

# CHAPTER ONE



## Chaya, Midsummer Feast

Falkieri Artfielan Phelan, King of Lyonya, waited with barely concealed impatience for his grandmother, the elven queen of the Ladysforest, to appear for the Midsummer ritual. Under his bare feet, the moss of the King's Grove felt cool and welcoming; the fragrance of the summer night, flowers that bloomed at no other time, filled his nostrils. Yet he could not take full pleasure in the soft breeze, the cool moss, the sweet scents. Where was she?

He had spent the entire short night on the central mound near the Oathstone, expecting the Lady to appear, but she had neither granted his request to come early nor sent a clear refusal. He had hoped to use this auspicious day to ask her once again for help with his continuing effort to reconcile the two peoples, elves and humans . . . but since his coronation she had come seldom, and never for long. The whole night she had been *elsewhere*, and not even his growing taig-sense could find the direction.

He looked again at the stars overhead; the ritual must begin when the Summerstar touched the oldest blackoak's crown—and as he watched, the star slid that last short distance.

"Grandson," the Lady said. "It is time." She was there, where she had not been an instant before, and already she had begun the chant. No time now to remonstrate. He raised his arms high and sang as the sky brightened overhead. Across the Oathstone, she also sang, the two of them—so the tradition went—singing the sun over its midsummer

peak. The Lady's hands drew patterns in the air, coils of silvery light, a net to capture the first rays of the sun's gold.

Kieri suspected she would withdraw into her elvenhome kingdom as soon as it was done, but as her enchantment wrapped around him, his irritation subsided. Her song, her power, held him fast. His mind soared: he knew he was in the place he belonged, performing the rituals he needed to perform. The taig responded to both of them; he felt it in his whole body, a tingling awareness of life that both nourished him and needed him. This was how it should be. But the dawn song and the Lady left him at the same time; her enchantment no longer clouded his awareness, and his resentment returned.

He knew she would not return until sundown, when they would spend another short night by the Oathstone. This time, he promised himself, she would listen to him. They were co-rulers; she should not ignore the king any more than he should ignore the Lady. She must at least explain why she had been so supportive that quarter-year ago and so ignored him now. Then he put that out of his head; he still had his own duties.

That morning he walked the bounds of Chaya, retracing the route he'd taken on his coronation day. Once more his subjects lined the streets and the city wall; now he knew many faces and names, and when a child wriggled loose from Berian, baker, and ran to him, he scooped her up.

"Jerli, where are you going?" Kieri glanced at the child's mother, who stood red-faced a few paces away.

"Give you Midsummer luck," the child said, pushing a flower behind his ear. Then she planted a wet kiss on his cheek and wriggled to get down. Kieri set her gently on her feet, and Berian snatched her up, face hardening.

"Don't scold her," Kieri said. "Kind hearts are Arianya's children." His own heart ached, thinking of his lost daughter at that age, who had run to him just as eagerly.

"If the king doesn't mind—"

"A child's good wishes? Never." He went on then, pausing at the four cardinal directions to pour a libation and break a loaf. At noon, he went to the royal ossuary to "bring the sun" to the dead with garlands of flowers. The Seneschal had a basket of fresh leaves ready; Kieri laid the leaves on eyeholes, mouths, earholes, and hung the gar-

lands at either end of the ossuary. He felt a welcome from the bones; he sat on the stool the Seneschal placed for him between the platforms, and the Seneschal set the Suncandle before him, its fragrant smoke wreathing about him, then bowed and left Kieri alone. By custom, he would tell the bones how the year went, reassure them or trouble them as it might.

He had visited the ossuary several times since his coronation, reading over the stories incised on the bones, aware of something he could not define—clouds of feeling from this one and that, not all of them. But always the Seneschal had attended him. This was his first visit truly alone and the first when he had a report to make.

He let his mind quiet, trying to drive away that persistent resentment of the Lady's neglect, and then began, talking to the bones as if they were living men and women, his ancestors, standing around him. He told of the coronation, of the many conferences with his Council, his assessment of the Siers he had met, his concern about the lack of trade, the slow withering of the land's economy, his concern about the danger from Pargun and what seemed to him an unreasonable aversion to preparations for defense.

"And the elves and humans are still estranged," he said, into the silent near-darkness. A chill ran down his back, as if behind him someone had stepped out with drawn sword. He felt a tension in the silence: true listening, it seemed. It could not be, he told himself . . . and yet the hairs stood up on his arms. He did not glance around; he would not give in to the fear. "The Lady of the Ladysforest—"

The Suncandle flared, the flame rising to the level of his knees as he sat on the stool. Kieri felt sweat break out on his forehead. Were elves listening? So much the better, then; perhaps they would carry his message to her. He laid it all out in plain words, in a voice flat with suppressed anger. She was his grandmother and his co-ruler: she owed him the courtesy of her presence and the kingdom the courtesy of her attention and her assistance. She had changed since the coronation, and he did not know why. He was angry, he admitted to the bones, that she had neglected what he saw as her plain duty . . . and yet he was not free to act as he would if he were sole ruler. Even that day, that sacred morn of Midsummer, she had ignored his request and come to the Grove only at the final moment.

As if physical hands touched his face, he felt something—a warmth

on his right cheek, a coolness on his left. Something of his father—the merest hint of a man’s firm, warm hand on his sword-side, the merest hint of a woman’s softer, cooler hand on his heart-side. His heart stuttered a moment, then beat on. He could not speak aloud; he asked the question in his mind. *Are you . . . father? Sister?*

*Yes.*

*What . . . do you want?* From his father’s hand—he could not think it otherwise—came a sense of love, support, peace. He could almost smell that dimly remembered smell, from times his father had picked him up and held him close. From his sister’s hand, something different: affection, wistfulness, and—stronger as he listened—anger. Then, sudden and strong: betrayal and warning.

Kieri scarcely breathed. *Betrayal? Danger? Who?*

*They lie. She—* But that was interrupted; his right cheek seemed to feel more pressure.

*Not now. No shadows this day.*



The sensation faded, his father’s faster than his sister’s, leaving the certainty that he had more to learn from them. The final word from his father felt like *duty* . . . from his sister, like *judgment*.

“Sir King.”

Kieri opened eyes he had not realized he’d closed; the Seneschal knelt before him, picking up the Suncandle’s holder, in which only a puddle of wax remained.

“The candle has ended, Sir King.”

“Thank you,” Kieri said. He had no idea how long it had burned. “I . . . I will need to talk with you after the rest of this.” A wave of the hand encompassed all the Midsummer rituals.

“I wondered,” the Seneschal said. “From my post I saw the Suncandle burn higher than I have ever seen it before. When it flares, sometimes there is a message.”

“There was . . . something,” Kieri said. “Something I do not understand, but must.” He shook his head to clear it. “Seneschal, do the bones ever speak to you?”

“Speak to me? You mean, do I hear voices?”

"I suppose . . . or something, some knowledge you feel the bones are giving you?"

"That, yes, Sir King. Just as you said you did, on your first visit. Is that not still happening?"

"Yes. But I do not know . . . how much is real. How much is my wish, or my . . . I was never given to fancies, that I know of."

"Nor would I think you so, Sir King. You have every aspect of a practical man, a man of experience and action. If your ancestors' bones are telling you something, then to my mind you should listen. I am at your service whenever you wish, but is it so urgent that you must ignore this feast?"

"No . . . I think not." Kieri sat down on the bench outside the osuary to put on his boots. "I must come back again, find the time to sit awhile with them, and then—then I will need to ask you how to interpret what I think I hear."

He found the court waiting for him outside, musicians and all. He led them to feast in the shade of the trees at the edge of the Royal Ride. They ate sitting on the grass, even the stuffiest of the Siers, and watched as a parade of livestock decked with flowers and ribbons, mellow bells around their necks clonking gently, ambled past on the main street. Music eddied in and out of hearing as the breeze shifted: ballads, jigs, round dances.

"We never did any of this in the north," he said to Arian, one of his half-elven Squires. In the quarter-year since his coronation, he'd found himself attracted to her despite the disparity in their ages and his determination not to involve himself with much younger women. "I wish I'd thought of it." It did no harm to talk to her, he told himself.

"Were you even there, in Midsummer?" she asked.

"Not often. I spent the summers in Aarenis." Hot summers those had been, sweat gluing his shirt to his body, sun beating down on his helm. "When we were in a safe camp, I poured a libation on Midsummer Morn, and some of the troops would sing songs through the night." Kieri lay back on the soft grass, eyes half-closed against the gleams of sun coming through the tree's canopy overhead, and pushed those memories away; the present peace and ease were too precious to waste. After a time, the Squires talked softly among themselves. He scarcely listened, letting his mind wander to the coronation taking

place in neighboring Tsaia, to his former captains Dorrin and Arcolin. He wished them well, a Midsummer prayer of abundance and health.

"But Paks said there were magelords in enchanted sleep out there," Harin said. Mention of Paks caught Kieri's attention. "If they are magelords, are any of them Verrakaien?"

Kieri opened his eyes. "What magelords? Where?"

"In Kolobia," Harin said. "When Paks was there with the Girdish, she said there were noble warriors in the stronghold the Girdish call Luap's. Didn't she tell you?"

She had, he remembered. Kieri nodded to show he understood.

"If some were Verrakaien, would they be under attainder if they were to wake?" Arian asked. She sounded fully awake herself. Kieri turned his head and glanced at her. She was plaiting the stems of pink and yellow flowers into a crown.

"Who could wake them?" Maelith asked. She fitted a wristlet of blue flowers over her hand and began work on another.

"Who would want to?" Harin asked. "Magelords were always trouble. Let them sleep, I say, until the end of time." Then he flushed as Kieri looked at him. The king, after all, had magelord blood. "The Tsaian ones, I meant."

"The Girdish are trying to find out," Kieri said without raising his head. "The Marshal-General visited me last winter—back in Tsaia—and I heard a little about it then."

"Surely whoever put them to sleep could wake them," Arian said. "And that I would like to know: how did they come to be sleeping there, and who else might be sleeping somewhere else?"

A disquieting thought. Kieri considered what little he knew of Kolobia, what Paks had told him. The magelords had taken refuge in that land, been attacked by something—perhaps the iynisin who attacked Paks—and then cast into an enchanted sleep. Why? For what purpose? And if what cast that sleep ended it, what would come out from that distant fortress? Allies or enemies?

"Maybe dragons out of the old tales are asleep somewhere, too," Maelith said.

"Dragons! They're all gone; Camwyn Dragonmaster sent them away."

"We thought magelords were all gone," Arian pointed out. "Maybe dragons are just sleeping."

"They were said to be shape-shifters as well," Sarol said, putting a pink and white wreath on his head. "We might have one in Chaya today: would we know?"

"The Lady would, surely," Arian said.

Kieri glanced around at his Squires, now all decked with flower wristlets, garlands, crowns of flowers. They looked harmless as any of the farm lads and lasses strolling down the lane but for the swords and bows laid close at their sides.

Some of them, he thought, must be barely out of Falk's Hall—certainly not more than a year or so. He felt his years of war and intrigue as a chasm separating them from him. Even Garris, leaning against a tree a few lengths away, a stone jar of summerwine in his hand, seemed young in comparison. His gaze met Arian's.

"I could make you one," Arian said, holding up a handful of flowers and grinning down at him as if she'd read his thoughts.

"Oh, just give him yours, Arian," Panin said, in a teasing tone. "Berne will plait you one to make it up."

Arian shook her head and gave Kieri a look he couldn't interpret. "No," she said, "I'll make my own." Before Kieri could move, she'd dropped her flower crown on his chest and turned away to pick more flowers.

It was not the first time he'd felt silent communications between Squires wafting past him, but he was not going to respond to it, whatever it was. If there were covert courtships or rivalries going on, better not to know. He'd learned that in the first few years he'd commanded his own company.



That Midsummer night, he and the Lady sang together again, Kieri trying to blend his taig-sense with hers. Once more she had arrived just in time, but he knew she would stay for the feast. The light of her own kingdom, the elvenhome kingdom, rose around them; the trees of the grove glowed silver-green. Other elves appeared from the trees below, circling the mound. Kieri had met many of them by now and knew their names, their families, some of their history.

After the ceremony the Lady sat enthroned on the mound, surrounded by her subjects. Kieri tried to approach, only to be stopped

again and again by elves who wanted to speak with him—a courtesy he could not ignore. The Lady smiled at him from that distance but did not beckon him to her. He felt like a child—loved, perhaps, but not wanted in what was an adult conversation. For all that she was his grandmother, she seemed less cordial than the elves who spoke to him.

One who sought him out and begged him to sit with her for a time was—she had confided before—one of the youngest and formerly a friend of his own elven mother. Her crown of violets and tiny white mist-stars released a haunting fragrance. Though she looked younger than his Squires, he knew she must be older; his mother had died nearly five decades before.

“Guess my age,” she said, teasing.

Kieri had been wondering but without permission could not have asked. Asking an elf’s age was, for reasons he didn’t understand, as rude as a slap in the face. Younger than the others . . . age of his mother . . . he tried to calculate what that might have been.

“Eighty?” he ventured.

“No, no,” she said. “Your mother was older than that when she bore you. I am just over two hundred.” She smiled at his confusion, and he felt like a toddler beside her, his fifty years banished by her smile. “But you are as handsome as your father, and you also are a king. And I am accounted a mere child by most elves.” She twinkled at him. “Some of us younglings might even be interested in you, should you wish to have an elven queen, as your father did.” The look she gave him from wide eyes the color of the violets in her hair made it clear she was one of those.

The thought of having a wife more than two centuries old chilled his loins, beautiful as she was, for he knew she saw him as the flower of a season, soon to wither and blow away and be replaced by another. He glanced toward the Lady and saw that she was watching him and the young elf with both speculation and approval. That was worse—his ancient and ageless grandmother watching him with a woman as old as his mother would have been. He murmured what pleasantries came to mind and did not touch the hand that hovered for a moment over his. The elf-maid chatted on a moment more, then shrugged slightly and withdrew. Kieri glanced again at the Lady; now her expression was remote, and she seemed to be looking past him.



Before he could reach the Lady without discourtesy to those who delayed him, she had once more withdrawn herself and the elvenhome kingdom, leaving him alone with the new dawn. His anger flared; he felt alongside it, like a thread laid alongside a rope, what had the flavor of his sister's anger and her warning. What had she known, that he needed to know?

Could she have meant the elves, all the elves? Or only the Lady?



Back in the palace, Kieri considered going directly to the ossuary, but he knew the armsmasters would expect him in the salle. For that matter, he welcomed the chance for open combat. Sure enough, both armsmasters were waiting for him with what looked like indecent glee.

"I hope you're not too sleepy, Sir King," Carlion said, tapping the blade of his wooden waster on his heart-hand.

"You do not intend to go easy on me, I take it."

"It would be a disservice," Siger said. He blew on his fingers. "Danger comes on its own terms. As the king knows."

"You are terrible men," Kieri said, grinning at them. He felt more awake already. "I shall have to do something about you." He turned to the chest of bandas, lifted the lid, then glanced back. Siger was where he had been, but Carlion—Kieri snatched a banda from the chest, whirled just in time, and parried Carlion's blade with the banda.

"I told you that wouldn't work," Siger said. He had his thumbs stuck in his belt now. "Always more awake than you think, the Fox is."

Carlion shrugged as he backed away. "I've caught a lot of 'em with that. Worth trying."

"You have no respect for your king," Kieri said.

"Not so, Sir King. I have enough respect for my king to test him. With due respect for your predecessor, I dared not test him, even as a young man. He was willing, but never strong or fast." Carlion stood beside Siger now, and tucked his waster under one arm so he could put his thumbs, too, through his belt. "I'll bide here until you're ready."

Kieri put on the banda, fetched a waster from another chest, and came back to face them.

"Pardon, Sir King, but that's not the length and weight you usually use," Carlion said.

"As you said, danger comes on its own terms. I might not have my own weapons—I might have only a branch or . . . or a jug of water or a loaf of bread."

Carlion raised his brows. "Well, then, another time I'll be sure to have them on hand so you can gain mastery with such weapons. Ready?"

Kieri nodded, and the day's practice began. A full glass later, sweaty and breathless, he felt much better despite a few fresh bruises. Physically, at least. Swordplay could not erase his worry about the estrangement between the peoples of his realm. Increasingly he sympathized with the humans. Just like his grandmother, the other elves avoided any disturbing or difficult issue by retreating to the elven-home kingdom, where even he—king of the realm—could not go without invitation, an invitation that never came. Yet whatever course of action he proposed, Amrothlin or Orlith would insist it must await the Lady's approval.

Garris wandered in, eyes bleary. "When will I ever learn that summerwine knocks me flat?" he said. Kieri chuckled; Garris shook his head. "I suppose it's your elven side that makes you impervious," Garris said. "Here's the new courier schedule."

Kieri looked at it. "You shaved another day off the time to Harway," he said. "How?"

"Another relay station. Thanks to your decision to increase the number of King's Squires and those extra horses. Though you are going to need more forage, come fall or if we have any problems to the north." Garris yawned. "Falk's Oath, I'm sleepy. Anyway, I've also set up a schedule that gives every Sier no more than a two-day courier run to Chaya. I want to know if you expect them to provision relay stations on their domains or if you want the Crown to do it."

"They should," Kieri said. "Otherwise we waste time and effort collecting our Crown due, bringing it here, and then sending it back out."

"And if the best place for a relay station is on the boundary of territories?" Garris pointed to the map.

"Both domains can share expenses. In fact, wherever it's possible, why not put it on the boundary?"

“Good.” Garris made a note. Kieri felt a wave of affection for the man who had been an old friend and had become a valued assistant, excellent at his new assignment. “Now,” Garris said, “while I’ve got you alone—have you met anyone yet? No, that’s a stupid question; I know you’ve been introduced to one Sier’s daughter after another, but—”

Marriage. Kieri scowled at Garris. Did even Garris have to bring that up? He would marry—he had said he would marry—but he would do it in his own time. With someone the right age, the right temperament, who was not ambitious or coerced. His mind drifted to the King’s Squires on the schedule Garris had brought. To one particular Squire. No, he must not. They were young, and he was a king, and he must be careful not to exert any pressure. “I’ll let you know first, shall I?” he said to Garris with some asperity. “You and Hanlin of Pargun are two of a kind.”

“Not so,” Garris said, hand to his heart.

“Nearly. She’s written me several friendly notes, always mentioning Pargunese princesses.” He had answered politely but without much warmth. “She says they’re beautiful. I expect they’re as sly as Hanlin and as difficult as their father. The Lady wants peace, but I doubt she’d be happy to get it by way of such a marriage.”

“I’m not urging that,” Garris said. He scowled.

“And there are more important matters than my finding a wife,” Kieri said, tapping his pen on the schedule. He mentioned one he could share with Garris. “Gods grant Mikeli made it safely through his coronation.”

“You think he might not?”

“Verrakaien,” Kieri said. “They didn’t want me king in Lyonya; they won’t want Mikeli king in Tsaia.”

“But they’re under attainder—”

“And Dorrin warned us they can take other bodies. The prince—the king now—survived one attempt on his life. I worry about another.” He blew out a long breath. “I should trust the gods, I know that. Falk’s Oath, I’ve been faithless so long, it’s hard to practice that discipline.”

“About the only one you don’t practice,” Garris said. He poured water from the flagon for Kieri and a goblet for himself. “I understand—we need a strong ally to the west. Prealith—”

"There's trouble in Prealith?"

"No, not trouble there. Rumors of trouble in Aarenis. You know—or maybe not—of the river trade to their ports and the sea trade around the Eastbight from Bannerlith to the Immerhoft ports." Garris paused; Kieri nodded. "Rumors from Immerdzan and suchlike of increased pirate activity and a pirate king building a castle right up the great river."

"That would be Alured the Black," Kieri said. "I know him too well. Started as a pirate, turned to brigandry in southern Aarenis, with some story about being the lost heir to the old duchy of Immer, which had been vacant more than a century. He was our ally for a while against Siniava. In Tsaia, we heard of unrest in Aarenis the last couple of years." He cleared his throat. "Someday I'm going to have to do something about him."

"You? You can't seriously think of returning to Aarenis—" Garris's voice rose.

"Someone must," Kieri said. "He could be worse than Siniava, and I'm the one who supported his claim to Immer—worst mistake I made. According to Paks, it's one reason the Lady thought I might not be fit to rule."

"Kieri—excuse me, Sir King, but this is madness. *This* is your realm now. That's in your past."

"I'm responsible," Kieri said. "By Falk's Oath, I cannot ignore my part in whatever he does."

"But your duty's here—"

"Yes, until I've sired my replacement," Kieri said. "I'm not planning to storm off tomorrow, after all. But in time—" Now that he had time, having learned of his half-elven heritage . . . barring accidents or illness, he could expect at least another seventy years of vigorous life and a slow aging after that. By their standards, he was now in the prime of life.

"Well, then," Garris said. "You'd best get to courting, don't you think?" He picked up the maps and schedules and left the room, his shoulders stiff with disapproval. Kieri stared after him. He had not expected that reaction . . . yet when he thought about it . . . about leaving his father's and sister's bones to go to Aarenis . . . the weight of his inheritance dragged at his earlier determination.