

The Trine Prophecy

“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.”

—The Book of Kinderra

CHAPTER 1

“Great need and greater love can beget miracles.”

—The Codex of Jasal the Great

“If I don’t understand my ciphers, I won’t get to be a seer. They’ll never let me choose an amulet,” Taddie whimpered. His breaths turned to little puffs of steam in the chill air of the stable.

Mirana Pinal bit her bottom lip and furrowed her brows in amused concern at the little boy’s predicament. “You were born a seer. Nothing and no one can take away the gift the Aspects Above gave you.”

She knew that all too well.

She scooted across the stable’s hay-strewn floor to sit closer to him and wiped the tears from his cheeks. “It’s not the end of the world. It’s just a cipher problem.”

“If I can’t understand my numbers,” he sniffed back more tears, “how will I understand my seer’s visions when I’m older?”

Mirana waved her hand, sending a small current of intent to the lamps with the gesture. They flared to life, dispelling some shadows and creating others as evening descended outside of the stable.

“Taddie, you’re only six summers old. I think you have some time to learn your numbers. You saw Falantir in shambles just like me. Just like the rest of the seers.”

Taddie wiped his nose with a sleeve. “*Ai*, but you were the only one who saw it was the Ken’nar.”

He was right. Her interpretation of that vision had led to the order extending her father’s tour of duty. And may have sent him to his death.

She tensed, her own throat tight with emotion she could not let come. No. She would know if he died.

The boy blinked, his tears momentarily forgotten. “Did I say something wrong?”

Ai. “No, of course not. I just—never mind.”

He lowered his watery sapphire-blue gaze. “I’m stupid.”

“You are not stupid. Just because you don’t understand something, doesn’t make you stupid. If anyone is failing here, it’s me. I’m not doing a good job explaining things to you.”

Taddie played with a piece of straw. “You never fail at anything.”

He could not be more wrong.

Mirana laughed anyway. Maybe he would think she thought his comment humorous.

“My *maithe* has us older *scholaire’e* teaching you younger ones to help us both learn our lessons. So, like it or not, we’re in this together. Let’s try something different.”

She searched the monstrous stable for something that would help the little boy learn the simple sum. The horse paddocks made up one quarter-mile-long arm of the massive, multi-storied square of the learning hall, all guarded by the imposing watchtower, Jasal’s Keep. The three aisles of paddocks housed hundreds of warhorses for Kin-Deren province’s army. Despite the wet snow falling outside, the bodies and breath of the horses made the stable nearly comfortable. And Taddie loved horses.

Horses. Horses running. Fast. Fleeing.

“*Scholaira Miri?*”

Mirana pushed back the particular nudge the Seeing Aspect made when it wished to antagonize her. She rubbed her eyes. Horses charged all the time. It was nothing.

She rose to her feet, brushing at the straw clinging to her heavy cotton leggings. “Come with me.” The boy followed her to the first paddock of one of the long stable aisles. “All right. Let’s try it again, except we’re going to use the horse stalls this time. Four plus six.”

Ten. It was important. The most important number there could be.

The probing sense of an impending vision prodded her brain. Ten? What the heck was ten? And why was it so important?

Taddie cocked his head and scowled. “Are you all right?”

She took a quick breath, pushing back her irritation. She didn’t want to see a vision. They were seldom good ones. “I’m fine.”

He nodded, dragging the heel of a hand over his nose and continuing through the riot of pale-yellow curls on his head.

Mirana frowned. “Ugh. And when we’re done, it’s off to the bathhouse with you.”

He shrugged.

She strode down the row of stalls, stopping at the fourth one. “I want you to tell me how many horses I need to pass to reach the answer.” She began to walk backward.

“Keep going.” He waved her on.

Horses whuffled and neighed as she passed. A gray palfrey stuck its nose out over the paddock gate and blew out a greeting.

“Not now, Bankin.” Mirana stroked the filly’s velvet muzzle. “We’re busy.”

Taddie laughed. “Go farther.” She continued past a few more stalls. “Stop. There.”

The paddock was empty. The crib belonged to Ashtar, her father’s warhorse. Her *paithe* hadn’t been home for most of the last Reckoning. Fourthmonth in the new Reckoning was only a sevenday away. He and his strike force had been sent to reconnoiter just what had befallen Falantir so far to the north. Because of the interpretation of her prescience. Her *paithe* was all right. Of course he was. He was the most skilled defender in Kinderra. Nothing could take him down.

Right?

“That’s ten,” the little seer boy piped.

Father. Her *paitbe*.

Ten. Ten beasts. All claws and fangs.

She shook her head to dispel the image. Had Taddie called it somehow? “Well done.”

“I wanna do another one.”

“All right.”

The stable boy fidgeted up and down on his toes, his face expectant.

“If this stall is ‘ten,’ show me the horse in the stall of ten minus seven. Only this time, don’t speak the name or point. I want you to call to my mind an image of the horse.”

Taddie thrust out his lip, this time in a thoughtful expression. The lip pulled back in when his mouth turned in a smile. He held her gaze intently with his own. An image of a magnificent stallion with a mahogany coat so dark it was nearly black popped up before her mind’s eye.

“Excellent! See? You’re ciphering—and calling—just like a real seer.”

The young seer boy squealed with joy and ran over to her, throwing his arms around her waist. She brushed a blond curl from his eyes. “I knew you could do it.”

He grinned, turning his bright little face absolutely cherubic. “*Gratas Oë, Mirana.*”

She returned his smile. “Don’t thank me. You’re the one who did all the work.”

She walked over to the stallion. The steed tossed its head and sputtered. “Always a testy one, aren’t you, Traga.”

The massive stable door groaned on its hinges, all but drowning out the groan of the one who opened it. They both lifted their heads to greet the visitor. Mirana’s smile grew. So did the sudden warmth that spread through her.

“*Ben dia*, or should I say ‘*Ben nōc.*’ That sleet out there is making this one miserable evening.” He shook the icy rain from his hair, the moisture making it look a darker shade of brown than it was.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s so bad.” She rushed over to him and took his hands, warming them in hers. “Teague, I’m so glad you’re home.” She pushed the hair out of his eyes, her smile not fading an inch. His grin matched hers, several freckles disappearing into the dimples of his smile. A giggle behind them reminded her they were not alone. People, presences, just about everything tended to fade into the background when she was with Teague. “Taddie, go help Herbsman Beltran with his horses.” She gave the stable boy a gentle push toward the mounts.

“Is that because you two want to go all mushy?” he asked as he took the horses’ reins.

“*Ai*,” Mirana replied, nodding. “Now, scoot.”

“Ew. I’m never having a girlfriend. Ever.” The little boy clicked his tongue and led the horses farther into the stable’s interior.

“I’m not an herbsman just yet,” Teague said, watching Taddie disappear among the seemingly endless rows of paddocks, “but we did manage to collect a good supply of willow bark and even some callas leaves that had sprung up early.”

She stepped closer to Teague. “I can’t believe you and your father stayed out an entire seven-day. What healing plants could you possibly find in this weather?”

“We would have stayed out longer.” He pulled his forest-green gaze away from her to stare at his boots. “My father’s Healing Aspect warned him we’ll be seeing a rise of gripe cases after this storm.”

Why was Teague sad? He’d done a good thing. Callas leaves were tiny and difficult to find. “But I’m certain it was your brilliant intellect that remembered callas plants grow at the base of willow trees.”

He laughed, however, he was anything but happy. “Brilliant intellect? I saved us with my brilliance from an epidemic of toothaches. Thank the Aspects Above.”

She lowered her head to meet his even lower gaze. “Have you ever suffered a toothache? I think finding the callas leaves is worthy of an herbsman.” When he lifted his head, she put a hand on his arm. “At least to me.”

She and Teague Beltran had been born within months of each other. And she cherished every single day of those nearly sixteen summers spent together.

He took her hand from his arm and held it. “How can I hate that pale color of snow on the ground so much when your silver eyes chase away any chill.”

Mirana raised an eyebrow. “Is that supposed to be romantic?”

He smiled. “*Ai*.”

“Try again.”

“It’s better than ‘your black hair makes even coal beautiful.’”

She squeezed her eyes shut in a wince. “Not only is that perfectly dreadful, it doesn’t even make sense.”

He leaned closer. “Maybe you’d prefer I did something else with my lips instead of using them to speak dreadful flattery, hmm?” He pulled her to him and covered her mouth with his.

“That’s much better,” she said through his kiss.

She reached up to cup his face. He said her eyes chased away his chill. Chill? What chill? She never felt cold in his arms.

Without lifting his lips from hers, he rushed her backward and into Ashtar’s empty stall—and tripped over the feed pail. They tumbled into the straw together, laughing.

“Somehow, I always imagined we’d be someplace more dung-free when you ravished me for the first time.” She hitched a thumb to the corner. Taddie had missed a spot.

His hazel eyes twinkled. “Ravish you? I’ve been nothing but a gentleman.”

She giggled. “*Ai*.” She kissed the faded freckles on his nose. “That’s been your problem all along.” She brushed his lips with hers.

“If this is the greeting I get from being gone just one sevenday, what would you do if I were gone ten?” He pulled her over to a cleaner corner of straw.

Ten.

The Seeing Aspect. Ten beasts. Grynwen. Twice the size of wolves. Black as midnight. Eyes as red as fresh blood. Long, pointed muzzles with uncounted long, pointed fangs. Carnivores charge out of the forest and leap upon a band of riders.

She stiffened. This time, there was no ignoring the vision as it forced itself before her mind’s eye.

“Mirana?”

Fangs shred flesh. Agony shreds nerves. The Healing Aspect. Bleeding, bleeding, away, away. Snow-white uniforms stained red with blood. Shrieks of pain, man, woman, beast.

“Miri, are you all right?”

Chill sleet falls, the same sleet, the same storm that’s outside now. Ice sizzles on the smoldering carcasses. The Defending Aspect. A burning in her chest, burning, burning. She must release it through an amulet. Amulets fire. Defenders. A man with silver-frosted black hair and silver eyes turns. Screams. Falls. The forest stills. Ice and wet snowflakes fall. Like here.

Like now.

“Father!”

Mirana sat up out of Teague’s arms, sucking in rapid gasps.

“Mirana! What happened? Did I do—? I would never make you—Miri?”

“What? No—he’s dying!” she said, breathless.

Teague shook his head in confusion. “Who?”

“My father. I have to reach him.” She sprang to her feet.

He sat back on his heels, looking up at her. “Isn’t he still in Kana-Akün? That’s more than a hundred leagues from here. I know your mind-calling ability is better than most, but that’s too far to reach anyone.”

“I know, but I’ve got to try.”

Teague stood. “We need to go to your mother with this.”

She shook her head. “There’s no time.” She curled her hands into fists and closed her eyes.

“Mirana.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “Your mother is prime of this province. You have to tell her.”

“Later. Right now, I have to warn my father or he’s going to die.”

She closed her eyes and reached out with her mind. Too many horses too close. She growled in frustration. Mirana tore from the stable and into wet snow falling in the gray twilight of the learning hall’s courtyard, Teague rushing behind her.

The learning hall complex housed hundreds of steeds and people, but in the courtyard at least, they weren’t right on top of her. And there simply wasn’t time to run out of Deren and leave the city behind for better isolation.

She sank to her knees on the icy cobblestones and centered herself again. She pushed her senses beyond the murmur of minds the way one would listen for a single voice in a crowd.

... Father ... Where are you? ... Answer me ...

She searched for his presence, his essence, a life force singing all he was within the grace of the Aspects Above. His life, his power, sang in her veins, as he and her mother gave her life. And if she didn’t find him in time, the echo of him that resided within her would be all that was left. She would never let that happen.

... Father ... Please ... Answer me ...

The jumble of innumerable minds and presences swirled around her as she searched for one and only one. So very impossible. She needed more focus, more power.

An amulet.

The thought bloomed in her mind, and she shrank from it. A bond with an amulet would be demanded of her when she saw eighteen summers, the duty expected of all those who possessed the gifts of the Aspects. The pure gemstone of an amulet would confer upon its bearer the ability to focus the Aspects so tightly, he or she could accomplish actions far beyond the limited control of innate power. As for her, she would accomplish amazing things. Terrible things.

Mirana let her Seeing Aspect spread through her. Fragments of visions, premonitions, prescience drifted as they would through her consciousness. She could only pray something of her father would rise above the tantalizing yet useless information her Seeing Aspect now showed her. Without an amulet, she was at the mercy of her powers, unable to control what—and who—she wanted to see. With an amulet, however, Kinderra would be at *her* mercy. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter. Not that. Anything but that. Unless there was no other way to save his life, she would not even touch an amulet. She still had time, two summers, before she faced such a decision. Her father still had time. Just.

Would he be in the forests of Kana-Akün, searching for the Ken'nar, or on the plains of that province's southern border, on his way home?

Neither her mother nor the other seers had made any mention of the information he and his strike force had discovered regarding Falantir, so he was not yet far enough away from the Ken'nar to safely contact them. He must still be in the forest.

Mirana couldn't create any serious manifestation of her powers without an amulet, but she didn't have to "see" with just one power. The Aspects Above never bestowed more than one gift, never gave more than just the Defending, Seeing, or Healing Aspect alone to an individual. She gritted her teeth. Unless they gave all three.

Gifts. What gifts? Having all three powers of the Aspects made her a Trine, one of the few ever to be born. But gifts? No. Her powers were a curse, or at least they might be someday. She had seen what would happen when she took up an amulet, the horror of destruction at her hands etched permanently in her mind. So she never told a soul what those so-called "gifts" made her, except for Teague. Sometimes, she regretted telling him. She wished she didn't know herself.

Images, hazy with uncertainty, flitted past her mind's eye. She pushed away Teague's warm energies and the cold of icy pellets of sleet hitting her skin, and awakened her Defending and Healing Aspects, letting them listen for her father with her Seeing Aspect.

The preternatural wariness of the Defending Aspect gave rise to an awareness of where life hummed. Tall, thick conifers rose from the ground hardened by winter. Icy, wet snow fell in spattering taps on tree trunks and coated naked black branches. Mice scurried down holes under barren shrubs. A rabbit paused its browsing through the prickly pine needles of the forest floor. A deer, no, a buck picked its way through the darkening woods. It stood motionless except for its ears. They swiveled, listening.

Mirana did not *see* the stag as much as she fathomed its essence. Unable to draw more of its presence to her without an amulet, she forced herself to remain patient and let the animal's being fill her. It was hungry, starving from the cruel northern winter. Her Healing Aspect told her of its want. A want desperate enough for two animals. Two *exact* animals.

Her hope swelled with the odd sensation. Perfection did not exist in nature. Two completely identical presences simply could not be. Every creation had flaws except for the Aspects Above themselves. She could attest to that.

Mirana's heart hammered in her chest as she thrust the thought away. The life of the buck mirrored itself, as did some rabbits, mice, a weasel. Duplicates of animal essences, exact in every way except reality, shimmered within the Aspects. They were too far, too faint for her to detect any more than a mere whisper. But they were there. Only a person with the powers of the Aspects could manifest such a duplication, a duplication with one purpose—to hide one's life energies—and none were better at performing the technique than those possessing the Defending Aspect. Defenders like her father.

She opened her mind further. If her father had cloaked his presence, she would never be able to call specifically to his mind. She could call to anyone in the vicinity of the false animals, but any Aspected mind would hear her telepathic communication.

She froze. What if the false presences weren't her father and his patrol group? What if they were Ken'nar cloaking themselves? And if she called out? Their enemies—the latest generation to engage the Fal'kin in three thousand summers of bloodshed—would know he was near.

The Healing Aspect within her sought to bolster her failing strength. Sweat turned to cloying ice on her skin in the bitter air of the courtyard. She opened herself deeper to the strange sensations of life in the distant forest. Hunger and wariness. And pain. Exhaustion. These people had fought, had been injured. So had the Ken'nar in sacking Falantir, but they now had a garrison, a place to rest, to eat, to heal. No, these Aspected who masked themselves had not paused to recover. That meant urgency. An urgency born of necessity. They had to flee Kana-Akün to warn Kin-Deren province, her home, that the Ken'nar were on the doorstep.

A sudden, bloodthirsty counterpoint slashed the soft harmony of animal presences within the Healing Aspect.

Grynwen.

Some said grynwen hunted with some primitive form of the Aspects. Even if the rumor were true, if her father and his strike force had cloaked themselves, the predators would sense mice, not people. They couldn't divine the duplications of essences, much less search for them, could they?

Before her mind's eye, the grynwen pack loped on long legs with primal confidence toward her father and his men and women, the drumming of their paws echoing through her Defending Aspect. Why? Their bellies were full. They had no young to defend, no blooded prey to bring down. These were not normal beasts. They hunted, she sensed, but not for food.

They wanted to kill. Because they *liked* it.

If the beasts hadn't tracked her father with ordinary senses, hadn't hunted him for food, they couldn't possibly know his location. Unless they were sent. Unless they had been given her father's position and sent to kill him.

To warn her father, she'd have to call wide, as if she were shouting across a crowded room. Any Aspected mind—Fal'kin or Ken'nar—in the local area would hear. The risk was worth her *paithe's* life.

The Seeing Aspect now joined with her Healing Aspect and Defending Aspect, merging of its own accord within her. It spoke of no future skein of time, no distant, uncertain knowing. It demanded her attention, present, real. Now.

... *Father!* ... *Gwynven!* ... *Ride!* ...

She poured as much of herself as she could into her mind's voice, into those words. The Defending Aspect burned within her chest at the resounding need trapped within the prison of her body.

The illusion of the second stag shattered. Shock and disbelief exploded in her mind. A presence surrounded her consciousness, full of awe, of love. A moment later, the presence disappeared as if it had never existed, replaced once more by a buck.

But it was enough.

The raw need to send a warning slipped away. Her chest tightened, her lungs could not draw air. The presences, even the Aspects, faded. Something hard, rough, and cold pressed against her cheek and temple.

"Mirana!" a voice cried.

Hands, strong yet gentle, lifted her and placed her right palm flat against a solid, warm surface. A thud, pulsing with life. A heartbeat. Teague's heartbeat. His life sang out to her Healing Aspect, reviving her.

"Mirana, wake up!" His confident fingers pressed her neck, her heartbeat throbbing against his touch. She looked up at him as she lay in his arms on the courtyard's frozen cobblestones, her breath now wreathing his face in the cold air.

He blew out a loud exhale. "Thank the Aspects Above." He stroked her cheek and blinked back the sleet. "Miri, you dropped like a stone. You didn't move. I couldn't wake you. What happened?"

The clatter of small boots on cobblestones interrupted her reply.

"What's wrong? What happened? I heard you both!" Taddie said as he approached.

Teague frowned. "I didn't even yell."

The stable boy shook his head. "No. Your minds."

Teague's frown deepened.

"I'm fine," Mirana said as Teague helped her to sit. "I just slipped on some ice, that's all." She caught her herbsman's eye. Calling to him would do no good. He couldn't hear her, and Taddie most certainly would. He made a slight movement with his head. Few would notice the simple gesture, but such responses had become a language all their own. She hated making Teague a party to her lie, but she couldn't very well have Taddie run to the hall seers, who would, in turn, run to her mother with the truth of what she had just done. Far too many questions would need to be answered if that happened.

"Now, get back inside before you catch a cold," Teague ordered. "You don't want me to use the nasal pot on you again to clear your stuffy nose, do you?"

Taddie's eyes grew as round as trenchers at the suggestion of such a horror. "Aspects, no!" He turned and pelted back inside the stable.

Once the boy was gone, Teague asked again, "What happened?"

Mirana looked up into his forest-colored eyes. "I found him."

The watchtower of Jasal's Keep loomed behind her beloved, dark and foreboding, its crenulated pinnacle crown lost to the icy precipitation and the gathering night.

Her father was safe. But for how long?