

# Chapter One

Wet blood stained the parchment in a perfect circle. Tiny ridges and whorls from a large finger held Taric's attention for far too long. He tore his gaze from it with difficulty to the man who'd left the smudge. No wound marked him, but then, Taric hadn't thought it was Bryton's blood. Bryton was far too skilled at questioning prisoners.

"You got him to talk?"

Bryton tightened the cinch on his destrier with a sharp tug and moved to the pack mule behind him. "Enough pain'll make anyone scream secrets like a girl and beg for mercy."

"Did you give him mercy?"

A whoosh whispered through the stable when Bryton palmed his dagger. Unsatisfied revenge tightened his jaw as he spun the knife, presenting the hilt to Taric with a raised brow. "Meet Mercy, Your Majesty. She's delighted to make your acquaintance."

*Mercy*, carved along the handle in a scrolling script, was darkened with age and worn smooth with use. Taric didn't blink and Bryton thrust the dagger back into his belt. The blade glinted with malicious hunger but not one drop of red marred the steel. Bryton had taken time to clean his weapon, long-instilled duty overriding his consuming anger.

Taric scanned the orderly list of names and prison numbers, his mouth filling with sour distaste. So many were crossed off, but not the one Bryton hungered for. He refolded the parchment and tucked it into his belt. "I still don't like this."

"You don't have to," Bryton muttered.

"I don't have to let you go, either."

Bryton ran a huge hand through his hair and jerked his head, cracking his neck with a loud pop. Lines of stress and strain furrowed his brow beneath the shock of inky black now staining his long copper hair. The wide line of black hair had appeared overnight, over one long terrible night more than a full summer ago. That thick swatch wasn't the only darkness Bryton now carried.

The determination blazing from his bright blue eyes would have made a lesser man cringe. As it was, Taric fought the urge to step back.

"I'm going," Bryton snapped. "The plan is sound. One man has a better chance of sneaking into their camp and executing an ambush. I'm the best soldier you have and you know it. Even Myla agrees tha—"

"No, Myla agreed a platoon would be too easy to spot. You took it on yourself to plan this suicide mission." Fisting his hands, Taric fought for an even tone. "You haven't slept. You look like shit. A few days won't matter."

"I'll sleep when I make camp. I'm not letting that son of a bitch go, not when I'm this close."

"You?" Taric roared, his temper slipping. The stable boys dropped their water buckets and scurried away like mice. Bryton never flinched. "Over two hundred murderers were wrongly given their freedom and turned

loose on *my* kingdom. It's taken over three long bloody summers but I've been right there beside you, my friend, sending the Skullmen back to hell."

"There's no way in hell's asshole Karok is getting away from me this time." Bryton locked eyes with Taric and gritted his teeth. "That bastard murdered my wife. You can bet your royal ass I'm going to kill him, and I'm going to make it hurt."

"Your duty is to me."

Deliberation and restraint slowed his movements but Bryton did not drop his eyes. "It is. But I owe her a duty as well. Don't forbid this, Tar. You of all people know what losing your wife feels like."

"Yes, I do. And I hurt for you."

"Don't," Bryton spat. "I have to do this."

"You can't bring Katina back, Bry. She died. You just stopped living."

"What the fuck do you want from me?"

Jester bucked at the shout and Taric leaped for the loose reins. Calming the horse helped him hold his tongue. He really didn't want a fistfight with Bryton right now. "I want you to be a pain in my ass again. I want you to call me 'Your Maggoty' and make fun of this stupid beard I'm trying to grow. I want...I want you to heal, Bry. That's all. Don't do this in anger. There are well over a dozen Skullmen holed up somewhere in those mountains. We'll get them. You don't have to go alone."

Bryton grabbed his labrys and slowly ran his fingers down the handle, chilling Taric. He stroked the doubleheaded battle-axe like a lover...or a killer. "You're just pissed Myla won't let you go instead of me."

Taric cocked his brow. “Myla doesn’t dictate what I do.”

New lines of frustration formed between Bryton’s brows. He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose with two fingers. Frayed threads of impatience barely hid under his careful words. “Tar, you’re the King of Eldwyn. She was right to call you down from the fighting. Let your men handle this. You need to think more about the future and your bloodlines.”

“My bloodlines are just fine.”

Bryton thrust his chin to the left. “Yeah, well, the future king is eating dirt right now so you might want to check on that.”

Taric glanced out the stable door. His filthy young son sat stomping a wooden horse to make tracks in the dirt. His dark hair was dusty and a thick smear of mud lined his face. Taric hurried to catch the little hand before the grimy fingers could go into his mouth. “Batu! Your mama’s going to skin us both like a rabbit if she sees you like this.”

His son laughed at the scolding. “Funny Papa. Me’s not a wabbit.”

Taric scooped the child up and plopped him into a freshly filled horse trough. Batu giggled and splashed him. Such pure childish joy beamed from that round face, it took Taric’s breath. He allowed his grin to remain for one perfect moment before solemnly looking back to Bryton. “Maybe you should think about your own bloodlines. Jana needs you.”

Bryton turned his head, looking at the horses, the feed sacks, anywhere but at Taric. His soft tone carried a deep,

hushed sorrow. “Last moon was the anniversary of Katina’s death. Jana called the nurse ‘Mama.’”

The slight pause in Bryton’s preparations heartened Taric as much as the sadness in his words pained him. Bryton’s joy, his laughter, had died along with Katina but his eyes always softened when he held his daughter. They weren’t soft right now. They glistened like shards of ice.

“She needed her mother. That didn’t stop Karok but I will. Jana will be fine with you and Myla.”

“You know we love her like our own, but that doesn’t change the fact she needs *you*. You’re her father. Trust me on this. Without a mother, she’ll need you more than you can imagine.”

Bryton looked at him for a long moment before grabbing the last bag of foodstuff from the stable floor. It slipped from his hand with a heavy thud as his eyes blazed with a radiant, unearthly glow. The color shimmered, obscuring the white and the black until nothing remained but illuminated blue.

Taric’s gut tightened. “Damn, I hate when you do that.”

“Doesn’t really wax my wood, either,” Bryton muttered through the brewing magic vision. His voice dipped lower, more graveled and menacing. “Keep the guards close...and go hunting.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. You just need to use your bow and go hunting.”

Taric snorted. “Bry, I haven’t hunted anything but enemies in—”

“Take up your bow, hunt through the darkness to the light—” Bryton’s tone tremored with power, with charm

that deepened to an ominous whisper, “—and aim toward a kiss.”

“That makes no sense.”

Bryton’s eyes dimmed to normal and he blinked rapidly. He yanked the fallen bag off the ground. “Hell, I just relay what I’m shown. Ask your kitty-cat queen for a translation. She’s the one that slapped this magic shit inside me to keep your blond ass safe.”

Making sure Batu was secure enough in the shallow water, Taric rose and walked to his captain. The jangle of coins on jewels rang loud in the quiet stable. Bryton’s gaze dropped to the heavy purse then jerked back to his.

“If you’re determined, take this in case you need more supplies...bribes, whatever. The crown pays. This is Eldwyn’s mission, not your personal revenge, right?”

Something flashed on Bryton’s face, a flicker of guilt. He tucked the purse in his homespun tunic with a nod. He turned his back to adjust the saddle blanket, an insult Taric barely acknowledged. Bryton had never treated him as a royal but as a friend. Friends acted like asses to one another at times. Friends also didn’t shy from the truth no matter how ugly.

The truth soured Taric’s stomach. Bryton had a death wish and no intention of coming home alive. Since Katina’s death, he’d taken increasing risks, put himself in harm’s way more times than Taric could count. He’d given up wearing mail, planned and executed reckless attacks, took point more often than any soldier in the ranks. Each time he survived, Bryton got drunk—not to celebrate but to mourn. Despite his friend’s longing for the other side of life and his wife, Taric wasn’t ready to lose him.

He stepped in front of the stirrup before Bryton could mount. "I've never pulled rank when we're alone."

Afternoon sunshine sliced through the wide doors, turning Bryton's hair to brass—all except the streak of black that hung along his left cheek. A tic there spoke of his strained patience. "No, you haven't, but your ass is just itching to, so get it over with."

"Do you want me to bring in a witness?"

Bryton snapped straight, insult tingeing his cheeks red. "My word used to be enough for you. Are you questioning my loyalty?"

"Your loyalty? No. I always have and will trust you. Swear to me on your oath you'll heed my command and I won't call a witness. It'll be between us."

Mouth clamped into a thin slashed line, Bryton bowed formally. Resentment stiffened his back and curled his fists.

Taric nodded, the mantle of royalty he could not shed falling on his shoulders like an invisible shroud. "Kneel."

One knee hit the stone floor of the stable and Bryton kept his head bowed. Steel sang on leather when he pulled his sword, holding it aloft in both hands. Dust motes and sunbeams danced like pollen, and golden light shimmered on the long silver length. *Salvation* was etched along the blade. Taric's gaze traced each curved and swirled letter, along the fine nicks from use, across the scarred knuckles holding the sword. The sword and the man had saved him from death many times. Could he do the same? Could he save his bodyguard from himself?

Bryton's sword rose proudly in one hand and his fist banged to his left shoulder. His voice echoed with reverence in the quiet stable.

“To thee, I have pledged my oath as a captain, to give my life without question. To thee, I give the strength of my arm, the force of my blade and the sacrifice of my blood. I swear by the oath I gave to thee, Taric Segur, as my liege and my king, to defend you and yours from all harm. I swear by my honor to give all for the preservation of my homeland. I swear by my fathers, those who came before me and perished, that Eldwyn should never fall. I obey thy every command. Long live the name of Segur.”

Had there been indignation or anger in his voice, Taric might have dropped the royal authority but there was none. Instead, there was only pure, formal honor. It was that honor Taric was counting on. A vicious tremor shook Taric’s arm but he forced his hand to stop before resting on Bryton’s head. Warmth from his hair flowed to Taric’s palm and up to his chest and he swallowed. Dutiful, ritualistic words rolled from his tongue.

“You are the High Captain of Taric Segur, King of the Land of Eldwyn, the twelve provinces therein and the Islands of Parot, Haverstead and Gillum. You are his Might and his Law. By honor and your sworn blood oath, you are life bound to the crown. Heed me now, Bryton Waru Haruk. This I command and this I demand as your sovereign king...get your ass home alive.”

Horses nickered and shuffled in straw-filled stalls, and Bryton did not rise. Batu splashed, wet sashes hitting the floor in a soft splatter, and Bryton did not rise. Outside, the metal ring of the blacksmith’s hammer chimed like music, and Bryton did not rise.

Umbrage laced his soft curse. “You bastard.”

“Not literally but you’ve called me worse. You should’ve learned by now, Bry. Check doesn’t count.”

Taric stepped back and reached for Batu. "That was checkmate."

Half an hour later, atop the parapet, Taric prayed his strategy was enough. Bryton's form was but a dot on the horizon and grew smaller with each second. Anticipated loss roiled in his belly.

"His honor is strong," Myla murmured behind him. A twitch lifted Taric's lip. He hadn't heard her approach. She was as light-footed as her jaguar had been before his magical guardian traded in her shape-shifting ability for the chance to become his human wife.

"It is, but is it stronger than his hurt? I don't know, Myla. I feel like I just lost him." Tearing his gaze from the faraway spot, he turned and gave her a rueful smile.

His queen looked more warrior than royal, which fit her well. Her long mahogany hair was braided tight and swung like a rope down her back. The plain oak-brown tunic had no embroidery, but the sword and dagger belted at her waist sparkled in the sunlight. Soft fawn leggings were tucked into tiny boots and clung to her figure like mist to the moist ground. She preferred teaching swordplay to the youngsters over stitching and mending. She drew less blood with a blade than a needle.

"Where is Batu?"

"I sent him in with the nurse for a bath."

A knowing look arched her brow and she tilted her head. "What mischief did he find this day?"

"No mischief, just a lot of dirt," Taric said, scratching at the new growth under his chin. He never realized growing a beard was so...scratchy.

Myla trained her face on the distant mountain ridges. Sunlight tripped over her cheeks and gilded her hair with

a golden sheen. Wind tossed stray tendrils about her nape and ears but she didn't move. A spark lit in the depths of her unfocused gaze, a spark that grew to a crackling fire. The husky timbre in her voice no longer shocked him but her words did.

"I have no power of life and death nor can I bend his will, but I am not without talents to aid him. Will you give me leave to help your captain find peace, Taric?"

"What are you going to do?"

"All that I can that he might lay his pain to rest."

Taric clasped his hands behind his back and delved deep into his own soul, searching for the right or wrong of it. Magic could be a blessing, he knew better than most, but it didn't come without sacrifice. His gaze drifted once more to the empty horizon.

"I owe him. He's stood between me and death many times. Other than you and our son, I'd give anything in my power to make him whole. Do what you can, my love."

Myla did not see the servants scrambling from her resolute path or the winding stone stairs she climbed to the tower room. Her vision was focused on a faraway memory, a place of colors and light, of song and serenity. From this place outside time, she'd heard the call of a pleading mother and come to guard the tiny infant who grew into the man who now held her heart. But there were others in that realm, others who did not guard, but healed.

The stiff, dry parchment crackled as she unfolded it from the protected cedar box. The calling charm had remained hidden, tucked under a cradle mattress,

undiscovered until that cradle had been needed again. Now it was not the infant bed she required, but the herbs and enchantment to summon a spirit.

The night crept upon the day and Myla ground, shaved and blended. She went herself to the kitchens, carrying back bowls of common herbs, and to the gardens, burrowing her fingers deep in damp earth for hidden secrets. A bit of ash scooped from the blacksmith pit joined a sliver of iron from beside his anvil. In the straw beside his woodpile, a feather leisurely waved in a soft breeze. This she tucked into the bowl, then she nodded to the watchful guards along the castle walls.

Hushed whispers filled the hallways as she peeked into the nursery. Batu curled into a knot with his favorite blanket pressed to his face. Myla brushed a lock of dark hair from her son's forehead then turned to the crib and drew her blade. Bryton's daughter lay on her back, rounded tummy plump and full, arms and legs spread wide. Her tiny pink lips pouted in a slumbering kiss tinged with a hint of milk. About her head, wild golden curls tumbled into a cloud.

Myla resheathed her blade. The child was too soft, too tender to pluck. She would find other means. Taric did not wake as she slipped into their bedchamber and pulled out his box of childhood treasures. Clutching her find, she returned to the small room that had once belonged to the most powerful sorceress on record. Now it served a magic queen of no less repute.

Embers glowed with orange heat and sent snapping bursts up the chimney as Myla made magic. Each precious ingredient thrummed through her essence like a drumbeat, the rhythm of creation. Whispered words in a

mystic cadence filled the small room, vibrating off the stone walls with a musical melody.

A rushlight's touch ignited the spell with a loud flash. Deep under her ribs, a power grew, stronger than a heartbeat and thicker than the smoke churning on the ceiling. It pounded and throbbed. She opened the shutters wide and the dawn's first blush shifted to rose along the dusky night rim. Fragrant blooms and fresh-tilled earth wafted on the breeze and she drew a deep breath, filling her lungs with sweetness. With her arms held high and her mind open to the otherworld, Myla called.

*"Ancient magic past and morrow, come now in this hour of sorrow.*

*Peace to staunch the wound that weeps, ease the pain that bleeds bone deep,*

*Peace as soft as feathered wings, bring to him a love that sings.*

*Hear my voice upon the wind, allow his battered heart to mend."*

A fierce gale blasted her face, cold and biting with a high-pitched screech. Along the courtyard, baskets tumbled from the laundry shed and dogs hunkered tighter to their corners. The night guard dipped helmeted heads and tightened their grips on weapons. Myla did not lower her arms.

In the pinkening sky, a lilac vapor grew closer. It darted into the room, circling her with stinging touches like a swarm of bees.

"Heed my call," she entreated, and opened her palm. "Go to him."

A braid of copper hair, cut from the head of a young boy decades ago, caught the glowing sunrise. The mist

coiled up her arm, threaded through the braid and streamed back through the opened shutters. Myla watched until the newborn day swallowed the enchanted pollen. Exhaustion overcame her and her knees collapsed. The stone floor was cold but hope warmed her. Her call had been answered.

The bird was back. Bryton squinted into the sun and watched the play of light over the glossy feathers. He shook his head and snorted. It would be his luck to get bird shit on his shoulder when an entire prairie spread out around him. A frown tightened his mouth. He'd awoken to a bird staring at him from the elm trees. This couldn't be the same bird, could it? Even as he discounted that, his gaze returned to the sky. The sickle-shaped wings and tapered tail of a falcon soared, looping casually in the blue as if waiting for him to catch up. Not the circling watch of guarding carrion nor the frantic buzz of feeding, the bird's flight was unhurried, as if simply enjoying the wind. What was it like to be that free?

The worn scabbard pressed in a sore spot and Bryton tugged at the sword, hitching it higher on his back. Rolling his head around his shoulders, he shifted. The tense muscle along his spine never released but it loosened enough to tingle and burn. The rough homespun rippled in the breeze and he scratched idly at his ribs. He wasn't used to such cheap fabric, preferring thicker, finer blends even for his most basic tunics. However, they would mark him as a richer man than he pretended to be. The unedged, unadorned elbow-length loose sleeves hid his kill marks, and as long as he didn't remove his shirt,

no one would see his full dagger mark. Even his boots were a lower grade of leather. These earth-tone garments carried no sign he was the King's Captain.

Jester kept the steady pace but grew tired of the mule slowing him. He tossed his head and pulled at the reins.

"Calm, boy, calm. No races today, no battles." Bryton's voice paled inside the rushing wind and he paused. Accepting it, he shrugged. So he talked to his horse. There wasn't a soul around to hear him and Jester held his tongue. He never had to worry about his mount stabbing him in the back, not like Taric had done.

Grudgingly, Bryton admitted that Taric did it out of his sense of friendship, of brotherhood, but he was going to be sorely disappointed. Kneeling in the stables, bound by conflicting vows, Bryton had made a choice. Taric had other guards. Katina had had but one husband. He would honor that vow.

His hand strayed unconsciously to the pouch at his waist. He didn't have to touch the tiny gold curl knotted with pink ribbon inside to remember the softness of his daughter's hair. He carried that softness in his heart. She deserved more than a bitter man as a father. She deserved a life of joy and happiness.

Jester's ears flickered and Bryton stiffened, scanning the open fields and faraway ridges. There was nothing but wheat, newly planted and still but ankle-high. It wasn't even tall enough to wave in the brisk wind. His gaze fell to a tree line not far off. The tops didn't sway and dance. He lifted his face and let the rush glide along his cheeks. He must be in the path of a low swirling wind, like a river made of air and scented with honey.

The breeze held a song. The horse's back worked in a rhythmic pace beneath him and freed him to listen. Tilting his head, he strained to hear the melody. Sweet, like a dulcimer with soft-pitched notes, it grew in strength as he opened his mind. A drum followed—low, heavy and thumping, with a life force that echoed deep in his belly.

*"I am called for you. I taste your pain. Your sorrow stains like blood upon the snow."*

The words jolted through him and his eyes snapped open. Hard breaths heaved from his chest and he hurriedly looked around for the woman who had sung those terrifying words. There was no one. Jester did not slow his gait and the wheat stood stone-still, although Bryton's hair whipped about his head. A verse whispered against his ear.

*"Be not afraid. I come to heal, to set you free. I bring you peace."*

The wind stopped as softly as it had begun, with no fanfare or tantrum. In its wake his body poised, ready to fight. He jumped at the falcon's caw then spat a curse. *What the hell was that?*

Bryton tightened his hold on the reins and clenched his teeth. He was going batty. *The wind does not sing.* Spurring Jester to a faster pace, he ignored the tickling along his nape and the longing ache deep in his chest.

When he accepted Myla's magic gift of foreshadowed knowledge to protect Taric, he'd had no idea what he was getting. The warmth that flooded his body with enchantment always left his skin itching and his mind reeling, but he'd never felt this. The bone-rich vibration that ached with something he didn't understand lingered long after he made camp.

The hissing and popping campfire thrust back the edges of night and he scrubbed his tired eyes. Maybe he just needed sleep. There were few nights he didn't bolt awake, sweat dripping down his face and icy needles jabbing his throat. Whiskey helped numb him at first, but it lost its lure quickly. Heartache and hangovers didn't help much when you had an infant to feed. Jana had been why he'd put the bottle down and taken up his sword. He couldn't bring her mother back but he could avenge her.

*Whoooooooooooo*

The eerie call of an owl raised his head from his mostly uneaten supper of dried meats and flat bread. Though soft, the woodland coo prickled along Bryton's neck. It was close. The night sounds grew loud as he listened for any clue where the bird might be. A flutter of movement just outside the fire's glow increased to a swoop of wings that circled the camp before angling low. His body stilled at the owl's soundless landing on a small outcrop of rock nearby.

Firelight caressed the dappled brown and tan feathers, the pale face with enormous eyes, the small pointed beak. Wings tucked tight around a powerful compact body and the round head cocked to study him.

"Welcome to my fire." Bryton thought the bird might fly away at his words but it simply stared at him with an unblinking stare. A quick darting move angled its head but the scrutiny never dropped. "Hungry?"

He tore a hunk of meat from the strip in his hand and tossed it lightly toward the bird. It hit the ground with a bounce. The owl quirked its head, looked at the meat then jerked back to him.

“Okay, so dried beef isn’t to your palate. Want some bread?”

The thumb-size bit of bread hit beside the meat and the bird dropped its gaze. Bryton held his quick-drawn breath when the wings unfolded, but the owl didn’t dart to the sky. It hopped off the rock, picked up the bread in its beak and tossed it back to him. The chunk hit beside his boot and he smirked.

“Finicky for a bird, aren’t you?” The hunk of meat landed beside the bread. Bryton chuckled. “Well, I guess you’re not that hungry.”

He tossed the scraps into the flames and the fire sizzled with a loud hiss. Tiny little feet left no impression in the grass as the owl stepped closer. The bird didn’t appear sick. The glossy sheen to its feathers and bright shine in its clear gray eyes spoke of a well-fed, healthy animal. But nocturnal birds did not join camp circles. They did not examine a man like this one did, with intelligence and curiosity. A question bloomed in his mind. What if this wasn’t a real owl?

His mouth opened to speak but the sudden unfurling of powerful wings stole his words. With little more than a push, the owl rose silently into the darkness. Bryton scanned the nearby tree line, finally focusing on a limb with a near-hidden addition. Silvered eyes winked at him. It was nothing more than an animal.

Bryton rifled through his saddlebag and retrieved his pipes. He wasn’t very good but he liked the sound of music. The glossed wooden tubes pressed to his bottom lip and he blew softly, a solid note rising above the fire smoke. The song of the wind played in his mind and he searched for the tune. Once he found the first pitch, the

rest flowed and he barely missed a note. It was haunting. It stirred that needy, restless ache in his gut but lulled his mind with a soothing cadence. The owl never left its perch. He fell asleep hearing the chords in his ear, the silvered eyes watching him, and with the pipes tucked to his chest.