

CHAPTER ONE



lood throbbed through my veins, pulsing with each beat of my heart even as I stood as still as any statue. My hands were clasped neatly behind my back while I stood rigidly at attention, shoulder to shoulder with the others in the Master Assassin's Guild.

King Oswald paced up and down in front of us. I kept my eyes fixed firmly on the banner bearing our kingdom's symbol—a fanged sea serpent—as I tracked our monarch in my peripheral vision. What could he want from us?

Our last mission, to eliminate one of the noblemen from Pyren, had been executed flawlessly...as had the nobleman. But it was always our commander, Kazan, who handed down mission orders from one of the military generals, never the king himself, and Kazan was standing in line with the rest of us instead of at the head of our group. He had even dispensed with his habit of spinning his throwing knives in his hand. The lack of the familiar sight drove home the gravity of the situation.

"Our kingdom has been offered a ceasefire and potential peace treaty," the king finally began. I hadn't thought



our postures could have been any more rigid, but I found my own shoulders holding even more tension after his statement. An offer of peace after two centuries of war? Was he about to shut down our division and eliminate our positions?

I maintained my fixed gaze, staring at the sea serpent with such intensity that the beam of my vision could have been used as a tightrope. My work was all I had. If I had to go back to Mistress Aldra and tell her that all her efforts and sacrifices to save me from a lifetime of poverty and hardship were for naught...

"There are conditions," King Oswald continued, still pacing across the damp stone so that the torches set into brackets along the walls set the sapphires in his crown agleam. "Prince Tarquin, who will take over as tzar in a few years, has demanded a bride from the ranks of our nobility."

My jaw locked as hatred rushed in seething waves that set my already pulsing blood to boiling. Had he not stolen enough from our kingdom already? Wasn't it sufficient that he burned our crops, blockaded our ports, and forced us to drain the kingdom's coffers in this eons-long war? If it weren't for phoenix shifters like him, I might still have had parents. And now, this Prince Tarquin was so arrogant as to demand a sacrificial bride from a nation that despised him. Was he determined to condemn an innocent girl to a lifetime of misery as a final trophy to satisfy his personal vendetta against Termarth?

"We need peace," the king continued. "And Prince Tarquin is willing to compensate our kingdom with a considerable sum and will cease the trade embargo, effective the day of the wedding. But we cannot leave ourselves defenseless in the event that foul play is afoot."

Of course foul play was afoot. This was the Pyrenese nation we were talking about. Anyone suspecting anything less was the naivest of fools.

Kazan saluted and barked, "Permission to speak freely, Your Majesty?"

King Oswald inclined his head.

"This presents an ideal situation to strike a fatal blow against Pyren. If we send a decoy bride from our ranks, she will be perfectly placed to eliminate Pyrenese enemies in the event the peace treaty is broken."

I resisted the twitch that tugged at my mouth. Trust Kazan to find every opportunity to spin any situation to suit our kingdom. For a man of more than fifty years, he was still as fit and mentally agile as any of the rest of us.

The king's face broke out into a wide smile, relieved that Kazan had picked up on his hint so quickly. "I was hoping you'd suggest it. None of the noblewomen are willing, and one from your ranks would be more likely to...cope with such a union than anyone else. I can deed over a portion of land and a title to whomever is willing, and I will ensure that the person's family will be well cared for after... well, after the marriage."

After the unfortunate bride was inevitably killed by the Pyrenese once they broke the treaty, he meant. No one needed to say it for the weight of the implication to settle on everyone present. It would be a suicide mission.

Kazan pivoted to look at the assembled assassins. "Would anyone be willing to volunteer?"

"Aye," Razo growled. Snickers broke out among our ranks. Razo was built like a battering ram and was just as tough, with a thick beard and body hair so dense that it sprouted from under each article of clothing so he resembled a gorilla no matter what he wore.

King Oswald quickly raised a hand to cover his mouth, but I caught the twinkle in his eye. When he lowered it, his face had reverted to a dignified expression once more. "As generous of an offer as that is, I was hoping for someone a little more...feminine. I don't think lace would quite suit you."

The image of Razo squeezed into a white lace gown, with dark hair protruding from every gap in the delicate stitches of fabric and sporting his bushy beard, burst into my mind with vivid detail. I locked my jaw, grinding my teeth together to prevent my mouth from turning upward. Several other assassins failed at the same task, and I spotted them biting their lips, trying hard not to laugh and ruin our militant image in front of royalty.

"There is another factor to consider," King Oswald continued once he'd mastered himself. "As part of the peace treaty, Pyren's military has agreed to free all those they've held hostage. They claim they have more than two hundred prisoners."

There was a quiet, collective intake of breath from everyone. We had lost many of our soldiers over the years, and extraction from the heart of Pyren was impossible. Anyone captured by the Pyrenese nation was considered dead. We had lost several from our own ranks.

Everyone standing in line had an instant-kill capsule hidden in a tiny compartment sewn into their belts behind the buckle in case they were taken. Better dead than divulging information to the enemy. But the common military minutemen had no such luxury. Many were being held captive, and several were friends or family members of those in our ranks.

"Why would they offer such a trade?" Kazan asked

baldly. "They have the advantage in numbers and have won more battles."

"Loathe as I am to admit it, they've already won the war," the king grudgingly admitted. "This is an opportunity for us to keep the land we still have, and they want all of their prisoners exchanged as well. They've accused us of taking many of their citizens."

I exhaled sharply through my nose. It was no secret that our prisons were bursting with Pyren's captives. That was no accusation; that was a simple observation. I didn't need extensive knowledge of the status of our country's coffers to know that keeping all the prisoners fed and clothed would deplete our treasury far more rapidly than if we defaulted to the more cost-effective method of simply disposing of them.

If someone married Prince Tarquin...they would have instant inside intelligence into the tzardom's operations. They would be able to collect data on their military movements and resources and be perfectly positioned to strike if and when the treaty was broken. Being married to such a powerful person would offer any number of advantages for advancing our kingdom's situation.

"I'll do it." The words leapt from my mouth and reverberated off the cold stone walls.

A heavy silence fell while my words echoed into non-existence and Kazan nodded his approval. I felt the heated gazes from the majority of the Guild settle on me, one of the only female assassins left in their ranks.

There was no need for surprise on any of their parts. I was ready-made for this mission. Many of them knew my shameful family history, and this was one situation in which it would be an advantage, for a phoenix could only be destroyed

by one of Pyrenese descent. Perhaps I could atone for the sins of my ancestors by taking on the mission that others had no chance of succeeding in. I may not be a full-blooded shifter, but I'd killed enough Pyrenese targets and seen enough of Pyren's fire-based culture to know that no Termarthian would survive marriage to a monster like Tarquin. I might not survive either, but at least I would be able to take Tarquin down with me. It wasn't every day that we had the opportunity to take out such a high-profile target. Even better, the idea of sending an assassin when Prince Tarquin demanded some innocent girl felt like a fitting punishment for the despicable man.

King Oswald studied me. "Come forward."

I did so, marching forward until I was three paces away from the torch bracket, then halted. The king circled me, his eyes scanning up and down my body as if I were a horse at auction while I stared at the flickering flames that threw shadows onto the wall.

"Kazan," he barked. "Do you agree?"

My back stiffened as I listened for the response I knew would come.

"She would be my first choice for this assignment," Kazan said. "Azora has been invaluable in recent missions to Pyren and succeeds where many fail. She's attractive enough to entice the prince, and having her so close to Pyren's leader would bring me immense peace of mind for our kingdom."

To entice the prince? A slight shudder ran down my body. I'd been so focused on the advantages of having an assassin situated so close to Pyren's future military and political leader that I'd failed to consider what would be required to maintain my cover. Would I regret my hasty decision?

I ran my tongue along the back of my teeth as I kept my lips pressed closed. We'd been at war for so long that, if we

had peace, it would be a win. If I got close enough to kill Tarquin, it would still be a win because, although we would be thrust back into a war, we would have the added benefit of an enemy leader being dead.

My shoulders relaxed slightly as I took comfort from this thought. If Prince Tarquin got any amorous ideas, he would end up dead. If he behaved himself, we would have the peace our kingdom desperately needed and I would allow him to live until I received word to finish him.

"I commend your dedication, Lady..." King Oswald paused, clearly having forgotten my name from the rapid-fire introductions that had taken place when he first entered the room.

"Azora," I supplied, still staring at the torch ahead of me.

"Lady Azora," the king said, smiling. "Give me your family name, and I'll ensure that they're well cared for during your...absence."

"I have no biological family," I answered. "But I would appreciate your sending aid to Mistress Aldra during my absence. She's the one who raised me." My heart tore as I realized I would have to go home and tell her that I would be leaving and likely would never return.

"Ah yes, I know of Mistress Aldra." He paused, then added, "I commend your dedication, Lady Azora. You're a credit to our kingdom. I shall not conceal that the path ahead of you will be difficult and dangerous. If it weren't for the dire need, I wouldn't send any woman into such a position. Many of Pyren's traditions revolve around fire, and I can only assume that marriage to Prince Tarquin would break even the strongest of soldiers. Are you truly prepared to undertake this mission?"

I refused to let any trace of amusement flicker over my

face. The king was trying to tell me that my mission would be difficult? He sat on a throne all day; what did he know of danger?

In response, I extended my arm so that my bare palm was held directly in the torch's hungry flames that licked at my skin, but unlike those whose ancestors were exclusively from Termarth, I felt nothing other than a comfortable warmth. I slowly revolved my head so I could meet the king's astonished gaze as he stared at my unblemished hand in the fire, then transferred his gaze to Kazan, who beamed with pride.

"As I said," Kazan said. "Azora would be my first choice for this assignment and has been able to succeed in previous missions that proved impossible for others. Of everyone here, she has the best chance."

"Are you..." King Oswald's voice trailed away as he took a step back. No one from Termarth could have held their skin to the hungry flames for a sustained time without screaming in agony. But for someone like me...

"My family's line was tainted long ago. I'm no shifter, and my loyalties are to Termarth only."

I felt more than saw the glances that I knew were being exchanged between others in the guild. There were slim few who understood the shame I carried with me from the sins of my ancestor, and it only fueled my desire to bring all phoenixes to justice.

King Oswald scanned me up and down, but this time, he wasn't assessing my beauty or potential ability to seduce Prince Tarquin. His eyes raked over my exposed right shoulder, which was free of the fire tattoo that was given to all those in Pyren at five years of age. Their barbaric branding was the only distinguishing feature that was used to easily tell those born in Pyren apart from those born in Termarth.

Both peoples had charcoal-black hair and fair skin, yet those from Pyren often hid their tattoos while abroad, likely to avoid flaunting the symbol of their nation's treachery. We in Termarth always exposed our shoulders as a way to show the world that we didn't count ourselves among their number.

"Fascinating," King Oswald said, still staring at my shoulder as I lowered my hand. "Kazan, may I speak with you? Privately?"

The two men left the room. Those remaining stayed standing at attention.

"They're debating if they should send me instead," Razo murmured. "I'm prettier." His deep voice carried his whisper throughout the room, and sniggers broke out among our ranks.

"I'd give a month's wages to see you in a dress," I whispered back, and several others nodded in agreement.

"Which only confirms how beautiful I am to fetch such a high price. Once I lift the hem of my gown to show a little ankle, everyone would instantly swoon."

I quirked an eyebrow. "Do you mean instantly faint dead away and be mentally scarred forever? Watch out, Prince Tarquin."

The scattered snickers turned into choked laughter as the image of Razo's monstrously hairy tree trunk of a leg seductively protruding from underneath a lifted gown's hem sprang to everyone's mind. I could perfectly imagine a simpering smile from beneath Razo's bushy beard as he coyly twirled a strand of his long hair around his fat knuckle and blew a kiss.

Kazan and King Oswald entered the room and we all quickly stifled our laughter, but many mouths continued to twitch.

"Azora, I'm willing to send you under the condition that you are also accompanied by two additional members of your guild to act as your personal guard. They'll be there to serve as your protection."

My protection? I wanted to scoff. They would be coming along to babysit me because the king didn't believe that anyone with the tiniest percentage of Pyrenese blood could be trusted, no matter how loyally I'd served Termarth for my entire life. But I'd expected as much, and the king must know that there was no other choice if Kazan had explained things to him. I was the only woman there with any Pyrenese heritage, and a phoenix could only be slain by one who had such ancestry. While a Termarthian woman might be able to take out some of the Pyrenese non-shifters, only I could kill Tarquin.

"Kazan has already agreed to serve as one of your guards," King Oswald continued. "Is there another volunteer?"

"I will." Razo protectively stepped forward. "Every noblewoman needs a bodyguard." As grateful as I was for his support, the tear in my heart opened more. Mistress Aldra had raised three in our ranks—myself, Razo, and another man named Quinn, who had stayed silent through this entire ordeal. The knowledge that two of the children Aldra brought in and fostered were going to the nation responsible for the deaths of her husband and son would devastate her. I could only hope that the financial compensation the king provided would bring her some measure of comfort in our absence. But I couldn't deny that having Razo and Kazan close while I was in the heart of enemy territory would bring me security that I didn't want to admit I craved.

Quinn often brought Aldra flowers and helped her as

she aged. Even though he and I didn't get along most of the time, I did appreciate what he did to care for Aldra. Would he do enough to make up for the loss of her other two foster children?

"I'll send a regiment of soldiers," King Oswald said, pulling me from my musings. "We want to ensure that you reach your destination unharmed, and my staff will draft the required records and deed land over to you so your claim won't be questioned upon your arrival. I'll send a personal letter as well."

He inclined his head once to Kazan, then again to the guild as a whole. We all snapped into a salute.

"May Termarth live forever," Kazan chanted, his voice so bold that it infused pure patriotism into our minds and vibrated down to our bones.

"May Termarth live forever," we echoed, and as one, held our fists aloft as the king exited.

Even if I perished at Tarquin's hand, Termarth would live on.

CHAPTER TWO



ix your face; you look like you're about to kill someone," Razo teased, poking a finger at the creases in my forehead as we walked back home.

"Isn't that the whole point of sending me on this mission?" I answered, allowing my facial features to relax.

Razo let out his great, booming laugh, which set his beard to quivering. "I suppose it is. But first, remember that you aren't supposed to let them know you plan to kill him ahead of time, and secondly, none of the people here"—he gestured at the citizens going about their day-to-day lives and ignoring us completely—"are your target, so stop glaring at them like you want to see them roasting over a spit. If it makes you feel better, Kazan's already yelling at Quinn so you don't have to."

He pointed to the training field, where Kazan was scolding Quinn, having held him back to berate him for some unknown mishap. I supposed that if I was to consider Quinn and Razo like brothers, Quinn would be the obnoxious older brother who always felt superior to his little sister, and I never minded seeing him yelled at.

"Shame. I would have quite liked to do some yelling," I told Razo, digging the toe of my boot into the compacted earth and flicking the dirt clod into the air.

"No, no, you get to play the part of the sweet, charming young woman who is off to seduce a wealthy and powerful man into telling her all his secrets. Do you need some tips?"

"Oh, are you a sweet, charming young woman with experience at seducing powerful men? I remember you volunteering." I couldn't resist teasing Razo. He was my favorite "brother."

"Oh no, I was going to tell you about all the many women who've tried to seduce me."

"I don't need to hear about your dreams. That's just gross."

Razo rolled his eyes. "I'm just saying, you can't just punch this prince into making him like you."

"I don't need him to like me. I just need him to marry me."

"Then you should pay attention in all those etiquette classes the king is arranging for you. We need you to act like a dainty lady now."

I lightly kicked his shin. "I am dainty!"

Razo grinned and stuck out his foot to try and trip me. "As dainty as a rhinoceros."



I grimaced as I flexed and unflexed my fists, bracing myself for the conversation I knew I needed to have with Mistress Aldra. How was it that I didn't bat an eye when

poisoning a drink or slitting the throat of some Pyren official, but the very thought of disappointing Aldra had me sweating profusely and unable to focus on anything else? I couldn't even bring myself to finish walking up the path to the manor's front entrance. My feet dragged to a halt.

Razo stopped as well. "We'll get back," he rasped, his low voice exiting as a gravelly growl.

"Never said we wouldn't. I'm pretty difficult to kill, remember?" Exchanging retorts with Razo always had a way of calming me.

"Let's hope the same can't be said for your husband-tobe."

"Jealous that I get a higher profile target than you've ever had?" I teased. "Don't go trying to steal my glory here."

"Is there any glory in marrying a murderer?"

I laughed out loud. "Do you mean no glory for him, or for me?"

Razo shrugged to readjust the massive warclub he always carried slung over his back. The light gleaming off the spikes on the club winked threateningly. "Ah, but at least our killings are justified. They're the ones murdering needlessly. We are simply eliminating threats to the kingdom to protect our people. We aren't murderers. We're heroes."

I grinned, still staring at the large manor. "Tell that to Aldra."

Razo didn't answer. When I looked around, I found him staring at the building with a similar expression of apprehension on his face. For several minutes, we stood side by side, watching as the storm clouds rolling toward us darkened the sky. For that short time, I didn't at all feel like the hardened assassin I had become over the past decade. I was still the little girl terrified of being alone again in the world.

It wasn't until we heard the distant low rumbles of thunder that Razo glanced sideways at me. My jaw locked as a light drizzle began to sprinkle down. Of course it would rain. Serpents alive, how I hated the rain. Eliminating enemies and holding my bare skin in live flames was nothing. Reliving the memories from the worst day of my life was far more traumatic, and it happened every time I heard thunder and saw rain pouring down. I even disliked the way raindrops felt on my skin, like tiny shards of ice sent from the heavens to dig into my brain and make my childhood trauma resurface.

At least in Pyren it rarely rained. I wouldn't have to find an excuse for becoming a recluse every time the skies darkened.

"Come on," Razo said, nudging me through the doorway and politely ignoring how every muscle in my body had tensed and my teeth ground together. He knew of my intense dislike for thunderstorms and was always good about leaving me alone when they occurred. "I can try to get Aldra in a good mood if you need some time."

Sweet Razo. It was almost difficult to believe that he was an assassin with how kind and considerate he was most of the time. Quinn, on the other hand, always mocked me mercilessly when it thundered, which had earned him more than one black eye from me.

While Razo went off through the manor in search of Aldra, I spent a few minutes hiding in my room while the worst of the rainstorm passed overhead. Each flicker of lightning and crack of thunder threatened to make the horrific images in my memories resurface.

I lit a candle and stared hard at the orders I had clutched in my hand, rereading each line a dozen times and forcing myself to focus on the mission details with such

intensity that any other thoughts weren't given room to grow.

Just as the storm was fading so that I could adequately ignore it, a soft rapping came at my door. "Azora?" The slightly creaky voice of Mistress Aldra was loud enough to overpower the distant rolls of thunder.

"Come in," I called, hastily folding up the pages Kazan had supplied me with. Most detailed the etiquette and protocol I would be required to learn over the next few weeks of training while King Oswald sent word that Tarquin's bride would arrive by the next full moon.

Aldra pushed the door open. Razo was right behind her, as was Quinn, the pompous prat. But the expression on Aldra's face made it so that I couldn't muster the energy to be horrible to Quinn. Aldra's eyes brimmed with tears. "You're leaving?" she asked, her voice shaking with emotion.

"Just for a little while. I'll be back," I reassured her.

There was a long pause while a solitary tear cut a track down Aldra's face. She wasn't a frail woman by any means and could still wield a sword well, just as most women in our kingdom could. The war had hardened us all. But at that moment, even her greying hair seemed fragile.

"Locke and Boran said they would be back too," she whispered.

Razo and I winced as if Aldra had brandished a whip. Aldra rarely spoke of her late husband and son; it was too painful for her, just as it was too painful for me to examine the memories of the family I'd once had.

Aldra's chin quivered. "Razo said he's going with you."

Quinn patted Aldra on the shoulder. "I'll still be here.
I'm loyal."

I narrowed my eyes at him. Perhaps he had more Pyre-

nese blood than Razo and I did, because he was the most obnoxious man alive. I could tell Mistress Aldra was trying to hold back more tears. "I took all of you in to try to protect you," she said softly.

My insides shriveled. Aldra was the only woman willing to take in orphans cursed with Pyrenese blood and had hidden our heritage from the citizens of Termarth who would go to any lengths to avoid association with Pyrenese children. Now, we were repaying her kindness by abandoning her and running back to the country where our shameful ancestors had originated.

"You've always been a good example of protecting people," I told her. "You protected us all these years, and now it is our turn to protect you. By going, we'll finally have peace. The war will be over."

"The war will never be over," Aldra said, staring at the windowpanes where raindrops carved their way down the glass, slowly picking up speed as each droplet gathered more beads of water as it migrated to the windowsill. "We'll always remember what we lost."

"But we can prevent others from losing their families in the same way we did," Razo said, his deep voice bracing and strong.

Aldra's chin quivered as she tried to smile. "If only you three had gone into the professions I picked out for you," she scolded gently.

"Yes, acrobatics was undoubtedly the career for me," Razo said, flexing his massive arms. I couldn't help laughing as I recalled the few tumbling lessons Aldra enrolled Razo in, after which the instructors had to have a private conversation with her, explaining that perhaps Razo would be better suited for any other job because he had nearly flattened the instructor trying to spot him doing

a back handspring. He had been twelve years old at the time.

"And my musical prowess would have deafened all of Termarth," I put in. I had just as little success as Razo had when Aldra encouraged me to learn to sing and play the harp, and I had loathed every moment I sat at the stringed instrument. Additionally, all of my screeching attempts at singing had sent birds flying away in a panic.

Quinn said nothing and merely looked smug. He had been briefly apprenticed to a tailor, another "safe" career as Aldra put it, but quit when he saw that both Razo and I had joined the military and that our Pyrenese blood gave us a significant advantage in our line of work. I had the sneaking suspicion that he was determined to outshine us in anything we did.

Aldra shook her head. "I should have apprenticed you all to the bakery instead." She let out a long sigh. "So you're getting married?"

I threw an annoyed expression at Razo. "I was planning to tell you myself, but—"

"Quinn told me."

Of course it was Quinn. I glared at him. He had adopted a self-righteous expression that I would have loved to slap right off his face. "She has the right to know."

"It wasn't your place to tell her, you—" Kazan had let slip an excellent swear word the previous day that I was eager to try out, but the disheartened expression on Aldra's face made me hold my tongue.

Quinn waggled his finger annoyingly at me. "Ah, ah, ah, you need to be a lady. Don't you have tea parties to attend now?" He turned smugly to Aldra. "They're putting her in formal etiquette and protocol classes for the next few weeks"

The faintest trace of a smile flickered in Aldra's eyes. "Who would've thought that being an assassin would finally help you embrace your womanhood? I'm so glad."

Both Razo and Quinn snickered behind Aldra's back. I threw a venomous glare their way.

"Recognizing her femininity and getting married all at once, what a glorious occasion!" It was impossible for Razo to keep his face straight. "She'll be a real princess now."

"Not quite the type of husband I would have picked for you," Aldra commented, trying valiantly to joke even though her melancholy hovered in the room like a dark cloud. After a slight pause, she added a little too hopefully, "Can anyone else take your place?"

I shook my head. "Razo tried, though."

That did elicit a quiet laugh.

Razo smirked. "I guess Quinn was the only one too cowardly to volunteer."

Quinn bristled. "I simply knew it would be a fruitless endeavor to do so. No corset could fool even the densest of fools into thinking that either of us was a woman."

"It's a joke, Quinn. Lighten up. You should've been a bookkeeper with your personality."

Aldra ruffled Quinn's hair in a motherly way. "I suppose if it had to be one of my three favorite people, Azora has the best chance of succeeding." She turned to me. "You'll write, won't you?"

"As often as I can. I'm sure with being a princess I will have ample paper and ink, and I won't spare any expense to Pyren's crown to send you all sorts of letters and packages. I would invite you to my wedding, but under the circumstances..."

Aldra smiled and shook her head. "I'll stay here. But...if you sent me your dress afterward, I'd like that." Aldra

reached out to squeeze my hand. "I want to see what...what my daughter looked like on her wedding day."

"I'll send you everything," I promised.

"And I'll write and give you every single detail, no matter how absurd," Razo put in. "It will be like you were standing right next to her." He wrapped his massive arms around both Aldra and me until we squeaked in protest.

"Assuming she can even read your phoenix-scratch handwriting," Quinn grumbled.

"Oh, come here, you. Group hug time!" Razo pulled him into the embrace so Quinn's nose was smashed into Razo's forest of an armpit.

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