

Chapter 1

Southern Central Plain, Fal'Borna land, Memory Moon waning, year 1211

He was being hunted. Somehow he had become their prey, like the rilda that grazed on this plain. Except slower. So much slower.

Stam Corfej had been peddling his wares among the Fal'Borna for the better part of eight fours; more than half a lifetime. He knew as well as anyone how hard the white-haired sorcerers of the Central Plain could be. He'd bargained with them, been threatened by them, been called a cheat and a dark-eye bastard and worse. More than once he'd considered giving up on the Qirsi and returning to his native Aelea. A peddler could do well in the Mountain Nation, perhaps not inland, but along her rocky shores, in Redcliff or Yorl.

But it had never taken him long to dismiss the idea of returning to the sovereignty. Whatever gold he might make in Eandi territory he could double and then some trading among the Fal'Borna. He knew the tastes of the golden-skinned clan. He knew their ways, and he knew how to best them in a negotiation.

And while he didn't particularly like the white-hairs, he had never felt threatened by them. At least not until now.

It was said among peddlers in the Southlands that commerce cared nothing for the color of a man's eyes. Qirsi and Eandi, white-hair and dark-eye; they had spent nearly a thousand years fighting the Blood Wars, learning from their fathers to hate the other, and passing that lesson along to their children. But when it came to trade, men and women of both races

managed to put aside their enmity. Gold was gold. The Qirsi might have thought the Eandi brutish and cruel, but they loved Qosantian honey wine; Eandi nobles cursed the white-hairs and their frightening magic, but they decorated the hilts of their swords and the hands, wrists, and necks of their mistresses with gems from the Nid'Qir.

Stam had done well over the years catering to such appetites. He'd traveled the length and breadth of the Southlands searching for wares that would fetch a good price. He'd traded in the fishing villages of the D'Krad and the woodland towns of the M'Saaren, the shining cities of the H'Bel and the septs of the Fal'Borna, and he had learned a great deal about the likes and dislikes of all the Qirsi clans.

So when he saw those Mettai baskets that Brint Hedfarren was selling at the bend in the wash, where he and his fellow merchants often gathered, he jumped at the chance to buy them. The Mettai were renowned for their basket weaving, and these baskets were as beautiful as any Stam had ever seen. Tightly woven, brilliantly colored, and, best of all, clearly dyed by hand, which increased their value. If Barthal Milensen and Grijed Saylor and Lark hadn't been there claiming their share, Stam might well have bought every one that Young Red was selling. As it was, he only got twelve.

Who would have guessed that twelve Mettai baskets -- fewer actually, since he still had three in his cart -- could kill so many people? Who would have thought that they could destroy two good-sized septs so quickly and so completely?

That night in the first sept, Stam had no idea what was happening. At first it seemed that the pestilence had come and he assumed that he would fall ill like the Fal'Borna around him. But as the night wore on and the white-hairs began to destroy their z'kals with fire and shaping

magic, he realized that whatever illness had struck at the sept was nothing like any pestilence he had ever seen. He fled the village, amazed that he had managed to survive and wanting only to put as much distance as possible between himself and the horrors he had witnessed.

Three nights later, when the same disease struck at another sept he was visiting -- a sept more than eight leagues away from the first -- he began to suspect that this was more than mere coincidence. He still didn't understand, but he knew that he wanted nothing more to do with white-hairs and their magic.

He decided that he'd lingered too long in the north. He resolved to turn his cart south and make his way to the warm waters of the Ofirean Sea. The Snows were coming; the plain was no place for an old merchant during the cold turns.

A few days later Stam stopped at a Fal'Borna village along the Thraedes River, intending to trade for some food and wine. This wasn't a sept, but rather a small, walled city, known as H'Nivar. It had once belonged to the Eandi, but it was taken by the white-hairs during the last of the Blood Wars. As Stam approached the north gates of the village, he saw a line of peddlers' carts stretching in his direction. He slowed, unsure of what to make of the column.

"Pardon, friend," he called to the trader at the end of the line. "Can you tell me what's going on here?"

The peddler, an old Eandi man with long grey hair and a full beard, shrugged, puffing on a pipe filled with what smelled like Tordjanni pipeweed.

"Word is, th' white-hairs are searching all peddlers' carts."

"What for?"

The man shrugged again. "Don' know."

“Baskets,” came a voice from farther down the column. A young woman peered back at them, the wind making her long red hair dance. “They’re looking for baskets, just like all the Fal’Borna.”

Suddenly, Stam found it hard to draw breath. “Why?” he asked, barely making himself heard.

The woman frowned. “Haven’t you heard about the plague?”

He felt light-headed. “What does the plague have to do with baskets?”

She waved her hand, seeming to dismiss the question. “Probably nothing at all. But you know the Fal’Borna: They’re always looking for some new reason to hate the Eandi.”

“They claim it’s a Mettai curse,” said the merchant in line ahead of the woman. “They think that the Mettai and some merchants have conspired together to destroy them.” He laughed. “As if the Mettai would trust us.”

The woman said something in return. Stam didn’t hear what it was. His mind was racing. Baskets? A plague? A Mettai curse? What had he done? What had Hedfarren done to him? Had it been his baskets that sickened the people in those two settlements? He didn’t understand how it could be possible, but then again, the blood magic of the Mettai had always been a mystery to him.

He shouldn’t have left the way he did. He would have been better off waiting there on line for a while longer before pretending to grow impatient. Then he might have been able to steer his cart away from the city without drawing attention to himself, without giving anyone reason to think that he’d had anything to do with the baskets. He might even have learned more about this curse the others were talking about.

But in that moment, all he could think was that he had to get away from the Fal'Borna as quickly as possible. He'd been dealing with the Qirsi of the plain for years, and he knew just how brutal they could be with their enemies.

And he was their enemy now. He hadn't intended it; he hadn't known what he was doing. But they wouldn't believe that, nor would they care even if they did believe it. He was a dead man.

He turned his cart around and started back the way he had come.

"Hey, where are you going?" asked the man who had been in front of him in line.

Stam didn't look back. "I have to go."

"It doesn't affect us, you know," the man called to him. "This pestilence. It won't make you sick. You have nothing to worry about."

Stam nodded, but he said nothing and he didn't look back. It was all he could do to keep from using his whip to make Wislo, his cart horse, go faster.

"What an idiot," he heard the man say to the others.

About the only thing Stam did right that day was turn north rather than immediately striking out eastward, toward the Silverwater Wash and the safety of Eandi land. As a lone rider heading away from the city to the east, he would have been noticed instantly by the guards at the gate. By steering Wislo to the north for a league or so, he was able to use the column of waiting peddlers' carts to conceal himself from the Fal'Borna.

Not that any of this occurred to him at the time. Instead, his mind was consumed with questions. Had Young Red known when he sold those baskets what they would do to the white-hairs? He had been awfully eager to be rid of them. At the time Stam believed that the young

merchant didn't know the value of his wares, though looking back now he realized how foolish he'd been to think so. Brint Hedfarren, despite his age, was already one of the most successful merchants in the Southlands, a rival for old Torgan Plye himself. Of course he would have recognized the quality of those baskets. He sold them for a bargain price because he wanted to be rid of them. It was the only explanation that made any sense.

Was Hedfarren in league with the Mettai? It seemed a ridiculous question, or rather it would have only a short time before. Now though . . .

He followed the river north from H'Nivar for several hours before realizing that he was making a mistake. He needed to get out of Fal'Borna land, and instead he was driving his cart into the heart of it. He considered his options for a moment or two, but quickly recognized that he had none. To the north lay the septs of the rilda hunters; to the south he'd find only the Ofirean and the great Fal'Borna cities along its shores. The J'Balanar held the lands west of the plain, and though the Fal'Borna and J'Balanar had fought battles in the past, both clans were Qirsi. If the Fal'Borna declared Stam their enemy, he'd be no safer among the J'Balanar than he was here.

He had to turn east and hope that he could cross the Silverwater into Stelpana before the Fal'Borna found him. As soon as he formed this thought, however, he felt his entire body sag. He'd never make it. He was at least thirty leagues from the wash, and with the moons on the wane he'd have little choice but to cross the plain by day and rest at night.

Still, Stam turned his cart, determined to reach the wash or die in the attempt. Once more, he had to resist the urge to drive Wislo too hard. It wouldn't do to kill the beast before they crossed into Eandi land, and he couldn't afford to appear to be in too much of a hurry.

He kept an eye out for Fal'Borna riders, septs, and villages. He forced himself to stop periodically so that Wislo could rest and graze and drink from the rills flowing among the grasses. And when he stopped for the night, he made do without a fire, despite the cold. Since he hadn't reached the H'Nivar marketplace, he was still short on food. But he could do nothing about that now. He would get by on a few bites of dried meat and hard cheese in the mornings and evenings. He had an ample gut; he wouldn't starve. And with the cold rains that had fallen over the past turn, he'd find plenty of water.

He continued this way for two days, and by grace of the gods, or by dint of skills he hadn't known he possessed, or thanks simply to sheer dumb luck, he encountered no Fal'Borna. At one point on the second day, he thought he spotted a sept to the north, but he turned slightly southward and drove on, glancing back over his shoulder every few moments, expecting at any moment to see riders bearing down on him.

By the fourth day, Stam had started to convince himself that he would be all right, that the Fal'Borna weren't even looking for him. Early on he had imagined the other merchants mentioning him to the city guards at H'Nivar, describing his odd behavior and noting that he fled immediately upon hearing of the plague and the baskets. But Eandi merchants had no reason to help white-hairs at the expense of one of their own, no matter how strange they might have thought him. He might still give himself away through some chance encounter with the Qirsi, but he didn't think he had anything to fear from the merchants.

He had been at a loss as to what to do about his three remaining baskets. Just as he didn't build a fire for fear of drawing the notice of the Qirsi, he didn't dare burn the baskets out here on the open plain. Nor could he risk just leaving them in the grass. What if some innocent

Fal'Borna came across them and didn't know the risk? What if it was a child? He didn't particularly like the Qirsi, but neither did he wish them harm. And he refused to be the cause of any more suffering like that he'd seen in the two septs in which he'd sold Young Red's baskets.

So he carried them with him, and deep down inside his heart he was glad. They were the only weapons he had that might give him some advantage over the Fal'Borna. He didn't want to use them this way, but if the Qirsi gave him no choice, he would. At least, that's what he told himself.

On the sixth morning after he fled the gates of H'Nivar, Stam woke later than usual, his heart pounding in his chest like a war hammer, his stomach tight and sour, his breath coming in great gasps. He'd slept poorly all night and had finally been driven from his slumber by a dream of Qirsi horsemen who pursued him across the plain, laughing harshly at his vain attempts to outrun them with his plow horse. It had been raining lightly when he went to bed so he had slept in the cart. Now, though the sun was shining and it was uncomfortably warm beneath the cloth covering that protected his goods from the elements. He tried to sit up, but his heart still labored and the queasy feeling in his gut seemed to be worsening by the moment.

I'm sick! he thought, fear gripping him by the throat. I'm dying!

He'd believed all this nonsense about a white-hair plague, and now he was going to die of the pestilence out here alone. The bitterness of this irony actually brought tears to his eyes.

For several panic-filled moments, he tried to decide if he was truly dying or if he was just a fool. In the end, he was forced to conclude that he was a fool and that everything he was feeling could be traced to his nerves rather than some disease. He forced himself to get up and crawl out of the cart. He had trouble keeping his balance at first, but the cool air steadied and

calmed him. After a few long, deep breaths he began to feel better.

He took a drink of water, which also helped. A bit of food might have been a good idea, too, but he wasn't quite ready for that.

Stam started toward Wislo, who was grazing a short distance away, and noticed immediately that the old beast looked agitated. He was switching his tail wildly. He held his head high and had his ears laid flat, and he was scraping his hoof in the dirt. Stam stopped and scanned the horizon, a different sort of fear taking hold of him.

“What is it?” he asked in a low voice. “What’s got you upset?”

Wislo shook his head and whinnied.

Stam gazed westward for another few moments, but he saw nothing. He was convinced, however, that something was out there. It could have been wild dogs, which moved south out of the highlands in packs as the Snows approached. It also could have been the Fal’Borna.

He’d never been one to place much faith in his own intuition, but it seemed too great a coincidence that he should wake up feeling as he did and then find Wislo in such a state.

“They’ve found us, haven’t they?” he said. “Or they will have soon enough.”

He made his decision in that moment. If the Fal’Borna caught up with him as he was driving his cart toward the Silverwater, they’d assume the worst. But perhaps he could deceive them.

He led Wislo back to the cart, put the harness on him, and climbed into his seat. And then he started westward, back the way he had come. Perhaps if the Qirsi encountered an Eandi merchant making his way into their land, they’d believe that he had been in the sovereignties all this time. Surely they wouldn’t be able to blame him for anything that had befallen their people

during the past turn.

This was Stam's hope anyway.

Before he and Wislo had covered even half a league, he spotted the riders. There were at least a dozen of them, and they were driving their mounts hard, heading due east on a line a bit north of the one Stam had taken. They seemed to spot him just a moment or two after he spotted them, and they turned right away, thundering toward his cart, their white-hair flying like battle pennons.

They reached him in mere moments, reining their horses to a halt a short distance in front of him and brandishing spears.

"Stop right there, dark-eye," one of the men called to him.

He was broad and muscular, with golden skin and bright yellow eyes. He might have been a few years older than his fellow riders, but otherwise there was little that distinguished one of the riders from the others. For all the years Stam had spent among the Qirsi clans, learning their ways and taking their gold, he had never figured out how to tell one Fal'Borna from another, or one J'Balanar from another of his kind.

"Greetings," he said, raising a hand. He was pleased to hear how steady his voice sounded.

"What are you doing in Fal'Borna land, Eandi?"

Stam let his hand fall to his side. He thought this an odd question, but he tried to keep his tone light. "I'm a merchant."

"Do you think we're fools? Of course you're a merchant. But what are you doing here?"

He opened his mouth to answer, hesitated, then repeated, "I'm a merchant."

The Qirsi and the rider next to him shared a look.

“Where have you come from?” the second man asked.

Stam had never been a very good liar, so he thought it best to keep his answers simple.

He almost said, “Aelea,” but that would have put him too close to Mettai lands. Instead, he said, “Stelpana.”

For some reason, this seemed to pique the Fal’Borna’s interest. “Where in Stelpana?”

He felt a bead of sweat trickle from his right temple. “Nowhere in particular. I just visited a few villages along the east bank of the Silverwater.”

“And how many days ago did you cross?”

Stam hesitated, chewing his lip. He wasn’t exactly sure how far he’d come since leaving H’Nivar, and he didn’t know how many days’ travel he was from the wash.

“I . . . maybe . . . I don’t know. Three days?”

Again the Fal’Borna exchanged looks.

“Three days,” the first man repeated.

Stam nodded. His mouth had gone dry.

“What goods are you carrying?”

The one question he’d been dreading most.

“The usual. Blankets, blades, cloth, some jewelry, a few flasks of wine.”

“Baskets?”

“A couple, yes.”

Their bearing changed. Clearly they’d already been suspicious of him; now they appeared to grip their spears tighter, to regard him with open hostility.

“Where did you get them?” the first man demanded in a hard voice.

“I traded for them with another merchant.”

“His name?”

“I . . . I don’t remember. It wasn’t someone I’d met before.”

The Fal’Borna frowned. “Where was this?”

He felt as if he were sinking in mud. Every lie he told seemed to compound the last one, and he was having more and more trouble remembering what he had said a moment before.

“One of the villages,” he said. “In Stelpana.”

“You’ve had them long?”

“No. Just a few days.”

“I take it these are Mettai baskets.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Why would you bring them into Fal’Borna lands now?”

“T-to trade. I’m a merchant. That’s what I do. But I can leave. I can turn back, if you want me to.”

The first man shook his head. “Get off your cart.”

“But, I--”

“Off!” the man said, his voice like a smith’s sledge.

Stam hurriedly climbed off the cart, his legs trembling. The Fal’Borna nodded to two of his riders. Immediately the men jumped off their mounts, strode over to Wislo, and unharnessed him.

“What are you doing?” Stam asked.

“We’re going to burn your cart, and we don’t wish harm your animal.”

“No!” Stam said. “You can’t!”

The man grinned darkly. “No? Perhaps you’d prefer that we search your cart. Perhaps you’d like us to handle those baskets you’re carrying. Isn’t that why you brought them here?”

Did they know that he’d been in their land all this time? Did they know what had happened to the septs he visited?

“I . . . I don’t mean your people any harm. I never have. You must believe me.”

“I don’t. If you’ve just come from Stelpana, then you know that your people and mine will soon be at war, if we’re not already.”

Stam’s eyes widened.

“That’s right, Eandi. We know about the army your people are gathering on the other side of the Silverwater. We also know about your alliance with the Mettai.”

Stam had no idea what to say. He wasn’t even sure that he believed the man. An army? An alliance with the Mettai? It made no sense. Why would the Eandi sovereignties attack the Fal’Borna? Why would his people risk the resumption of the Blood Wars?

The hatred that divided Qirsi from Eandi was as old as Qirsar and Ean, the gods who had created the people of this land. The two gods -- who were both brothers and rivals -- had instilled in the people their enmity for each other. Eandi fear of Qirsi magic was rooted in the earth, like the mountains of Aelea and the woodlands of Tordjanne. The Qirsis’ contempt for the Eandi was as fundamental to life on this plain as water and air. The Blood Wars had been over for a century, but the truce that followed had done nothing to change the way white-hairs and dark-eyes regarded one another.

But during the last century of the old wars, the Qirsi had beaten the Eandi armies in battle after battle. They'd taken the fertile land of the Horn, pushing the warriors of Stelpana back across the Thraedes. And then they'd gradually taken the Central Plain as well, forcing the Eandi to cede more territory, until at last the white-hairs held everything west of the Silverwater.

Now, according to this man before him, the Eandi were planning an attack. It made no sense. Or did it?

"They've allied themselves with the Mettai?" he asked. "You're sure of this?"

The Fal'Borna bristled. "You think I'm lying?"

"No, of course not. I just . . ." He shook his head. "I don't understand why they'd do this."

"Your kind hate us. Isn't that enough?"

But it wasn't enough. Yes, the Eandi of the sovereignties hated the Qirsi, and they hated the Fal'Borna most of all. But to send thousands of men to their deaths . . .

They must have believed they had a chance to succeed. Was the magic of the Mettai that powerful? Could it win this new war for them?

"Step away from your cart, dark-eye. Unless you want to burn with your baskets and the rest of your wares."

It hit him like a fist to the stomach, stealing his wind, nearly making him gag. Young Red's baskets. That was why the Eandi were attacking now. From the way the merchants at H'Nivar spoke of this white-hair plague Stam gathered that it was sweeping across the land, destroying septs and villages just as it had those he visited.

"Move, dark-eye!" the Fal'Borna barked at him.

Stam staggered forward, away from his cart. After just a few steps, though, he stopped.

“Wait. My gold.”

“Your gold will burn along with everything else. The fires we conjure spare nothing.”

“But that’s all I have. How will I live?”

The man regarded him, the look in his eyes so cold it made Stam shudder. “You won’t,” he said.

Stam felt his legs give way. If it hadn’t been for the Fal’Borna warrior beside him, who grabbed him by the arm, he would have fallen to the ground.

“I don’t deserve to die,” he said. “I’m just a merchant.”

“You’re an Eandi, and your people are about to invade our lands. You’ve just crossed the Silverwater carrying baskets that you know will kill us. You truly expect us to spare your life?”

“I didn’t.”

The man narrowed his eyes. “You didn’t what?”

Stam straightened and pulled his arm free of the warrior’s grip. If he was going to be executed, he’d die with his pride intact. He wouldn’t let the white-hairs hold him up, and he wouldn’t be killed with a lie on his lips.

“I didn’t just cross the Silverwater. I lied to you.”

“What do you mean?” the Fal’Borna demanded. “Why would you lie about such a thing?”

Stam actually laughed. “I thought I was saving my life.”

The man stared back at him, a stony expression on his square face.

“I’ve been trading on the plain for nearly half the year. The last time I was in one of the

sovereignties the Growing hadn't even begun. I lied to you because I sold baskets in two villages that were then struck by the wh--" He winced at what he'd almost said. "By this pestilence that's killing your people."

The Fal'Borna glared at him. "If you're arguing for your life--"

"I'm not. I'm simply telling you the truth. I didn't know what the baskets would do. It took the second outbreak of the pestilence for me to begin to understand, and even then I needed to hear other merchants speaking of it in H'Nivar before I finally made the connection."

"When was this?"

"A few days ago. I've been trying to reach the Silverwater ever since."

The man shook his head. "But this morning--"

"This morning I sensed that you were near, so I turned around and pretended to be driving onto the plain instead of leaving it. If I had known that war was coming . . ." Stam shook his head. "I don't know what I would have done, but I wouldn't have bothered with this deception."

"You know that we still intend to kill you."

Stam nodded, taking a long, unsteady breath. He wasn't ready to die. Then again, he wasn't sure he ever would be. His had been a good life. Suddenly his eyes were filled with tears.

The Fal'Borna eyed him briefly. Then he faced Stam's cart. An instant later the cart burst into flames, the wood popping violently, the cloth that covered his wares turning black and curling like a dry leaf. Wislo had been led away from the cart, but still he reared when it caught fire.

Stam was surprised by how little smoke there was. The Fal'Borna was right: Qirsi fire burned everything.

“There are more baskets, you know,” Stam said, staring at the blaze. “I wasn’t the only merchant who bought them.”

“We know that. We’ll find the others.”

“And you’ll kill those merchants, too?”

“We’re at war,” the Qirsi said, as if the answer was obvious. “The Fal'Borna won the plain by showing no mercy to our enemies. We’ll defend our land the same way.”

“We’re merchants, for pity’s sake! We didn’t intend--”

“Enough,” the man said. He didn’t raise his voice, but he didn’t have to. “Your death will be quicker than those of the Fal'Borna you sickened with your baskets. Think of that as you go to Bian’s realm.”

Stam wanted to be brave, to die well, as he had heard soldiers phrase it. But he couldn’t help the sob that escaped him in that moment.

Abruptly he felt pressure building on the bone in his neck. He tensed, opened his mouth to scream. But no sound passed his lips. Instead he heard, as clear as a sanctuary bell, the snapping of bone. And all was darkness.

Chapter 2

Stelpana, along the eastern bank of the Silverwater Wash

Tirnya Onjaef had done everything in her power to make certain that the army of Qalsyn reached the Silverwater Wash by this day. It had been her idea to attack the Fal'Borna. She had recognized the spread of the white-hair plague across the Central Plain for what it was: a unique opportunity to win back for the people of Stelpana the lands lost to the Qirsi during the Blood Wars, and to reclaim for her family its ancestral home of Deraqor. She had persuaded her father, Jenoe, a marshal in the Qalsyn army, to use his considerable influence to push for this invasion. And it had also been her idea to propose an alliance with the Mettai, the Eandi sorcerers of the north. This strategy finally convinced His Lordship, Maisaak Tolm, Qalsyn's lord governor, to let them march.

This was to be her war. When at last the armies of Stelpana defeated the Fal'Borna and reestablished the Central Plain as Eandi territory, the lion's share of the glory would be hers as well. She stood on the cusp of history. And never in her life had she been so bored.

They'd been camped along this shallow stretch of the wash for two days, awaiting the arrival of the army from Fairlea, the largest city in northern Stelpana. This was one of two armies Stelpana's sovereign had sent to supplement the force that marched from Qalsyn under the command of Tirnya's father. The other army, from the southern city of Waterstone, had arrived the same day as Jenoe's soldiers.

Tirnya had never been patient. Her father still told anyone who would listen the story of the first year she attended Qalsyn's famed Harvest Battle Tournament. She was three years old at the time and already headstrong. Sitting with her mother and hundreds of spectators, waiting for the first match to begin, she had finally grown so irritated that she stood on her seat and screamed as loud as she could, "When is someone going to fight?" Even His Lordship had

laughed, though he was a thoroughly humorless man who despised Tirnya's father.

If anything, Tirnya found it harder to wait now than she did when she was young. She prided herself on being punctual, on following orders, and on demanding the same of those under her command. She had little tolerance for those who weren't as conscientious as she.

In this case, though, her own annoyance was the least of her concerns. The Snows were almost upon them. Already cold winds blew out of the north. In another turn or two, these winds would strengthen and bring with them wicked storms from the lofty peaks of the Border Range. An invasion of Fal'Borna lands held tremendous risks any time of year. The Qirsi rilda hunters were fierce warriors and accomplished sorcerers. Fighting them on the plain during the Snows would have been unthinkable under any other circumstances.

But the plague was striking at the Fal'Borna now. No one knew for certain how long its effects would last. Tirnya and her father couldn't afford to wait for the warmer turns of the Planting. By that time their opportunity would have vanished, and Deraqor might be lost to the Onjaefs for another century. Every day that they waited brought the Snows that much closer, and gave the Fal'Borna another chance to find a cure for this illness that had weakened them. For now, as well, the Fal'Borna didn't know of their plans, or if they did, they hadn't yet had time to gather an army of their own and send it to the Silverwater. That advantage wouldn't last forever.

Jenoe might have been as eager as she to cross the river and begin their march toward Deraqor and the Horn, but he didn't show it. After waiting a few hours the first day they reached the wash, he suggested that they make the most of the delay by using the time to train their soldiers. Hendrid Crish, the marshal of the Waterstone army, agreed, and soon captains from both armies were leading their soldiers in drills.

The Mettai, who had marched with Jenoe's army from their village of Lifarsa near Porcupine Lake, kept to themselves but watched the soldiers from afar.

Tirnya trained with the rest that first day, but by the middle of the second morning, she had become too agitated to do much more than watch the eastern horizon for signs of the Fairlea army. She left it to her lead riders to train her men. As darkness fell that night she went to speak to her father. She was so angry that she couldn't help raising her voice, even though Marshal Crish was there with Jenoe.

"They're going to make a mess of this, Father!" she said, raking a hand through her long hair. "We can't wait much longer."

Jenoe had merely shrugged. "There's nothing I can do. I'm sure they'll get here before long. Until then, we'll train."

He was right, of course. They couldn't do anything at all. But that only served to make her angrier. She stalked off without saying more, and bedded down before most of her men had finished eating their suppers. She lay huddled in her blankets for a long time before falling asleep, and awoke frequently during the night, thinking each time that she had heard the sounds of an approaching army.

On this, the third day since their arrival at the camp, they woke to dark skies and a heavy, wet snow. Again, Tirnya's father called for the men to train. When they complained, he said "We may have to fight the Fal'Borna in weather like this. Best we're ready for it."

Again Tirnya kept apart from her men, gazing eastward, shivering within her riding cloak.

"You should train with them."

She turned at the sound of the voice, but quickly looked away.

Enly Tolm. He was Maisaak's son, lord heir of Qalsyn. He was also a captain in Qalsyn army, just like her. And once, not so very long ago, he had been her lover.

Of all those in her city with whom she had discussed her plans for this invasion he had argued against it the most vehemently. It was madness to risk a new Blood War, he said. They could never overcome the magic of the Fal'Borna; they were destined to fail. Yet, when His Lordship gave them permission to march, Enly asked that he be allowed to accompany them. He'd claimed that he wished only to help them succeed, but Tirnya suspected that he was driven primarily by his lingering affection for her.

Since leaving Qalsyn she had avoided him as much as possible. He was arrogant and an ass, and she wasn't interested in hearing him argue that they should abandon their mission and return to the city. As for any feelings she might have had for him . . . That had ended long ago.

"You look cold," he said. "You should join your men. It'll warm you up."

"You're not training," she said, still facing east.

"I was. I came to see if perhaps you wanted me to keep you warm."

She smirked and shook her head. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I should think."

"Go away, Enly."

"Maybe they're not coming," he said, standing beside her and gazing to the east as well.

"They might have decided that this was folly, and that they'd be better off staying in Fairlea."

"The sovereign ordered them to march. They'll be here."

"I wouldn't be so sure. The Ballidynes have a reputation for defying authority and

keeping their own counsel.”

She looked at him. “Do you know them?”

“I’ve met Shon, the lord governor, a few times. He’s been a guest in my father’s palace, and we visited Fairlea several years back.” He glanced at her. “If you think I’m an ass, you should meet Shon. He makes my father seem gracious. And the lord heir is even worse.” Enly cringed. “Gods, you don’t suppose Shon will send him, do you?”

Tirnya grinned. “I hadn’t given any thought to who he might send. But if this man bothers you that much, I hope he does.”

“It’s not funny,” he said, scowling. “Gries is condescending, smug, and ambitious to a fault. I was kidding when I said they might not come. They’re probably keeping us waiting just to show us that they can, to make it clear to your father that he won’t have authority over them. But they’ll show up eventually. If they believe there’s even the slightest chance that they can improve their standing or add to their treasury, they’ll be here. It’s true of Shon and doubly so of the son. He’d make a terrible commander, and a dangerous ally.”

“He sounds like you.”

“He’s nothing like me.”

Tirnya raised an eyebrow, the smile still on her lips. “Why do I get the feeling that this man -- Gries? Is that his name?”

Enly nodded.

“Why do I get the feeling that he’s exceedingly good-looking?”

He looked away.

Tirnya laughed. “I knew it! I bet he’s an excellent swordsman, too.”

“He is,” Enly said, his voice flat.

“Better than you?” She leaned forward trying to look him in the eye. “Enly, has he beaten you?”

He turned to face her. “No!” he said. “He did not beat me. We drew blood at the same time. Both of our fathers agreed that we did.”

Tirnya stared at him open-mouthed. “He drew blood? Against you? I’ll have to ask him how he did that.”

“I’m serious, Tirnya. I know you’d do just about anything to make a fool of me, but Gries is . . . You shouldn’t trust him. And if he really is in command of Fairlea’s soldiers, you should warn your father to be wary of any counsel he offers. He’s reckless.”

She rarely saw him this way: earnest, almost pleading with her to take him seriously. Most of the time Enly used his wit and his bravado to conceal his feelings. And though usually her first impulse was to poke fun, this time she felt compelled to reassure him.

“My father’s a wise man,” she said. “He’ll weigh carefully any advice Gries gives him, just as he does the advice he gets from you and me.”

Enly nodded, but his lips were pressed thin, his brow creased.

“If you’re so concerned about it, you should speak with my father yourself.”

He shook his head. “The lord heir of one house can’t be overheard speaking ill of his counterpart in a rival family. It would be . . . unseemly.”

“You spoke ill of him to me.”

Enly met her gaze, but only briefly. “Yes, I did. And I trust that when you tell your father about our conversation, you’ll be discreet.”

Tirnya almost made a joke of this, but again she could see that to Enly this was no laughing matter.

“Of course I will,” she told him.

He still didn’t look mollified.

“His father probably won’t even send him,” Tirnya said. “We’re a long way from Fairlea, and as you’ve told me time and again, marching to war against the Fal’Borna is pretty dangerous.”

Enly shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Gries will be leading them. I meant what I said before: he’s reckless. He’d risk his life and the lives of his men if he had a chance to bring glory to House Ballidyne.”

“You really hate him, don’t you? I’ve never heard you speak of anyone this way. I think it’s a good thing I didn’t beat you in this year’s Harvest Tournament.”

“I told you he didn’t beat me! And besides that has nothing to do with it. I’d hate him even if we’d never fought.”

“I find that hard to believe. You Tolms hate to lose at anything. You don’t even like it when--”

“There they are.”

Tirnya spun to look in the direction Enly was pointing. Far in the distance, cresting a small hill, she saw the army, easily a thousand men strong. They marched under two banners: the blue, white, and green of Stelpana, and a second flag of blue and black that must have been the sigil of House Ballidyne.

“I have to tell Father,” she said, hurrying back toward the camp.

“Tirnya!”

She stopped, turned.

“Don’t let anyone else hear what I said about Gries.”

“I promise,” she said, and went in search of her father.

By the time Tirnya found Jenoe, he already knew that the Fairlea army had been spotted. His cheeks were flushed and his face was covered with a fine sheen of sweat, but he was grinning. He enjoyed training, even out here in the middle of nowhere.

“You should have worked with your men,” he said, as soon as he saw her. “Your watching for them didn’t make them get here any sooner.”

“Yes, Father.”

“You’re humoring me,” he said, with a slight frown.

“Yes, Father.”

He laughed.

They started walking to the east edge of the camp, where they would greet the soldiers of Fairlea.

Tirnya was eager to share with Jenoe all that Enly had told her about House Ballidyne, but Stri Balkett and several of Jenoe’s other captains were walking just behind them. Instead she asked her father what he knew about the lord governor and his son.

“Not much, really. I met Shon when he came to Qalsyn. You were young at the time -- I don’t think you’d finished your third four. He struck me as being a rather difficult man,” he went on, lowering his voice and glancing back to see that the captains wouldn’t overhear. “I think that he and Maisaak got on quite well, if you follow my meaning.”

She smiled. "I think I do. What about his son?"

"The older one, you mean? Gries?"

Tirnya nodded.

"I've never met him. Why?"

She felt her cheeks redden. "No reason. Enly seemed to think that he might be commanding this army."

"He might be at that," Jenoe said, apparently oblivious to her discomfort.

Enly was waiting for them at the east end of camp, and he raised a hand in salute to the marshal.

"Captain," Jenoe said. "Tirnya tells me you expect the lord heir to be at the head of the Fairlea army."

Enly shot Tirnya a quick look, but then nodded to her father. "Yes, sir. I think it's possible."

Jenoe looked out at the approaching army. "It hadn't occurred to me that the lord governor would send him, but I think you're right. That's Gries leading them, isn't it?"

"Yes," Enly said, his tone betraying little. "I believe it is."

The northern army was close enough now that Tirnya could see the man clearly. He was tall and lean, with curly yellow hair and a long, angular face. He wore a simple brown riding cloak over a surcoat of blue and black, and he had a leather baldric slung over his back. Even from this distance, even with the skies dull, Tirnya could see the jeweled hilt of his sword gleaming just above his left shoulder, within easy reach of his right hand. This weapon and his impressive white horse, which he rode with easy grace, were all that marked him as anyone more

than a simple army captain.

Tirnya could see immediately why Enly would dislike this man. He was handsome, he looked like someone who had grown accustomed to success, and he didn't appear to lack for confidence. Once more she couldn't help thinking that he and Enly were probably very much alike.

The man riding just behind Ballidyne's lord heir said something that made Gries laugh. He had a good smile; strong, nothing held back. She found it hard to believe that this was the man Enly had described just a short time before. She glanced his way and found that Enly was already watching her, frowning, probably reading her thoughts. She looked away.

Before long, Gries and his army reached the wash. The Ballidyne captain dismounted, walked to Jenoe, and dropped to one knee. The other captains and lead riders in his army had climbed off their horses as well, and now every man from Fairlea followed Gries's example and knelt before the marshal.

"Well met, Captain," Jenoe said, stepping forward.

"Marshal Onjaef," Gries said in a clear, ringing voice. "The army of Fairlea is here to give whatever aid it can. We are yours to command."

"Thank you, Captain. We're honored to march alongside the soldiers of your fine city. Please rise, all of you."

Gries stood and the two men embraced, drawing cheers from every soldier there.

"We number twelve hundred, Marshal," Gries said, his tone crisp. "One hundred or so are mounted, the rest are on foot. My father and I agreed that we'd be better off against the Fal'Borna if we had more bowmen than swordsmen. So we marched with seven hundred

archers. That's why we're late in arriving. We already had the bows, but laborers worked night and day to fill our quivers. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

Jenoe smiled. "No apology is necessary, Captain. We're pleased to have you here." He indicated Enly with an open hand. "I believe you know Qalsyn's lord heir, Enly Tolm."

Gries grinned and extended a hand, which Enly took with obvious reluctance. "It's good to see you again, Enly. I'm sure I'll enjoy fighting alongside you a great deal more than I did fighting against you."

"And this is my daughter, Tirnya. She's one of my captains."

Gries faced her, still smiling. Gods, he was handsome.

"Captain Onjaef. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Jenoe introduced Ballidyne's lord heir to Stri and the other captains. Gries was every bit as gracious with them as he had been with Tirnya and Enly.

Tirnya caught Enly's eye while this was going on and gave a small shrug, as if to say, "I thought you told me he was a monster."

She could see that Enly wanted to say something, probably about how she was too easily taken in by a winning smile and large, deep brown eyes. But in the end he merely shook his head and looked away.

When Jenoe had finished his introductions, he instructed Gries to have his men make camp beside the armies of Qalsyn and Waterstone.

"We're eager to cross the Silverwater and begin our march toward the Horn," the marshal said. "But you and your soldiers have come a long way. We can begin our march westward tomorrow."

“With all due respect, Marshal, that’s not necessary.”

Jenoe hesitated, eyeing the man doubtfully.

“We’ve kept you waiting long enough,” Gries went on. He glanced at Tirnya and the others. “All of you. It’s only midday. Even with the time it will take you and your men to break camp, we can still cross the wash and cover another league before nightfall.”

Tirnya caught her father’s eye and nodded.

“Very well,” the marshal said. “Thank you, Captain Ballidyne.” He turned to Waterstone’s marshal and the other captains. “You heard him. Let’s break camp. I want to be moving as soon as possible.”

For the next hour, the camp was like a bee hive, teeming with activity. The tents of the two marshals were dismantled and packed away, riding horses were saddled, cart horses were harnessed to the wagons that held provisions, and finally soldiers arrayed themselves in their companies. They were ready to go so quickly, that already Tirnya was wondering if before darkness fell they might cover two leagues rather than one.

Then they commenced their fording of the wash.

This section of the river, known as Enka’s Shallows, had been used for crossings by Eandi armies during the Blood Wars. The Silverwater was wider here, and so its waters were slower and relatively shallow. Still, the wash was one of the major waterways of the Southlands; even during the driest turns of the Growing its waters were powerful and treacherous. And with the rains that had fallen recently, its current had strengthened.

Two dozen riders were sent across the wash with heavy rope, which they were to stake to the ground on the far bank. Those on foot would then use the ropes to resist the current as they

crossed. But from the start, little went as they had intended. Three of the mounts under those first riders lost their footing and were swept downstream. All three horsemen managed to right their horses before they were lost, but clearly Tirnya and her father had underestimated the difficulty of this crossing. If horses struggled to make it, the foot soldiers would have a terrible time.

Jenoe ordered a dozen more riders across with what remained of their rope. Tirnya was to lead this second group and after securing her piece of rope to her saddle, she urged Thirus, her sorrel, into the waters. The other riders followed, all of them upstream of Tirnya. The bank of the wash was steep and no sooner had Thirus plunged into the river than it was up to Tirnya's thighs. The water was frigid, and it tore a gasp from her lungs. How could anyone hope to wade across on foot?

She wanted to shout to her father that they needed to find another way across, even if it meant marching south to N'Kiel's Span, but Thirus had begun to struggle against the current and was having trouble keeping his footing in the soft silt of the riverbed. Twice the beast stumbled and was nearly pulled under, but both times Tirnya managed to right him. She spoke to him, trying to keep him calm, but she could feel him growing more agitated by the moment.

She heard someone cry out just to the right of her. Another horse had stumbled as well, and its rider wasn't as fortunate as Tirnya had been. The horse went under briefly, broke the surface of the water again, and began to thrash wildly. The rider, a young captain from Waterstone, was unseated.

Tirnya saw him go under, his eyes wide with fear and shock. He thrust his hand up out of the water in a desperate attempt to grab the rope that trailed from Tirnya's saddle, but he missed.

At the same time, she leaned back as far as she could and reached for him, brushing his fingers with her own. Again Thirus stumbled, and Tirnya lost her grip on the reins. She heard someone behind her shout her name -- Enly, probably. She slipped off the saddle, but managed to grab hold of the pommel before being taken by the waters.

The water was so cold she could barely draw breath, which was the only reason she didn't let go and swim after the young captain. She could see him still, flailing in the current, clearly trying to swim back to the east bank. But the stream was too strong, the water too frigid.

And then she saw something out of the corner of her eye that lifted her heart. A figure on horseback thundered southward along the riverbank after the captain. The horse was white, and she knew without looking that the rider must be Gries. The captain's efforts to swim to safety were growing weaker by the moment. He had to be growing weary, and Tirnya didn't expect that he could even remain conscious in water this cold for very long. He was also nearing the end of the shallows. Another hundred fourspans or so, and he'd be lost to swifter waters.

Gries drove his mount hard, but for several moments Tirnya doubted that he could reach the man in time. Yet somehow he did. He drew even with the captain, passed him, and then steered his mount into the water, halting directly in the captain's path. With a great effort the captain raised a hand. Gries grasped at it, lost his grip, reached for him again. And this time he managed to hold on to the man.

Tirnya heard a mighty cheer from the men behind her, and knew a moment of profound relief. The captain had been her responsibility, and she'd nearly lost him. Only a turn before, she had lost two of her men in a skirmish with some road brigands. She had grieved for days afterward, and she still found it difficult not to blame herself for their deaths. Losing this man as

well might have been more than she could bear.

Confident that the captain was safe, she tried to haul herself out of the water and back onto Thirus, to whose saddle she still clung. But the cold water had weakened her, too, and her clothes weighed her down. Her arms felt leaden; her legs were growing numb. She tried a second time to climb onto her mount, and this time succeeded in getting her leg over Thirus's back.

Just as she did, she heard splashing behind her. Looking back, she saw that Enly had ridden his bay into the wash.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, breathless from her struggle to get out of the water.

"I was coming to help you."

She pulled herself the rest of the way onto her horse and took hold on the reins again. She was shivering violently, her teeth chattering, but she was safe.

"I'm all right," she said.

"You're freezing." He reached for her reins. "Let me help you to the other bank."

"I don't need help," she told him again, her tone hardening. She exhaled and closed her eyes, then looked at him again. When next she spoke it was in a softer voice. "Thank you. But really I'm fine."

Enly looked hurt, but he nodded and started back to shore. Tirnya continued on to the other side of the wash and upon reaching it spurred Thirus out of the water and onto solid ground. He was as exhausted as she, but he managed to gain his footing on the steep embankment. The other riders had already reached land and were driving their stakes into the

ground and tying off the ropes. Tirnya did so as well.

Then she straightened and gazed back across the river. Gries had just reached the armies again. Those remaining on the opposite bank were cheering both the lord heir and the captain he had saved. Several men helped the young captain off Gries's horse and one threw a blanket around his shoulders. Jenoe was there with the others and he offered Gries his hand. The marshal grinned broadly and said something; no doubt he was complimenting the man on his quick thinking and bravery.

Enly still sat his horse a short distance from them, his britches darkened and dripping. He stared at Gries and the others, but he didn't go near them. After a moment, he gazed in Tirnya's direction. Seeing that she was watching him, he turned his mount and rode away from the water's edge.

With the ropes finally in place, the foot soldiers and the Mettai who were marching with them were able to make their way across the river. It was slow going, and by the time the men and women reached the western bank, they barely had the strength to climb up out of the riverbed and onto the grass of the plain. But no one else was carried downstream by the current, and even the carts bearing their provisions forded the wash without incident. Still, by the time everyone had crossed, the sky had begun to darken. Not that it mattered. No one had the strength to march deeper into Fal'Borna land on this day. They made camp for the night barely a hundred four-spans from where the armies of Qalsyn and Waterstone had slept the night before.