

Chapter 1

Curtell, Braedon, year 880, Amon's Moon waning

What did it mean to be a god? Was it simply immortality that separated the great ones from those who lived on Elined's earth? Was it their power to bend others to their will, their ability to shape the future and remake the world as they desired? Did he not possess those powers as well? Had he not made himself a god?

Victory would soon be his and with his triumph would come a new world, one that he had foreseen, a world of his own making. Was that not the highest power? He could not cheat death -- Bian would call him to his side eventually. But he would be remembered forever: the Weaver who toppled the Eandi courts and ruled the Forelands as its first Qirsi king. Was that not immortality?

In these last days before war and conquest and the attainment of all for which he had worked and hungered for so long, he found himself remembering a legend told to him by his father when he was no more than a boy, before anyone had thought to call him high chancellor, or Weaver, or king. It was a tale of four brothers, a story his father said had come from the Southlands, with the first Qirsi invaders, nearly nine centuries ago. He had heard it told since by Eandi living in the Forelands, as if the parable and its moral belonged to them. But he knew the truth.

According to the tale the four brothers were soldiers who, as they wandered the land, came across a white stag that had been caught in a hunter's snare. The beast was more beautiful than any creature the four men had seen before. It stood taller than the greatest mounts of the southern plains, with a coat the color of cream, and ebony antlers as broad across as an eagle's wings. White stags were said to be enchanted, and they lived under the protection

of royal decrees throughout all the kingdoms of the land. Those who dared hunt them not only invited ill fortune by slaying a magical creature, but also risked execution should they be caught.

Knowing this, the brothers freed the beast, cutting through the snare with their blades. When it was free, the stag bowed to them, and then spoke.

“You have given me my life, and so I will grant to each of you your heart’s desire,” the creature said. “You need only sleep tonight in this glade and await the first light of dawn.”

The stag left them then, and the brothers bedded down in the glade.

In the middle of the night, the oldest of the four awoke to find a warrior standing before him in shining mail, bearing a sword that gleamed in the moonlight. “Come with me,” the warrior said, “and I will make you the greatest swordsman in the land. No enemy will dare stand against you, and bards will sing of your prowess in battle.”

Believing that the stag had made good on his promise, the first brother followed the warrior from the glade. Once beyond the last of the trees, however, the warrior vanished as if a spirit and the brother found that the trees would not part to allow him back into the glade.

Soon after, the second brother awoke to find an old man standing before him in the robes of a king. “Come with me,” the man said, “and you shall rule all the land. Nobles will bow to you and swordsmen will follow you to war. All power shall be yours.” Like his older brother before him, the second brother thought that this was what the stag had promised. He followed the man from the glade, only to find that the old king had been an apparition and the glade was now closed to him.

A woman came to the third brother, clad in lace, her silken, black hair falling to the small of her back, and her skin gleaming with starlight. She led him from the glade before dissolving into the night like one of Bian’s wraiths.

The youngest of the four brothers awoke to find a child standing before him. It was a boy, though his hair was long and his face as fine featured as that of a young girl. In his hands he held glittering gems and gold coins and pearls that seemed to glow from within. "There's more," he said, holding out his hands to the youngest brother. "Follow me and you'll have riches beyond your greatest imaginings."

"No," said the youngest brother. "The white stag told me I had only to await the dawn. And that is what I shall do."

The boy begged him to follow, but still the brother refused, and at last the boy left him there.

When morning came, the stag returned. "You have heeded my words and so earned the rewards you were promised." Then the boy returned, and with him the warrior, the old king, and the woman. The youngest brother became the greatest warrior the land had ever known, the people made him king, and the woman became his queen. Even his brothers knelt before him, knowing that he had succeeded where they failed. And for the rest of his days he enjoyed fame, power, wealth, and deepest happiness.

Dusaan had taken the lesson of this tale to heart years ago; he had awaited his own destiny with the patience of the youngest brother. And even as the time of his victory approached, even as the first spoils presented themselves to him -- be it in the form of gold from the emperor's treasury, or the willing gaze of the underminister who would be his queen -- he denied himself the pleasure of taking them as his own. He would in time. Qirsar knew he would. The woman in particular would be a prize to be savored. She had sworn that she would give all to his movement. And he knew that she would give all to him as well. He need only ask. She would bear him children. He had imagined others as his queen; he still did. Harel had several wives, and he was no more than a fat fool, an emperor whose grip on power

was more tenuous than he could possibly know. If such a man could claim four women as his own, could not the first Qirsi ruler in the history of the Forelands do the same?

Soon. So very soon.

He could see it coming together, like some great quilted blanket spread over the Forelands. Civil war in Aneira, suspicion and murder in Sanbira, a divided kingdom in Eibithar. And in Braedon, an emperor who was so eager for war that he gladly embraced an uncertain ally in the Aneirans and planned an invasion against the Eibitharians that was doomed to fail. The noble courts of the Eandi were destroying themselves. Ean's children were strong of body, but their brawn was nothing next to the magical powers and subtlety of mind of Dusaan's people. The High Chancellor had only to wait a bit longer and they would be too weak to stand against him.

Yes, they had a Weaver on their side as well. Grinsa jal Arriet. But he had weaknesses: a lover and a daughter he could not protect, and allies who so feared any Qirsi Weaver that they would sooner execute the man than allow him to wield his power on their behalf. Dusaan would have to deal cautiously with this other Weaver. He of all people knew better than to take him too lightly. But with care and a bit of good fortune, he might actually be able to use Grinsa to his advantage. There remained a good many Qirsi who had yet to pledge themselves to Dusaan's cause, men and women who would be outraged to learn that a Weaver -- a Weaver! -- had chosen to protect the Eandi courts rather than side with his own people in their struggle for freedom.

What kind of man cast his lot with nobles who would execute him and his child merely because of the magic he possessed? What kind of man betrayed his people even though he possessed power enough to lead them to victory? In choosing to fight with the Eandi, Grinsa made himself a traitor to all Qirsi, a modern day Carthach to be vilified, to be used as a tool that

would unite all people of the sorcerer race. By comparison, Dusaan seemed a champion by comparison, a contrast that would serve him well when the time came.

So very soon. All he needed was to wait a short time longer, with the patience of the youngest brother.

Chapter 2

City of Kings, Eibithar

"There can be no more question of their intent, Your Majesty," Gershon Trasker said, watching the king closely. He had known Kearney for years, since before the man became Eibithar's king, or even Glyndwr's duke, and had long thought him a wise and strong leader. But Gershon's father used to say that there was no greater test of a king's mettle than war. The swordmaster found himself wondering how Kearney would respond to these latest tidings from the north coast and the banks of the Tarbin River.

"You believe they mean to attack as one, the empire from the sea, and Aneira across the river."

"Yes, Your Majesty, I do."

Kearney shifted his gaze. "Do you agree?"

Half a year ago, perhaps as recently as three turns ago, a mere season, he would have asked this of Keziah ja Dafydd, for she was his archminister. More to the point, she had once been Kearney's lover. Gershon had never thought to see the day when anyone would supplant her as the king's most trusted advisor. But on this day, she sat in the far corner of Kearney's

presence chamber, alone and ignored. The king had spoken not to her, not to any of his Qirsi, but to Marston, thane of Shanstead, whom he had taken into his confidence in recent days.

“I’m afraid I do, Your Majesty. The empire has always maintained a formidable presence in the waters north of Thorald, Galdasten, and Curch, but their fleet has not menaced our shores so in my lifetime. This latest marshaling of their vessels only makes sense as the prelude to an attack.”

“And the Aneirans?”

The thane gave a slight shrug. “For several years now, House Solkara has been pursuing closer ties with the emperor, and I’m not sure that Harel is confident enough to contemplate war with Eibithar without support from the south. I agree with the swordmaster: the assault, when it begins, will come from both realms.”

“How long do we have?” the king asked, looking at Gershon again.

The swordmaster rubbed a hand over his face, his eyes falling to the messages that had arrived that morning. His knowledge of letters was not what it should have been -- even Elric, his youngest child, had begun to write simple words under the watchful eyes of Sulwen and the castle tutors, and here he was, one of the king’s most trusted men, and he could barely read more than the boy. He had never let the king know how little he understood of the messages they discussed. He had his pride, and he had managed thus far to hide his ignorance. Just as he would now. For though he had little understanding of letters, he did know numbers, and in this matter, numbers meant more than the words beside them.

“It’s hard to say, Your Majesty,” he answered after a few moments. “Judging from the number of Braedon ships in the waters around the islands at the top of the scabbard, I’d say that we don’t have much time at all. The emperor has already gathered a large force. He could order them into our waters tomorrow, and our fleet commanders would have about all they can

handle.”

“But?”

“It’s these numbers from our scouts on the Tarbin, Your Majesty. If the Aneirans intend to engage enough of our army to help the empire with an invasion, they’ll need a few thousand more men. As it is. . .” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“So you think they’re still moving men northward?”

“Looking just at these numbers, I’d have to think so. But they have no more soldiers on the Tarbin than they did half a turn ago. I would have thought that they’d be bringing in more men, but thus far they haven’t.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Perhaps the regent needs his men elsewhere.” Keziah.

They all looked at her, the king with his lips pressed thin, a wary look in his eyes. The archminister seemed to quail at what she saw on his face, and for a moment Gershon thought that she might not say anything more.

“What do you mean?” the king demanded.

“Ever since Carden’s death, we’ve heard talk of discontent among the other Aneiran houses with the Solkaran Supremacy. It’s even been said that some of the dukes are fomenting rebellion. What if it’s more than talk? What if the regent hasn’t sent more men northward because he’s afraid to leave himself too small a force to guard against those in his realm who might oppose him?”

“It is possible,” Marston said quietly. “Some of the other houses may even have refused to send additional men to the royal house.”

Kearney stared at Keziah a moment longer before sweeping the chamber with his gaze.

All the dukes who had traveled to the City of Kings were present -- Javan of Curch, Welfyl of Heneagh, Lathrop of Tremain -- and, a sign of how seriously the king took the latest missives from his scouts, so were their ministers. Some of the dukes had been in the royal city for over a turn now. Kearney had summoned them to Audun's Castle after the Qirsi woman held in the prison tower of the great fortress confessed to being a traitor and the person responsible for arranging the murder of Lady Brienne of Kentigern.

Yet this was the first time since the dukes had come to the castle that their Qirsi ministers had been included in any of the king's discussions with his nobles. Gershon sensed that Marston wasn't pleased to see them here. The thane seemed to be as distrustful of the white-hairs as Gershon once had been, and during his brief time here he had managed to convince the king to regard his Qirsi with suspicion as well.

But this had become a council of war, and Kearney was wise enough to consider advice from all who might offer it. No doubt he wished that more of his dukes had answered his summons, even those who had joined Aindreas of Kentigern in his feud with Javan and his defiance of the king.

"If all this is true," he said now, regarding the other nobles. "If the Aneiran army has been weakened by dissent within the realm, what should we do?"

"There's only one thing we can do, Your Majesty," Javan said, from his chair near the open window. "We must prepare for war as if the Aneirans had massed ten thousand men on the banks of the Tarbin."

Welfyl sat forward, his bony hands gripping the arms of his chair. "But the regent's weakness offers us an opportunity. We can send a larger force to the north coast to repel the emperor's invasion."

Javan gave a wan smile. "We haven't the men to do so, my friend. Aneira may be

weakened by rifts among its houses, but so are we. If we had the armies of Galdasten and Kentigern, I'd agree with you. But we don't."

"Surely the other houses will join us to fight an invasion." Welfyl glanced at the others, looking old and frail. "Maybe not Aindreas, but I've known Renald of Galdasten since he was a boy. He may be ambitious, but he's as loyal to this realm as any of us."

No one spoke up to agree with him. They just sat, silent and brooding, almost as if they were embarrassed.

"Any invasion from the north will land near Galdasten. The cliffs are lowest there, the strand the broadest. You can't doubt that he'll guard his dukedom."

"He can guard Galdasten without fighting to repel the invasion," Javan said. "If he seeks the throne, he need only keep his army strong and his city and castle whole."

"I don't believe what I'm hearing," the old duke said, shaking his head. "Is this what we've become then? Are we no better than the Aneirans? Are we more concerned with our petty quarrels than with the defense of our realm?"

"I assure you, Lord Heneagh," the king said, his voice hardening, "the same message you received summoning you to Audun's Castle, was sent to every house in Eibithar. If some choose to place other concerns above the welfare of the realm, then so be it. But I have not."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Welfyl said. "Forgive me."

"You're here, Lord Heneagh. You've pledged yourself to the defense of Eibithar. There's nothing to forgive."

Welfyl lowered his eyes. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"It's time all of you returned to your homes," Kearney told them, looking and sounding every bit the warrior king. "Lord Heneagh is correct in saying that Galdasten is the most likely target of any sea-borne invasion. No doubt the Braedon fleet will attempt to take Falcon Bay

and control the mouth of Binthar's Wash. That would give them a powerful foothold from which to wage a land war." He turned to Javan. "Lord Curgh, once you've returned to your home, I want you to take your army north and east. Obviously we don't know how much help you can expect from Galdasten, so you should take as many men as you can spare from the defense of Curgh. I'll send five hundred men from the King's guard north with you, under your command."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Lord Shanstead, you shall have five hundred as well. I assume that you'll be commanding the army of Thorald."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

"Good. You too should take them to Galdasten. And you should do the same with your men, Lord Heneagh. I'll also send an additional two thousand men north. Perhaps we can outflank the Braedon army as it lands. I'll send word to Eardley and Domnall instructing them to go north. If they're with us, that should be enough."

And if they're not? The question burned in every pair of eyes trained on the king, but no one in the chamber gave it voice. No doubt they all feared the answer.

"What of the rest of us, Your Majesty?" the duke of Labruinn asked.

"The armies of Labruinn and Tremain will march south to the Tarbin. So will the Glyndwr army, and fifteen hundred men from the King's Guard. I'll send word to the dukes of Sussyn and Rennach, but again, we should plan to fight this war without them."

Javan's Qirsi cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. "Forgive me for asking, Your Majesty, but what if Lord Kentigern joins forces with the Aneirans?"

The king glanced at Gershon. The two of them had discussed this possibility just an hour earlier, before the nobles and their ministers joined them in the chamber. At the time,

neither of them had an answer, and the swordmaster had yet to think of anything. The king had sent men to Kentigern hoping to compel the duke to pay his ducal tithe and declare his loyalty to the Crown. They had heard nothing from the men since, and Gershon feared the worst.

“I have no choice but to hope that Aindreas is not so consumed with hate for me that he’d do such a thing.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

It wasn’t much of a response, but no one in the chamber seemed inclined to challenge him on the matter.

“What of our allies in the east and south, Your Majesty?” Javan asked.

“I’ve already sent word to the king of Caerisse and the Archduke of Wethyrn, asking them to consider joining us in any war against Aneira and Braedon. I’ll send new messages today, and include in them the information we’ve just received. And I’ll send word to Sanbira’s queen as well. She asked us to join in an alliance against the conspiracy. It seems that we need more than that now. But again, we must assume that we’re fighting this war alone. If we go into battle with one eye on the horizon, watching for allies who never come, we’re doomed to fail.”

“Where will you be, Your Majesty?” Marston asked.

“I haven’t decided yet. A king should be wherever his men are fighting and dying, but in this case that’s not possible.”

“The greater challenge looms in the north, Your Majesty.” Javan. “You should be there.”

Gershon wondered if one of the southern dukes would disagree, but Lathrop nodded his agreement. “Lord Curch is right, Your Majesty. Braedon is the more dangerous foe. If the emperor’s assault can be stopped, the battle with the Aneirans will go our way as well.”

A mischievous grin crept across the king's face, one that Gershon knew well, though he hadn't seen it much since Kearney's ascension to the throne. "With all my dukes urging me to ride toward the more dangerous foe, I have to wonder if you want me to survive this war."

Both Javan and Lathrop started to protest, but Kearney held up a hand, silencing them. "It was a joke, my friends, or at least an attempt at one."

"Your Majesty possesses a singular humor," Javan remarked drily.

"So I've been told." Kearney paused once more, looking from one face to the next. "I needn't tell you that we fight for the very survival of the realm. If we were united, I wouldn't fear at all, for I've seen the strength of Eibithar. But divided, against these foes, we must fight as we've never fought before. And we must remain watchful as well. I sense behind all of this the hand of the conspiracy. If the renegades truly seek to weaken the courts so that they can take the Forelands for themselves, then this war will give them as fine an opportunity as they're likely to have." He stood and drew his sword, holding the flat side of the blade to his forehead and bowing to the rest of them. "May the gods keep you safe, may Orlagh guide your blades, and may we next meet to celebrate our victory."

Everyone in the chamber stood and, led by Javan, the nobles pulled their swords free and saluted the king, much as he had done a moment before. "Ean guard our king!" they said in unison.

Then, one by one, again led by the duke of Curch, the nobles came forward, knelt for a moment before the king, and left the chamber. Each was followed in turn by his minister, after the Qirsi bowed to the king as well. If any of them were discomfited by the king's words regarding the conspiracy, they showed no sign of it. Gershon cast a look toward Keziah, who stood now, though she was still alone. She met his gaze, but the swordmaster could read little from what he saw in her eyes.

Marston was the last of the nobles to offer obeisance to the king, as was appropriate, since he was the lone thane among them. As he straightened and started toward the door, the king called to him.

“Lord Shanstead, please stay for a moment. I wish a word with you.”

“Should I go, Your Majesty?” Gershon asked.

“No, Swordmaster. Please remain.” He looked past Gershon toward Keziah. “You may go, Archminister.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” She bowed and left, as did Marston’s young minister.

When they had gone, and a servant had closed the door, Kearney returned to his throne and sat. “Gershon, I always thought that when I rode into battle, it would be with you at my side. I see now that this isn’t possible.”

The swordmaster had expected this. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

“As Javan and Lord Shanstead suggest, I’ll ride north to meet the threat from Braedon. I want you to lead the defense of the Tarbin. Take whichever of your captains you wish to have with you. I’ll make certain that the dukes understand that your orders carry the weight of the throne.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I won’t fail you.”

Kearney smiled. “I’ve never doubted that for a moment.”

The swordmaster started to ask a question, then stopped himself.

“What is it, Gershon?” When the swordmaster still hesitated, the king sat forward, his brow creasing. “Come now, swordmaster. This is no time for diffidence.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I was wondering, since you said that the Glyndwr army would be coming to the Tarbin, will Lord Glyndwr be leading them? And if so, shouldn’t he command the armies, and not I?”

The king stared at him a moment, then sat back once more. "Kearney the Younger won't be fighting in this war."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You think I coddle him."

"Not at all. He's not even of Fating age, and the House of Glyndwr must have an heir. I believe you're wise to keep him in the Highlands."

"He's already made it clear to me that he doesn't agree."

Gershon actually grinned. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but he's just a boy. He's bright, and he's brave, but he's a child. He thinks of war as it sounds in children's tales and warriors' songs. My boys are the same way. He may think that he wants to join this battle, but he's not ready."

"The swordmaster is right, Your Majesty," Marston said. "I wouldn't allow my sons to fight either."

The king gave a wan smile. "In fairness, neither of your sons is duke. But I thank both of you. Certainly the queen will agree with much of what you've said."

The three men fell silent for some time, until finally the king sat forward again, seeming to rouse himself from a dream. "There remains one matter I wish to discuss."

Marston nodded. "The Qirsi."

"Yes."

Gershon looked at them both, feeling his stomach ball itself into a fist. "What about the Qirsi?"

"Lord Shanstead has suggested that I have the Qirsi woman, the traitor, removed from Audun's Castle."

"Why?" he asked the thane. "Removed where?"

Marston gave a shrug. "At first I actually suggested that His Majesty have the woman executed. She betrayed the land, she admits complicity in Lady Brienne's murder. We would be justified in whatever we chose to do."

"But the king gave his word, not only to the woman, but also to the gleaner, the father of her child."

"His Majesty said much the same thing, and also pointed out that it would be a terrible thing to do to the child. And so I counseled him to send the woman to Glyndwr."

"I still don't understand why."

"She was attacked by a Weaver, swordmaster," the king answered. "The same Weaver who leads the conspiracy. As long as she stays here, Audun's Castle will be a target for every renegade Qirsi in the land. She's a danger to the lives of everyone in the castle, including the queen and my daughters and your family as well, Gershon. Under other circumstances, I wouldn't be so concerned. But with both of us riding to war along with much of the royal army, it seems too great a risk. The Weaver might have a more difficult time finding her in the Highlands."

Gershon couldn't help but shudder at Kearney's mention of the attack on the Qirsi woman. From what he understood, the Weaver had entered her dreams and used her own healing magic to open ugly gashes on her face and shatter the bones in her hand. Had the gleaner not been there to save her, the Weaver surely would have succeeded in killing her. But the swordmaster knew that there were risks in sending her away from the castle. "Then again, he might not, Your Majesty," Gershon said, "in which case you'll be placing your son and your home city at risk. Glyndwr is a fine castle, but it's not nearly the equal of this one. Even with the King's Guard abroad, it's safer to keep her here."

Marston and the king exchanged a brief look.

"I disagree," the thane said. "With the woman--"

Kearney stood and walked to the window. "It's all right, Lord Shanstead. He should know all of it."

"All of what, Your Majesty. I don't understand any of this."

"There's more to this decision than just sending the woman away, swordmaster." With the king staring out at the castle ward, Gershon couldn't see his face. But the swordmaster could hear the tension in Kearney's voice, and he felt his own apprehension growing. "I intend to have Keziah escort her to the Highlands."

The swordmaster felt his mouth suddenly go dry. "The archminister?" he said, knowing how foolish he must have sounded.

"Surely this doesn't come as a surprise, Gershon. You of all people should have expected it. For the past several turns she's been belligerent and disrespectful. The counsel she's offered has been questionable at best. I don't believe she's betrayed me to the conspiracy, though at times she behaves as though she had. But her loyalties are divided in ways neither of you could possibly understand. And her feelings for me have grown difficult to discern. I'm not certain what caused all this -- maybe it was Paegar's death, or perhaps . . ." He shook his head. "Whatever its source, I no longer have faith in her ability to serve in this castle."

Gershon knew all of this, of course. No one who had lived in Audun's Castle over the past half year could have failed to notice the tension that had grown between Keziah and the king. But Gershon also knew that this had been Keziah's intention all along. She had contrived to join the conspiracy, hoping to learn what she could of its leaders and its tactics. "But, Your Majesty--"

"You can't tell me that you object, Gershon. I'd have thought you'd be pleased. It seems to me that you've been trying to get me to do this very thing for years."

He wasn't certain what to say. The truth was he would have been pleased a few turns ago, when he still saw Keziah as a threat to Kearney and all Eibithar. But with Keziah's decision to join the conspiracy he had finally come to realize that whatever her faults, the woman was as brave as any warrior in the Forelands, and was devoted to the king and the realm. If Kearney sent her away, it would render her useless to the conspiracy, thus undermining all that she had done in winning the Weaver's trust. It might even endanger her life.

"I admit that there have been occasions in the past when I wanted you to banish her from the court," he said. "But this is not the time. As you say, you're about to ride to war. I don't know what powers the archminister possesses--"

"Gleaning, mists and winds, language of beasts," the king said, his voice flat. Of course he would know.

"From what I know of the Qirsi, I believe at least two of those are considered to be among the deeper magics. Can we really afford to go into battle without her?"

"There are other Qirsi in this castle, swordmaster," Marston said.

Gershon glared at him. How had this whelp convinced the king to do such a thing? "Yes, Lord Shanstead, there are. But Wenda is old, and Dyre is neither as intelligent nor as powerful as Keziah."

"I speak not only of the king's ministers, but also those of the other nobles. Surely Javan's first minister is as powerful a sorcerer as there is in the Forelands, with the exception of this Weaver who leads the traitors."

Gershon turned back to the king. "The point is, Your Majesty, we need to use all the weapons at our disposal. We face a powerful foe, and we may find ourselves confronted with an even greater one, if the conspiracy chooses to strike at us as well. From what I understand, a Weaver can turn even a small number of Qirsi into a powerful weapon. I've heard it said that

one Weaver and a shaper or two could tear a castle to its foundations. If this man has even a hundred renegades in his army, he'll be far more of a threat than any force the emperor might send to our shores. And I'll wager he has a good deal more than a hundred sorcerers under his command."

"All the more reason to send the archminister away," Marston said. "If she is a traitor -- and I think it possible even if His Majesty does not -- then having her anywhere near the king when the renegades begin their attack would be sheer folly."

"You have no evidence that she's a traitor!"

"Given what's at risk, it's enough just to suspect it!"

"That's enough, both of you." Kearney hadn't raised his voice at all, but his words silenced them nevertheless. "I've made my decision, Gershon." He turned and faced the swordmaster. "I want you to tell her, and have both woman ready to make the journey two days from now."

Gershon knew that he should let the matter drop. With Marston there, Kearney wasn't about to reverse himself. But the thane had poisoned the king's mind against Keziah, at a far greater cost to the realm than either Marston or Kearney could know. "This is a mistake, Your Majesty," he said. "It's an injustice to the archminister, and more than that --" He faltered glaring at the thane once more. He couldn't say too much in front of this man, not without putting Keziah in greater peril. "You could be endangering the realm."

"I think I understand your point of view quite clearly, swordmaster."

Kearney said the words evenly enough, but there could be no mistaking the rage in his pale eyes. Gershon had pushed him far. And still he wasn't done.

"No, Your Majesty, you don't. If I could just have a word with you, alone."

"I see no need for that. The matter is closed."

“What is it you said to him?” Gershon demanded, whirling on the thane. “How have you turned him against her?”

“That is enough, swordmaster!” Kearney said, his voice reverberating through the chamber. “I’ve given you an order! Now, I’d see it done!”

The swordmaster continued to glower at Marston, itching to draw his blade. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he managed, through clenched teeth.

He sketched a quick bow to the king, cast one last look at the thane, and strode to the door. Yanking it open, he glanced back at Kearney. “With all respect, Your Majesty, she deserves better.”

“I know,” the king said, and turned away.

Keziah had returned to her chamber and was searching through her wardrobe when she heard the knock at her door.

“Enter,” she called, pushing aside the ministerial robe she had worn in Glyndwr and a number of dresses she had stopped wearing when her affair with Kearney ended.

She heard the door open, the scrape of a boot on the stone floor of her bedchamber. Glancing back, she saw Gershon Trasker closing the door behind him.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. Before he could answer, she turned her attention back to the wardrobe. “Do you know if there are any mail coats in the armory that would fit someone my size? I had one, but I can’t find it. For that matter, I don’t see my sword here either.”

“We need to talk.”

The archminister frowned, stood up. “All right,” she said absently. She kept a small chest at the foot of her bed. It might have been in there.

“Keziah.”

She turned at that. Gershon almost never called her by name. Seeing his face, she felt a sudden tightness in her chest. His face was flushed, his lips pressed in a thin, hard line. For a moment she wondered if he had brought tidings of a death. She saw Grinsa’s face in her mind and began to tremble.

“What’s happened?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

“It’s the king.”

“The king? What about him? Is he all right?”

“Yes, he’s fine. But surely you’ve noticed that he’s been turning to the thane of Shanstead for counsel.”

“Yes, what of it?”

“And I’m sure you’ve noticed as well that Marston has little regard for your people, that he’s quick to question the loyalty of every Qirsi he meets.”

“Yes, swordmaster, I’ve noticed,” she said, her patience wearing thin. “Now for pity’s sake, tell me what this is about!”

He held her gaze for but a moment before averting his eyes. She noticed that his hands were shaking. “The king has decided that the woman has to leave Audun’s Castle. He wants her sent to Glyndwr.”

“You mean Cresenne?”

He nodded.

“But that makes no--”

“Wait. There’s more to it than that. He wants you to escort her there. This isn’t about her at all. The thane has convinced him that you aren’t to be trusted, that in fact you’re a threat to Kearney and the realm.”

The tightness in her chest was suddenly an ache so unbearable she could hardly draw breath.

"He wants to send me away?" She could feel tears on her face, but she ignored them. Her entire body was trembling. How had it gotten so cold so quickly?

"It's Marston making him do it," Gershon told her bitterly.

She tried to force her mind past the hurt and the grief. This was important in ways that went far beyond her heartache, she knew it was. But all she could think about was the fact that Kearney had chosen to banish her from his castle. Not too long ago they had been in love; now he couldn't even stand to have her near him.

"This is all my fault," she murmured. "I made him do this."

"Archminister--"

"Marston didn't do this, I did."

"Keziah, you have to listen to me."

She looked at him, his face a blur through her tears.

"Think for a moment. What will the Weaver do if you're sent away from Kearney's court?"

Yes, the Weaver. That was it. She swiped at her tears with an open hand, trying to clear her mind.

"Keziah?"

"Yes, I know. The Weaver." She swallowed, took a breath. "He won't be pleased. He told me some time ago that if the king sent me away, or if I lost Kearney's trust entirely, I'd no longer be of use to the movement. He didn't say what he'd do if that happened, but I can imagine."

"As can I."

She was trembling still, but now out of fear rather than anguish. She was terrified of the Weaver and what he would do to her if he ever learned the true reason she had joined his movement. But already her mind had turned to Cresenne ja Terba, the woman who had betrayed Grinsa, her brother. The woman who had also given birth to his daughter, Keziah's niece. "There's more to this than you know. The Weaver has commanded me to kill Cresenne."

The swordmaster's eyes widened. "Demons and fire."

"As long as we're both in the castle, she in the prison tower under the watch of Kearney's men, I can make excuses for not doing so. But as soon as we leave the City of Kings together, I won't be able to delay any longer."

"And if you fail him in this?"

"He'll kill us both. I'm certain of it."

"Then you have no choice. You have to tell the king."

"Tell him what?"

"Everything, of course. Your belief that Paegar was a traitor, your decision to draw the attention of the movement, your efforts to win the Weaver's trust. All of it."

Keziah shook her head. "I can't do that."

"You have to!" He crossed to where she stood. "I don't give a damn about the other woman. I understand that she's important to the gleaner, and therefore to you. I even understand that having given his word to guard her, the king can't very well turn around and order her execution. But in my mind, that's what she deserves. She's a traitor, and a murderer, and she's almost solely responsible for the divisions that have weakened this realm. To be honest, I'd gladly kill her myself. You, though -- you're a different matter. You've put your life at risk in order to serve the king and save our land."

At another moment, hearing the swordmaster speak to her so might have moved her

They had spent years hating each other, vying with one another in the court of Glyndwr for Kearney's ear. They might never truly be friends, but clearly she had earned the man's respect.

"That's why we can't tell Kearney any of this!" she said, pleading with him. "If he knows, he'll treat me differently and someone's bound to notice. We have to find some other way to convince him that I should remain here."

"There is no other way. He's ordered me to prepare you and the woman for the journey to Glyndwr. You're to leave two mornings hence. Either we tell him now--"

"No." She was crying again, shivering as if from a frigid wind. If only Grinsa had stayed. Kearney could send Keziah away without endangering Cresenne and the baby. She would still have had this ache in her chest -- leaving Kearney would never be easy. But it might also have come as a relief. Better to render herself superfluous to the Weaver and his movement than continue to endure the king's contempt and mistrust. Yes, it might mean her death, but she wasn't certain that she cared anymore. She was so weary. For too long she had been lying to her king, lying to the Weaver, harboring secrets that could get her killed. She just wanted it all to end. "I won't tell him," she said. "I can't."

"Demons and fire, woman! Do you intend to let the Weaver kill you? Is that it?"

When she didn't answer, his eyes grew wide. "That's just what you intend, isn't it?"

She turned her back to him and stared out the window.

"And will you let him kill the woman as well? And her child?"

"He won't do anything to the child."

"You mean aside from killing her mother?"

"What if I offered to leave without Cresenne and Bryntalle? You said before that this wasn't about her. Would he be satisfied if I left alone?"

"He might. I'm not really sure. I think Marston would object, but I might be able to

prevail upon the king to allow it anyway.”

“Would you do that?”

“No.”

She whirled toward him. “Why not?” she demanded, hardly believing that he would refuse her.

“Because this is no solution. It removes you from the king’s court and so still puts your life at risk. And I swore to you when all this began that I would do everything in my power to keep you safe. I believe the best way to do that is to tell the king the truth. It would be better coming from you, but I’ll tell him myself if I have to.”

“Swordmaster, you can’t do that! Please!”

“Tell me why I can’t. We’re just talking about the king; no one else need know. But surely Kearney can be trusted with this. I see no danger in telling him. In fact, it might even help. No doubt the Weaver expects you to make Kearney do certain things, to bend his will somehow. Wouldn’t it be helpful to have the king privy to this, so that he could make the deception more convincing?”

He was right of course. True, Kearney might be tempted to treat her differently once he understood all that she had done in recent turns, once he knew that her loyalty had never wavered. But he was the most intelligent man she’d ever known -- he’d find a way to keep her secret. If he didn’t banish her from the castle for what she’d done.

“Kearney will never forgive me for this,” she finally whispered, relieved in a way to say at last what she had wanted to all along. “He’ll hate me for it.”

Keziah glanced at the swordmaster, saw a sad smile on his face. She knew what he was thinking. He hates you already.

But he surprised her.

“Is that what’s stopping you?”

She nodded, afraid to speak.

“He’ll never hate you, Archminister. Even now, thinking you a traitor, he still loves you more than he can bear.” He reached out and took her hand, the first time he had ever done anything of the sort. His hand was calloused and rough, but oddly comforting. “Come with me to his chamber and we’ll explain all of this to him. You shouldn’t leave; neither of you wants that.”

“I’m afraid.”

“I know. But this is the only way. You know this as well as I do, even if you’re too stubborn to admit it.”

Keziah managed a weak smile.

Gershon led her to the door, releasing her hand to pull it open and usher her into the corridor. She had thought herself frightened already, but by the time they reached the door to Kearney’s presence chamber she could barely stand for the shaking of her legs. Gershon knocked and gave her a quick smile.

“It’ll be all right.”

“Enter!” came the call from within.

The swordmaster pushed the door open and led Keziah into the chamber. Marston was still with the king, and he stared at the two of them, his expression dark.

“What is this, swordmaster?” Kearney demanded. “I instructed you to see to this matter for me.”

“We need to speak with you, Your Majesty. In private.” This last he added with a glance at the thane. It occurred to Keziah that Gershon didn’t like Marston, that perhaps he resented the young noble’s sudden influence with the king.

Marston started to object, but the king nodded to him. "It's all right, Lord Shanstead. We'll speak later."

Frowning, the thane left them, closing the door a bit too loudly as he did.

Kearney eyed the swordmaster briefly, but refused even to look at Keziah. "Now, what is this about?"

"The archminister has something to tell you, Your Majesty. I'd ask you to listen to what she has to say."

"Gershon--"

"Please, Your Majesty. If, when she's done, you still wish her to leave Audun's Castle, I give you my word that she'll be gone within the day. But give her a chance to speak."

Keziah saw the muscles in the king's jaw clench, but after a moment's hesitation he turned his gaze on her. And she very nearly lost her nerve. Better just to leave than to suffer through this. "Well?" He sounded so impatient, so eager to have her gone.

The words wouldn't come. She looked at the swordmaster, feeling panic grip her heart. "I don't know how to tell him."

"Start with Paegar. That's how all this began."

Kearney stared at her with narrowed eyes. "What about Paegar?"

Paegar jal Berget had been high minister to the king, and Keziah's one friend in Audun's Castle in the first turns she spent in the royal city. He had also been a traitor, a member of the Qirsi conspiracy. Gershon was right. It all started with him.

She began slowly, reminding the king of how he had asked her to see to the high minister's personal belongings after Paegar's death several turns before, and revealing that she had found over two hundred qinde in gold coins hidden in his wardrobe. She told of her belief that the minister had been a traitor, and of her decision to learn what she could of the Qirsi

conspiracy. When she explained how she had done all she could to anger the king, to convince both Kearney and any traitor still living in the castle that she was ready to be turned to the renegades' cause, she couldn't keep the tears from her eyes. Still she went on, telling of her first encounter with the Weaver, describing how he had hurt her, making it clear that if she refused him, he'd kill her. And finally, she told him how she had managed to convince the Weaver that she was indeed committed to his cause.

As she spoke of this, Kearney stood and walked to the window, so that she could no longer see his face. Even after she finished, he didn't turn, and for a long time no one in the chamber said a word.

"I knew of all this from the beginning, Your Majesty," Gershon said, after some time. "I supported the archminister's decision to seek out the conspiracy, and I agreed that she shouldn't tell you."

"Did you do all this to avenge Paegar?" Kearney asked, ignoring the swordmaster, his voice so low that at first Keziah wasn't certain she had heard him properly.

"I did it to strike at the conspiracy." I did it for you. "I was grieving for Paegar, but I didn't know at the time that the Weaver had killed him." She paused, knowing what lurked behind his question, but unsure as to whether she should say more. In the end, she decided that she had little left to lose. "I never loved Paegar, Your Majesty. In my entire life, I've only loved one man."

He turned to her. "What is it this Weaver expects of you?" The way he asked the question one might have thought he hadn't heard what she said. Keziah felt something within her wither and die.

"He wants me to convince you to take a harder stance with the duke of Kentigern and those who stand with him. And he's ordered me to kill Cresenne, which is why I can't leave

Audun's Castle with her."

"She shouldn't leave Audun's Castle at all, Your Majesty. That should be obvious now."

The king glared at Gershon. Keziah would have fallen silent immediately had he looked at her so, but the swordmaster was not so easily cowed.

"The archminister has given us an opportunity to learn a great deal about the conspiracy and this Weaver who leads it. We need to give her every chance to finish what she's begun. And we have to do everything in our power to keep her safe. That means keeping her here with you, where we can protect her, and where it will seem to the Weaver that she continues to serve his cause."

"What role did your brother play in this?" Kearney asked her.

"None, Your Majesty. He was as surprised to learn of it as you must be. And he was angry with me for even making the attempt."

"Well, that makes two of us."

She lowered her gaze. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"I can't decide if I should be railing at you for being so damned foolish or thanking you for risking so much for the realm."

Gershon grinned. "I've done both by turns, Your Majesty."

Kearney eyed the swordmaster briefly, but didn't answer.

"Obviously I won't be sending you from the castle," the king went on a moment later. "I have no desire to endanger your life, and as the swordmaster points out, you may be able to tell us a good deal about the conspiracy."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you."

"What would you have me do about the woman?"

"She should remain here, Your Majesty."

“I thought you said that the Weaver wants you to kill her. Won’t she be safer elsewhere?”

“No. As soon as the Weaver learns that I can no longer reach her, he’ll kill her himself. So long as he believes I intend to do this, he’ll leave her alone. He sees this as a test of my commitment to his cause, a test he wants me to pass.”

Kearney didn’t look pleased, but he nodded. “All right. She’ll remain here.” He started to say something more, then stopped himself. After a moment he said, “You can go, Archminister. We’ll speak of this again.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” She bowed to him, glanced at Gershon, who was watching the king. Abruptly feeling self-conscious, she walked to the door. Before she opened it, however, she faced the king again. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty.”

His expression didn’t change, but he nodded a second time. “Apology accepted.”

She let herself out of the chamber, and walked away from the guards standing in the corridor, all the while keeping a tight hold on her emotions. Only when she was safely back in her own quarters, with the door shut and locked, did she allow herself to cry. And once she began, she felt as if she never would stop.