

CHAPTER ONE



Jaykun felt the sword puncture the hard leather of his armored vest, the power of its wielder outstanding. The sword went through his vest and entered his heart, cleaving it nearly in two. The shock of it drove him to his knees.

His enemy leaned in with snarling laughter and spit in Jaykun's face.

Jaykun lost his temper.

He surged back up to his feet, startling the man looming over him. He reached for the abandoned hilt of the sword driven into his chest, and with a mighty heave, he yanked it out of his body. He knew he had only minutes before the trauma caught up to him, so he used those minutes wisely.

Finding himself armed with a sword in each hand, he hurled himself at his enemy, who was now weaponless. With an ear-splitting battle cry, he plunged both swords under his enemy's armor—one through the man's neck, the other under his arm and, reciprocating the honor, through his heart.

When this man fell, he did not get up again.

Jaykun's enemy was facedown in the mud and blood

only seconds later, having drawn his last breath in this world.

Jaykun threw down the inferior sword the man had used in an attempt to slay him and turned to look back toward the encampment. He began to walk toward it, the seconds ticking by with every pump of his damaged heart. He staggered, but he forced himself to remain on his feet. If he went down into the mud, he would be left there for hours, until the battle was over and one or both of his brothers came to retrieve his body.

Instead he walked off the battlefield, managing somehow to avoid engaging another enemy combatant. He stumbled up the embankment—the high ground from where they had launched their offensive—and lurched toward the command tent. He reached it by sheer force of will, but only just. He stumbled inside, startling his elder brother Dethan, who had been poring over a map of the field and its outlying areas—as well as the prize that lay beyond the battle: the city of Kriza.

“Jaykun!” Dethan cried out, dropping what was in his hands and hurrying to catch Jaykun before his face hit the ground full force. Dethan eased him down to the ground. “Tonkin! Where is my brother Garreth?” he demanded of his page.

“I will fetch him from the battlefield!”

“Have a care. I don’t want you injured as well!” Dethan said. He rolled Jaykun onto his back and watched as he gasped for breath and grew pale and cold.

But he would not die. Only a god-made weapon that took off his head, or the gods themselves, could kill him. It had been an ordinary weapon that had pierced Jaykun’s chest; that much was obvious. But it had hurt just the same and would continue to do so until Jaykun began to heal.

“It was four on one. I had them all . . . then a fifth

came out of nowhere and plunged the bloody thing in!” Jaykun panted.

“I will get the mem presently,” Dethan said, looking around for a priestess within sight of the tent, who could use her healing gift and hasten Jaykun’s healing processes. It would help alleviate the pain more quickly.

But oddly enough, Jaykun wasn’t feeling any pain. Just cold. A bone-deep chill that had him shaking.

“You would be better served to have Tonkin fetch a mem rather than Garreth,” Jaykun wheezed.

“I was not thinking,” Dethan confessed. “I will find one at once.”

“No.” Jaykun reached up and grabbed his brother by the armored brace on his forearm. The armor was god made, just as Dethan’s sword was—the sword that presently was clutched in Jaykun’s hand. He wanted to make himself release it. To force himself to relax. But he couldn’t seem to accomplish it. He was going numb slowly, which he supposed was better than dealing with pain. “I will be fine.”

“Eventually,” Dethan bit out. “But that will take time and I will not have you suffer in the interim. Next time you are wearing my armor as well as taking my sword!”

“No. I will not have you unprotected. Besides, you know I do not like to wear full armor. It slows me down.”

“By the gods, you are a stubborn man,” Dethan hissed at him. “Will you not let anyone help you?”

Jaykun didn’t reply to that. He loved his brothers, but he would not depend on them for anything. It was not that he didn’t trust them, but he would not burden them with the trials of his life. They were his to bear and no one else’s.

“You! Mem! Come and help my brother!” Dethan called out suddenly to a mem passing by the opening of the tent. She was very young and fair-haired, and since

she was a priestess of Weysa, the goddess of conflict and war, she wore armor. It was hardened leather like Jaykun's was, meant to help protect but light enough to move in. Of course leather armor had its flaws, as was exhibited by Jaykun's present condition, but overall it did its job.

The young mem knelt beside Jaykun, her eyes widening when she saw the evidence of where the sword had entered. "Take off his armor," she instructed Dethan as she drew a satchel from around her neck. She set it on the ground and rummaged inside it as Dethan quickly worked the straps of Jaykun's armor. He pulled the vest away, making Jaykun grit his teeth from a fresh wash of pain, which reminded Jaykun he was indeed injured. Fresh blood pumped freely from the wound Dethan had exposed. The mem's eyes widened again.

It was not common knowledge that Jaykun was an immortal warrior. There were whispers and speculation, some soldiers having taken note of how quickly he healed from injury. Too quickly, even with the help of a mem. But no one knew for certain because the brothers had not wanted to spook their soldiers with talk of them being cursed.

Now it was possible they would have little choice but to address the matter. Or they could swear the mem to silence. Most of the men and mems were more than a little intimidated by the strong and relentlessly war-hungry brothers. Still, the mem was a full witness to Jaykun being alive while wounded in a way that would have killed any other man. Depending on the nature of the mem's personality, she was likely to tell someone eventually. People talked. They simply could not help themselves. It was just in their nature.

The mem put together a poultice and spread it over his open wound. Then she laid hands on him, closed her eyes, and began to recite her healing prayers.

About ten minutes into this healing process their youngest brother, Garreth, arrived at the tent. “What happened?” he asked breathlessly.

Garreth was covered in blood, the red of it staining his god-made armor. There was an enameled picture of the wey flower, the flower of the goddess Weysa, in the center of his breastplate and it was smeared with the congealed fluid.

Garreth was the shortest of the brothers, but he was still quite tall and not more than a hand shy of Dethan, who was by far the tallest of the three. He also had a leaner, more athletic build in comparison to his bigger brothers.

All the brothers were green eyed, although each pair was shaded a bit differently. Each brother also had curly hair, but Dethan’s was a chestnut-brown, Garreth’s was as black as night, and Jaykun’s was a deep golden blond. Dethan was wearing his hair long these days, twisted into two thin braids at his temples with a single long braid down his back. Each braid was tipped with a flame-red feather, a gift from his fire mage wife, so that he might have something to remind him of her. Garreth’s hair was shorter and unadorned, curling just around his ears and the nape of his neck. Jaykun’s blond locks were of a similar length.

Garreth knelt beside his brother and seemed to check his color.

Jaykun swatted him away. “Stop fussing over me as though I were an old woman who has fallen over her own feet. I will be fine given time. Tell me, is the battle won?”

“We fare very well,” Garreth told him.

“Get back out there and see it through to the end. I want this city.”

Garreth hesitated, not wanting to leave his brother. Oh, he knew Jaykun could not die any more than he

could, but he also knew just how painful these injuries could be, immortal or no.

“Do it!” Jaykun barked.

Garreth rose to his feet. “Let’s get him into a bed. Give him a cup of wine. Maybe it will improve his disposition.”

He helped Dethan lift their brother from the ground and they carried him over to one of the cots in the command tent. There were three beds in the tent, one for each brother—though they saw very little use when the army was in the thick of a battle. The men laid Jaykun out on the bed, and the mem returned to his side and began to pray again. Garreth fetched Jaykun a cup of wine, handed it to him, then moved to the open flap of the tent before Jaykun could lecture him to return to the battle once more.

After their youngest sibling had gone, Jaykun looked to his elder brother. “What is our progress?”

“That is not of your concern. You will focus on healing. Dusk comes soon and I—”

“Do not talk of it!” Jaykun snapped sharply. He wanted to push the mem and his brother away, but he was too weak. He hated this. Hated being weak and incapacitated and at the mercy of whoever wanted to force conversation on him. But his brother should know better than to speak of dusk when others not in their circle were present.

“I was not going to say anything. What do you take me for?” Dethan snapped back. “Drink your wine. Garreth is right; you need to improve your disposition.”

Dethan pushed away from his brother and went back to the maps. On the maps were small figures of wood meant to represent troop locations, so he could follow where they had progressed and where they had fallen back. Kriza was a coastal city with a strong armada in its docks. An armada they wanted control of very badly.

Fortunately for the brothers, an armada did a city no good on the land, and thus Kriza, for all its tremendous size and population, did not have a well-organized standing army. The men of Kriza were used to working ships in defense of their city. They were used to raids and battles that took place amongst the riggings of a vessel. But fighting in the rocky terrain that surrounded their home was another story.

Jaykun's army was a vast one. It was a compilation of warriors from many different cities—cities that the brothers had defeated and claimed as their own over the full turnings. Normally Dethan would not be in battle with them. Instead he would be making the rounds of the cities they had previously secured, making certain that the trusted men they had left behind to rule them were still securely in place and were supported if any type of discontent grew.

After all, Dethan was not immortal any longer. He had traded away his immortality for a normal life with the woman he had claimed as his own. The woman Jaykun now called sister. Selinda was the ruler of the city of Hexis and the mother of Dethan's children. She had given him three thus far, all very young, the eldest just four full turnings old. The middle child was half that age and the youngest had been born mere weeks ago. That was partly the reason why Dethan was on the battlefield. He had gone to be by his wife's side for the birth and then come straight to his brothers' location before continuing on his progress through their other holdings.

In the past it had been Dethan who had commanded a great army and taken cities in the name of Weysa, and Jaykun had been his second in command. Now their roles had reversed and Jaykun was the leader of this army, Garreth and Dethan playing second to him in turns.

Because now it was Jaykun's lot in life to win cities in the name of the warrior goddess, and his brothers were free to live and love their beautiful families in all but the summer wanings.

Garreth had a family as well. A beautiful wife and child, and another on the way. Sarielle helped him to rule over their home city of Kith. She was also a wrena, which meant she was soulbound to a mighty wyvern, a dragon-like beast that lived in the caves of the Asdar Mountains. To be soulbound to the creature meant that she could speak into its mind, hear its thoughts, and feel its feelings. To Jaykun, a wyvern would have been an excellent tool for an invading army . . . except that every time the wyvern was injured, Jaykun's new sister was injured as well. The reverse also held true. And since Garreth did not want to see his wife come to any harm, they did not use the wyvern to help them advance on their target cities.

To say Jaykun envied his brothers was something of an understatement. Oh, he did not actively seek or desire a family of his own—those days were long past him—but he did envy them their contentedness. Their peace. He had never known a life that was not surrounded by war and strife, and perhaps he would be bored in a life without it . . . but still . . .

“Where is Tonkin?”

“He should be back shortly.”

Tonkin was Dethan's most trusted aide.

He walked into the tent at that very instant. He was very tall, nearly as tall as Dethan, so he had to duck to enter the tent. He was broad shouldered and lean, and he always gave the overall impression of being very easygoing.

“Tonkin, are the supplies stowed?” Dethan asked.

Tonkin took in the tableau inside the tent, his eyes widening only a fraction as he saw Jaykun's injuries and

supine position on the cot. Other than that, he acknowledged Jaykun's injuries not at all. It was typical of Tonkin to react very little to things. It was one of the reasons the brothers kept him close. Jaykun did not need someone who grew emotional at the drop of a hat. His brothers used to be steady like that . . . before they had fallen in love. Now they could be as emotional as most women were. The juxtaposition of the situation gave him some measure of amusement.

"Yes. All the supplies are well secured. We should have another caravan coming on the morrow, according to the missive I just received." Tonkin held up the letter he was referring to.

"Good."

"Sor . . . you will sleep," the mem said.

"The hell I will," Jaykun barked at her.

"You do not have a choice. Your body, however strong and enchanted it might be, will force you to sleep so that you may heal more quickly."

"I am not enchanted," Jaykun barked.

"Of course you aren't," the mem said a bit dryly. "You are merely miraculously able to live after what should have been a death stroke."

"She's got you there," Dethan said with a laugh.

Jaykun gave him a rude hand gesture. He turned to the mem. "You'll not be speaking to anyone of miracles or anything else concerning this," he said threateningly.

"Of course," she said with a patient smile. "Have good dreams."

"I am not going to sleep!" But Jaykun found himself suddenly with the desire to do just that. An overwhelming desire. An irresistible one.

He was asleep within minutes.