

## Chapter One

### *Lysienthe*

With a shiver of dread the Queen of Lothria, clenched her hands on top of the tower wall and turned her gaze to the east. Far in the distance—beyond steep, rocky cliffs, beyond the basin of a harbor below—sky and sea retained a dark oneness. The stillness in the air enveloped her like the cool mist clinging to her skin. Then slowly, an orange orb crowned the horizon. A swath of luminous red crystals danced on the water in its wake, and dawn spread like flaming tendrils across the receding darkness. Her breath caught in her throat as night surrendered its hold. The fine hairs on her arms prickled.

*Rivers will burn.*

“We have been undone.” Her voice rasped on a whisper. “All is as I saw in my dream.”

The old man at her side laid a warm hand on her shoulder. His silence told her he had seen the omen as well, and yet he remained soundless, watching.

She looked up at the black outline of her father’s face in the brightening morning. “You must take my daughter now and do as we discussed.”

“Lysienthe...!” The disbelief in his sighed reply sent a wave of panic coiling into her very center. “The king...?” His voice hoarse with urgency, he tightened his grip on her. “Did you not warn the king?”

Hot tears surprised her with the harshness of their sting and suddenness. Where cold fear had restrained her as if in shackles, a pang, deep and long, now rippled. “I could say nothing to convince him.” She turned away lest he see the weakness overcoming her in a debilitating wave. She shivered in her shift, hugging herself against the chill.

The memory of her husband’s breath on her neck yet clung on her senses, its warmth rustling the loosened hair from the braid that fell over her shoulder. His words, with their sincerity and single-minded resolve, resonated still on her aching heart. His smile, forever seared in her mind’s eye, moved her with its tinge of sadness mixed with resolve. The sweet taste of his kiss lingered on her lips.

“Wolthar says he has no reason to fear deception.” She labored for calm and closed her eyes, fighting back images in her mind. “He said his course is set. He said no price is too high for our chance at a lasting peace.”

“Oh, my dear child...” The old man gently turned her around and opened his arms to her, the trace of his expression reflecting the anguish in his voice. Pressing her cheek to his chest, Lysienthe succumbed to her father’s embrace. For a long, silent moment, he held her close, warming her with his dark cloak and his hands on her back. “Many years have come and gone,” he said in a quiet voice, “since you placed such faith in your gifts.” He took a step back, holding her at arms’ length, his large hands strong on her arms. “Why now?”

Fighting the panic that seized her, she shuddered. “It was fear for my children. Fear made the *denanth* strong in me...my gift...my curse...”

The light of the red sky cast his face in shadows. His jaw tensed, then relaxed, and his eyes shone black as fenstones. “It has always been strong in you, my daughter. True and wondrous gifts you have been blessed with and not a curse at all.”

Lysienthe breathed deeply of morning’s raw chill and, with its release, all fear and panic melted away, leaving her with a clarity of thought she had never known. She had foreseen all that had come to pass, and that which had yet to occur. But she had no power to prevent the events from unfolding; she had not been blessed with that particular gift.

“Then I beg you to trust me.” She raised her head and squared her shoulders. “Soon it will be light. Take Elthwen to my sister, by any means you see fit. I will distract her maid.”

“*To Morolath...?*” Her father backed away. “The girl will go kicking and screaming if she goes at all. I told you, if the plan was to see her to the fortress at Elyndrus, I would take her there.”

“The Imperon will expect that. I fear he and his lackeys will stop at nothing to prevent our alliance with Elyndrus.” She grasped his hand in her two. “See her safely to Morolath Island. That is all I ask. Protect my daughter...”

“You needn’t worry on that count. I would die before I let anything happen—”

“...*by any means you see fit.*”

He stared back, eyes glinting shards of light. “Of course you do not mean—”

“*By any means.*”

He drew in a slow breath and expelled it in a short burst. “I have taken an oath to the king, as have you.”

“Oaths, it seems, can be broken. You *must* awaken your crystal. As your queen.... No....” She hesitated, reluctant but compelled to continue. “As a *ghathwen*...I...I command you.”

“If you put it like that, I have no choice but to....” Her father fell silent, head bowed in contemplation. “The use of such power has been outlawed. Surely, you—”

She tugged on his hand. “I know what is at stake! You know it as well. As soon as Elthwen is safe at Morolath, you will go to Elyndrus and plead our cause to the old king. He will listen to you. You are Nochlan, Eryth Rhanthir, a man of great gifts.” She added softly, “At least you were...once.”

“That was long ago,” he said with a slow shake of his head. “Now I am known as Old Nochlan, the queen’s doddering father. I hardly remember how to....” He sighed and then spoke with resignation in his voice. “And what of you?” He found her eyes with his shadowed gaze.

“No harm will befall me.”

“But your place—”

“My place is here. My son needs—”

“Elthric is lost.” He flapped a hand in the air to punctuate his words. “His uncle has twisted him. You said so yourself.”

She paused and said in a measured voice, “Then I mean to untwist him.”

Nochlan, Eryth Rhanthir, raised his head and opened his mouth, as if he would protest. Instead he simply nodded with a forced sense of duty. “As you wish.” He set his jaw. “My duty is to abide by the old laws.”

He made a move to turn, but she could not bring herself to release his hand. “No, Father...I beg you, not as your queen, not as a priestess of Morolath, but as your daughter....” She ached to tell him of her fear. For herself and her husband, for her children. For everyone. The anguish deep inside cried out to him, of the hopelessness and the darkness to come, all she had foreseen. She held her breath at the hope of comfort in the words she longed to hear. But the moment of weakness dissipated before she could give voice to her thoughts.

His hand slipped from hers. For an instant, he lingered as if sensing the unspoken turmoil churning inside her, waiting for her to speak, and then he hurried off, leaving her utterly alone and shivering.

From high in her tower, Lysienthe gazed out over the brightening harbor where the rising fog revealed shrouded forms of longships moored along the quays. Dark forms scurried to and fro among them. “My dearest husband, my love, my lord,” she said softly, “may Nirmanath, Mother of All Things, watch over you.”