

Chapter 1

Glyndwr Highlands, Eibithar, year 880, Eilidh's Moon waning

An icy wind whipped across the road, screaming in the spokes of the cart like a demon from Bian's realm and tearing at Cresenne's wrap and clothes like a taloned hand. A heavy snow rode the gale, shards of ice stinging her cheeks and forcing her to shield her eyes.

The two great geldings pulling the cart plodded through the storm, their heads held low, the slow rhythm of their steps muffled by the thick snow blanketing the highlands. Occasionally the cart swayed, jostling Cresenne and ripping a gasp from her chest, but for the most part the snow had smoothed the lane, a small grace on a day more miserable than any she could remember.

Pain had settled at the base of her back, unlike any she had known before. It was both sharp and dull; she felt as if she had been impaled on the blunt end of a battle pike. Every movement seemed to make it worse, and more than once as the cart rocked, she had to fight to keep from being ill. She lay curled on her side -- the one position in which she could bear each new wave of agony -- cushioned by the merchant's cloth. She propped her head on the satchel in which she carried what few belongings she had taken with her from Kett: a change of clothes, a bound travel journal that had once belonged to her mother, a Sanbiri dagger, and the leather pouch that held the gold she had earned as a festival gleaner and chancellor in the Weaver's movement.

It was too cold to sleep, and even had it not been, the pain would have kept her awake. That, and her fear for the baby inside her.

“Are ye sure ye don’ want t’ stop, child?” the merchant called to her from his perch atop the cart, turning slightly so that she could see his red cheeks and squinting dark eyes. “There’s plenty o’ villages a’tween here an’ Glyndwr. One’s bound t’ have a midwife for ye. Maybe even a healer, one o’ yer kind.”

I’m a healer myself, she wanted to say. *If this pain could be healed, don’t you think I’d have done so by now?* “No,” she said, wincing with the effort. “It has to be Glyndwr.”

“If it’s a matter o’ gold, I can help ye.”

She would have smiled had she been able. The man had been kinder than she deserved, sharing his food willingly, though the twenty qinde she paid him for passage up the steppe and into Eibithar hardly covered the expense of half her meals. The gloves she wore were his; an extra pair, to be sure, but still, no Eandi had ever treated her so well.

“Thank you,” she said, trying to sound grateful. “But it’s not the gold. I just need to get to Glyndwr; I need to have my baby there.”

Even through the snow, she could see him frowning.

“I don’ know how much farther the beasts can go,” he said at last. “I’ll do my best for ye, but I won’ kill them jes’ so ye can get t’ Glyndwr.”

She nodded and the man faced forward again. Then she closed her eyes, her hands resting on her belly, and tried to feel the child, even as she weathered another surge of pain. She remembered hearing once that a baby’s movements decreased as the time of birth approached. It made sense. The larger it grew, the less room it had. Where once it had turned somersaults like a festival tumbler, it could now only wriggle and kick.

But with the onset of her labor, the baby’s movements had ceased altogether, and panic

had seized her heart.

“Just a bit longer, little one,” she whispered in the wind. “We’re in the highlands. It won’t be long now.”

Cresenne had known for some time now that she would have a daughter. At first she had assumed that such knowledge came to all gleaners who were with child. But speaking with the other Qirsi of Aneira’s Eastern Festival, she learned this wasn’t so. Yet this did nothing to diminish her certainty. There had been no dream, no vision to confirm the affinity she already felt for her child; she had wondered briefly if she might have been mistaken. She quickly dismissed the idea. It *was* a girl. The more she thought about it, the more confident she grew. Perhaps, she thought, her powers as a gleaner ran even deeper than she had known.

No sooner had she thought this, however, than she dismissed this notion as well. If her powers were so great, wouldn’t she have realized sooner that Grinsa, the child’s father, was a Weaver rather than a mere Revel gleaner? Wouldn’t she have realized that this man she was supposed to seduce so that she might turn him to the purposes of the Qirsi conspiracy, could not be used so easily? No, hers was an ordinary magic. Her powers had served her well over the years, and because she wielded three magics -- fire, in addition to healing and gleaning -- she had drawn the attention of the other Weaver, the one who led the Qirsi movement. But the power to know that her child would be a girl? That lay beyond her.

Instead, she was forced to consider a most remarkable possibility. What if she knew she would have a daughter because this child, begotten by her reluctant love for Grinsa jal Arriet, had communicated as much to her? What if the baby she carried already possessed enough magic to tell her so? She had never heard of such a thing. Most Qirsi did not begin to show evidence of

their powers until they approached Determining age. Then again, most Qirsi women never carried the child of a Weaver.

Cresenne hadn't told anyone that her baby would be a girl -- she hadn't even revealed it to the Weaver when he entered her dreams to give her orders or hurt her, though by defying him in this way, even over such a trifle, she invited death. It was her secret, hers and the baby's. Perhaps when she found Grinsa, she would tell him. Perhaps.

She would name the girl Bryntelle, after her mother. Even the child's father would not have any say in that. Bryntelle ja Grinsa. A strong name for a strong girl, who would grow to become a powerful woman, maybe even a Weaver. For if she could already tell her mother so much about herself, wasn't she destined for greatness?

"You won't have to fear anyone," Cresenne said, whispering the words breathlessly in the chill air. "Not even another Weaver." *Provided you survive this day.*

The cart lurched to the side forcing Cresenne to grip the nearest pile of cloth. The effort brought another wave of nausea. An instant later, they stopped, and the merchant climbed down from his seat to examine the geldings.

"What happened?" Cresenne called through clenched teeth.

"One o' the beasts stepped in a hole," the man said, squatting to rub the back leg of the horse on the left. "He's lucky he didn' break a bone." The man stood again and walked back to the cart. "It's no good, child. We have t' stop, a' least until the worst o' this storm is past."

She shook her head. "We can't."

"We've no choice. The beasts can' keep on this way."

"How far are we from Glyndwr?"

He stared past the horses as if he could see the road before them winding through the highlands. "Another league. Maybe two."

"We can be there before prior's bells."

"We won't ge' there at all if the beasts come up lame!"

"My baby--"

"Yer baby can be born in a village jes as easily as in Glyndwr."

"No, listen to me. There's something wrong." She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. "There's so much pain."

He smiled sympathetically. "I saw six o' my own born, child. It's never easy."

"This is different. I feel it in my back. And the baby hasn't moved for a long time."

His smile vanished, chilling her as if from a new gust of wind. "Yer back, you say?"

Cresenne nodded, wiping tears from her cheeks with a snow-crueted glove.

The merchant muttered something under his breath and glanced at the geldings. Then he forced another smile and laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

"All right, child. Glyndwr i' tis."

He started to walk back to the front of the cart, then stopped and bent close to her again.

"Yer too young t' be doin' this alone. Where's the father?"

"Glyndwr," she managed. "He's in Glyndwr."

The man nodded and returned to his seat atop the cart. In a moment they were on their way again, the jolt of the horses' first steps knifing through her like a poorly honed blade. Her stomach heaved and she scrambled to the edge of the cart and vomited into the snow until her throat ached. She sensed the merchant eyeing her, but he had the good sense not to say anything.

When her retching ceased, she crawled back to her frigid bed of cloth and lay down once more, hoping that what she had told the old man would prove true.

After the murder of Lady Brienne in Kentigern, and Tavis of Curgh's escape from the dungeon of the great castle, Kearney, then duke of Glyndwr, granted the young lord asylum. Kearney had since become king, and Tavis had traveled through Aneira with Grinsa, no doubt searching for the assassin responsible for Brienne's death. But if Grinsa and the Curgh boy had returned to Eibithar -- and Cresenne had good reason to believe that they had -- they would have to stop first in Glyndwr and ask the king's leave to venture further into the realm. Getting word to the City of Kings and waiting for Kearney's reply would take time, especially during the snows. Even with all the time it had taken her to find a merchant who was headed north from Kett, Cresenne thought there might be a chance they were still in Glyndwr Castle. And if they weren't, at least she'd be able to find healers.

Gods, let her live.

The ocean of pain within her began to crest again, like a storm tide in the Aylsan Strait. There had been no jarring of the cart, no movement on her part. Her time was approaching. This baby was coming, whether or not they reached the castle. She let out a low cry, squeezing her eyes shut and gripping the cloth beneath her.

"Steady, child. We've still a ways t' go."

"Faster," she gasped. "Can't you go any faster?"

"I can, but it'll be a rougher ride."

"I don't care!" She cried out again, feeling her stomach rise, though there was nothing left in it.

The merchant called to his beasts and snapped the reins. The cart leaped forward, jouncing her mercilessly. Cresenne clung to the cart, trying to keep herself still and whimpering with each breath. The tide had her now. Agony was all around her; she was drowning in it.

She heard the merchant speaking to her again, but she had no idea what he was saying. Snow and wind still stung her face and she fixed her mind on that, for cold and miserable as it was, it was better by far than the appalling pain in her back.

“It’s the promise of that baby that keeps you going,” someone had once told her, speaking of childbirth. Had it been her mother? “All the pain in the world can’t match the joy of that moment when your child is born.”

All the pain in the world. Yes.

Except that she still didn’t feel her daughter. Not at all. Bryntelle. Somewhere in this ocean she had to find Bryntelle. Before her babe was lost to the tide as well.

Grinsa stood at the open window, the biting wind off Lake Glyndwr making his white hair dance around his face like a frenzied child. Snow drifted into the chamber and a candle on the table near the window sputtered and was extinguished. It was a fine chamber, larger and more comfortable than one they might have expected had Kearney the Elder and his wife still lived in Glyndwr. But with the old duke now king, and so many of his advisors with him in Audun’s Castle, Glyndwr Castle had a preponderance of empty chambers. This one, they had been told, had once belonged to Gershon Trasker and his wife. No doubt they would not have been pleased to see snow covering the woven mat on the stone floor.

“Close the shutters,” Tavis said, standing before the hearth. “The fire’s barely warming

the room as it is.”

The gleaner watched the snow for another moment, then pulled the shutters in and locked them.

“I suppose we can wait another day,” he said, facing the young lord. “Though if you’re willing to brave the storm, I’m happy to go.”

A messenger from the City of Kings had arrived at last just after the ringing of the midday bells. They had leave from the king to journey north to Curgh, though Kearney had warned that they would be safer if they remained in Glyndwr. He even went so far as to recommend that, if they chose to leave the highlands despite his misgivings, they take a small contingent of guards. “I have sent separate word to my son, Kearney the Younger,” the king wrote, in a message addressed to Tavis, “instructing him to make available to you as many of his soldiers as you deem appropriate. I urge you to accept their protection.”

Kearney wrote nothing of recent events in his realm; he didn’t have to. His offer of an armed escort told Grinsa and Tavis all they needed to know about the state of the king’s relations with Aindreas of Kentigern.

Tavis rubbed his hands together. “Let’s wait another day. It’s late now to be setting out. We’ll make our preparations today and be ready to go with first light, regardless of the weather.”

“All right. And the king’s offer of guards?”

The young lord appeared to weigh this briefly. Then he shook his head. “We’ll draw more attention with an escort than we will alone. And I don’t want reach the gates of my father’s castle with Glyndwr’s men in tow.” He smiled sadly. To those who hadn’t grown used to the lattice of scars that covered his face, he might have looked bitter. “He’ll think I don’t trust him

to protect me.”

Grinsa smiled as well and shook his head. “I doubt that. But I understand.”

The smile lingered on Tavis’s face, but he kept his dark eyes fixed on the flames crackling in the stone hearth. “Do you think we’re safe here for another night?”

There would have been no sense in lying to the boy. Ever since the day Kearney first granted Tavis asylum, when the armies of Kentigern, Glyndwr, and Curch marched from the battle plain at the Heneagh River to Kentigern, where the duke of Mertesse had laid siege to Aindreas’s castle, it had been clear to all of them that Glyndwr’s men thought Tavis a butcher. Most of Eibithar believed that he had murdered Lady Brienne, and though it would have an act of brazen defiance, many of Kearney’s men would have thought themselves justified in killing him. Grinsa had little doubt that if Tavis had chosen to remain here in exile, rather than journeying south into Aneira, the young lord would be dead by now.

“We’re safe here, yes,” he said.

“But only because you’re powerful enough to protect me.”

Grinsa shrugged. “I don’t think Glyndwr’s men would act against you in the castle. To be honest, the real danger lies in our departure, after we leave the castle and city, but before we’re out of the highlands.”

Taking a long breath, Tavis nodded.

“We’ll be all right,” the gleaner told him. “It shouldn’t be any worse than Aneira.”

“That’s a fine thing to say about my own kingdom.”

“Do you want me to tell the duke that we won’t need an escort?”

For a moment Tavis didn’t respond. Then he shook his head, like a dog rousing itself

from slumber. “No,” he said, glancing at the gleaner. “I should speak with him, courtesy of the courts and all. There may come a day when we’re both dukes under his father, or when I have to pay tithe to his throne. My father would tell me that this is a friendship to be cultivated.”

“Your father is probably right.” Grinsa stepped to the door. “I’ll see if I can convince the kitchenmaster to give us a bit of food for the journey north.”

The gleaner left the chamber and made his way to the kitchens. Before he reached them however, he nearly collided with an older man turning a corner in the dim corridor below the chambers. It took Grinsa a moment to recognize the castle’s herbmaster.

“Forgive me, Herbmaster,” he said, stepping out of the man’s path.

The man frowned at him and continued on his way. After just a few strides, however, he stopped.

“Say there,” he called, narrowing his pale eyes. “Are you a healer?”

Grinsa hesitated, but only for an instant. Eibithar was his home, but he could ill afford to reveal too much about his powers, even here. “No, I’m not. Doesn’t the castle have a Qirsi healer?”

“It does, but I haven’t been able to find him.”

“Is the need urgent?” Preserving his secret was one thing, letting an innocent die to preserve it was quite another.

“Not terribly,” the herbmaster said, turning to walk away. “A woman at the gate in a difficult labor. I’ll see to it.”

“If I see the healer, I’ll send him to you.”

The older man raised a hand, but did not look back again. Grinsa watched him briefly, then resumed his search for the kitchenmaster.

The head of Glyndwr's kitchen, like most men in his profession, proved rather reluctant to part with any of the food in his realm. Grinsa had anticipated this however, and had brought with him the message from Kearney. Though the king's words had no direct bearing on Tavis's need for food, they had the desired effect on the kitchenmaster, who, upon reading the letter, began barking orders at the servants around him. Suddenly, there wasn't a man or woman in Glyndwr who could give the gleaner what he wanted fast enough. Within a short while, Grinsa had two satchels packed full with dried meats, cheeses, hard bread, dried fruits, and even some wine skins, filled from the duke's private cellar.

He carried the satchels back to the chamber he shared with Tavis, intending to talk next with the stablemaster. The journey to Curch would be easier and faster if they had mounts. Reaching the room, however, he found the door ajar and a pair of guards speaking with the young lord. Fearing for the boy's safety, he shoved the door open.

"What's all this?" he demanded, eyeing the soldiers warily and resting his hand on the hilt of his blade.

"This is the man you're looking for," Tavis said evenly, nodding in the gleaner's direction as the guards turned.

"What do you want with me?"

"There's a woman come to the south gate, sir. She's with child."

"Yes, I'd heard. I've already told your herbmaster that I'm not a healer."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but that's not why we've come. She was asking for you."

Grinsa narrowed his eyes. “What? By name?”

“Yes, sir. She even knew you was with Lord Curgh.”

For some time, the gleaner didn't move. It hadn't been too long since he traveled with Bohdan's Revel, Eibithar's great festival. Certainly he knew a few people in the highlands, but none he could think of who had a daughter of age to bear children. Could it be a deception of some sort, an attempt by Tavis's enemies to leave the boy unprotected? Or had the Weaver found him already and sent this woman to kill him?

“Did she give her name?”

“No, sir. She came with a merchant, but he's gone now. We don't know who she is.

He didn't like the sound of this at all.

“All right,” he said at last, gesturing toward the door. “Lead the way.”

The soldiers stepped from the room and Grinsa started to follow.

“Do you want me to come?” Tavis asked.

The gleaner hesitated. “Yes.” The boy would be safer if they were together.

“You have no idea who it could be?” Tavis asked.

He shook his head.

“Guess he's been busy,” one of the men whispered, drawing a snicker from his companion.

Even as Grinsa felt his face redden, realization crashed over him, cold as Amon's Ocean in the snows. He faltered in midstride. It had been Elined's turn when he left her in Galdasten, and they had been together for nearly a full turn before that. Certainly it was possible. . .

“Grinsa?” Tavis asked, stepping closer to him. “Are you all right?”

“Is the woman Qirsi?” he asked the guards.

“Yes, sir.”

“You know who--?” The boy stopped, staring at him. They had spoken of Cresenne only a few times. The pain of her betrayal still scored his heart and though he had cursed her name a thousand times since their last night together, the very thought of her still made his breath catch. Tavis had asked few questions about her, but for all his faults, the boy was observant and uncommonly clever.

“It’s the woman from the Revel, isn’t it? That would have been about the right time.”

“It would have.”

They started walking again, then broke into a run.

“Does your duke know of the woman’s arrival?” Tavis asked the men, his voice carrying over the beat of their footsteps.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good. Tell him that Lord Tavis suggests he post guards outside her room at all times. She may be a member of the Qirsi conspiracy.”

Grinsa looked at the boy sharply, but then gave a reluctant nod. Tavis was right. If this was Cresenne she needed to be watched, no matter her condition. He had loved her -- perhaps he still did -- but that did nothing to change the fact that she was a traitor, that her gold had bought Brienne’s death.

They reached the herbmaster’s chambers a few moments later and were greeted by a breathless scream from within. Grinsa reached for the door handle, only to draw back his trembling hand. His heart was a smith’s sledge hammering in his chest. He tried to take a breath

and nearly retched.

“Stay out here,” he managed through gritted teeth.

“Of course,” Tavis said.

Another scream made them both wince.

Grinsa gripped the door handle and entered the chamber. It was far too warm within, and the air smelled of sweat, vomit, and an oversweet blend of healing herbs. The gleaner gagged.

The herbmaster looked up at him, his face pale, a sheen of sweat on his brow glowing in the candlelight. “Are you the one she’s been asking for?”

Grinsa nodded, unable to tear his eyes from the figure propped up in the bed next to the man. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her damp face a mask of pain, her white, sweat-soaked hair clinging to her brow. Her breath came in great gasps and she rocked her head from side to side as if trying to break free of some great evil.

Yet through it all, Grinsa could see the exquisite woman with whom he had fallen in love ten turns before. Silently he cursed Adriel, Goddess of Love, for smiting him so.

“Well, come on then and help me,” the herbmaster said, laying a wet cloth on her forehead. “She’s worsening, and the child may be lost already.”

At that the gleaner hurried to the bed.

“What do you mean it may be lost?”

“The baby is blocked somehow. I’m not a healer, and it turns out the duke’s healer is gone from the castle. There may be an outbreak of Murnia’s Pox in one of the baronies and he’s gone to check on it.”

“So there’s no one here at all?”

“I’m doing the best I can. I’ve given her dewcup and groundsel to stanch the bleeding, and dittany and maiden’s weed for the blockage.” He handed Grinsa a cup of pungent, steaming liquid.

“What’s this?”

“A brew of a bit more dittany, as well as some common wort to calm her and ease the pain. She barely kept any of the first cup down. See if you can get her to take more.”

The gleaner knelt beside the bed and carefully raised the cup to Cresenne’s cracked lips.

“Drink,” he whispered.

She took a small sip, choked on it, and turned her head away. An instant later, though, as if his voice had finally reached her, she turned to him, opening her eyes. Pale yellow they were, the color of a candle’s flame, the color of passion and love and, ultimately, deepest pain. Unable to hold her gaze, he looked away, though he raised the cup again.

“You need to drink this,” he said.

“You came.” Her voice was scraped raw from her ordeal, and even as she spoke, her body convulsed.

“Yes. Drink. It will ease the pain.”

“Save our baby, Grinsa. Please. She’s dying. I know she is, and I’m not strong enough to help her.”

“The herbmater--”

She reached up and grabbed his arm, her slender fingers like a vise. “He can’t save her,” she said in a fierce whisper, forcing him to look into those pale eyes again. “He knows it, and so do you. But you can. We both know that as well. Whatever you may think of me -- however

much you hate me now -- you must save our daughter.”

“What does she mean?” the herbmaster demanded, leaning closer. “I thought you said you couldn’t heal her.”

A moment before Grinsa had been unwilling to meet her glance. Now he felt powerless to look away. “I told you I wasn’t a healer,” he answered, his eyes never straying from hers. “And I’m not. I’m a gleaner by trade.” *And a Weaver by birth.* No doubt Cresenne knew this by now. She might have reasoned it out for herself, or she might have been told by the other Weaver, the one who led the conspiracy. The one for whom she had betrayed him. “But I do have some healing power.”

“So you can help her?”

“Perhaps.” He cupped her cheek with his hand. Her skin felt cold. “Perhaps together we can save the baby. You have healing magic as well. I remember from. . . from before.”

Cresenne nodded slowly, her eyes widening at what he was proposing.

“How can you both help the baby?”

First, though, Grinsa knew, the Eandi had to leave the chamber, at least briefly.

Grinsa looked up at the man. “This may take some time, herbmaster. Lord Tavis of Curch is in the corridor just outside this chamber. Please tell him that we won’t be leaving in the morning as we had planned.”

The herbmaster frowned. “But--”

“I assure you, herbmaster, she’ll be fine. Your brew has seen to that.”

The man straightened, and, after a moment’s hesitation, turned toward the door.

“Give me your hand,” Grinsa whispered, looking at Cresenne once more.

She slid her hand into his, their fingers intertwining like lovers. Closing his eyes, Grinsa reached for her power with his own, entering her mind as he might have stepped into her dreams had she been sleeping. Instantly, the pain hit him, excruciating and consuming, as if Cresenne had struck at him with her fire magic. He couldn't imagine how she bore it. As he struggled to keep from succumbing to it himself, the gleaner followed her anguish to its source at the base of her back. . . And doing so, he encountered something utterly unexpected.

His eyes flew open. "I sense her!"

"She's alive?"

"Yes." He could feel the baby's pain as well. It wasn't nearly as severe as her mother's, but it was real nevertheless and growing worse by the moment.

"I'm going to try to stop the pain," he said. "I need you to help me, and then I need for you to relax all your muscles."

"Do you know what's wrong?"

"Yes." He lifted his head and called for the herbbmaster, who returned immediately. "The blood cord is around the baby's neck," he told the man. "You'll have to slip it back over the baby's head before she can be born."

"How can you know this?"

"I just do." He exhaled, sensing that the man wasn't ready to accept such a poor explanation. "In trying to heal the mother's pain, I sensed the child's as well. Now please, as you told me before, there isn't much time."

"I've never done such a thing before."

"You have to try, herbbmaster. She needs my healing magic. There is no one else."

The man stared at him for several seconds, then nodded reluctantly.

Grinsa looked at Cresenne again. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, and together, their hands still clasped, they turned their powers toward her pain, so that magic flowed over the tender muscles and bone like cool water from the steppe. After a time, he began to feel her muscles slackening.

"Now, herbmaster. Quickly."

For several moments the room was silent, save for Cresenne's breathing and the low conversation of the soldiers in the hallway beyond the oak door.

Finally, the herbmaster exhaled loudly and nodded to Grinsa. "It's done."

"Thank you. You should be all right now," he told Cresenne, releasing her hand. He tried to stand, but she reached for his arm once more, her grasp more gentle this time, but no less insistent.

"Don't leave me." She faltered, her eyes holding his. "If . . . if something goes wrong again, I may need you."

He didn't want to stay. He still loved her. As much as he wanted to hate her, he couldn't. And now they were bound to each other by this child she carried, the daughter whose mind he had touched just a moment before. He knew that he should run, that he and Tavis should leave Glyndwr this night and drive their mounts northward heedless of the wind and snow.

But all he could do was nod and smile, taking her hand once again.

"All right," he said, the words rending his heart. "I'll stay."

Chapter 2

Glyndwr, Eibithar

Tavis had thought that when Grinsa called the herbmater back into the chamber, the woman's labor was near its end. But though she no longer screamed out with such desperate anguish, she continued to moan and cry, as if pushed beyond endurance. The soldiers who stood with him in the corridor had long since stopped talking among themselves. Mostly they kept their eyes lowered, exchanging looks occasionally, when the Qirsi woman sounded particularly wretched.

After a time, the duke of Glyndwr entered the hallway and the men straightened. He nodded to them as he walked past, but he didn't stop until he reached Tavis.

In most respects, Kearney the Younger was the image of his father. He had the king's bright green eyes and fine features, but his hair was a soft brown, perhaps like Kearney the Elder's had been before it turned silver. Though still two years shy of his Fating, the boy was already nearly as tall as Tavis. He was thin as a blade, however, and awkward. He wore the silver, red, and black baldric on his back, as did all Glyndwr's dukes. But the baldric and the sword it held appeared far too large for him. His father had chosen to give him the dukedom rather than appointing a regent to oversee the realm until Kearney the Younger's Fating. As Tavis looked at the young duke now, he couldn't help but wonder if the elder Kearney had placed too great a burden on the boy.

The Qirsi woman groaned again and Kearney glanced at the door, the color draining from his face.

“She labors still?”

Tavis nodded. “She doesn’t cry out as she did earlier, but I’ve heard no babe yet.”

Kearney faced him. “I’ve posted guards as you suggested, but I’d like to know more of this woman. You say she’s part of the conspiracy?”

“We believe so, yes. My companion, the gleaner, knew her in the Revel. When he left for Kentigern, intending to win my freedom, she sent an assassin for him.”

“So after her child is born, I should imprison her?”

One of the guards glanced at Tavis, then quickly looked away, his face twisting sourly. Kearney had seemed afraid of him a few turns before, when they met at Kearney the Elder’s investiture. He since seemed to have accepted that Tavis was innocent of Brienne’s murder, treating the Curgh lord as he would any noble from a rival house. Glyndwr’s soldiers might consider Tavis a murderer, but their duke did not, and the young lord vowed silently to remember the boy’s courtesy when he finally reclaimed his rightful place in the Curgh court.

“To be honest, Lord Glyndwr, I’m not certain what you should do. I felt you should know who the woman was before extending to her the hospitality of your house. But as to her future, I would have to defer to Grinsa’s judgment.”

“The Qirsi? He’s but a gleaner.”

“He’s as wise as any of my father’s ministers,” Tavis said. “And the woman bears his child as we speak. I would ask you to consider his counsel before you do anything with the woman.”

Kearney appeared to weigh this briefly, before nodding once. “Very well. Still, we’d be wise to guard against any possible dangers. Aside from your friend, I intend to keep all Qirsi out

of her chamber. My father and I don't suspect any of the white-hairs who serve Glyndwr, but we'd be fools to ignore all we've heard from other courts across the Forelands."

"It seems a most sensible precaution, Lord Glyndwr," Tavis said, and meant it. He might look callow and ungainly, but there was more to this young duke than Tavis had thought. It seemed the king's faith had been justified.

"I trust you've been treated well since your arrival, Lord Curch," the young duke said after a brief silence. Tavis noted that Kearney's eyes were fixed on the nearest of the guards.

"I have, Lord Glyndwr. Your castle is all it was reputed to be, and more, as are those who serve in your name."

"Thank you."

Tavis expected the duke to leave then, but Kearney surprised him again, leaning against the opposite wall, as if intending to take up Tavis's vigil as his own.

"You said she bears his child," the boy began, meeting the young lord's glance for just an instant. "Yet she sent an assassin for him?"

"Yes."

The duke pursed his lips. "What does a man do after such a thing?"

Tavis gave a small, sad smile and shook his head. "I hope never to find out, Lord Glyndwr."

Kearney grinned, but quickly grew serious again. "You also said that the woman hoped to stop your friend from reaching Kentigern. Do you believe she had something to do with . . . with the events there?"

"We believe the conspiracy did. We suspect that they wanted to make me appear her

killer in order to drive a wedge between my father and Aindreas of Kentigern.”

“It seems they succeeded.”

Tavis felt his throat constrict. They had indeed. True, with Grinsa’s help, and the timely intervention of Kearney’s father, the kingdom had managed to avoid a civil war. But Tavis’s father had been forced to relinquish his place in the order of ascension and Tavis had become an exile, cast out of his own court until he could prove his innocence, something he had not yet been able to do, though he’d confronted Brienne’s killer in a tavern in Mertesse. From all Tavis had heard, Aindreas still threatened war against Curgh and had even gone so far as to challenge the legitimacy of Kearney the Elder’s reign.

“Yes,” he murmured. “I suppose they did.”

“Forgive me, Lord Curgh, but my point is this: if this woman was involved with Lady Brienne’s murder, then she can help prove your innocence.”

Tavis stared at the boy as if he had just conjured mists and winds like a Qirsi.

“I’m not certain anyone would listen to her,” he said, hoping the duke would gainsay him. So many times already in the turns since Brienne’s murder, Tavis had thought that his redemption was at hand. The discovery of blood on the window shutter outside his chamber in Kentigern Castle; his encounter with Brienne’s spirit in the Sanctuary of Bian; his struggle with the assassin in Mertesse. Yet each time, his hopes had been dashed. “She’s a Qirsi traitor. Some will claim that she’d say anything to escape execution.”

“Perhaps. But others may listen.”

He had denied himself the luxury of hope for so long that he couldn’t bring himself to embrace it now.

“Not the ones who matter. Not Galdasten or Eardley or Rennach. Certainly not Kentigern.”

“Perhaps not at first. But you have to try. Surely you don’t mean to ignore the possibility.”

Tavis would have smiled had it not been rude to do so. He remembered what it was to be this young. Not very long ago he would have argued much as Kearney did now. But Aindreas’s prison had aged him. Every cut of his blade, every searing touch of his damned torches had struck at his faith in justice, or even in the mercy of the gods.

“No, Lord Glyndwr. I won’t ignore the possibility. But neither will I celebrate my absolution prematurely. I’ve done that before, to my rue.”

The boy nodded, seeming to sense that there was more at work here than he could fathom.

A lengthy silence ensued, to be pierced at last by a long wail from within the chamber that trailed off into gentle sobs. A moment later came a different sound, unexpected after so much anguish, and welcome as rain after drought: the cry of a babe.

For just a few seconds it was easy to forget that this was the child of a Qirsi traitor. Even the guards grinned.

“I should tell the prelate,” the duke said, pushing away from the wall. Then his face reddened. “Though I suppose the child’s mother will prefer that the prior come from Morna’s sanctuary.”

This time Tavis did smile. “I would think so, yes.”

Kearney started leave. "I'll send a message."

"Don't you want to see the child?"

The boy shook his head. "I still remember when my brother was born, and my sister as well. I'm not very fond of babies."

Tavis watched Kearney walk away, deciding that he liked this boy-duke. Finding himself alone once more with the guards, the young lord allowed himself a quick glance at the men positioned around him. Still, none looked at him. Even their duke's acceptance was not enough to overcome their suspicions.

The baby soon stopped crying, to suckle, or perhaps to sleep, but still Grinsa did not emerge from the chamber. After some time Tavis began to wonder if he should return to their room rather than wait any longer. Abruptly he realized that his journeying with the Qirsi was about to change drastically. Perhaps it had even come to an end. Grinsa was a father now and regardless of whether or not the woman was to be punished, Grinsa's first responsibility had to be to their child. For all he knew, the gleaner had forgotten that he was in the corridor and had no intention of leaving the woman's side until morning. Tavis could hardly blame him, and yet neither could he deny that he felt angry, even betrayed.

Just as he was ready make his way back to the chamber, however, the door opened, and the gleaner stepped out into the hallway, his skin flushed deep red, and his hair damp with sweat. In the past nine turns, he and Grinsa had been pursued by the king's guard in Aneira and the soldiers of Kentigern. Yet Tavis had never seen the gleaner look so weary.

"Is she all right?" the young lord asked.

“Yes. They both are, though we almost lost each of them in turn.” A smile touched his lips and was gone. “I have a daughter. Cresenne tells me she’s to be called Bryntelle.”

“This was her decision? You have nothing to do with naming your own child?”

“You forget. My daughter is Qirsi. She’ll always bear my name. Bryntelle ja Grinsa. I couldn’t have chosen any better.”

Tavis nodded. “Well, I’m . . . I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you. I’m not sure that I am.”

“What do you mean?”

Grinsa eyed the guards for a moment. “Walk with me.” They started toward the nearest of the towers, descended the stairs, and stepped out into the castle’s upper ward. The wind had died down, but snow still fell, the flakes soft and cold on Tavis’s face.

For a short while, the two of them merely walked, following a meandering path through the Glyndwr gardens.

“What have I told you about her?” Grinsa finally asked, his voice low.

“Very little. I gather that you thought her a gleaner, just as she did you. I believe you loved her and that you only learned she was with the conspiracy after you left her.”

“I should have known earlier.” He shook his head. “She kept asking me about your Fating, about what I saw in the stone. The night I left she pretended to be hurt that I was leaving her, but I could tell there was more to it than that. I just chose not to see it for what it was.”

“You were in love.”

“That’s a poor excuse.”

Tavis started to argue, but quickly thought better of it. Grinsa expected a great deal of

himself, more than was fair, it sometimes seemed to the young lord. If the gleaner had decided to blame himself for the woman's betrayal, there was little Tavis could do to talk him out of it. And since he had never been in love, Tavis could hardly claim to be knowledgeable on the subject. Instead he walked and waited for Grinsa to continue.

"I'd always known that I would have to find Cresenne eventually. She serves the conspiracy and she may know something about the Weaver who leads it. But I had hoped to put this off as long as possible. I wanted to find Shurik first, and since his death I've hoped that my sister could find out what I might otherwise have to learn from Cresenne. I didn't expect to see her this soon, and certainly not under these circumstances."

He didn't want to ask, but there seemed little choice. "Now that she's here, what are you going to do?"

The gleaner shrugged. "I don't know."

"Do you still love her?"

"I'd be a fool if I did."

Tavis grinned. "That does nothing to answer my question."

Grinsa actually laughed. "I don't suppose it does." His smile gave way to a grimace that told Tavis all he needed to know. "I don't know if I can love her after what she's done. But I am still . . . drawn to her."

"Does she know that you're--?" He stopped himself, searching the ward for Kearney's guards.

"Does she know the extent of my powers?"

"Yes."

“I never told her, but I think she’s reasoned it out by now. It’s one of the reasons she called for me today, maybe the only reason. She needed my healing magic.”

“I expect that she called for you because you’re the child’s father. Whatever else lies between you, nothing can change that.”

The gleaner smiled and put his hand on Tavis’s shoulder. “Thank you. You may be right. But still your question raises an interesting point. If she knows I’m a Weaver, she’s a danger to me, to Keziah, and to our hopes of defeating the conspiracy.”

“Maybe now she can be turned from their cause.”

“You mean because of the baby.”

“I’m sorry, Grinsa,” Tavis said, retreating quickly. “I wasn’t implying that we should use your daughter as--”

“It’s all right, Tavis. Before this is over, we may have to think in such terms. For now, though -- for tonight -- I’d just like to think of Bryntelle as my babe, and nothing more.”

“Of course.”

They both fell silent, though Grinsa gave no indication that he was ready to return to the herbbmaster’s chamber.

“There’s more on your mind,” the gleaner said at last. “I can always tell.”

Tavis was eager to tell him of his conversation with Kearney, but this didn’t seem to be the time.

“It’s nothing.”

The Qirsi halted, forcing Tavis to face him. “I don’t believe you. Just speak and be done with it.”

“All right.” He took a breath. “The duke came to the chamber during Cresenne’s childbirth. We spoke briefly, and he suggested that if she is or once was, a part of the conspiracy, and if she had anything to do with arranging Brienne’s murder, she might be able to prove my innocence.”

Tavis saw the gleaner’s jaw tighten, but his expression remained the same, and when he finally replied, his voice was even and low. “The duke makes an interesting point. What is it you’d have me do?”

“I don’t know. First, we need to learn all she knows about what happened in Kentigern.”

“I already intended to ask her about that, along with a host of other matters. What then?”

He shrugged. “If it turns out she knows something of the plans to kill Brienne and of the assassin, I suppose we’ll need to bring her before the other dukes, perhaps even the king.”

Grinsa looked away, his lip pressed in a tight line. “I don’t want her journeying with us.”

“It wouldn’t be for long.”

“Any time at all will be too much. She’s dangerous, Tavis. For you, and especially for me.”

“Even now? Even after what you two have shared this night?”

“She lied to me!” Grinsa said, his voice rising. “She tried to have me killed!”

“Perhaps she can change.” It seemed to Tavis that he and the gleaner had reversed roles for just a moment. How often had Grinsa urged him to use reason, to move beyond his anger and resentment?

“Just because of the child?” The Qirsi shook his head. “That’s a great burden to put upon such tiny shoulders.”

“It’s not just the child. You said yourself that you almost lost both mother and daughter tonight. If it weren’t for you, Cresenne might be dead, or she might be mourning the babe rather than nursing her. Whatever happened between you before tonight, it’s all different now. You saved her despite her betrayal, and together you share responsibility for another life.” He chanced a smile. “Even I know enough to see the significance of that.”

“We’re not a family, Tavis. I don’t think we ever can be. We’re adversaries in a war. That’s more powerful than any bond that ties us to each other.” He rubbed a hand over his face, looking haggard and worn. “I’ll consider what you’re asking of me. Truly I will. And I’ll speak with her tomorrow. But I make you no promises.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to.” Tavis gestured toward the tower entrance. “You should sleep. It’s been a long night.”

Grinsa smiled wearily. “Are you ministering to me, Lord Curch?”

“It seems someone needs to.”

They turned and started back the way they had come. It was snowing harder now and already it was hard to see their footprints in the dim light of the castle torches.

“I do think you’re mistaken, though,” the young lord said after a few moments.

“Whatever else you and Cresenne may have been, you are a family now. Not even this war can change that.”

She would have liked to sleep for days, uninterrupted. But Bryntelle woke her several times during the course of the night, the first few times to suckle, and the fourth time, Cresenne finally realized, because she had soiled her swaddling. When Bryntelle did sleep, Cresenne

managed to as well, but as dawn broke, and the baby drifted into slumber during yet another feeding, Cresenne remained awake, lighting a nearby candle with a thought and staring at her daughter in the firelight.

She had promised herself that she would not be one of those mothers who saw her child through ensorcelled eyes. If the babe was ugly, so be it. She would admit as much to herself and to the world. And seeing Bryntelle for the first time, she had to concede that her baby did not look as she had hoped. Her skin was too red, her eyes swollen from the trauma of her birth, her head somewhat misshapen.

With every hour that passed, however, these flaws seemed to diminish, leaving Cresenne with a child she could describe only as beautiful. Overnight, her skin had lightened to a pale shade of pink, the swelling around her eyes had lessened. Her lips were perfectly shaped, as was her tiny nose. Her fingers and toes, wrinkled like the skin of some ancient Eandi, were smaller than Cresenne had ever imagined possible. Wisps of fine hair covered her head and the back of her neck, softer than Uulranni silk and as white as the new snow covering the highlands. Sitting in her bed, she felt helpless to do anything more than gaze upon her baby and weep, not for fear, or exhaustion, but for a joy unlike any she had known before.

Eventually, Bryntelle awoke again, her yellow eyes opening slowly. They were the color of fire, not quite as pale as Cresenne's but not so bright as those of her father.

"Are you hungry again, little one?" Cresenne whispered, placing a finger on the child's lips to see if she wanted to nurse. Immediately, Bryntelle took the finger in her mouth and began sucking on it. Cresenne laughed. "Very well."

She sat up straighter, wincing at the dull ache in her back and hips. She pulled off her

shift and raised Bryntelle to her breast. The babe began to suckle greedily.

“You’d think I hadn’t fed you all night.”

She heard a knock at the door and felt her body tense.

“Come in.”

She had expected Grinsa, but instead the herbmaster bustled in, crossing hurriedly to the shelf near her bed where he kept his herbs and stoppered vials of various extracts.

He glanced at her. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m sore. But other than that I feel all right, thank you.”

“Some pain is normal, particularly after a difficult labor. And the child?”

“I think she’s fine.”

“Good.” He stepped to the bed and looked at Bryntelle a moment. “She’s nursing quite well, and her color seems right for a Qirsi child.” He turned and started for the door. “I’d stay longer, but one of the guards was wounded in training this morning. I’ll try to return later.” He hesitated at the door, facing her again. “The gleaner is here to see you. Shall I send him in?”

She didn’t answer. As much as Cresenne wanted to refuse him, to avoid this encounter for as long as possible, she knew that she couldn’t, not after what Grinsa had done for her the night before. “Yes,” she said at last, the word coming out as a sigh. “Thank you.”

He nodded and let himself out of the room, leaving the door ajar. A moment later Grinsa walked in.

Cresenne, though very much aware of his presence the night before, hadn’t really looked at him until now. She hadn’t remembered his face being so thin, and though he had always been an imposing man, he appeared taller and broader in the shoulders than he had in Curgh. She

silently cursed the racing of her pulse.

His bright eyes fell on her as soon as he entered the room, but he quickly averted his gaze, his face coloring, as if embarrassed to see her nursing the baby.

She should have found a way to use this against him, but instead she felt herself growing discomfited as well. With her free arm, she draped her shift over her shoulders and breast so that only Bryntelle's face could be seen.

Grinsa paced the room briefly, like a restless dog, finally stopping before the hearth.

"How do you feel?"

She shrugged glancing down at Bryntelle. The baby's eyes were beginning to droop again. "Not too bad."

"And Bryntelle?"

She smiled in spite of herself. It was the first time someone else had used her -- their -- daughter's name.

"She's hungry all the time."

"Isn't she supposed to be?"

"I think so, yes."

He nodded, resuming his pacing.

"I believe she looks a little bit like you."

"Don't!" he said, halting near the door and glaring at her.

"Don't what?"

"Don't talk to me like we're husband and wife! Don't pretend that this child changes

who you are and what you've done!"

"What do you know about who I am, Grinsa?"

"I know you're a traitor."

"A traitor to whom? The kingdom of Eibithar? I was born in Braedon and raised in Wethyrn. How can I betray a kingdom that's not my own?" She forced a thin smile. "From where I sit, you're the one who's guilty of treason. You've forsaken your people for the Eandi courts. You, of all people."

He narrowed his eyes. "What does that mean?"

"I think you know. We live in a land where you risk your life simply by admitting the extent of your powers, yet you willingly serve those who would be your executioners."

She thought he would deny it. Until this moment none in the movement, not even the Weaver himself, knew for certain that Grinsa was a Weaver as well. They suspected, of course, and Cresenne had been fairly confident of it for some time. But only now, watching him wrestle with the implications of what she had said, did she know beyond doubt.

"Do you really want Bryntelle to grow up in a world where her father fears for his life every day?" she went on. "And what if she inherits more from you than just her name and the shape of her face? What if she carries your power in her blood? Do you want her to live in fear as well?"

The Weaver had said much the same thing to her several turns before, walking in her dreams as he often did. At the time it had been mere speculation, one possibility among many. Yet still, it frightened her, as if the Weaver had already claimed her child for his movement. Yet here she was echoing his words to Grinsa, the one man in the Forelands whose claim to Bryntelle

rivalled her own. As she searched Aneira for the gleaner, carrying his child, dreading her next dream of the Weaver, Cresenne had wondered if she could turn Grinsa to her cause and thus trade one Weaver for another. She had thought to control him then, so that rather than serving a Weaver she feared, she might wield this man as a weapon. Gazing at him now, though, seeing how he regarded her, with loathing in his yellow eyes, she wondered if that had been folly.

“Of course I don’t want her to grow up as I did,” he said, “bearing the burden of that secret and that fear.”

“Then why do you fight us?”

“Because I’ve seen what your Weaver can do.”

She felt the blood drain from her cheeks. “What?”

“Yes, I know about him. I know that he’s capable of great cruelty, that he wields his power as a weapon, not just against the Eandi, but against Qirsi as well.”

“How is this possible?” she asked. “Has he seen you? Does he know where you are?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were concerned for my safety.”

“I am.”

He let out a bitter laugh, though not before Cresenne saw something else flash in his eyes. “Of course you are. That’s why you sent that assassin for me.”

Actually, I’ve sent two. She hadn’t intended to give Grinsa’s name to the second man, Cadel, the partner of the one Grinsa killed. But Cadel asked upon learning that Jedrek was dead, and to have denied him the name would have raised his suspicions. “That was before. . .”

“Before what? The baby? I’ve already told you, this child changes nothing.”

She met his glare as long as she could, seeing once again all the hurt and hatred in his

eyes, and knowing this time what lay at the root of it all. He had loved her so deeply. Twisted as it was now, that love still resided within him, waiting to be rekindled. Waiting to be used again. Yes, she loved him, too, though he would never believe that. But she loved Bryntelle more. Her love for this child was already the most powerful force in her life, more so even than her fear of the Weaver. No doubt he would sense this the next time he walked in her dreams. Only Grinsa could protect her now, if he could be convinced to do so. Folly or not, she had little choice but to try.

“She changes everything, Grinsa, and you know it. Not long ago I expect you thirsted for my death. You planned to capture me and have me executed as a traitor.” She looked down at Bryntelle, who had fallen asleep at her breast. “You won’t do that now. How would you explain such a thing to your daughter?”

“So much for a mother’s love.”

She looked up. “What does that mean?”

“You don’t see a child lying in your arms. You see a tool, a weapon, perhaps even a shield.”

“That’s not true!”

“You think that I’ll spare your life for her sake. You probably even think that you can use my concern for her to turn me to your purposes.”

“I love her more than you could ever know!”

“Good. Because this blade cuts both ways.”

Cresenne shivered. “I don’t understand.”

“I need you to do certain things. You sent the assassin for me, which tells me that you

sent his partner -- the singer? -- to Kentigern. You paid him to kill Brienne and make it look like Tavis's crime."

She should have denied it, just as he should have denied being a Weaver. And like Grinsa, she couldn't bring herself to speak the words. "What is it you want?"

"As soon as you're able, you're going to come with us to the City of Kings, where you'll tell the king just what you've done."

"You can't be serious!"

He gave a thin smile, his reply.

"Why? So that I can restore the Curgh boy's good name. Don't you understand that I hate the Eandi, that I'd sooner bring ruin to the Forelands than help even one of their nobles?"

"Yes, I understand. But you should understand that if you don't do as I ask, I'll have Bryntelle taken from you, and I'll instruct the duke of Glyndwr to place you in his dungeon."

She searched his face for some sign that he was dissembling. Seeing none, she began to tremble, as if he had doused the fire and thrown open the shutters to the icy wind. "She needs me," she said in a small voice, holding Bryntelle so tightly to her breast that the baby awoke and began to cry.

"I know she does." He spoke gently now, stepping closer to the bed. "And if you do as I ask, she'll remain with you. I'll do what I can to make certain of that. But you have to begin to make right all that you did in the service of your Weaver."

"He'll kill me."

"I'll protect you."

She made herself smile, though abruptly there were tears on her cheeks. "If you really

wanted to kill someone, is there a person in all the world who could stop you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been so desperate to kill someone.”

“Not even me?”

“I never wanted to kill you, Cresenne. And I never wanted to see you executed. To be honest, there was a part of me that hoped I’d never have to see you again at all. It would have been far easier that way.”

She nodded, looking at Bryntelle again. A tear fell on the bridge of the girl’s nose and she wrinkled her brow. Cresenne laughed, wiping the tear away.

He sat in the chair beside her bed. “What do you know about this Weaver?”

She stared at the fire. She had expected this, though she had hoped that she might be able to avoid his questions for a few more days, at least until she had time to decide whether or not to lie to him. For now, however, she realized that the truth would serve her as well as any lie. The fact was, she couldn’t tell him much. “Very little,” she said. “He makes certain of that.”

“Is he in one of the courts?”

“Possibly.”

“He seems to have a lot of gold. Do you know where he gets it?”

“No.”

He exhaled through his teeth. “You have to give me more than this, Cresenne.”

“I don’t know more. I’ve never seen his face, he’s never told me his name, or anything about his life beyond the conspiracy.”

“How does he contact you?”

“He enters my dreams.” She glanced at him for just an instant. “Isn’t that how all

Weavers do it?"

"How does he pay you?"

"He seems to have a network of couriers. I imagine he uses merchants to get the gold from one place to another."

"Are all of them Qirsi?"

"So far."

Grinsa looked down at his hands. "Has he ever hurt you?"

She felt her stomach clench. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Has he hurt you?"

"Sometimes he needs to demonstrate the extent of his powers. It's not like he hurts me every time we speak."

He just stared at her, saying nothing.

"I suppose Eandi nobles never use the threat of pain to maintain discipline among those who serve them."

"An interesting comparison. If your Weaver is so much like an Eandi noble, what's the point of this movement he leads?"

"That's not what I meant!"

"No, I don't suppose it was."

"I didn't say he was like the Eandi," she said, her face growing hot. "I just meant that a leader -- any leader -- sometimes has to use force to keep order among those who follow him."

"I see."

She swiped at a strand of hair falling into her eyes. "Look, I'm still tired and sore from

last night. Can we talk about this another time?”

Grinsa regarded her for a moment, before giving a small nod and standing. “Of course. Do you need anything? Can I bring you some food, perhaps?”

“No, thank you.”

He turned from the bed and started toward the door.

“Do you want to hold her?” she called after him.

He stopped, facing her again. “What?”

“Do you want to hold her? She’s your daughter, too, and you haven’t held her yet. I thought maybe you’d like to.”

He stood motionless, as if held by some unseen hand.

Cresenne laughed aloud. Strange how this powerful man, who spoke of defeating the conspiracy and protecting her from the Weaver, could suddenly look so frightened at the notion of holding his own child.

“She’s not going to hurt you. You’re the Weaver, not she.”

“I--I don’t know how.”

“To hold a baby?”

He approached the bed, his steps uncertain. “I’ve never held one before.”

She lifted Bryntelle, holding her out to him. “Just be certain to support her head. Her neck isn’t strong enough yet.”

Grinsa swallowed, nodded. Taking her in his slender hands, he cradled her awkwardly against his chest. Immediately, Bryntelle began to cry.

“See?” he said, trying to give her back to Cresenne. “I told you I didn’t know how.”

“You’re holding her like she’s a crate of pipeweed. Have you ever held an animal in your arms?”

“Well, yes. A cat.”

“Good. Hold her as you would a cat.”

“By the scruff of her neck?”

Cresenne arched an eyebrow.

“Please take her,” he said. “I’ll try again another time. I think she senses that you and I are at odds right now.”

She shrugged, taking Bryntelle to her breast again. The baby fretted a moment longer, then began to nurse again.

“Do you think there’ll ever be a time when we’re not at odds?” Cresenne asked, her eyes fixed on the baby.

“I hope so, for Bryntelle’s sake.”

“So do I.” She looked up, meeting his gaze. “Truly I do.”

“I’ll check on the two of you later.” He crossed to the door. “Consider what I’ve told you, Cresenne,” he said, pausing with his hand on the door handle. “Whatever affections I still harbor for you, whatever I may feel for our child, I won’t let sentiment be my guide in this. I can’t. Too many people are depending on me.”

She eyed him for a moment, then nodded, though she kept her silence. At least until he was gone.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered to the baby, once the door had closed. “He won’t really take you away from me. He can’t. We’re all he has in the world, unless he actually thinks of that

Curgh boy as family.”

Brave words. But, her hands still trembled as they had when he first threatened to take Bryntelle. A voice in her head screamed for her to take the baby and flee, but her body wasn't ready for a walk through the corridors, much less flight through the highlands. Which actually worked to her advantage. It would be several days before the herbmaster would let her leave for the City of Kings, and the journey would have to be a slow one. That gave her time.

Grinsa might have been allied with the Eandi now, but he was a Weaver. And who had more to gain from the Qirsi movement than a Weaver?

A Weaver with a child.