

From the omens she had read to the advent of the eerie maned star that hung unmoving in the icy heavens, visible now even by day, Myrha knew that Rynna's time was imminent. The girl was restless, even more intractable than usual, chafing at her confinement. "I cannot endure this waiting!" she burst out, striking futilely at the wall-hangings that provided a measure of insulation as well as decoration. "Why can it not be over and done with?"

Awkward because of the weight of her belly, she crossed the room to slump onto the bed, forced to straighten immediately as the child within protested. She glowered down at the hard mound, then at Myrha.

"He will come when it is time, daughter. But I do not think it will be long now... I have a herb tea here for you – it will ease your craving for..." She broke off as a spasm crossed the girl's face, and her hands reflexively clasped her belly. "Ah. You will have your wish, I think..."

"No. It was nothing." Denying, she pushed herself to her feet again, kicking at the unaccustomed long skirts that tangled around her feet. "My back aches, that is all." Myrha did not speak, merely watched, knowing the signs. All was in readiness – she had made certain of that. And perhaps, when Rynna saw the child, held it in her arms, then the miracle might take place, and she would know herself truly Blessed by the Goddess. Perhaps. "Why can Velra not come to me?"

*Because I do not trust her,* Myrha thought. *Not after she brought you the herbs to help you abort.* Aloud, she said calmly, "Velra has other matters to concern her."

"She should be here!" Again the sullen complaint: and, again, a spasm of pain, but followed this time by a gasp of shock as her skirts suddenly darkened with wet, splashed to the knee. Her eyes, huge with fright, turned to Myrha. "Mother...?" she whispered, giving her the title for the first time.

"Be at ease, daughter," Myrha said briskly. "He is ready to be born. It will go quicker if you walk a little." *It will be quick,* she thought. *She is as made for bearing as any D'Shael woman – and the child is not large, which is as well. .if she does as she is told... Huntresses are all the same, their sinews are too tightly knit to stretch easily, but she has more endurance than many.*

It was not as swift a labour as she hoped, probably because Rynna, deathly afraid, was fighting the pains, not able to work with them. Before the night was gone she was screaming, thrashing away from Myrha's touch, and Myrha had called Syre and Emre for assistance. Rynna calmed a little with her childhood friend, forgetting their new enmity, and at least began to follow what Myrha and her own body were telling her to do. Finally, with Syre supporting her rocklike from behind, they lifted her into the birthing crouch and Myrha knelt between her knees, watching the contractions ripple across the taut mound of the girl's belly.

"Now, daughter! Push! Push hard!"

Grunting, Rynna obeyed, eyes screwed shut with effort.

"Again!" Emre, eyes intent, let her friend grip her hand until the knuckles showed white, leaning close and whispering encouragement.

"And – now!" Myrha cried out in triumph, catching the baby as it slid bloody from the womb into her hands, drawing its first breath in a crowing gasp. "There, my dearling, my sweet child..." She knotted and severed the birth-string, laying the infant in the cocoon of fur laid ready, and nodded at Syre to lay Rynna down. "Another last push, daughter..."

And it was done, Rynna limp as a rag on the bed, tended by Syre, and the child – the child! In Emre's arms, squalling intermittently as she crooned at him. She and Myrha cleaned him gently of his mother's blood, Myrha murmuring charms of protection in counterpoint to Emre's praise-song, and they bedded him at last in his cocoon of fleece

and fur to sleep. "I go to take the afterbirth to the Shrine, and to tell Kherin," Myrha said. Straightening, she eased her back. "Emre, you go to the hearth. Syre – your brother should tell the Elders..." She threw wide the shutters to the fresh dawn air.

In the clear blue above the mountain crest, the maned star held vigil.

They were gone – she was alone. Rynna opened her eyes. Yes, the room was empty save for herself and the thing in the cradle. The stench of blood and birth-fluids had been banished by a scent of bruised herbs.

She ached all over, as if after a long day's hunting – she longed to sleep. But – if she was to do what she must, it must be now. She raised up on one elbow, taking a deep breath, and managed to pull herself upright. Carefully, as if it were some wild creature, she lifted the bundle of fleece and carried it to the window, folding back the wrappings.

Well, it was small. A man-child, with a fluff of dark hair, clear-skinned. She touched the starfish hands, intrigued by the strong grasp in those minute fingers – a grip for sword or rein or spear... Touched by the chill of the air, the baby drew up its legs, kicked – opened its eyes. Rynna drew breath sharply. Those eyes were not her summer-sky blue, not its father's indigo dark, but clear and startling silver – *and saw her*.

"I gave you life," she said to the intelligence she read there. "And so – I take it from you..."

She closed the fleece over those knowing, frightening eyes, closed the strong hand of a Huntress over the covered nose and mouth. "It will not be long..." she said – perhaps to herself, perhaps to the child. "This is as it must be."