?’

A pertinent question. Alarik was aware that Tor had three sisters, he’d even met one of them – the eldest – briefly, many years ago at Grinstad, but he did not know the name of the other two. He did not especially care about their names, only that he knew they shared their brother’s gift for wrangling. Outside, a mewling rasp echoed through the courtyard. Alarik turned from the sound of a soldier’s answering shriek. Those infernal cowards would sooner hand his country to Regna on a silver platter than face down a bear cub.

‘I don’t care which sister,’ he said, storming off.