

Excerpts: Song for the Forsaken

Excerpt I

God Is Just Around the Corner

“How far along are you, chile?” Lonie asked her as Mandy returned from the toilet.

Just for a split-second, Mandy thought about asking her what she was talking about. But as she looked at her one-time mentor and vaguely-remembered surrogate mother, she knew she couldn't lie. “I'm...not sure. A month...maybe two.”

“Yo' gonna hafta' tell your sister.

Mandy looked up at her questioningly. “Lonie, Ciri won't even talk to me. How'm I gonna tell her anything?” Her gaze wandered a bit as she imagined the scenario. “And even if I could get her somehow to listen, how would she take the news? One thing I drilled into her was to not be like most mountain gals—that intimacy between a man and a woman is sacred, to only be sanctioned by marriage...in a church by a representative of God.” She stopped and then added as a vain hope. “I mean...if it *is* what we think.”

“It is, chile.”

“Lonie, I just had tests done before I left Baddon. I don't know fer shore.”

“I do, chile. I never bin wrong 'bout that. And you will have to tell yo' baby, 'cuz I'm gonna bring her here.”

“Lonie...Ciri thinks I'm an agent of Satan.” A new thought struck her. “With what I did all those years ago, maybe I am.”

“You was a' innocent chile, Missy.”

“*Innocent?* My God, Lonie, is there such a thing?”

“You was a victim of yo' grandpa's hate.”

“I was a *victim?* Then we're all victims. Paw was a victim of Mama's religion. Mama was a victim of Grandpa Rhoem. And I'm sure somebody else is responsible fer what he become. Where do we put the blame, finally?”

Lonie had to think about the question for a moment. “We all to blame.”

Mandy looked at Lonie for a good long time. Then, as she walked to the window and looked out it a moment she said, “I think God's to blame.”

Excerpt II

And it was true that those hard-bitten years were traced all too keenly in that face. Indelible lines dug deep in the creases between her brows. Those feathery eyebrows were the only soft feature on her mountain-hard body, long and thin and wiry as goat gristle. Handfuls of blondish hair had come out in her brush of late. Strands of gray had already become visible in them. The hollows beneath her jutting cheekbones had deepened and now sagged with the cavernous dark waves beneath her eyes. Shadows of sleepless nights and endless days swept out from their corners and seemed to spell the word *tired* there.

But beneath all these external signs of defeat was a will of iron. Pride, self-sufficiency and courage were the very foundation of her genetic code. And however battered and bruised, surrender was not in her vocabulary.

So she focused on the one hint of solace, the one potential ray of sun peeking out from the dull grayness of resignation: the baby-sister she'd raised from birth. "Oh Ciri baby, I need you so much now," she quietly murmured out into the murky haze that surrounded her.

She realized she'd spoken out loud and looked around her to see if any of her fellow passengers had overheard. Perhaps it was only that the expression of need had made her self-conscious. From every angle she saw hard-bitten mountain stoicism. And she was surprised to find in herself a tiny spark of rage at it. *Whaddya git for all yer grit?* She thought to herself. Then, back to her reflection. *Whadda you got?*

If anyone had heard, no one gave notice. No one would. In that mountain sensibility, privacy was law and talk was reduced to bare necessity: food, family and God. It was somehow indecent to express a personal feeling, even to admit to having one.

From the seats directly in front of her a sharp-faced, forty-something-looking-seventy woman chewed out in no particular direction, "Sow outta' be ready to litter soon."

An aged wraith sat next to her in battle-weary overalls over a frayed muslin shirt. "Um," he grunted in the same sheared-off tone, not bothering to look up.

"Gotta make sure she dudn't lie down on 'em 'n' crush half of 'em to death like last time."

"Um," he commented again.

And that was the extent of their colloquy.