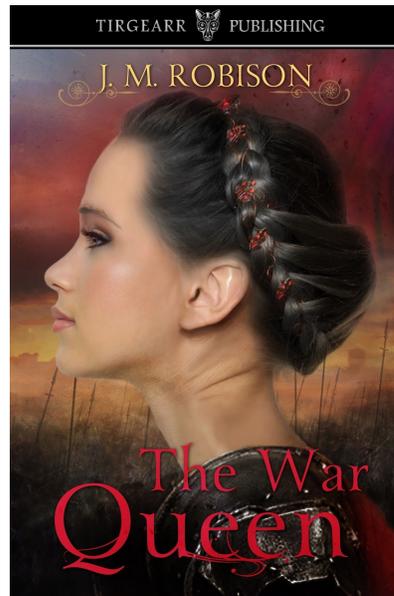


THE WAR QUEEN



Chapter One

A Pail of White Paint

Thundering hooves on cobblestone rattled vibrations up her body. She hunched over the animal's neck, cloak tugging against her throat as it swirled behind her.

The stable boy sprinted across the lawn up ahead, dodging potted plants and manicured bushes. She yanked back on the reins and the horse stuttered to an abrupt halt in the dirt just as he reached her. The horse snorted, sides pumping as it sucked in more air and flung foam off its lips. The boy looked in much the same state.

She dismounted, throwing the reins to the panting boy who inhaled to control his breathing, lowering his head, and intoned a polite, "Lady Altarn."

She swooshed by without a glance.

She entered the manor, the harsh click of her boot heels against the wood floor echoing in the empty hallway. The armorer waited at the counter, a pair of wing-shaped blades at his elbow and a lackluster glaze across his eyes as if to create a wall against the bad mood that followed the lady in.

“Would you like a musician?” he started to ask, but she whisked the winged blades off the counter and continued down the hallway.

Altarn threw open the door into the training yard. Dropping her cloak on the ground, she stomped across the yard to the target constructed out of wooden logs to resemble a person—resemble a man. A small pail of white paint and a brush next to the target claimed her attention. She stared at the pail, disbelief somehow wedging room between her clashing war with anger and hurt.

Do they know me that well? She couldn't decide if she should be offended or grateful by the gesture.

She decided gratitude.

She dipped the brush in the paint and slashed it across the chest of the target to spell the name, *Jessom*.

Gathering a winged shorn in each hand, she stepped toward the target and sliced into it with an angry wildness she would disapprove of in her troops. Every strike became harsher, her angry grunts louder. She targeted the chest over and over so the still-wet name there became daggered smears of white paint.

“A shame our enemies don't actually die that way.” The voice reached her from behind, across the yard, so she wondered how she even heard it at all through her numbness.

She halted, the winged blades clanging as she dumped them at her feet. “Japheron, does my whole manor know of my business?”

The Dethroner leaning against the back wall of the training court came forward and stood next to the molested wood. He must have been doing target practice of his own because he wore a leather vest and matching pants. His brown, military-cut hair splattered against his sweat glistened forehead and dust speckled his goatee.

“Can we get away from it?” He paused, as if expecting her to defend herself. She didn't. “What has this man done to you?” He indicated the target, pointing at the damaged name.

“*Man* is the answer to that question.” She turned a shoulder on him. “Something I should have realized three men ago.”

Japheron opened his mouth to say more but she whisked passed him and marched to her room.

Inside, her court dress had been spread across the bed and a bath warmed in the next room. She looked about for Ratavia, who was so astute at having such things ready for her.

Sure enough, she emerged out of the bathing room, red hair slaved into a bun.

On paper, Ratavia hired into the manor as a laundress. From there, Altarn hoodwinked her into the position as her personal maidservant. She had known her from the time they had tinkered in law school. She had been married at the time and had dropped out during her first pregnancy.

After Altarn had secured the State Head, Ratavia had voiced her financial concerns and had wondered what a mother with a new baby could do about it. On paper, she was a laundress. In reality, she was Altarn's anchor when the stormy seas of politics threw her about.

Her expression asked more than her actual question. "How did your morning go?"

Altarn rested both palms on her hips, staring at the dress on the bed. "Fine."

Ratavia looked askance at her and slipped thick, rubber-studded gloves over her hands. She then pulled a ceramic bowl filled with short metal cylinders out of the embers of the fire and brought it to the vanity while Altarn relocated to the bathing room.

She undressed, tying her hair up before sinking into the tub, careless of the rose water she splashed over the side.

"I don't know why I bother with men anymore," Altarn directed at Ratavia, who entered with an arm load of towels. "I'm certain you nabbed the last good one."

Ratavia sighed with a gentleness Altarn had not known herself to use in a long time, and stretched up to put towels in the cupboard. "No man is perfect. Neither are women."

Is she implying I'm to blame? Her nostrils flared, but she caught herself and released her irritation with a pinched sigh. *No. No, that is not what she said. Stop looking for reasons to feed your contempt.*

"Jessom washed out, then?"

"He asked when we could finally secure our relationship in bed." She dunked her ears back in the water, trying not to listen to Jessom's awful words coming out of her own mouth. "When I told him I wanted to wait until marriage, that bastard had the audacity to

tell me, 'you have to ride the horse before you buy it. Because if you buy it first, you may find out later it limps.'”

She glanced at Ratavia and wished she had a painter in the room to capture her expression, for it might start her bath to boil in a minute.

“Where did you find Jessom, again?”

Altarn pinched the top of her nose, trying unsuccessfully to smother a headache. “My last state party.”

“Oh. I thought you were going to say a stable, because my next question was going to be whether he was a stud horse or a gelding.”

“I don't understand your reference.”

Ratavia smiled. “Either Jessom thinks it's his job to populate the earth or he's lost his manhood to a pair of shears.”

“He didn't want children. He just wanted a herd of mares to flock to him because he believed he served some vital purpose to them.”

“Oh. Then he's not a horse. He is, in fact, a feminine monthly bleed-rag.”

Altarn laughed, the innocent sound easing her despite her fear of relaxing too much. If there wasn't always something clenched inside her, she'd fall apart.

She vacated the tub and dried, reinforcing her mental fortitude like a soldier before a promotion board as Ratavia assisted her into the cumbersome court gown. She didn't know why her tailor recommended she wear this atrocious tent, despite the reassurance it would make her look the part, and thus necessary.

But that still did not stop her from complaining about the bulbous hips and the excessive layers of lace representing a fragility not suited for a woman in charge of Blindvar's army.

The color mix of white and cream mimicked a bridal gown she doubted she would ever wear, and opening the doors into the courtroom felt too much like opening the doors into a church. Except minus a husband, which made her feel weirdly sad and joyous at the same time.

She sat at the vanity and Ratavia again placed the gloves over her hands. She pulled the still-hot cylinders out of the ceramic bowl and curled Altarn's hair around them each in turn. She didn't find the heated curlers necessary. Enough heat emanated from her own

scalp that the curlers simply aided in forming her internal turmoil into something pretty.

“Do you think your court will agree with your call for war on the State of Ruidenthall?” Ratavia asked, as if war were a regular pastime for her and the real issue was her need for teammates to participate.

Altarn flicked a glance into the mirror as Ratavia pulled the first curler out. The hot curl bumped against her throat. She never lied if it could be avoided, but if she told the truth then there would be no reason to even show up to court today. “Yes.”

“Even though they didn’t agree last time? Do you have anything more to convince them?”

She loved Ratavia’s blunt honesty. But Altarn withdrew into survival mode and stopped answering any more of her questions.

Ratavia must have seen Altarn’s subtle withdrawal because she finished curling and pinning her hair without another word. Altarn stood and, avoiding her reflection in the mirror, trudged the downhill journey into the courtroom.

All seven members were already seated, one baron for each major city in Blindvar. There were actually six cities, but there could not be an even number on the court.. The seventh was a random member qualified to be a court official, currently held by a female named Brigot. The idea of females serving in positions of authority was not settling easy.

Altarn walked to the head of the table, sitting in her large, leather chair which felt awkwardly like a throne, reminding her of the last king the Blindvarn citizens had dethroned more than three hundred years ago.

Her seven members waited for her to speak. Perseth pushed his glasses higher up his sweaty nose. Leodin coughed into his sleeve.

Females were not discouraged from positions in politics, but the concept still troubled many. It had been a traditionally male position to hold both the state’s title and to fill the positions in court, but Altarn had been in a particular mood eleven years ago and had broken it. She became the first female State Head and had already served one year out of the three-year session.

Two men had competed for the State Head with her. The background check on one revealed he had a criminal record. The

second was leading the election by a large margin until authorities discovered he was born in Luthsinia.

“The minutes will reflect the presence of all representatives from their respective cities,” Altarn began. “On seven Midar, year three twenty-four After the Reign of Kings.” She paused to let the court scribe catch up. “So being, I am unaware as to the nature of the request for court so I will let another member proceed from here.”

Perseth stood from his chair and straightened his buttoned waistcoat over his round belly. “Baron Perseth of the City of Fellsbarren requested this session due to concerns with the present dealings with the State of Ruidenthall.”

His nasally voice made Altarn want to hand him a tissue. She drummed her fingers on the armrests. She had suspected as much.

“May I speak freely, Lady?”

“Proceed.”

Perseth pushed his glasses higher up his nose. “We all think it is impulsive of you to threaten Ruidenthall with war.”

His eyes, too round and too close to his nose, swept over the other members of the room, who all nodded.

“They have been our friends and allies since the war to dethrone our king. If Luthsinia didn’t cut straight between our two states, we might even be one. A lot of us have family who either came from Ruidenthall or who live there now.”

“Is it so easily forgotten the Lord of Ruidenthall is trying to steal Blindvar from us?”

The members at the table moaned.

“Please reflect on my use of the word ‘impulsive.’”

It pushed on the edges of her serenity to listen to Perseth’s boldness and not respond to it. But she’d been called to court to listen to a problem, not create one.

“Scribe, will you please read us the letter from the Lord of Ruidenthall concerning the matter our lady has just mentioned?”

The scribe pulled a book off the shelf at his desk and thumbed through it, pages snapping crisply. “Seventeenth of Kaidar,” the scribe read. “Year three twenty-four After the Reign of Kings. Addressed to Lady Altarn Shadheing from Lord Kaelin-drath Morrendrake. It reads:

“Greetings, Lady of Blindvar.

“It is fortunate our two states are such great friends. It has come to my recent attention that a number of Ruidenthall citizens have taken a fancy to your small town of Heathe. So much so, that there are more Ruids than Blindvarns. I’ll have to visit to see what the attraction is. After all, who would sacrifice great Ruid food to live in a small Blindvarn town where the closest city is thirty miles out?”

“Of course, having this offset of Blindvarns to Ruids must make it a tad more difficult for the yearly census for you, which gave me an idea. Since our states are such good allies, I propose—just as a speculative thought—that Heathe be merged into the State of Ruidenthall in exchange for a small bit of land out of my own good state, if you like.

“Maybe this small exchange can start something bigger, and maybe someday Endendre will eventually be one state instead of divided into three. Of course, it is just an idea, and something like this has never been done before between our two states. Please reply with your thoughts. If it is disagreeable, I’ll digress. Signed, Lord Kaelin-drath Morrendrake of Ruidenthall.”

The members at the table watched Altarn like ghosts waiting for the moment they could pounce on the living and suck out their souls.

They’d all heard the letter before. They required the State Head to submit every missive sent and received from a government official to the court’s scribe. She’d just procrastinated submitting the last three letters from Lord Kaelin written in a scathingly personal manner which she didn’t feel should be shared with the court.

“To which our lady replied that Lord Kaelin was soliciting war between the two states, calling him a...” Perseth looked at the scribe. “Would you open Lady Altarn’s reply to that letter?”

The scribe did so. Perseth relocated to the desk, bending over the book, his glasses slipping to the tip and pinching an already stuffy nose. “...Calling him a, ‘land thief in the most honest of ways.’”

“Baron Perseth, you’ll do better not to sound as if you are convicting me of crimes.”

“My apologies, Lady.” Perseth hunkered down back at his seat, straightening his glasses. “But those are direct quotes from both letters.”

“My question to you gentlemen...and lady.” Altarn threw a glance at Brigot, who shrugged. Suppose there was no easy way to integrate females into political positions and still make them feel equal. “Is...why was Kaelin watching the Blindvarn census to know that Ruids over-populated Heathe?”

“It is a small town,” stated Brigot. “Just big enough to have a small church. In towns like that, everyone knows everyone, and it would be easy to tell who was Blindvarn and Ruid. It’s as simple as writing or visiting Ruidenthall and letting them know that.”

“Heathe is in the middle of Blindvar.” Altarn held her ground. She’d thought long about this, had even known about the odd number of Ruids in Heathe. It had been like that before her election. Why, then, was this proposition to merge Heathe into Ruidenthall brought to the first female to ever hold the State’s Head?

She had been in session only for a year, long enough to know Ruidenthall on a friendly level, enough so its lord would feel comfortable asking for such a thing. Lord Kaelin wasn’t as new to his session as she was to hers. He’d been lord for seven years already. Why hadn’t he asked the lord before her for Heathe?

“That matters, how?” someone asked.

Altarn didn’t know who had spoken, didn’t care. They were different limbs on the same monster.

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She’d left the terrible incident from this morning at the door before she had come into the courtroom, but the more unpleasant this session became, the harder it was to avoid thoughts of Jessom. She touched both hands to her eyebrows to reset her fleeing calm.

“Heathe is in the middle of Blindvar,” she repeated. “It’s a tactically located town and at times it was thought to relocate the State Manor there for equal control on Blindvar. To give it to another state would give them an advantage if they were seeking to eventually take all of Blindvar, and the fact that Lord Kaelin offered to give us a small piece of land in Ruidenthall is a moot point.

“It would be so easy to gradually push the borders on Heathe and filter more Ruids in so soon there would be a huge hole in the center of our formation. We would be too spread out to do anything about it, too easy to cut us off. Had it been a similarly small town on the border, *not in the middle of Blindvar*, I would have spent longer considering it.”

“Lord Kaelin is not taking Blindvar from us!” This comment earned the speaker muffled chuckles. “We’ve been friends and allies with them for *three hundred twenty-four years*.”

“So why are there so many Ruids in Heathe?” she challenged.

Perseth shrugged for all of them. “Same reason as Blindvarn-born live in Greatmar?”

“Not to the amount that they supersede the number of Ruids there.”

“Such a trivial matter, Lady. All we’re saying is that it’s a little rash of you to jump to such conclusions so violently. Of course we won’t bother re-reading the letter from him apologizing for the upset. But instead of leaving the matter alone, you pursued it and told him to prepare for war.”

“Not in those exact words.”

“Does it make a difference what words you used if the understanding is still the same?”

Altarn looked at each of them in a slow, personalized manner. The stares back at her resembled what they might express for a convict in front of a jury of peers. Lord Kaelin only backed down because she discovered his play at conquest. The scathing letters he’d sent to her afterward proved he was upset about it.

Upset enough to say things like, *Wars and melting alliances only follow the tempest of a woman’s menstrual cycle*. That was the last letter, still on her desk, melting a hole in it.

“And Ruidenthall has a larger army than Blindvar,” Perseth continued in Altarn’s silence. “So challenging them to war is a terrible idea on several levels.”

That was Altarn’s only hesitation. It would be like a litter of kittens against a hive of bees. Blindvar had a unique weapon system proven effective in the King Wars, but Ruidenthall still had more soldiers. That was why she’d sent a private bird to their sister state Luthsinia to ask for aid. Why she’d sent five birds. The last bird had gone out three weeks ago, and she had yet to hear a response from any of them.

Altarn straightened her shoulders and stood, clasping her hands in front of her. “Does anyone here agree with my call for war?”

No one made any indication of approval.

A hard knot welled below her ribcage. “Is there anything more this court wishes to address?”

A brief, quiet scan around the room by Perseth ended with a, “No, Lady.”

“I will take your concerns into account. We will convene again in three weeks and I will make my final decision at that time. This session is concluded.” Altarn left the room while her court members grumbled and pushed chairs away from the table to stand.

Tears whirled against the back of her eyes. She’d hoped for reprieve today. Where Jessom had left an aching void in her chest, the men of her court had filled it with accusations that she overreacted, reminding her yet again why the men of Blindvar had not encouraged women to hold such positions.

She’d been losing the election until both men she had been up against had fallen out. She did all the things required of her. She looked the part, had all the right schooling, spent taxes where needed, made sure no power-hungry tyrant learned from the kings before him on how to acquire land...

She made it to her room, closing the door and pausing with her back against it to straighten out her frazzled composure.

Ratavia was laying fresh linens on the bed. “A bird arrived while you were in court.”

“From Luthsinia?”

Ratavia looked up. Her eyes offered bandages. “From Kaelin.”

The rest of Altarn’s thin emotional binding snapped. Tears burned her eyes and she fought to keep them from ruining her makeup. Was being the State Head this brutal for everyone who held the position? It was a requirement to serve in the army for two years to qualify to run for the State Head. She could handle the stress of sleepless nights and physical training far easier than bearing the discontent of a court who hadn’t voted for her.

Like a prisoner before the judge, she walked to the sealed missive on her desk. Stiff fingers broke the seal.

Altarn,

The introduction lacking her title spoke a complete letter by itself about what he thought of her.

Your dramatic reaction over my suggestion of making Heathe part of my estate has reminded everyone why females have been discouraged from positions of power. Our people have been friends since before the King Wars, and you’ve threatened that. I’ve told you I don’t want your land, and I have rescinded anything to

do with my offer. But your continuing threats of war are pushing my own hand to act first.

Though I do not want to fight my allied Blindvarns, I will do so to maintain the security of my own state. Any more threats and you will find my army marching to your manor in a fortnight.

Signed,

Lord Kaelin-drath Morrendrake of—

She threw the paper on the desk. It floated over the side and onto the floor.

Altarn sat on the bed, slumping forward. Ratavia rushed over and braced an arm around her.

“My lady, Kaelin is a tyrant. Anyone who is shallow enough to use vulgarity to make one feel weak is a bully and not a leader.”

“You haven’t read the letter.”

“I don’t have to. Every word is on your face.”

Altarn sobbed and Ratavia comforted her like she had done so many times before. An anchor in a sea of political storms.

“I shouldn’t cry.” Altarn sat up, nudging Ratavia away, refusing to wipe the tears off so they would dry on her cheeks like battle scars. “He *wants* me to look weak. I’m certain he’s after Blindvar, but no one believes me.”

“You might consider revealing these letters to the court. His vulgarity and threats might convince them he’s only angry he got caught.”

“Nothing will sway them save Kaelin marching upon us. Even then they will believe his army has come for dinner.” Altarn shrugged out of the dress. It collapsed on the floor, where she left it. “He’s doing it so cleverly. Steal Blindvar over time under friendly pretenses, or threaten to remove the State Head because of her threats that she caught on to his intentions. I need Luthsinia’s aid. We’re losers either way without a larger army.”

“Maybe Luthsinia hasn’t responded because they’ve already declared they will remain neutral in your war.”

“So it’s *my* war now?”

“Oh, ah...I mean—”

“Never mind,” Altarn amended. “I could say demeaning things to a priest at this point and not feel hell open to swallow me.” She dropped, exhausted, onto the couch, still in her undergarments, and

considered—not for the first time—abandoning her post and relinquishing her duties as State Head.

It really was just that easy. Just like the citizens chose whom they wanted to hold the position, the State Head could resign and leave. All it took was a formal letter to the court and in ten minutes the State Head could go back to washing dishes at the roadhouse. But Altarn would never do it because that would show the men in her court they were right all along about her, and she would not give them that satisfaction.

It would also make the Baron of Fellsbarren State Head by default until the next elections. Perseth. She shuddered.

“It’s just so easy to see how innocent this thing is,” Altarn bemoaned. “So well done I am almost convinced.”

“Have you thought that maybe it is innocent? You know I agree with you, but you have to hold both stones to know which one is heavier.”

Altarn loosened her hair, dropping the pins on the floral cushion beside her. “You should’ve finished law school. You’d make a better lady. But yes, I have. The small things bother me. *Why* are there so many more Ruids in Heathe than Blindvarns? *Why* was Kaelin looking at the Blindvarn census? *Why* did he wait until I—a female—came into the State Head to make such a request?”

“That is why I believe you.” Like a mother cleaning up after her child, Ratavia gathered up the pins Altarn had piled beside her. “You’re not biased against façades of friendship when it comes to protecting anything of value.”

Altarn nestled back against the couch. “I’m glad I have your company. I might have already fled this manor if it wasn’t for your calm reasoning.”

Ratavia’s cheeks reddened in a nervous smile. She poured them both a cup of tea, tossing a mint leaf into each. Handing one to Altarn, she sat on the couch opposite. “When is your next court?”

“In three weeks. I told them I will make my final call then. If I can’t get Luthsinia’s aid, I will have to call off my declaration. People may think me bold for giving it life in the first place, but I’m not so bold as to face an army bigger than my own.”

“Three weeks gives you enough time to ride to Luthsinia and ask for aid in person.”

Altarn's eyes narrowed on Ratavia, whose gaze was fixed on the inside of her cup. She sipped.

"You can't be ignored if you're there in person," she continued when Altarn failed to respond. "They'd be forced to hear your plea. They could still say no, of course, but then you can tell your court you did everything you could to prevent a war if Kaelin truly intends to take Blindvar. And who knows? Maybe Kaelin is intercepting the birds and Luthsinia hasn't received any of the ones asking for aid."

Altarn shuffled to sit straighter. "But Luthsinia has barred Kaelin and me from crossing their borders. They will detain us if we do. They say they will not allow warlords to incite their neutral state."

"Can they do that?"

Altarn rubbed her temples, trying to chase away a headache. Jessom held the nail to her brain, her court of men offered the hammer, and Kaelin pounded it in. "Because they retained their king, yes. Just another reason why we dethroned ours."

"How are they to know you've entered their borders?"

"They've started checking everyone's tags on the roads." Altarn picked up a forgotten pin and flicked it at the back of Ratavia's couch. Her problems did not go with it. "And they patrol the borders to make sure no one sneaks in."

Ratavia's fingers drummed the side of her cup. Lifting a chain off her neck, she tossed it at Altarn. "Then go as me. You don't leave the manor enough for people to know what the Lady of Blindvar looks like. Farther away from the manor, there are smaller towns than Heathe who think we are still ruled by a man. No one will recognize you."

Altarn's fingers dangled the identification tag on the chain, wondering at the possibilities. "Will anyone notice if we switch places?"

"Well, I'm not going to be *lady* while you are gone."

"You could. My best advice comes from right here on the couch, speaking with *you* and drinking tea. I'm starting to wonder why I even bothered to run for session in the first place."

"Then you have forgotten that the King Wars..." Ratavia paused, smiling over the edge of her cup, "were won by a female."

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