

Chapter 1

City of Kings, Eibithar, Adriel's Moon waxing

The touch of his mind on hers was as gentle as the Weaver's had been brutal, as tender and loving as the Weaver's had been vengeful and cruel. She sensed in that touch his passion, his longing to be with her, his hope that he could shield her from the pain that seemed to have enveloped all the land. And she wanted nothing more than to hold him in her arms -- really to hold him, beyond this haven he had created so that he might speak with her as she slept -- to show him that she yearned for him, too.

Theirs was the most unlikely of loves, having overcome deception, betrayal, and her devotion to the Weaver's conspiracy. But feeling the caress of his thoughts, Cresenne could not question the power of what they shared.

"Tell me about Bryntelle," Grinsa whispered, still holding her close amid the sun-warmed grasses of the plain he had conjured for this dream.

How could she not smile at the mention of their daughter? The girl had been the lone spar of light in a darkness that had consumed her days and nights over the past several turns.

"Bryntelle's fine. She's been up much of the day, crying, but I think that's because she's getting her first tooth."

He pulled away slightly, looking down at her, his face lit by a dazzling smile. "A tooth? Really?"

Cresenne nodded. "It's not much right now -- just a little bump on her gums. But one of the healers tells me that once it appears it'll grow in very quickly."

Grinsa was still smiling, but there was a pained look in his eyes. “I wish I could be there to see it.”

“Soon,” she said, looking down, her chest tight. She sensed that he wanted to kiss her, and she kept her face turned away from his. “Has the fighting begun?”

“Yes, we fought our first skirmish this morning.”

At that she did look up. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, fine.”

“And Keziah?”

“She is, too. As are Kearney and Tavis.”

“Good.” She nodded again, shivering as if the warm breeze had grown icy and harsh. “That’s good.” She hesitated. Then, “Have you seen the Weaver yet?” Her stomach turned to stone as she spoke the words, but she tried to keep her voice even.

Grinsa shook his head. “Not yet. I expect he wants the war to begin in earnest before he reaches the Moorlands. The more damage the Eandi do to each other, the easier his task when the time comes.”

She felt certain that he was right. While Grinsa and the Weaver had little in common beyond their powers and their formidable appearance, Grinsa had come to understand the conspiracy’s leader quite well. Only a year before, he had been but a gleaner in Eibithar’s Revel, concealing the true extent of his powers and spending his days and his magic showing others glimpses of their futures. Now he was an adviser to kings and nobles, though still they called him gleaner. Cresenne of all people, having been one of the Weaver’s most trusted servants -- a chancellor in his movement -- knew how strong the enemy was, and so how great the land’s

need. If anyone could destroy the Weaver and his movement, her beloved could. So why did she find it so difficult to take comfort in Grinsa's arms, to believe that he could prevail in this war that loomed before them, as black and menacing as some seaborne storm summoned by Amon himself?

For a long time, neither of them spoke. Cresenne sensed that Grinsa was gathering himself to end the dream. She could feel his despair at the distance between them, how he begrudged every day they spent apart. No, there could be no doubting the power of their love.

All of which made what the Weaver had done to her that much more galling.

"I should return to the front lines," he said, grimacing. "Who knows when the empire's men will attack again?"

"I understand."

"You'll kiss Bryntelle for me?"

Again she smiled. "Of course."

Grinsa pulled her close again, kissing her deeply. Cresenne returned the kiss with as much passion as she could muster, not wanting him to sense how she suffered for it.

At last he released her, a frown on his handsome face.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"It's nothing."

"Cresenne--"

"Please, Grinsa," she said, closing her eyes, wishing she could just sleep. "I just. . . It's going to take some time for me to. . . to heal."

"I want to help."

“You can’t. No one can,” she added, seeing how this hurt him. “Just make certain that you win. Killing the Weaver will do more to help me than you can know. Destroy him for me, and I’ll see to the rest.”

He just gazed at her, looking so sad. “I’ll do what I can.”

That’s not enough! she wanted to say. You can’t fail at this! He’ll kill me! He’ll kill Bryntelle! But he knew all of this. As much as she wanted Dusaan jal Kania dead, Grinsa wanted it more.

“I know you will.”

He brushed a strand of hair from her brow with the back of his hand. And even this gesture, done with such care and tenderness, was nearly enough to make her shudder with the memory of the Weaver’s brutality.

“I love you, Grinsa.”

“And I love you, more than you know.”

She awoke to the sound of swifts chattering as they soared past the narrow window of her chamber. Bryntelle still slept in her cradle, her arms stretched over her head, her mouth making suckling movements. Cresenne sat up, taking a long breath and running both hands through her hair. Grinsa deserved better from her. He carried the burdens of every man and woman of the Forelands on his shoulders, and all she could think to do was tell him what he already knew: that in order to be whole again she needed for him to destroy the Weaver.

Her wounds had healed, and in recent days she had finally begun to eat again, slowly regaining her strength after the poisoning that almost killed her. But the Weaver had left her with other scars that remained beyond a healer’s touch. True, she had managed to fight Dusaan off

and then to end that horrific dream before he could take her life, but the memory of rape clung to her bed, her hair, her body -- the stench of his breath, hot and damp against her neck. She could still feel him driving himself into her again and again, tearing her flesh, his weight bearing down on her until she wondered if she could even draw breath. She could hear him calling her "whore." It had only been a dream, she tried to tell herself, an illusion he had conjured by using her own magic against her. But did that lessen the humiliation or deepen it? It had been a violation in so many ways and on so many levels. Did his invasion of her mind make what he seemed to have done to her body any less real?

She feared that she might never again be able to bear Grinsa's touch. The Weaver had poisoned all of her dreams, even those in which her love spoke to her. Grinsa's merest kiss when he walked in her sleep, his most gentle caress, made her feel once more the savagery of Dusaan's assault. Cresenne wanted desperately to believe that it was the dreams that did this, that once she and Grinsa were together again, and he could hold her in his arms without touching her mind, everything would be all right. But she had no way of knowing this for certain, and doubt lay heavy on her heart.

Grinsa would have told her to sleep more. The sun would be up for several hours yet, and since she still didn't dare sleep at night, for fear of another attack from the Weaver, she wouldn't have another opportunity to rest for quite some time. But she was awake now, and she knew herself well enough to know that she could lie on her bed from now until dusk, and she wouldn't get back to sleep. Instead, she stared out the window and waited for Bryntelle to wake, knowing that the baby would be hungry when she did.

She didn't have long to wait. After nursing Bryntelle and changing her wet swaddling,

Cresenne took her daughter in her arms and left their small chamber to wander the grounds of Audun's Castle. It was a rare treat for them to be out of doors during the daylight hours; Cresenne savored the warm touch of the sun on her skin, and the mild breeze that stirred her hair. Bryntelle seemed to enjoy the day as well. She squinted up at the sun repeatedly and squealed happily at the sight of clove-pink and irises blooming brightly in the gardens.

One of the advantages of wandering the castle at night was that Cresenne rarely found herself in the company of others. She had no desire to make conversation with ladies in the queen's court, and she dreaded being recognized as the "Qirsi traitor." Nurle, the young healer who saw her through the poisoning, occasionally joined her after tending to patients during the course of the night, but mostly she and Bryntelle kept to themselves. On this day, however, there were several people walking the castle grounds, and though Cresenne was loath to return to her chamber, she dreaded the thought of being among other people, particularly since everyone she saw was Eandi.

Hesitating, yet eager to find some way to enjoy this day without having to endure the stares of all these people, Cresenne ducked into a small courtyard off one of the main paths that meandered through the garden.

She knew immediately that she had erred. Cresenne had only seen Leilia of Glyndwr, Eibithar's queen, once before, but she recognized the woman immediately. The queen was seated on a small marble bench in the middle of the courtyard. Sunlight angled across her face, making her skin look pale and thick. Her black hair was tied up in a tight bun and the dress she wore appeared so tight around the bust that Cresenne found it hard to imagine that she could be comfortable.

Several of the queen's ladies stood around her, chatting amiably, and four guards stood at attention nearby.

Cresenne had every intention of leaving the courtyard, but at that moment Bryntelle let out a small cry, drawing the stares of every person there. The guards turned toward her, glowering, and the ladies regarded her with frowns and pursed lips.

"Forgive me," she muttered, not entirely certain that they could even hear her. "I didn't know there was anyone here." She curtsied quickly and started to leave.

"You there! Wait a moment!"

Cresenne turned back to them. Leilia was eyeing her with obvious interest, though there was no warmth in her expression.

"Yes, Your Highness," Cresenne said, curtsying again.

For a moment she wondered if the queen expected her to approach, but then Leilia stood, and as the guards rushed to her side the queen began to walk toward her. Leilia paused, regarded them with obvious disdain, and waved a hand, seeming to dismiss them. One of the men said something to her in a low voice, but she merely glared at him until he bowed and backed away. Then she started toward Cresenne again.

Bryntelle had begun to make a good deal of noise -- she wasn't crying, fortunately, nor did she seem particularly unhappy. But she certainly was being loud. Leilia glanced at the babe as she drew near, but only for a moment. Mostly, she kept her dark eyes fixed on Cresenne.

"They tell me that you're the renegade," the queen said, stopping just in front of Cresenne, and gesturing vaguely at the soldiers behind her. "The one who had Brienne killed. Is this true?"

Cresenne stared at the ground before her, her cheeks burning. A thousand replies sprang to her lips, any one of which would have earned her a summary hanging. In the end, she merely muttered, “Yes, Your Highness.”

“They also warn me that you might make an attempt on my life. Is that your intent?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“Good. Walk with me.”

Leilia stepped out of the courtyard, and turned toward the north corner of the gardens, leaving Cresenne little choice but to follow. Emerging from the courtyard, she found Leilia waiting for her a few strides away, an arch look on her face.

“Well?” the queen said. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Yes, of course, Your Highness. Forgive me.”

But even after Cresenne reached her, the queen didn’t resume her walking, at least not immediately. Instead, she regarded Cresenne’s face critically, as if examining a new piece of art. It took Cresenne but a second to realize that Leilia was staring at her scars. She had to resist an urge to stomp off.

“You’ve healed well.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“I can see why some think you pretty.”

“Do they, Your Highness?”

Leilia began to walk again, sniffing loudly. “Come now, my dear. Let’s not be coy. I’m certain that you’ve had no shortage of men in your life. Certainly, Eandi men seem fascinated by your kind.”

Something in the way the queen said this caught her ear. As she hurried to keep up with the woman, Cresenne remembered that during her many conversations with Keziah ja Dafydd, Eibithar's archminister, she had found herself speculating about Keziah's relationships with both Grinsa and Kearney, the king. On several occasions she had wondered if one of the men might have been Keziah's lover. The same thought came to her now. Leilia sounded very much the wounded wife, though clearly she had no cause to be jealous of Cresenne.

"Silenced you, have I?" the queen said, glancing at her sidelong.

"Have I given offense in some way, Your Highness? Is that why you wished to speak with me?"

That, of all things, brought a smile to Leilia's lips, though it was fleeting. "No. You haven't given offense. I've been . . . curious about you."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"I've been a curiosity since I arrived here, Your Highness."

"Yes, I sure you have. Is that why you spend your days in your chamber and your nights wandering the castle corridors?"

She thought the queen a strange woman. Her directness was both disconcerting and refreshing, and while Cresenne thought it best to keep her replies circumspect, she sensed that Leilia would not have taken offense had she chosen to be more candid.

"Actually, Your Highness, I sleep during the day to avoid the Weaver who attacks me in my dreams."

"I'd heard that, but I wondered if there were other reasons as well."

Cresenne said nothing.

“The child doesn’t seem to mind?”

“She’s hardly known any other way to live.”

Leilia nodded, and they walked in silence for several moments, Cresenne gazing at a bed of brilliant ruby peonies.

“Tell me of the child’s father,” the queen said abruptly.

Cresenne made herself smile, sensing that their conversation had taken a perilous turn.

“Her father, Your Highness?”

“Yes. This tall Qirsi who’s been the subject of so much talk throughout the castle.”

“I didn’t know that people were speaking of him.”

“Shouldn’t they? He’s little more than a Revel gleaner, yet he was Tavis of Curch’s lone confidant over the last year, and my husband thinks highly enough of him to include him in councils of war. Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

“Grinsa is a wise man, Your Highness, as I’m sure Lord Tavis will attest. I’ve no doubt that he’ll serve the king well.”

“I’m not questioning his worth, my dear. I’m merely asking you to tell me more about him. And I sense your reluctance.”

“I’m not--”

“Don’t dissemble with me.” Leilia glanced at her again, as if gauging Cresenne’s reaction. “Is he a traitor? Is that it? Have you both contrived this elaborate farce to gain Kearney’s trust?”

“No, Your Highness! I swear it! Grinsa’s no traitor!”

Again, the queen smiled. "I believe you. You love him very much."

Cresenne nodded, afraid to speak. She had come close to losing him so many times, all of them her own fault. She had betrayed him, sent assassins for him, and nearly driven him away with her stubborn, foolish devotion to the Weaver and his movement. And she knew that she might lose him still. Or he her. Who could say whether he would survive the fighting between the Eandi armies, much less his inevitable encounter with Dusaan? Who knew how many more of the Weaver's servants had been sent to kill her?

"You fear for him."

"I fear for all of us, Your Highness. I've seen how wicked this Weaver is, though I was blind to it for too long."

"Kearney will find a way to prevail." The corners of her mouth twitched. "He always does." When Cresenne didn't respond, the queen looked at her again. "War is hardest on the women, you know. It's always been so, though men will deny it. Remaining behind, awaiting the outcome, fearing that the next messenger will bear word that your husband or lover or brother has fallen." She gazed up at the sky, as if to judge the time. "I envy the women of Sanbira, who fight their own battles alongside the men. Their way strikes me as being far more just."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"You're humoring me." She wore a smirk on her fleshy face.

"No, Your Highness! I was just--"

"It's all right, my dear. I suppose I deserve it. I find it easy to complain here, safe behind Audun's walls. But given the opportunity to ride to war, I'm not at all certain that I would." She

frowned. “Does that make me a coward?”

“I believe it makes you honest, Your Highness.”

Leilia laughed. “Well said, my dear! I’ll take that as a compliment!”

Bryntelle started at the sound of the queen’s laughter, but then let out a squeal and offered a grin of her own.

“What’s the child’s name?”

“Her name is Bryntelle, Your Highness.”

“Bryntelle. That’s lovely.” She regarded the baby for a time, looking as if she wished to hold her. But the queen never asked, and Cresenne thought it presumptuous to offer.

“Is she the reason you did it?” the Queen finally asked, meeting Cresenne’s gaze.

“Your Highness?”

“Is she reason you turned away from the conspiracy?”

Cresenne didn’t want to talk about this, not with Grinsa, or Keziah, or the king, and certainly not with this odd woman standing before her. But how did one refuse a queen?

The truth was, everything she had done, both on behalf of the Weaver and to thwart him, she had believed she was doing for this child, or at the very least, for the promise of her. She joined the movement to create a better world, not only for herself, but also for the child she knew she would someday bear. After Bryntelle’s birth, Grinsa threatened to take the child from her in order to compel Cresenne to confess her crimes to Kearney. He knew as well as did Cresenne, that she would do anything to keep her child. And in the days since, she had come to see that the future once promised to her by the Weaver -- a future in which Qirsi ruled the Forelands through torture and murder and deception -- was not the one she wanted for her daughter. More than

anything, she wished to see Dusaan's movement defeated, and she had resolved long ago that she would not allow herself to be killed, not merely because she wished to live, not merely because by surviving she defied the Weaver, but because she would not allow her child to grow up without a mother's love. Bryntelle had been the most powerful force in her life for as long as she could remember, going back far beyond the consummation of her love affair with Grinsa.

“Yes, Your Highness, I did it for Bryntelle, at first because I feared having her taken from me, and more recently because I've come to realize that I don't want the Weaver's tyranny to be my legacy to her and her children.”

“That's more of an answer than I expected.”

Cresenne looked down at Bryntelle, whose pale yellow eyes shone in the late day sun like torch fire. “It's merely the truth.”

“I've never had much use for your kind, and I never thought I'd go looking to a Qirsi for any kind of truth. But you impress me.”

Cresenne couldn't help the small noise that escaped her.

“You find that amusing?”

She knew that she should just deny it and end their conversation, but she had been honest up to this point, and pride would not allow her to be anything less now.

“Not amusing, Your Highness. But I have to wonder if you truly think I should be flattered by what you just said.”

Leilia's face shaded to scarlet and Cresenne felt certain that she had pushed the queen too far. The woman surprised her, though.

“No,” the queen said, the smirk returning. “I don't suppose I do. You'll have to forgive

me. My past . . . encounters with Qirsi women have been rather unpleasant.”

Now she was certain about Keziah and the king, although she knew better than to reveal as much to the queen.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Your Highness. Our peoples have struggled with such misunderstandings for centuries. Perhaps if more of us simply spoke our minds, we’d find a way past these conflicts.”

“Perhaps.” A faint smile touched her lips and was gone. “I should return to my ladies before they send the guards out to search for us.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Shall I accompany you back to them?”

Leilia waved the suggestion away. “No need, my dear. I daresay I know the way.” She started to turn, then paused, eyeing Cresenne once more. “Is there anything you need?”

“Anything I need?” she repeated, knowing how foolish she sounded.

“Yes. Are you comfortable? Are you and your child getting enough food, enough blankets? Would you feel better with more guards outside your door?”

On more than one occasion in the past several turns, Cresenne had been surprised by the kindnesses shown to her by Eandi men and women, be they wandering merchants in the Glyndwr Highlands or lords and sovereigns in the noble courts. But nothing that any of them had done surprised her more than this question from Eibithar’s peculiar queen.

“Thank you, Your Highness. We’re just fine.”

“Very well. If you think of anything, you only need ask.”

“Again, Your Highness, my thanks.”

Cresenne curtsied once more, then straightened and watched the queen walk away. Only

when Leilia had disappeared into the small courtyard did Cresenne leave the gardens and make her way to the castle kitchen. It would soon be dark, and the kitchenmaster had made it clear to her long ago that she was to be out of his way before it came time to feed the queen and the ladies of her court.

Besides, after dusk the courtyards and corridors emptied, leaving Cresenne and her daughter free to wander in solitude. It was her favorite part of the day.

Chapter 2

Dantrielle, Aneira

Not long ago -- only a few days by his reckoning, though it was hard to keep track in this prison cell -- Pronjed jal Drenthe had been archminister of Aneira, the most powerful Qirsi in all the realm. Now, with the failure of Numar of Renbrere's siege at Castle Dantrielle and the collapse of the Solkaran Supremacy, which Pronjed had served, he was but a prisoner of Dantrielle's duke, his ministerial robes tattered and soiled, his hair matted, his skin itching with vermin and sweat. For another man, this might have been a humiliation, cause to despair in his dark, lonely chamber. But not for Pronjed. He was a powerful sorcerer, a man with resources beyond the imaginings of the foolish Eandi who guarded him day and night. He possessed shaping power with which to shatter the iron door to his cell. He wielded mind-bending magic with which he could turn Dantrielle's guards to his purposes. He could raise mists and winds, which would allow him to elude his captors once he was free of the tower. Even the silk bonds holding his wrists and ankles wouldn't be enough to stop him, though they presented something

of a challenge. He had been planning his escape almost since the moment of his capture. He knew just how he would win his freedom. Despite what the Eandi might have thought, this prison of theirs couldn't hold him.

And yet here he remained. Pronjed had thought to escape several nights before, in the tumult just after the breaking of Numar's siege, when Tebeo, duke of Dantrielle was still occupied with removing dead soldiers from the wards of his castle and determining, with the aid of his allies, how best to proceed now that the Supremacy had been toppled.

But somehow one of his own people, Evanthya ja Yispar, Dantrielle's first minister, had divined his mind. Not only did she know of his intent to escape; she had guessed as well that he planned to head north from Dantrielle to meet the Weaver in Eibithar, on the battle plain near Galdasten. She claimed that she would do nothing to hinder him, that all she wanted was to follow, so that she might find her lover, Fetnalla ja Prandt, Orvinti's first minister, who had betrayed and killed her duke. But Pronjed had been so badly shaken by their conversation that he now found himself afraid to make the attempt. He had sensed no deception on Evanthya's part -- it truly seemed she wished only to find her love. But what if he were mistaken? What if he allowed himself to be followed, only to find that the minister had found some way to thwart the Weaver's plans? He thought this unlikely, but he would have been a fool to dismiss the idea entirely.

The Weaver expected him to join the Qirsi army; Pronjed desired this, as well. He expected his service to the movement to be rewarded with power and wealth. The Weaver had often spoken to him of creating a new class of Qirsi nobility, and the archminister had every intention of claiming his place among them. The previous night he had resolved at last to escape

his chamber, notwithstanding the risk of being followed by the first minister. Although still unwilling to trust that she meant no harm to the movement, he was confident he could kill her should the need arise.

And yet, even after the midnight bells tolled in the city he couldn't bring himself to try. Fear held him in the chamber; fear as unyielding as that iron door, as immune to his power as the silk bonds. How had Evanthya known so much about him and his intentions? She was but one woman -- what danger could she pose to a movement as vast as theirs? Though blessed with a keen mind and more courage than he would have expected from one with such a slight frame and reserved manner, she would have been no match for Pronjed in a battle of magic. Yet, several hours later, when the dawn bells rang and the sky began to brighten, the dark of night giving way to the soft grey light of early morning, Pronjed still sat in his prison.

He had made the mistake of angering the Weaver once -- when he killed Carden the Third, Aneira's king, assuming incorrectly that the Weaver would be pleased. He could still feel the way the bone in his hand had shattered, the pain so severe he could barely remain conscious. The Weaver, who could be so generous with his gold, was no less stingy with his punishment when the occasion demanded. That memory, as much as anything, kept Pronjed in his chamber, grappling with his uncertainty.

Nothing in his past, however, could have prepared him for the conversation he had later that same morning. The last peals of the midmorning bells were still echoing through the castle when he heard a light footfall in the corridor outside his chamber and then a woman's voice he recognized immediately.

"Open the door and then leave us," Evanthya told the two guards.

“We’re to remain in the corridor at all times, First Minister,” one of the men answered.

“Duke’s orders.”

Silence. After several moments, she said, “Fine then. Let me into the chamber.”

“Yes, First Minister.”

It took the man but a moment to find the correct key. After he opened the door, Evanthya stepped past him into the chamber, then pulled the door shut behind her.

“One of us should be in there with you, First Minister.”

“It’s all right. I’ve a dagger with me. I’ll call for you when I’m ready to leave.”

She faced Pronjed, her cheeks flushed, her expression grim. Her yellow eyes were as bright as blooms in the castle gardens, and her fine white hair hung loose to her shoulders. Pronjed knew that she loved another, a woman at that, but he couldn’t help noting how attractive she was.

“You realize, of course, that your dagger will do you no good against me,” he said quietly, not bothering to stand. He held up his wrists so that she could see the silk ties. “There’s a reason I’m bound with these.”

“Yes, Archminister. You may remember, they were my idea in the first place. We both know that I won’t need the weapon at all. You have no intention of harming me.”

“How can you be so sure?”

She had stepped closer to him and now she cast a quick glance at the door. “Because,” she whispered, “if you try to hurt me you’ll either be executed or thrown in the castle dungeon. You aren’t ready to die, and if you’re placed in the dungeon, you’ll have a much harder time escaping.”

Pronjed's eyes flicked toward the door. Neither of the guards appeared to be listening. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Stop it. Of course you do. And I want to know why you've yet to make the attempt."

"What?"

"Why haven't you tried to escape?"

Perhaps there was an opportunity here. "Because I have no intention of escaping. I never have."

"You're lying."

"You seem terribly sure of yourself, First Minister, and yet, as you yourself point out, I've made no attempt to win my freedom. Isn't it possible that you've been wrong about me, that in your haste to pursue Fetnalla, you've imagined a traitor where there is none?"

"No, it's not," she said. But Pronjed heard doubt in her words and pressed his advantage.

"I can imagine how hard it must have been for you, hearing of Lord Orvinti's death, knowing that there could be little doubt but that Fetnalla was responsible."

"Be quiet!"

"Still, just because the first minister proved false, doesn't mean that I will as well. I'm sure that would be of great comfort to you, but it's just not--"

"I told you to be quiet!" In a swirl of her ministerial robes and a blur of white and steel, she was on him, her forearm pressed against his chest so that he was forced back against the stone wall, her blade at his throat.

It was all Pronjed could do not to shatter the dagger instantly. He tried to reassure himself that she needed him too much to kill him, and that she couldn't risk harming him in any

way and thus raising the suspicions of her duke. But he was trembling, and the edge of her blade felt cold and dangerous against his neck.

“First Minister?” one of the guards called from the grated window in the iron door, sounding alarmed.

“Leave us alone!” she said.

The man looked at Pronjed briefly, a smirk on his lips. Then he turned away.

“Why don’t you shatter my blade, Archminister?” she said, her voice dropping once more. “Or do you intend to tell me now that you’re not really a shaper?”

“This is foolishness, Evanthya. As you’ve already made clear to me, I can’t afford to harm you. Nor are you going to hurt me. You still believe that I can lead you to Fetnalla. So put your dagger away, and let’s speak of this civilly.”

Evanthya glared at him another moment, her weapon still held to his throat. Finally, slowly, she released him and sheathed the blade. “All right,” she said. “Tell me why you’re still here, or I’ll go to the duke and convince him to put you in the dungeon.”

“Another empty threat. As I say, you need me, or at least you think you do.”

“I need you as an excuse to go after Fetnalla, Archminister. Nothing more. Tebeo won’t let me pursue her -- he sees no sense in it so long after Brall’s murder. But if you escape, I can prevail upon him to let me follow you. He hasn’t enough men left to send soldiers after you, so he’ll send me.”

“As I said--”

“But if you don’t tell me what I want to know, I’ll send you to the dungeon and then leave Dantrielle without his permission. I’ll forfeit my title and place in his court if I have to. As

I've told you once before, all I want is to get Fetnalla back. I don't care about anything else. I certainly don't give a damn about you."

A braver man might have been willing to test her resolve, to force her either to give up her position in Tebeo's court or prove that her threats amounted to nothing. But Pronjed felt his nerve failing him at the mere suggestion of being sent to the castle dungeon.

"I haven't made the attempt," he said at last, "because I've been unable to decide whether you truly wish to find her, or have been hoping to lure me into a trap."

That, of all things, seemed to leave her speechless. She opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again. The archminister would have laughed had he not been trembling at the realization of what he had done. With that small admission he had, in effect, confirmed for her all that she had been assuming about him.

"Is that true?" she finally asked him, her voice so soft that he could barely hear her.

"It is."

"Damn." She raked a hand through her hair, closing her eyes briefly. "We've lost a good deal of time. There's no telling where she is by now."

"Perhaps then, it no longer makes sense for you to follow me."

"I didn't say that I was ready to give up."

"And I didn't say that I was ready to let you follow me." She started to respond and Pronjed raised a hand, stopping her. "I know: you don't need my permission, and I might not be able to prevent it. But I'm obligated to try. I'd be a fool not to."

After a moment, she nodded. "So, when?"

Pronjed shook his head. He must have been an idiot. "Tonight," he whispered. Seeing

the doubtful look on her face, he added, "I swear it. I can't afford to wait any longer either."

She glanced toward the door. "Don't hurt the men. You have delusion magic. Use it."

He should have denied this, too. But like before he found himself helpless in the face of her certainty. He could argue the point for the rest of the day without convincing her. Instead, he shook his head. "I make you no promises in that regard. I'll do whatever I have to. If you really want to ensure their safety, you'll have these silk bonds removed. I can shatter manacles, but with these . . ." He shrugged.

"But your powers--"

"I can't control two men at one time, which means that the second guard will have to be incapacitated somehow. It's up to you, First Minister. If you truly care about these men, you'll help me."

Evanthya offered no reply, save to hold his gaze for a few moments more before straightening and crossing to the door.

"Guards!" she called.

One of the men was there immediately, unlocking the door and letting her out. An instant later he clanged the door shut again and threw the lock, the sound echoing in the chamber.

"Watch him closely," he heard Evanthya say to Tebeo's men. "It wouldn't surprise me if he tried to escape."

Pronjed just gaped at the door. The silk at his wrists and ankles felt tighter than ever.

Evanthya was trembling as she descended the stairway of the prison tower. Tonight.

She had never known that she could be afraid of so many things at one time. The

archminister, the Weaver, the castle guards, her duke and his reaction if he learned what she intended. And behind it all, the fear of her next encounter with Fetnalla. She no longer doubted that her beloved had betrayed the realm or that she had killed her duke, Brall of Orvinti. Nor did she have any illusions as to her own power to turn Fetnalla from the dark path she had chosen. Yet she had to try. She owed that much to herself, to both of them.

The two soldiers outside Pronjed's chamber had regarded her strangely when she stepped back into the corridor, a testament to how deep suspicions of the Qirsi still ran in Aneira. All the men in Castle Dantrielle knew how she had fought against the soldiers of Solkara and Rassor during the recent siege. They had seen her doing battle, back to back with the duke, risking her life on Tebeo's behalf. They had seen as well the mist and wind she raised to protect Dantrielle's men from enemy archers when Numar's invaders briefly took control of the castle ramparts. After all that, none could question her loyalty to Tebeo and his house.

Or so she had thought. For some still did, and these few would see a dark purpose in her whispered conversation with the archminister. And would they be wrong? Hadn't she been plotting the traitor's escape, ignoring the fact that he may well have been responsible for the death of Aneira's king? She had used her own gold to buy the murder of a Qirsi traitor in Mertesse. Wasn't she then an enemy of the conspiracy? Did sharing a bed with a traitor and wishing desperately to lie with her again negate all that she had done before?

These questions plagued her as she made her way across the castle's upper ward. Evanthya didn't even notice the two soldiers standing in her path until she had nearly walked into them.

"Pardon me," she said, flustered and feeling slightly dazed. "I didn't see you."

“Actually, First Minister, we was waitin’ for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes. The duke wants a word right away.”

The minister looked up at the window of Tebeo’s ducal chamber and saw that he was watching her, his round face lit by the morning sun.

She nodded, swallowing. “Of course.”

The two men fell in step on either side of her and in silence the three of them entered the nearest of the castle towers, climbed the stairway, and walked to Tebeo’s chamber. One of the guards knocked, and at the duke’s summons, he pushed open the door and motioned for Evanthya to enter. She nodded at the two men, trying with little success to smile, and stepped into the chamber. Neither man entered with her and an instant later she heard the door close.

Tebeo was still at the window, his back to her. “Please sit, First Minister.”

Evanthya took her usual seat near the duke’s writing table. Her heart was pounding so hard it was a wonder Tebeo didn’t notice.

“Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you, my lord.”

“Wine perhaps?”

She smiled, despite her fright. “I’m fine, my lord.”

He turned at that. “Are you?”

Evanthya shivered. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been impressed with your strength this past half turn since the breaking of the siege. You’ve done all that I’ve asked of you; as always your service to House Dantrielle has been

exemplary.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“I can only imagine how difficult it’s been for you.”

She felt the blood rush to her face and looked away. There would have been no sense in denying it. “Yes, my lord.”

“To be honest, I’m a bit surprised that you’re still here.”

Evanthya could only stare at him.

“I have some idea of how much you love her, and I know as well that you hate the conspiracy, that you’ve risked a great deal to strike at its leaders.”

Not long ago, Evanthya had told him of hiring the assassin to kill Shurik jal Marcine, and though he hadn’t approved, neither had he punished her, which would have been well within his prerogative as her sovereign.

“Had it been me,” he went on, “I would have gone after her already. That you haven’t speaks well of your devotion to me and this house.”

“You honor me, my lord,” she managed to say.

“I’m merely being honest. And I’d ask the same of you.”

“My lord?”

He came and sat beside her, a kindly look on his face. “What were you doing in the prison tower just now?” he asked, his voice so gentle it made her chest ache.

She tried to answer, to say anything at all, but instead she began to cry.

“There are only two men in the tower right now,” he said. “Numar and the archminister. And I doubt that you have much to say to the regent. That leaves Pronjed.”

When she didn't answer, he took a long breath.

"After all we've been through these past few turns, I'll never again question your loyalty.

I think you know that."

Evanthya nodded, tears coursing down her face.

"Still, I need to know what you and he discussed. As much as I trust you, I fear the archminister. You've told me yourself how dangerous he is. If my castle is in peril--"

"It's not, my lord."

In the next moment she thought of the last words Pronjed had spoken to her and the danger his escape might pose to Tebeo's guards, and she regretted offering even this meager assurance.

"You're certain of this?"

She lowered her gaze again. "Not for certain, no."

"You must tell me, Evanthya. You know you must."

A thousand denials leaped to mind, all of them lies. How different would she be from Fetnalla if she resorted to any of them?

"He means to escape, my lord."

"Escape? How?"

"He has mind-bending magic, mists and winds, and shaping power. It should be a fairly simple matter."

"Then why hasn't he done so already?"

"Because several days ago I informed him of my intention to follow him, and he fears a trap."

The duke expressed no surprise. His expression didn't even change, save for a momentary closing of the eyes.

“In other words, you meant to let him go, though surely his escape would strengthen the conspiracy.”

“He can lead me to her, my lord.”

“That hardly justifies it.”

“We'd merely be exchanging one traitor for another. Pronjed might join them, but Fetnalla won't.”

His eyebrows went up. “You believe you can turn her from the renegades?”

“I have to try. If that doesn't work, I'll find some other way to keep her from joining them. In any case, she won't be fighting alongside her Weaver.”

Tebeo frowned. “I hate to have to say this, Evanthya, but Fetnalla is dangerous, too. She used magic to kill Brall, and as you've often told me, yours are not the powers of a warrior. You're still thinking of her as your love, but she's your enemy now. You may not be strong enough to defeat her.”

“I'm not without advantages of my own, my lord,” Evanthya said. “She may be formidable, but so am I, in my own way.” The minister was surprised at herself. Pride had always been Fetnalla's failing.

Tebeo smiled, as might an indulgent parent. “You needn't try to convince me of your worth, First Minister. I saw you fight for this castle. I stood and did battle with my back to yours, and never did I fear that a killing blow would come from behind.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“I fear losing you, not only because I value your counsel, but also because I count you as a friend.”

“Then think for a moment as my friend, rather than as my duke. Do you honestly believe that I can simply remain here while Fetnalla fights beside the Weaver? After what she’s done, how can I not go after her?”

He shook his head. “This wasn’t your fault, Evanthya. You couldn’t have known--”

“But I should have! There’s no one in the world who knows her as I do. She was acting so strangely the last time we were together.” She brushed a tear from her cheek. “It should have been obvious.”

“You ask too much of yourself.”

“The person I love most in this world revealed has herself as a traitor and murderer. How can I not blame myself?”

The duke winced, seeming to cast about for something to say.

“You want to tell me that you can’t answer, that the duchess would never do anything of the sort. And of course you’re right. But until just a short time ago, I had no reason to think otherwise about Fetnalla.”

The duke stood and walked back to his open window. “I can’t even begin to imagine what that must be like,” he said, gazing out at the castle ward. He said nothing for a long time, until Evanthya began to wonder if he was waiting for her to say more. At last, however, he faced her again. “If it were simply a matter of giving you leave to go, I’d do so in an instant, despite my fears for your safety. But you’re asking me to allow Pronjed to escape, and that I can’t do. We suspect him of the foulest crimes against the realm, and I fear he remains a threat to all of

us.”

“I can’t find her alone, my lord.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He’s going to escape whether I follow him or not! It’s simply a matter of how much damage he does to your castle and how many men he manages to maim and kill in the process!”

“Don’t you believe I can stop him?”

“Not if he’s determined to win his freedom, no.”

Tebeo let out a short harsh laugh. “Evanthya, I command an entire army. He may be powerful, but he’s only one man.”

“Then why is it so important that you keep him here?”

The duke hesitated, then smiled wryly and shook his head. “You’re playing games with me, now.”

“I assure you, my lord, this is no game. He can lead me to Fetnalla, and she, in turn, can lead me to the conspiracy. There’s far more to be gained by letting him go. If I can find Fetnalla, if I can turn her from this dark path she’s on, perhaps she and I together can strike a blow against the renegades. Wouldn’t that be worth something?”

“It would, were it possible. But I don’t believe it is. I’m sorry, Evanthya, but I believe that Fetnalla has gone too far to turn back. And as you’ve told me yourself, the archminister is a threat to us all. I can’t let him escape, and I’ll look upon any attempt on your part to help him do so. . . as a most serious offense.”

He had been going to say, “as an act of treason.” She was certain of it. It was a measure of how much he cared for her that he didn’t.

The duke crossed to his door, pulled it open, and beckoned to one of the guards. “Have the master of arms sent to me immediately,” he said.

“What are you going to do, my lord?” Evanthya asked, as Tebeo closed the door again.

“I’m going to double the guard in the corridor outside his chamber, and place extra guards in every corridor that offers access to the prison tower.”

The minister shook her head. “All you’re doing is placing more men in danger, my lord. A shaper can shatter bone with a thought. A man with delusion magic can make a man do nearly anything -- it’s quite possible that Pronjed made the king kill himself.”

“So what can I do?”

“That’s my point. I’m not certain you can do anything without putting more lives at risk. This is one instance in which your army can’t help you. If he was in a courtyard surrounded by one hundred archers, you might be able to stop him, though his power of mists and winds would make it difficult. But he’s in a prison tower, where the corridors are narrow, and only a few men can stand against him at any given time.”

“Surely four men outside his door will make his escape more difficult than would two.”

“A bit. But in the end you’d merely have to build four pyres rather than two.”

Tebeo rubbed a hand over his face, looking forlorn. “How does one fight such an enemy?”

No doubt this was a question Eandi lords were asking themselves throughout the Forelands.

“You fight them just as you would any cunning, powerful foe: by forging alliances, by using tactics that you’ve never thought to employ before, and by choosing your battles

carefully.”

He eyed her for several moments. “What do you suggest?”

“You know what I want you to do, my lord. Let him go. Remove one of the guards from the corridor outside his chamber.”

“What?”

“If only one man is there, Pronjed can use his mind-bending magic on the man. He can free himself from the chamber without harming anyone. Indeed, if we plan this well, he can escape without hurting a single man.”

“Did you speak to him of this as well?”

Evanthya felt her face coloring once again. “Yes, my lord. Forgive me. I was--”

“No. It’s all right. We’re living in extraordinary times. My loyal minister is conspiring with a Qirsi renegade to effect his escape in a way that saves Eandi lives. I suppose it’s funny, in a way.”

“It’s a bitter jest, my lord. You should know that I hate this man. I do this for Fetralla, and because I believe that I can help those who are fighting the conspiracy.”

A lengthy pause, and then, “You’d be the only one of us.”

Evanthya frowned. “My lord?”

“Men from Mertesse and Solkara marched north to fight the Eibitharians, but I doubt that they’ll join forces with the enemy to fight this Weaver and his renegades. And even if we had a king to lead us, I’m not certain that we could provision an army and send it north in time to take part in a war against the conspiracy. Be it through our own foolishness or the machinations of the traitors, Aneira has been effectively removed from this battle. You’d be the only one of us

who could strike a blow.”

She couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. “Does that mean you'll let me go, my lord?”

He exhaled heavily, his whole frame seeming to sag with his surrender. “I must be mad,” he muttered.

“My lord?”

“I won't try to stop you.”

Her heart was pounding once more, with excitement, with fear, with the anticipation of war. “And the archminister?”

“You say that if there's only one guard up there, he won't harm the man?”

“He'd have no reason to.”

“Save for his hatred of the Eandi.”

She shrugged, then nodded, conceding the point.

Before she could answer, there came a knock at the door. Tebeo stared at her a moment, before calling for whoever had come to enter. The door opened and Gabrys DinTavo, Tebeo's master of arms, entered the chamber.

Seeing Evanthya, the man hesitated and gave a small nod. Then he faced the duke and bowed.

“You sent for me, my lord?”

“Yes, armsmaster.” The duke returned to his writing table and sat, his face pale. “How many men do we currently have standing guard in the prison tower?”

Gabrys cast a quick glance at Evanthya. “There are four, my lord, two each outside the

chambers of the regent and archminister. Plus we have men in the ward outside the tower, and along the corridors that lead to it. That would be sixteen men in all, my lord.”

“That strikes me as being quite a few.”

“Yes, my lord. It would be for ordinary prisoners. But these men are far from ordinary. We’ve felt all along that one or both of them may try to escape.”

“But wouldn’t we be well served to have some of these men working on the ramparts and battlements? The repairs are going slowly.”

The master of arms looked at Evanthya once more, suspicion in his dark eyes.

“Perhaps he should know, my lord,” she said, thinking again of the soldiers outside Pronjed’s chamber.

Tebeo nodded. “Very well.”

“Know what, my lord?”

“We intend to allow the archminister to escape. I want only one guard positioned by his door, and I want the south corridor on the ground level cleared of men entirely.”

To Gabrys’s credit, he offered no reaction, other than to say, “May I ask why, my lord?”

“This was my idea, armsmaster,” Evanthya said. “I’m going to follow him when he leaves the castle. I believe Pronjed can lead me to . . . to the leaders of the Qirsi conspiracy.”

Before becoming master of arms, Gabrys had seemed wary of her, as so many Eandi warriors are distrustful of all Qirsi. But after Tebeo named him as successor to Bausef DarLesta, who was killed during the recent siege, the new master of arms put aside his suspicions, appearing to recognize that Evanthya had the duke’s trust. And Gabrys, of all people, understood how desperately she fought to save Castle Dantrielle. She sensed that he no longer doubted her

loyalty.

Still, she was not yet ready to reveal to him that she sought her beloved. And he was not ready to trust her on this matter.

“With all respect, First Minister, this is madness. What’s to stop him from killing you once he’s free? For that matter, what’s to stop him from helping the regent escape and allowing the Solkarans to menace us once more?”

She shook her head. “He has no interest in helping the regent, armsmaster. All he wants to do is go north to join his fellow renegades. As for killing me. . .” She looked away. “That’s my concern, not yours.”

“My lord--”

“I know what you’re going to say, Gabrys. I’ve already argued as you would. But Evanthya has convinced me that we risk more by trying to keep the archminister here. He means to escape, and given the powers he wields, we’ll have a difficult time stopping him.”

“We can put him in the dungeon.”

To her horror, Tebeo appeared to consider this.

“Please don’t,” Evanthya said, crying again, cursing herself for her weakness. “You have to understand, armsmaster. I need this man. No one else can help me find her.” She regretted the words as soon as they crossed her lips.

“Her?” the master of arms repeated, his eyes narrowing.

“It’s all right, Gabrys,” the duke said quietly. “She refers to Lord Orvinti’s first minister. She believes the archminister can lead us to her as well.”

The man frowned. “Again, my lord, I must advise you not to do this.”

“I know. I share your concern, Gabrys, but against my better judgement I’m going to do as Evanthya requests.”

Gabrys was a soldier, and Evanthya had to give him credit for his discipline. Clearly he wished to argue the matter further, but he nodded once, not even glancing in the first minister’s direction, and said, “Is there anything else, my lord?”

“No, armsmaster, thank you. See to the removal of the guards.”

“Yes, my lord.”

He let himself out of the chamber, closing the door quietly, and leaving Evanthya alone with her duke. Perhaps for the last time.

“You’re certain about this?” Tebeo asked.

Abruptly she was trembling. “I am, my lord.”

Tebeo stood and walked to where she was sitting. Taking her hands in his, he made her stand as well, and then he gathered her in his arms.

“You have served me as faithfully as any minister has ever served a noble,” he whispered.

“And you’ve defended this house as bravely as any soldier who’s ever worn its colors.

Whenever you return, you’ll still be first minister of Dantrielle, and so long as I live, no other person will ever bear that title.”

Evanthya knew she should say something, but she couldn’t speak for her weeping and the aching in her throat. After several moments Tebeo released her, though he took hold of her hands again.

“Do you have everything you need?”

Evanthya nodded.

“Do you need gold?”

“I have some, my lord.”

“You should have more.” He let go of her hands and returned to his writing table.

Opening a small drawer, he produced a leather pouch that rang with the jingle of coins. Crossing back to her, he opened the purse and began to count out gold rounds. After a few seconds he put them back and handed her the entire pouch.

“Just take them all. It’s not much, really. Fifty qinde perhaps. But it should help.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“You should get food from the kitchens as well.”

But Evanthya shook her head. “No one else should know that I’m leaving.”

“Oh. . . of course.”

They stood in silence, their eyes locked. Evanthya’s tears still flowed, and Tebeo seemed to be searching for something more to say. In the end, the first minister merely stepped forward, kissed his cheek, and fled the chamber.

Just a short while after the ringing of the midday bells, the archminister heard men speaking in the corridor outside his chamber. The soldiers there and whoever else had come, kept their voices low, and though Pronjed strained to hear them, he could not. He hoped, though, that men had come with orders to replace the silk ties that still held him with iron shackles.

After some time, however, the conversation in the corridor ceased and still no one entered his chamber.

Had the first minister betrayed him? Had she tricked him into confessing his intentions

only to turn to her duke and warn him of the danger? He didn't think so -- he wasn't even certain that Evanthya was capable of such duplicity -- but in truth, he couldn't really be sure of anything anymore.

Actually that wasn't quite true. He knew with the assurance of a condemned man, that if he didn't join the Weaver in this war he would be killed, either in the dungeons of Dantrielle, or in his dreams by the Weaver himself. And so he resolved, despite his doubts, to carry through on his promise to escape this night.

His decision did little to calm him. In fact, as the day wore on, marked by the tolling of first the prior's bells and then the twilight bells, his apprehension only grew. Yes, he wielded deep magics. But if Evanthya had deceived him, even they might not be enough.

As night settled over the city of Dantrielle, darkening the narrow window of his chamber, he again heard footsteps in the hallway outside his door. A few moments later, one of the guards unlocked his door and stepped into the cell, bearing Pronjed's evening meal. The man placed it on the floor near the archminister, and straightened, clearly intending to leave again.

Before he could, Pronjed reached out with his power and touched the man's mind. Immediately the soldier's face went slack.

"Where is the other soldier?" Pronjed whispered.

"There is no other," the man said, his voice flat. "I'm here alone."

Pronjed gaped at him. "What?"

"I'm here alone."

"Since when?"

"Earlier today. The duke says you're not a threat anymore and we need only one man to

guard you.”

He eyed the man closely, searching for some sign that he was lying, that he had found some way to resist Pronjed’s mind-bending magic. During the last days in Solkara, as Numar planned for his siege, Pronjed had found himself unable to turn the regent or Numar’s brother, Henthias, to his purposes. He had assumed at the time that the two men had learned of his abilities and were warding themselves. But what if his power was simply failing?

“Hit your head against the wall,” Pronjed said, pushing with his magic again.

The man stepped to the wall, and pounded his forehead against the stone. His powers were working just fine.

“What else has the duke done?”

“He’s moved men out of some of the corridors leading to the tower.”

“Which corridors?”

“I don’t know.”

He pushed harder with his magic until the man winced and held a hand to his temple. “I don’t know,” he said again, whining slightly, like a hurt child.

It would have been useful information, but Pronjed could hardly complain. Evanthya had done more for him than he had dared hope. It was time for him to do his part.

“Come here and untie my wrists.”

The man complied instantly. In just a few moments his hands were free, and he had removed the bonds from his ankles.

“Now, tell me where I can find the nearest sally port.”

The man’s directions were a bit muddled, and Pronjed had to tell him to repeat several

parts, but Castle Dantrielle was somewhat similar in design to Castle Solkara, where he had served for so many years. He'd have little trouble finding the hidden doorway.

“Give me your sword and dagger.”

The soldier appeared so docile as he handed Pronjed the weapons that the archminister nearly laughed aloud. “The mighty warriors of the Eandi,” he said, regarding the man with contempt. “Our Weaver has nothing to fear from any of you.”

The man simply stood there, slack-jawed and helpless. Pronjed would have liked to strike at him with the blade. Let Tebeo and his noble friends think on that. But he had struck a bargain of sorts with Evanthya, and she had kept up her end of it.

“Lie down and go to sleep,” he said.

And as the man stretched out on the stone floor, Pronjed slipped from the chamber to begin his long journey toward freedom and the triumph of his people.