

CHAPTER TWO

THE GLEN

‘Hold fast, sir,’ Kai Jagger, the Chief Huntsman, instructed Prince Jared. ‘You and I will wait here.’

They had dismounted from their horses and now stood waiting in the long grass as the two other members of the hunting party set off on foot towards the woodland up ahead. The grass was wet with dew and some remnants of the morning mist still snaked around them. Jared could feel moisture seeping in above the tops of his riding boots. It was unwelcome but, at the same time, the cold and wet made him feel that bit more awake and alert.

He hadn’t wanted to be dragged out of his bed to hunt this morning – he would never actively choose to be dragged from the comfort of his bed – but it was all part of his princely training. He knew there was no escape for him – any more than there would be for the stag.

Jared’s crossbow was trained on the line of trees ahead: the line of trees from which, assuming Jagger’s subordinates executed their part successfully, the stag would emerge, directly into the firing line. Jared watched his companions – a man and a woman – advancing on the glade. He noticed the precise way they walked, staying close to the adjacent trees so that their green and brown uniforms blended in with the flora. It was becoming harder and harder for him to distinguish the hunters from the trees. What chance would the stag have?

He turned now to the man at his side. Much as Jared would rather be back indoors and under his bedcovers, if he was to be subjected to activity at this hour, at least Kai Jagger was an easy, undemanding companion. Jagger was not much given to small talk, or to any kind of talk, really. Watching him now, Jared had the feeling that Kai’s senses were far more engaged with the plants and animals surrounding him than with his human companion. This suited Jared just fine.

He couldn't help but feel intimidated by Jagger. Jared considered himself to be in reasonably good physical condition: at sixteen years old, his body seemed to be constantly evolving from that of a boy into a young man; with each day, he appeared to pack on harder muscle and notice gains in his strength and endurance – a metamorphosis that happened almost without conscious effort. But, in spite of Jared's growing strength, and indeed height, he always felt like a puny youth in comparison to Kai Jagger.

He was unsure of Kai's age, and had never dared to ask him. It would seem somehow too intimate a question, even though he was a prince and entitled to ask whatever question came into his mind. Surely Kai must be in his forties now? For as long as Jared had known him, the hair on Kai's head and beard had been bright silver, and yet his face, though ruddy from endless days exposed to the wind and sun, was smooth and for the most part unlined.

Kai was one of the older members of The Twelve, having kept his life while others around him had been lost in the last war. It was no surprise that Kai Jagger had made it back from the battlefield unscathed. As a boy, growing up in the court, Jared had aspired to become something like Kai when he reached adulthood. But even now that he was sixteen, and in spite of his growing physical power, he sensed he would always feel like a stripling boy in comparison to Jagger.

'He should make his way out any time now, sir,' the Chief Huntsman informed Jared, raising his own crossbow. Jared knew that the onus was on him to make the kill shot. Jagger was only readying himself to fire a second if the entry was not clean or decisive enough.

There was a sudden noise and Jared tensed, preparing himself for action, but he swiftly realised that the sound had come not from the woodland but from above. He glanced up in time to see a falcon flying overhead.

'Nova,' he whispered. It wasn't unusual to see one of her falcons on the wing at this hour, but there was something ominous about the bird's arrival today. Or perhaps

he was only imagining it. The prince took in, with awe, the way the bird climbed with seemingly minimal effort to a higher airstream.

Now he felt Kai's breath, warm at his ear. 'Don't allow yourself to be distracted, Prince Jared,' the Chief Huntsman told him. 'Stay focused on the woods. You may only get one chance at this.'

Obediently, Jared returned his full concentration to the woodland. The sun was growing stronger all the time and now a golden shaft of light struck a section of the trees. As it did, Jared witnessed a most curious – and impossible – sight; his father, Prince Goran, stepped out from between the trees and glanced towards him.

Utterly transfixed, Jared raised his hand in greeting. His father lifted his own hand, in mirror fashion. Jared found himself trembling. His father had been dead for two years now – slain on the battlefield before Anders had rallied the troops to the final, decisive victory. So how could Prince Goran be here now?

'Focus!' Kai Jagger told him. 'Look! Here he comes. Take aim!'

When Jared looked again, his father had disappeared. In his stead, the sunlight now illuminated a stag.

The stately creature stepped out from the line of trees, as if drawn by the light. Their fellows had executed their part. Now it was down to him to finish the job. But the stag was such a fine, noble creature, and Jared was still in shock at the strange vision of his father. He hesitated, bow strung back.

'Now!' Jagger commanded him. 'Do it now!'

No 'sir', no 'Prince Jared'. No further pretence about who was in command here.

Feeling a cold sweat overtake him, Jared released the bow and sent his arrow racing towards the trees. And that's exactly where it took root – in the trunk of a tree.

Before the stag could run, however, a second arrow had taken flight through the air. And, of course, this one made perfect contact with its target: Kai Jagger's aim would never fail at this range.

The fatal arrow plunged into the stag's neck. The entry was deep and the creature reared up for a moment, then fell slowly backwards as the tip of the arrow buried itself deeper still, slicing through the animal's nervous system and almost instantaneously shutting down one faculty after another. Jared could see, almost feel, the waves of pain the stag was experiencing, until at last its ability to stand gave way and it crashed down to the wet ground, sending up a spray of dew. Jared was filled with a heavy sadness and was unsure if this stemmed from his own sense of failure or from such a close proximity to death.

Jagger sighed, resting a heavy hand on Jared's shoulder for a moment. 'You must not allow yourself to be distracted, sir. I believe I have told you this before.'

Without further conversation, they set off towards the dying prey. Their two fellows emerged from the woodland and made their way over to meet them. As the four hunters were reunited, the stag looked up wearily then gave out its last defeated breath.

'Well done, sir!' One of Jagger's subordinates congratulated Jared. Evidently, she hadn't noticed that it was not Jared's arrow that had felled the stag.

Jared opened his mouth to correct her mistake but Jagger's voice now cut across his own, rendering him silent. The Chief Huntsman gave brief instructions to his team and, in answer, they began stringing up the beast to transport it back to the palace. Jared averted his eyes.

Since being named as Anders's Edling, his heir, Jared had been subjected to these hunting exercises every week. It was not something he naturally excelled at, unlike his older – and, indeed, his younger – brother. It seemed that the middle Wynyard brother lacked the killer instinct. But if the unlikely day did come when he was

crowned Prince of All Archenfield, he would have to be as precise and ruthless a shot as anyone in the Princedom. That was the plan at least. But this morning's outing had only proved how far from fruition that plan still was.

Jared knew that Anders wouldn't have fluffed that shot any more than Jagger would. How much more rewarding Jagger must have found it to train Anders in princely pursuits. Not for the first time, Jared thought how little he had wanted his brother to choose him as his Edling. If only Anders had chosen Cousin Axel instead. Axel was far more accomplished with a bow and arrow. He seemed to enjoy all sporting endeavours – especially those ending in death.

His reverie was broken by the drumming of hooves. He looked up to see the Chief Groom galloping towards the hunting party at breakneck speed. Lucas Curzon's horse seemed almost to be flying through the air rather than pounding over solid ground. Glancing to his side, Jared saw that Kai was standing alert. Did he know, or suspect, the Chief Groom's purpose? If so, he was giving nothing away.

Lucas brought his steed to a stop right at the foot of the fallen stag. He swiftly dismounted and stepped closer still. Jared held his breath, seeing pain in Lucas's expressive blue eyes. He could tell it was bad news, even before the Chief Groom fell to his knees before him.

'I'm sorry, Prince Jared,' Lucas began, his voice unusually husky. He took a breath and resumed more forcefully, 'Prince Anders is gone.' He paused, but only for an instant. 'Your brother was found dead in his bedchamber. It looks like he was assassinated.'

Jared was dimly aware of Kai Jagger asking a question and of Lucas Curzon turning to him and beginning to answer. He could see the Chief Groom's mouth moving, as if in slow motion, though, and with no comprehensible sound emerging. Jared felt his body going through a sequence of convulsions. He remembered keenly the way the arrow had buried itself in the stag's flesh, causing deeper and deeper impact and chaos within. Now he was the stag and this terrible news was the arrow. His brother was dead. Now he, Jared, was not merely a prince. He was the Prince of All

Archenfield; ruler over all the lands his forefathers had claimed for themselves and fought many wars to protect.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. His first thought was that it was Kai Jagger again. But, looking up, he saw that Kai was still deep in conversation with Lucas. Kai's two companions stood on either side of him. In which case, whose hand was on Jared's shoulder? He turned and found himself looking into his father's face once more.

The ghost – if that was what it was – did not speak, but somehow Jared knew that his father was trying to comfort him, to tell him to pull himself together. He nodded, discreetly, so the others wouldn't see. Then he drew himself to his full height. As he did so, he realised with a fresh wave of sadness that his father had faded from view.

Jared felt giddy. Then nauseous. A deep churning sickness seemed to rise up from his entrails. Powerless to hold back, he opened his mouth and emitted a quite spectacular torrent of vomit all over his hunting boots.