

CARA--- ALGORTHIA

Chapter One---

It was as it has always been in the land of Algorhia.

Cara rose and dressed.

Today was the beginning of the Twenty-Fourth Triumvirate.

Today she became the third ruler.

Today she became hated.

Today her life ended.

The long purple robe spilled around Cara's feet. She held her head high as she stepped towards the tall, paneled altar at the front of the sanctuary.

The High Priest, an ancient man, older than everyone else Cara knew, lifted a diadem from a velvet covered stand.

Rubies gleamed in the light of a thousand candles from where they hung from the band of the crown. They shone like giant drops of blood dangling around the High Priest's wrinkled hands.

Cara knelt upon the cold stone stair.

The High Priest lowered the diadem on to her head.

The dangling gems caressed her forehead while the golden band pressed her tightly braided hair against her skull.

On either side of her, the other two members of the Triumvirate knelt to receive their crowns.

At a signal from the High Priest, all three newly crowned rulers stood and faced the crowd gathered for the coronation.

For one long, agonizing moment, the crowd stood silently staring. Then a mighty roar of forced exultation burst from their mouths.

The other two rulers held their heads high and accepted the applause. They wore long black robes reminding Cara of bats waiting in the shadows. No emotion shown in their eyes, no fear, no joy, only a cold indifference.

Cara swallowed back the sob rising in her throat. No one could truly rejoice about today, least of all herself.

The High Priest had selected her, and his judgments were always right. Everyone said the High Priest never made a wrong choice. But why did this feel so wrong then?

She scanned the crowd, holding her head high and resisting the weight of the crown upon her head. Near the edge, Cara spotted her mother, tears running down her tired face as she vainly tried to wipe them away with an embroidered handkerchief.

Cara turned away, willing herself to forget how much she wished to be anywhere but here at this moment. This wasn't how she had dreamed of coming to power.

In the middle of the room, three rows from the front, she spotted her friend Julianna. A small, tired smile crossed her friend's face. It contained no joy. Cara knew her friend well enough to know that this was not Julianna's real smile.

A quick movement in the balcony overlooking the altar caught her gaze. As she peered closer, she saw something, or someone, move in the shadows that covered the back wall.

No one else had noticed the movement.

A man stepped to the middle of the balcony and threw back the hood of his cape.

Cara gulped and fought to keep her dignified posture. She knew that movement anywhere. It was her old friend Tavitan.

Why was he here? The Twenty-Third Triumvirate had exiled him two years ago under charge of rebellion. The punishment for the infringement of banishment was death. Why had he returned here of all places?

The High Priest began a long, droning oration about the duties of a member of the Triumvirate, but all Cara could concentrate on was Tav's tall, still figure.

He flung the edge of his cloak over his shoulder and pulled out a solid black object and pointed it towards the front of the room, towards the altar, towards her and the other members of the ruling three.

His mouth pressed into a thin line, and he positioned himself to face her.

Cara knew what he held. Tav held a pistol. She had never seen him without one.

She looked up, eyes wide.

He straightened his aim.

The crack of a gunshot exploded through the room.

She screamed.

The High Priest glowered at her as the assembly hall fell into a dead silence.

Tav ducked out a side door. Shadows filled the empty balcony again.

The bullet whistled past Cara's ear.

She screamed again, frozen in place, unable to move as it smashed into the altar.

Why had Tav shot at her? Why was he here? Didn't he know how dangerous it was?

And why, she wondered, why hadn't he hit her? Assuming she was his intended target. Two years ago, Tav had won the national shooting contest, and no one had even come close to his skill.

What he aimed for, he hit.

She turned towards the altar and gasped.

The front panel lay in a thousand shattered pieces. A man crouched in a small cavity within. His hands curled around a pistol, finger on the trigger. A patch of blood stained his left arm where Tav's bullet had pierced his skin.

He lept out, gun trained on Cara.

A guard dove for Cara, shoving her to the ground.

But as it passed, the bullet pierced her arm. A moment sooner and it would have hit her heart.

Cara screamed at the pain of the bullet's bite, her breath coming in short shallow bursts. The guard held his body protectively over her and two other guards joined him.

The man with the gun cursed as more guards wrestled the gun from his grip and bound him hand and foot.

Cara peered through a crack between two of the guards and watched the man through a blur of tears. The red leather sash across his chest, the silver chain around his neck and the bold red tattoo on his lower left arm marked him as who he was...

An assassin.

Would she ever feel safe again?