

CHAPTER 1

There would only be one chance. If she failed tonight and got caught, the past beatings her father had given her would be light compared to what he'd do to her. Trinia shivered as she stuffed the rest of her belongings into her pack and tied the straps. *It'll work*, she told herself, taking a calming breath. *It'll work*.

Shouldering her pack, she threw her midnight blue cloak over her shoulders, pinning it in place with a silver broach in the shape of a wolf—the symbol of Vyrni, goddess of protection. Next, she moved to the mirror and quickly braided her silver strands to keep them out of the way. She leaned on the small table, gripping the sides until her knuckles turned white. *This is madness, sheer madness*. Looking at her reflection, she wondered if the girl looking back at her had what it took to stop a man as powerful as her father?

She sighed. “I’ve got to try. Prophecy be damned!”

Grabbing her daggers, she slid them into the sheaths on her belt and pulled up her hood. Opening the door, she peered into the dark hallway lit by sparse torchlight. Not a soul in sight. Creeping out of her room, Trinia moved swiftly down the hall toward her first stop before she headed out into the

deepening night. She took a left, staying against the walls as best she could, all senses alert.

Coming to an opening in the wall, she checked around the corner to see the shrine empty. Rushing over to the altar, she kneeled before it. "I'm sorry, Vyrni. I have no offering," she whispered. "Please forgive this insult and protect me as I go out."

Trinia moved back to the hall and continued through the endless maze of passageways until at last she reached the Grand Stair, the only way in or out the palace proper. She looked up, seeing the endless night sky with the countless stars above her and relishing in its beauty. Then she took the steps down two at a time.

When she reached the bottom, she turned and looked back at the mouth of the palace carved into the side of the mountain, sitting like an open maw. Maybe one day it would be restored to its former glory and receive dignitaries like it had during the Old Empire. Just not at the cost of her people's lives.

She shook her head, making her way down toward the southern gate, the only real obstacle standing between her and her goal of reaching Canamor to speak with their king about fighting her father. Surely they would want to save their people from certain destruction?

Voices ahead drew her out of her thoughts, and she dove behind an ox cart, wrapping her cloak about her and holding her breath. Two guards appeared, talking casually as they patrolled the Upper Quarter. When they were far enough away, she crept from her hiding place and picked up her pace.

As she moved through the Upper Quarter, she wondered what Rionnagan, or the City of Snow and Stars as it was once called, would have looked like in all its glory. Precious few

paintings or tapestries were left after the thousand years since the fall of the Old Empire and they were severely damaged, not unlike the real thing. After some unnamed god had sent a devastating winter upon the whole of the Empire, followed by flooding and other disasters, it had collapsed in the span of two hundred years.

While she wanted to see her home restored, she wouldn't do it at the cost of her people, unlike her father. Trinia grimaced at the thought of him. *Focus on the task at hand. We'll take care of him later.*

The Mid-Quarter came and went with only the decline in housing to show that she was nearing the Lower Quarter. Homes were cobbled together, and the roofs were a combination of stout moss and thatching while others were a patchwork of stones chiseled and shaped from the ruins. Typically, the area would bustle with the market and traders from the other Airgíd clans, though with the approach of winter, trade was slowing down.

Moving to the edge of Market Square, Trinia waited in the shadows and took everything in: Padrig's hammer was ringing through the night as he worked in the back of his smithy; Roparzh's honey stall outside her shop sat empty and dark; Niren standing watch by the gate.

She did a double take. *Hells, it is Niren!* The last thing she needed was him asking her questions. He could always tell when she was lying. Though, that was why he was one of her closest friends. *How in the name of Madol am I going to get past him? Are there more guards in the barracks?* She strained her ears but couldn't hear anything over Niren's soft singing.

Maybe if she got his attention somehow, she could talk to him and convince him to help her... No, that would only put him at risk. Looking around, Trinia spotted a bucket a couple

of feet away. *That will have to do.* Picking it up, she crouched down and gave a low whistle, one he would recognize as hers.

Niren looked up and glanced around a moment before returning the call. Letting out another whistle, Trinia readied herself as his gaze turned to her hiding spot and he started walking toward her, as if he were out on a stroll. He sat down on the edge of a barrel, back turned to her, picking at his nails. “What on earth are you doing here?” he whispered.

Trinia brought the bucket down on his head hard. “I’m so sorry,” she replied, dragging him back behind the barrels. Once she’d set him in place, she unsheathed his sword and put it in his hand. Hopefully, it would look like he was attacked. She kneeled and gave him a kiss. “You wouldn’t understand, but I hope you don’t hold this against me,” she murmured.

She crossed the square and pressed her back against the wall, listening a moment for any signs of alarm. All was silent. Taking a few breaths to calm her nerves, Trinia launched herself from the wall and tore through the gates past the lit braziers toward the outer stables where they kept livestock and horses housed for the night. Upon reaching it, she glanced over her shoulder to see if anyone had noticed her. She saw no one. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Carefully, she opened the doors and made her way down the rows of stalls, using the light of the braziers outside the gate, until she found a horse staring at her from behind its gate. It was a beautiful russet brown and had a keen look in its eyes. Trinia held out her hand, letting the animal get familiar with her scent before stepping closer. She smiled, petting the side of its face. “Will you be the one to help me? Hmm?”

A horn sounded in a long, mourning wail that made her heart skip a beat. Not wasting a second, she flipped open the latch to the gate, grabbed the horse’s mane, and launched

herself onto its back, giving it a swift kick to the ribs. She held on as the horse reared and took off toward the open door. Another horn blasted, closer now. “Show me your speed!” she yelled to the horse.

Bursting through the door, she caught sight of men pouring from the gate a dozen yards away, all pointing and shouting at her to stop while launching a volley of arrows. All missed but one, sinking into her pack under her cloak. Trinia glanced back, seeing the fletching. *Hells, that was close!*

The horse stumbled a moment over the rough terrain, almost throwing her off. She squeezed with her knees to steady herself and grabbed the mane a little tighter. “Watch where you’re going!”

Trinia counted off the distance between her and the Forest of Nex. She would try to cut through it and circle back around to the Old Road, which would take her to her goal. If she didn’t stray into the heart of the forest, she shouldn’t have any issues with the creatures rumored to lurk there.

Behind her, she could hear a low rumbling in the distance, which she suspected were the guards she had seen at the gate. With only a few miles to the edge of the forest, she would easily make it with enough time to disappear into the dense brush and escape.

She stole another glance at the star-studded sky as the moon peeked over the eastern mountains, and a small smile parted her lips. It never failed to take her breath away. By the milky light, she could see the dark outline of the forest ahead.

An arrow flew past her head, burying itself in the ground while another flew over her and landed a dozen feet away. Casting a look over her shoulder, she could see ten riders gaining on her. *Figures, I picked the slowest horse!* she thought, giving the animal another kick in the ribs.

She closed the distance between her and the tree line, preparing to dodge between them when the horse came to a dead stop, throwing her over its head. She landed on her back, knocking the wind out of her, and she gasped for breath as she rolled over to let the air fill them again. “Stupid horse,” she growled, slowly getting to her feet. She tried to grab it, but it bolted, running parallel to the trees and leaving her on her own.

The thundering grew louder and Trinia saw one rider ahead of the rest, sitting tall and lacking the long silver hair of their people. Her heart froze. *Sweet Vyrni! He came for me himself!*

Bounding into the forest, she ran blindly through the underbrush. Her lungs burned, and her legs ached as she raced away from the one thing she feared most—her father. Even the surrounding trees seemed to claw at her and slow her down, catching her clothes, scratching her skin, and tangling her hair. Everything seemed to be against her. It was as if the forest wanted him to catch her, beat her, torture her.

Panic rose and her palms itched as she ran, her heart racing and cold sweat dripping down her neck. One option was still left to her—one horrible option. As low branches whipped past her in the dark, Trinia flicked her left hand out, feeling the flow of energy as her flesh separated from her in the blink of an eye and sent a perfect duplicate running the opposite direction into the woods.

Ducking behind a tree, Trinia doubled over as guilt and shame pierced through her. She ran her hands over her hair while tears streamed down her face, her breath coming in shallow gasps. *Gods above, I sent it to its death!*

The woods rang with shouts, one she could recognize as her father; it was so much colder, so much crueler. They grew

until a scream pierced the night, one that sounded so much like her own. Trinia bit her fist as the screams echoed around her, paralyzing her and taking her back to her most recent beating a fortnight ago. She screamed in her mind and covered her eyes, praying to each of ten gods of her people to end it.

Then it did end. Silence stretched out, muting all other sounds around her. She held her breath, afraid that the slightest movement would bring him down upon her.

“You die when I say you die!” roared a voice. Her father.

Trinia jumped up and rushed headlong into the forest on shaking legs as her father raged behind her. She had to get away. She had to find help. Only then would she be able to repay him for the wounds he’d given her, both seen and unseen.