

The Trine Prophecy

—The Book of Kinderra

“And it shall come to pass that Kinderra will cry out in such agony as to deafen even her birth. The chosen shall be like a ship without a keel. Aspect will appear where there was none. Light will be dark; dark will be light. One will come forth, thrice-cursed, to destroy. One will come forth, thrice-blessed, to rebuild. End and beginning in one, in both. Only hope shall remain.”

CHAPTER 1

“My visions have disheartened me once again.”

—The Codex of Jasal the Great

Mirana Pinal curled her fingers around the hilt of a long knife, the blade an extension of her hand, the gnawing ache of hunger chewing her stomach. She had let one of the animals go and stayed on the trail of the other. He was dark, smaller but still of good size. She had missed him twice. She didn't know why she felt it was a “he”. It could be a female. It didn't matter. Her prey would not escape her again.

His mind held fear. She advanced, making less sound than the evening breeze through the tall grass of Sün-Kasal province.

She slipped through the dense growth closer to her quarry and licked dry lips as she moved. The Healing Aspect gave her impressions of hunger and exhaustion. She pulled her lips tightly against her teeth in a sneer. That made two of them.

She was close now, almost upon him. In a single, fluid movement, she rose to her feet, parted the grass, cocked her arm to thrust the long knife—and froze.

The newborn roebuck fawn shivered in the grass as its mother stood still in much the same stance as Mirana herself. The doe had tried to lead her away from the fawn. Believing she and her offspring were safe, the doe had circled back.

Trine Tetric Garis came up behind her in silence. ... *Go on ... Take it down* ... he called to her mind.

If she killed the mother, the fawn would die for certain. If she killed the fawn, well, that wasn't about to happen. He was just hours old, still wet in places, his umbilical cord still drying.

She let her hand fall and sheathed the blade in a scabbard strapped to her waist. She couldn't take a life that had scarcely begun.

"Hah!" Mirana clapped her hands. The roe deer and the fawn darted away through the parched sward.

The Trine's long shadow stretched to an even more imposing length by the setting sun. "Why didn't you kill it?"

He didn't need to reveal the displeasure held in his mind; his voice told her all she needed to know.

"I just couldn't."

He balled his large hands into large fists and set them on his hips. "We haven't had a decent meal in sevendays, and you couldn't take down a simple deer?"

Her stomach chose that moment to growl. Loudly. She winced in embarrassment. "I, well, that is, maybe there are some roots we could eat instead." She pretended to search the ground around them for dinner, as that was far easier than meeting her mentor's midnight-black eyes.

"Mirana."

She peered up at him. "He was just a baby."

His mouth flattened into a frown, dark eyes growing darker with exasperation and maybe genuine anger. Remarkably like her father's expression when she would snipe at his corrections, actually. Oh, Aspects Above. She was in for it now. "You cannot hunt an Aspect-forsaken deer to keep from starving?"

She opened her mouth to say something in her defense, but any excuses would be just that. She hung her head. She had never killed

anything before. Not before Two Rivers Ford. His rebuke stung more than he probably meant it to.

A hot wind drove the Sixthmonth summer heat in her face. Weather this warm was not unusual in the lowlands, but she had never experienced it before. She had never been this far south, this far anywhere.

She had never done any of the things she had in the past sevendays.

She had chosen an amulet when she swore she never would. She had killed Ken'nar, the ancient enemy of her Fal'kin people, through powers she had spent sixteen summers trying to contain. She had shattered Teague Beltran's heart.

"I will try harder tomorrow. I promise." She more than promised. She would never stop trying to be the Fal'kin she wanted to be, one who bonded with a crystal amulet and used the innate Aspect gifts of the Light from Within. Not the enraged monster she feared destiny might have her become.

A corner of the Trine's mouth twitched, pulling at his dark beard. "How do you propose we bring peace to Kinderra on empty stomachs?"

Had Lord Garis just laughed? Or at least shown a hint of something more light-hearted than his usual morose expression?

Mirana eased some of the tension from her shoulders. "Let me try again. Maybe I can find a prairie grouse or ladahen? Or at least dinner that doesn't have such big, adorable, brown eyes?" She pointed to her face.

"You most definitely will try again, and you will keep hunting until you succeed without help." He lifted his head toward the horizon. "But tomorrow. The sun has nearly set. Come."

They tramped back through the grass to where they had left their horses and meager supplies.

Mirana's warhorse nickered at her approach. "Ashtar," she said, patting his coppery neck, "you have a feast surrounding you for hundreds of miles. It might even be enough for you, too." To say the chestnut destrier was large was a laughable understatement. Standing seventeen hands, he was as fierce a fighter as any Fal'kin defender and a friend as close as family.

Ashtar snorted again and butted her with a velvet nose. She chuckled and kissed his white face.

She hefted the saddle off the horse's back. "We can probably squeeze one more meal out of our waybread. If we get an early start, we should be in Kasan before nightfall tomorrow, won't we?"

"We are not going to Kasan," Lord Garis replied as he unpacked his horse.

She whirled around to stare at the Trine. "But we are almost out of food."

"Are we?" He spread his arms wide. "Did you not say we have a feast surrounding us for miles?"

"I meant *grass*. For *him*." She jabbed a thumb behind her at Ashtar.

"And yet we could be roasting not one but two deer at this moment."

Her shoulders fell with her frustrated sigh. "*Èo comprende, tuda ben?* I messed up. *My lord*." She sketched a curt bow.

He did not reply. His glare was a weapon all its own. ... *The humor of your insolence lasts only so long ...*

She rubbed her forehead at the strength of his call. "I am sorry. Truly."

He now exhaled himself and stepped closer, his expression softening. Thankfully. "Think. Why am I pushing you to hunt?"

"So I can survive on my own."

"*Ai*." He smiled down at her. "And maybe get us a meal or two."

"I wanted to get some apples. They'll last us a long time on the road. That's why I wanted to go to Kasan." She set down her saddlebags. "But I suppose even if we did travel there, it wouldn't do us any good. I don't have any coins for apples or anything else."

"You do not need coins. Any farmer is obligated to tithe to us. Aspected whatever we need."

She scowled. "I'm from Kin-Deren province, so I guess I would expect a small tithe there, but Sün-Kasal needn't favor us."

"You now claim Dar-Azûl as your province. But that matters little. You are a Trine. All of Kinderra should tithe to you, as you were born to serve all of Kinderra."

She shrugged. “Tithing. I’ve never liked that custom. It seems wrong somehow. *Brepaithe* Toban was fair with his tithe requests from Kin-Deren’s Unaspected, but I’ve heard other primes have not run their halls quite so frugally.” Or honestly.

“What is wrong is the slaughter that happened at the ford, something the Unaspected will never have to face. I think our sacrifice is worth a few apples,” the Trine snarled. She blinked in surprise at his sudden emotion. He sighed and shook his head, dismissing his aggravation. At least his anger had not been directed toward her this time. “I want to stay away from cities and towns as much as possible. There would be too many questions to answer by our presence.”

She bit her bottom lip. “About the ford?”

“*Ai*,” he replied, “but also about you.”

She sat heavily on the ground and stroked Ashtar’s fetlock. “My horse was so brave during the battle at the ford. He loves apples. As much as I do.” She peered up at the Trine with a hopeful smile.

His mouth sank into the familiar flat line at her attempt to persuade him once more. He wore the expression when he was displeased. Which seemed to be all the time.

He leaned his head to one side, stretching his neck muscles. “Mirana, think about this. We would be seen together in the markets. That information would be passed immediately to Sahn Klai, Sün-Kasal’s prime. We would have to meet with him. He would ask why you are with me instead of your mother, the prime of Kin-Deren province. To avoid explaining the true purpose behind our journey, I would have to tell them you are now attached to my province as my *scholaira* to avoid your mother’s pronouncement elevating *scholaire’e* far too young to be Fal’kin. Need I continue?”

Prime Klai would no doubt then question why she, and her mother, frankly, would shirk her duty as an Aspected. Then her crime of publicly refusing to choose an amulet, as was required by Aspected, would be known across this land—if it wasn’t already. A crime carrying the capital sentence of provincial expulsion.

She shook her head. “No, sir.”

Lord Garis gave her a brusque nod and returned to unpacking his mount.

Technically, his stallion was a “he” as well, but the animal seemed to have little in the way of personality as Ashtar did. Except, of course, when she drew too close. Then he had all the gracious demeanor of a mountain leopard whose fur had caught on fire.

“I’ll bet your horse acted bravely during the battle, too. Why have you never given him a name?”

The Trine paused in his tasks and looked at his steed with something like pride. “He needs no name. But, *ai*, he is brave.”

The pure black stallion stood placidly as he removed the last of its gear. The steed all but growled at her if she came anywhere near him. Aspects Above help any Ken’nar.

She knelt on the bedding and rummaged through a saddlebag to find something—anything—to eat. “It’s all so senseless.”

“What is?” He, too, searched his bags.

“This war.” She scraped together a few crumbs and some lint from the bottom of the satchel. She frowned and tossed them on the ground. “How can the Ken’nar possibly think their Power from Without is right? Stealing life forces...” She shuddered.

He handed her an entire piece of waybread. “And yet, the Light from Within kills as surely as the Power from Without.”

She took the wafer but avoided his gaze. It was a fact she knew only too well.

All the bloodshed. Thousands of summers of it. A choice to give of oneself. Or to take from others. It had been that way for three thousand summers, giving rise to an endless conflict with untold numbers of dead. All over a choice.

If Lord Garis hadn’t found a way to stop the Ken’nar after decades of fighting them, it was ridiculous to think that she—all of five feet tall and sixteen summers of dubious wisdom—would ever have a chance.

By all the Light Above, she would try, though. Had she not stopped the Ken’nar at Two Rivers Ford, most of Kin-Deren province’s Fal’kin would have perished. It had been a desperate, even foolhardy, act that had

nearly killed her, but she had to do something. They were her people, her friends. Her father and mother.

She gritted her teeth so tightly it made her jaw ache.

Unlike her father, Tetric Garis had not betrayed her.

Her father, and her mother, too, had said they did not tell her she possessed the Trine Aspects because they meant to save her life.

The mother deer. She had left her fawn and stood immobile, believing she protected it with her silence. *Ai*, Mirana was still alive, but her mother and her father stood immobile in their silence and had consigned her to summers of self-inflicted torture as she tried to come to terms with possessing three accursed Aspected blessings.

Unlike her parents, Tetric Garis had stayed the knife at her throat and had given her hope that a different future, a different destiny might be possible.

“We must be careful with the fire tonight.” Lord Garis reached over and plucked a few grass blades. He toyed with them a moment before letting them fall. They didn’t break apart, but they remained bent.

Mirana lifted her gaze skyward. Gabriel, the first of the evening’s stars, winked above in the clear heavens. “We had all our rain in the spring. We could use some now.”

“*Ai*.” He nodded. “It will be a long summer.” He sat back against his saddle. “I will keep watch tonight.”

“You’ve led us all day and probably will for the rest of our journey. Let me at least take watch for a few hours. Until midnight. Please, Lord Garis.” She smiled at him. “It might make up for my utter lack of hunting skills.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “I believe your hunting issue is more a bleeding heart than lack of skill, but truth be told, I am tired.”

“And hungry. I have the Healing Aspect, too, you know.” She continued to smile as she broke the waybread he had given her in half and handed him one piece. “Here. You haven’t eaten all day. Even a Trine can sacrifice only so much.”

He took a bite and rested his hand on a bent knee. “This journey we are on,” he gestured to the grasslands around them with the wafer, “I think it should afford us some informality.”

“My lord?”

“Don’t call me by a title. We are trying to save the world we know from ripping herself apart. I think that means we can be a bit more familiar.”

She was surprised, even uncomfortable with the idea. The great Trine Tetric Garis was a living legend, enigmatic, larger than life, quite literally in many respects.

“All right. If you insist. Tetric.”

His given name, speaking it, sounded strange yet somehow empowering. How many others had he invited to use it? Everyone knew Trine Tetric Garis, but how many did he count as friends?

He ate the last of his waybread and gathered some tinder. Cupping his hands over his amulet, he released a thin beam of light at the kindling. He had just thrown more grass on the fire when he tensed. His sudden movement made Mirana jump.

Her hand flew to the hilt of a long knife. “What is it?”

... *Silence!* ... He looked down over his shoulder. She didn’t move a muscle, not even to breathe. A thin stiletto appeared in his hand. She hadn’t seen him draw it. She hadn’t even seen the knife on him.

With a blindingly fast move, he struck something beside him. A three-foot-long snake on the end of the stiletto made one last attempt to coil then hung limply from the tip.

She gave an explosive sigh of relief. “*Gratas Aspecta’e Alta!* I don’t know what I would have done if it had bitten and poisoned you. I don’t know how to heal someone of snake venom.”

“Behold. The feast around us.” He tossed the dead snake into the fire.

She eyed the roasting snake, her stomach curdling now with revulsion. “I am not eating that.”

“*Ai.* You will.” He drew his long sword and gently repositioned the blackening serpent in the flames.

She tried to swallow, but her throat wouldn't move. "Can I at least wait until it's cooked?"

He kept the snake in the fire until it blackened and the skin split. He cut off a piece and handed it to her. "Now, eat."

She eyed the reptile morsel as if it were still alive. Closing her eyes, she shoved it in her mouth and chewed. After a moment, she opened her eyes again and smiled. "It tastes like chicken." She wolfed down half of the snake in less time than it took to cook it. "Strange chicken, but chicken."

They finished their meal under a blanket of stars.

Mirana picked at an errant scale stuck in her teeth. "Who would have thought the skin and scales would have prevented the meat inside from burning to ash?" She flicked the reptile flake into the brush.

"All of Kinderra was given to us for our benefit," Tetric said as he rubbed some soil between his palms. "Even snakes have their place."

She glanced at the stains on her saddle blanket from where she had wiped her hands. The dusty soil would have absorbed some of the grease. Why hadn't she thought about that first?

"Would that the Aspects Above had given us a spring lamb to roast instead, but your point is well taken, my lor—Tetric."

As she rearranged the saddle blanket on her bedroll, she scratched herself on the brittle grass. She hissed and sucked at the cut. As tired as she was from the day's long, hot ride, she was not ready to sleep. The days of endless riding had strengthened her muscles. Her limbs, however, felt sapped without the amulet she had briefly held, her chest hollow, less a physical ache than a vacancy in her being. Losing Teague had felt the same way. She touched the mica pendant under her shirt.

She wished Teague were here with some of his mother's numbweed to put on her scratch. Sometimes she deliberately didn't take away her discomfort but let him rub salve on her cuts or bruises anyway. His touch alone would take away the pain, only to ignite a burning elsewhere in her body.

Her throat tightened. Again, she touched the pendant, lying warm against her skin.

Tetric frowned and paused in his own bed-making. His eyes drifting to her hand. “I told you to let him go.”

“I have.”

“No. You have not. Far from it.” He shook his head sadly and sighed. “He will never, ever understand you or your power. Who and what you have been called to be. A union with you will only cause him pain. Is that what you want?”

She sat up, her eyes going wide in horror. “No. Never.” She shook her head violently. “Why do you think I let him go?”

“Then you did him a kindness.”

Teague’s pendant remained in her hand. It had been warped and scorched from the amulet fire she’d leveraged at the ford. The promise of the love he held for her and only her had fallen into the twin river chasms along with the ford bridges, too. Destruction she had created.

Her hand fell away from the pendant. “Then why does it still hurt so much?”

“It shouldn’t.”

She scowled at the Trine’s answer.

“Did he know about your vision of Jasal’s Keep?”

She nodded.

“I thought as much.” He frowned again. “Did he believe it?”

She looked back down at the pendant. “No. He never believed a word of it.”

“I am afraid it is a solitary road we must travel.”

“But I thought you meant—” She sighed and rubbed her eyes. She didn’t want to think about this anymore. She didn’t want to think about anything anymore.

Mirana caught the flash of a memory from her mentor. A young woman with flaming-red hair and arresting green eyes. She didn’t have time to sense any emotions behind it. The image was gone as quickly as it came as he closed his mind.

“Who was that?”

“No one.” He unfurled his bedroll with a snap, his back to her.

“Did you love her? Did you have to let her go, too?”

He whirled around. ... *I said it was no one!* ...

She winced at the force of his call. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

He took a breath and shook his head to dismiss her apology. "It was a long time ago. Let us leave it at that."

She pulled Teague's pendant over her head and tucked it in her belt pouch. The whole reason why she had left Teague behind was for his safety. Where would the quest for the missing pieces to the keep lead her? Into danger, probably. But what if it led nowhere? That terrified her as much as her vision of white light.

"What if it's not there?" she whispered. She wasn't certain if she was merely thinking aloud or if she genuinely wanted an answer.

He roused. "What if what's not there?"

"The portion of the keep treatise in Tash-Hamar province. In Rhadaz. That's where we're going, after all. What if, well, there's nothing to find?"

"Are you saying this out of concern that the verses no longer exist? Or your ability to find it?"

She offered him a faint smile. "Both."

He studied her from across the fire. "Jasal meant for us to discover the secrets of his keep. Have faith. We will see this through." He made a curt nod and lifted his cowl over his head. She caught a tendril of emotion from him, not necessarily encouragement, but more like determination. Had he said that for her benefit or his own? Either way, it helped.

Another question sprang up in her mind as she looked up at the stars, one far less fraught with self-doubt.

... *The Archer will be overhead at midnight* ... he called and chuckled, sending a picture of stars arrayed in a bow-like curve.

She smiled. ... *Gratas Oë, Tetric* ...

The simple expression failed utterly to convey her gratitude for his knowledge of southern constellations, hunting skills, and so very much more.