

Chapter 1

Qalsyn, Stelpana, on Ravens Wash, Hunter's Moon waxing

First blood, the rules said. Beyond that, they didn't specify. A nick of the skin, the severing of a limb, a fatal strike to the breast; any of these would do. First blood. That was all a warrior needed to win.

Every person understood how Qalsyn's Harvest Tournament worked. From the youngest child, dreaming of the day when she might step into the ring and bow to His Lordship, to the oldest man, his memory of that first bow to the lord governor a fading memory, they all knew. A battle could turn with a single thrust, be it the desperate last lunge of a weary guard or the methodical advance of a skilled swordsman. The ring, it was said, was as unforgiving as steel, as merciless as the Growing sun. One mistake, one momentary lapse of concentration. First blood.

Even as she circled her opponent, watching for his next assault, Tirnya was conscious of the spectators shouting and stamping all around the arena. She had watched enough matches as a child to understand the rituals of those in the boxes: the wagers, the exchange of coin at the end of each match, the constant shifting of fortune among men and women hoping to profit from each new wound. But while the spectators made sport of the contests, there could be no doubt: the tournament was a matter deadly serious to all who watched.

And yet, the earnestness of those in the boxes was nothing compared to the gravity of those in the ring. Each contest began the same way. The two combatants entered through the doors at opposite sides of the ring, walked to the center, and turned to face His Lordship, who sat

in the main box. Each warrior bowed to the lord governor, the flat of his or her blade pressed to the forehead in salute. Then they bowed to each other. And then they began to fight.

Tirnya had fought dozens of battles in the ring, and had watched more than she could count. Some began and ended with a single devastating assault or in a blindingly quick frenzy of metal and flesh and the obligatory spilling of blood. Other matches began slowly, as this one had, the warriors turning slow circles, eyeing one another, looking for any advantage. Attacks in such contests came in quick bursts; swords dancing suddenly, fitfully, bright blurs in the sunlight, chiming like sanctuary bells each time they clashed, whistling dully as they carved through air.

Standard Qalsyn army blades and Aelian bastard swords; Tordjanni broad blades and the famed shillads of Naqbae; silver dirks and bodkins; curved Qosantian daggers and narrow bladed knives concealed in a sleeve or a boot: Tirnya had faced all sorts of steel in the ring. She herself might use three or four different swords and as many short blades in the course of a single tournament. But every warrior knew that the weapon itself meant nothing; it was the hand wielding the blade that mattered. There was a saying that was heard quite often this time of year, both in the arena itself and in the chambers beneath, where the combatants awaited their turn. “You can arm a fool with the finest Aelian steel, and at the end of the day he’ll still end up bloodied.”

Like all sayings of its sort, this one carried the weight of truth. Tirnya remembered a battle tournament from her tenth or eleventh year, when she still sat in the boxes with her mother and brothers, watching with the women and children and the men who had grown too old to fight. A warrior had appeared in the ring who none could remember seeing before. His coat of mail, the only armor the combatants were allowed, was dull and fit poorly. The clothes he wore

beneath the forged ringlets were tattered and travel stained. And, most memorably, his sword was rusted and notched, a weapon barely adequate for a road brigand, much less someone who hoped to be the last man standing in Qalsyn's famed Harvest Tournament and take home the crystal blade and twenty gold sovereigns.

No one who saw him step into the ring for the first time thought the stranger would last more than a round or two.

"Even the Tordjanni army would turn away a man who looked like that," said one older gentleman who was sitting behind Tirnya and her family.

His companion agreed. "One round with a Qalsyn guard will send him back into the wilds, where he belongs."

But this unknown warrior surprised them all, defeating his first opponent with elegant ease. His sword work was restrained and efficient, his winning strike a controlled blow to the neck that drew blood, but caused the vanquished man no serious injury.

"The first man was no one," the older man assured himself and his companion. "I'd never seen him before, either."

His companion might have nodded his agreement. Tirnya wasn't certain. She knew only that he said nothing.

When next the stranger entered the ring, it was to face a soldier from the Qalsyn army. Coaf Vantol wasn't the finest swordsman in His Lordship's force, but he was a good fighter, a big, strong, genial man, and a favorite among the city people. Surely the stranger would fall to Coaf. But no. With astonishing speed this man no one knew, this so-called warrior, who looked more like a troubadour desperate for coin than a fighter, had Coaf on his heels. In mere

moments, the city's man was bleeding from a cut on his cheek. First blood; second victory. No one cheered, until at last His Lordship himself stood and began to clap his hands for the stranger. Slowly, the applause spread through the arena, growing louder and louder.

After that the man became the favored warrior in the tournament. And he didn't disappoint. Nine more times he stepped into the ring, and nine more times he raised his rusted blade in victory, bowing graciously, first to the central box and then to the rest. Even the old man began to cheer for him, cataloging in a loud voice the man's fine attributes as a fighter: his agile footwork, his skilled use of the long-handled dagger in his off hand, the fluid grace of his sword arm. One might have thought that the old man had instructed the stranger in swordplay, so extravagant was his praise.

Eventually the stranger did lose, to Tirnya's father, as it happened. Her father was a marshal in His Lordship's army, and one of the finest swordsmen in all of Stelpana. He was also well-liked in many parts of the city; usually a victory for Jenoe Onjaef would have elicited a mighty roar. But on this day, the defeat of the stranger left the arena strangely quiet. The men and women in the boxes cheered for her father as he raised his blade, but even Tirnya could sense their disappointment. This once, they had been pulling not for Jenoe, but for the other man. Tirnya couldn't deny that even she had felt the briefest pang of regret at the stranger's loss.

Her father won the tournament that year, the last of his seven championships. He could have fought for several years more; there were some who said he could still fight in the ring to this day and compete for the crystal dagger. But his duties in His Lordship's army had begun to lie heavy on his shoulders and he had grown bored with the ring. Besides, a few years later Tirnya was ready to take her place in the tournament, and only one member of any family could

enter the ring in a given year. Still, though that was Jenoe's last year as champion, forever after that tournament was remembered for Stri Bakkett's appearance in Qalsyn. Stri had since become a captain in her father's battalion and one of the city's most renowned soldiers.

But for Tirnya, it was the warning inherent in Stri's success that remained freshest in her mind. Never again would she look at any warrior and underestimate his or her prowess in battle on the basis of a worn blade or tarnished armor. Nor would she assume that a man or woman couldn't fight simply because he or she didn't look the part of a warrior.

Others in the Qalsyn tournament had been slower to take this lesson to heart, and she had benefited from their carelessness. The first year she entered the Harvest Tournament, the year she came of age, the other combatants looked at her and saw the daughter of a great warrior, beautiful, graceful, but too weak and too lovely to be a swordswoman of any consequence. Like Stri, she proved them wrong, making it through seven rounds before finally being beaten. She still bore the scar from that tournament. In fact, she bore scars from every tournament she had entered, for though she had established herself as one of the best fighters in all the land, she had yet to win the crystal blade.

The last two years she had made it to the final match, only to be beaten on both occasions by Enly Tolm, son of Maisaak, the lord governor. Tirnya fully expected that they would meet again this year, though with a different result.

First, though, she had to defeat this giant of a man stalking her in the center of the ring. She had never learned his name; like most of the other fighters she knew him only as the Aelean. But she had seen him fight several times, and she knew that this was not a victory she could take for granted.

The Aelean was a full head taller than she with huge shoulders and long, muscular arms. For a man of his size, he was fairly nimble: he moved his feet well and reacted quickly to his opponents' attacks. Usually, against so powerful an opponent, she would have circled continually toward his off hand and the smaller blade. But the Aelean had won more than a few of his matches with the dirk he carried in his left hand, which lashed out like a serpent at any foe too concerned with his great sword.

His greatest asset as a warrior, though, was his strength. One stroke of his bastard sword, it was said, could hew through an oak tree two hands wide. Tirnya wasn't certain that she believed this, but there could be no denying the power of the man's sword stroke. If she tried to parry more than one or two of his attacks, her arm would end up numb, or broken.

Best, then, to keep moving. Not toward his dirk, but to her left, his right. She took care to keep outside of his sword hand, so that any blow he landed with the bastard sword would be backhanded. He eyed her warily as they turned their slow circle in the dirt. He might have been twice her size, but he knew as well as she that Tirnya had her own advantages in the ring.

She was strong for her size, though not nearly as powerful as the Aelean. But she was quicker and more skilled with her shillad, the long, thin blade used by the horsemen of Naqbae. It wasn't the weapon she used when leading her soldiers; it wasn't even the sword she usually carried into the ring. But she always brought it with her to the tournament, knowing that it would be the perfect weapon against an opponent like the Aelean. The blade was light and perfectly balanced, and its length allowed her to keep her distance, to dance at the edges of her opponent's reach. She was tall and long-armed. With the shillad she became elusive as well.

In her off hand she carried a second sword -- short-bladed, but longer than the dagger she

usually used. Anything to keep her distance. Some of the more powerful combatants in the tournament could fight the Aeleon on his terms; she didn't dare. "A clever warrior guards against his opponent's strengths," her father had once told her, "and watches for his weaknesses. More often than not, the clever ones live to fight another day."

The Aeleon struck at her and she parried with the short blade. It wasn't a particularly hard blow, but still it made her arm sting from her wrist to her shoulder. She swiped back at him with the shillad, but he jumped away and she missed. Once more they began to circle. The crowd had been loud a moment before, but with the man's attack they had grown quiet and restive. Even His Lordship seemed intent on their battle. He leaned forward in his chair, his chin resting in his hand, his eyes narrowed.

Perhaps sensing that she had allowed herself to be distracted for the briefest instant, the man suddenly lunged at her, leveling another backhanded blow at her head. She parried this one as well, but nearly left herself open to the dirk, which flicked out at her side, like silver lightning. The crowd gasped. Tirnya spun away, unmarked. Two blows she had parried, and already her arm was beginning to ache.

The Aeleon began to stalk her once more, and again Tirnya circled, trying to stay outside his sword arm. She waved her blade at him, trying to reach the side of his neck, but he knocked it away disdainfully with the bastard sword.

"Fight him!" someone shouted from behind her. Others murmured their agreement. She was losing them.

Early in one of her first tournaments, several years before, she had won a contest against a larger opponent by drawing blood at the knee. Whistles and shouts of "coward" chased her

from the ring that day, and she never did such a thing again. Nor did she have any intention of doing so today. She wondered, though, if those shouting at her now remembered that day as clearly as she did.

“I hope you learned something,” her father had said to her that evening, after the tournament was over.

She had been dejected and humiliated, stung far more by the reaction from the boxes than by her loss in the next round. “I won’t go for someone’s leg again, if that’s what you mean.”

“It’s not.”

She looked at him.

“People often liken the ring to a real battlefield,” he said. “What you experienced today should make it clear to you that they actually have very little in common.”

Tirnya frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“When you’re fighting in a war, your object is to win. It’s that simple. You win for your sovereign, you win for your people, you win for the soldiers under your command. Nothing else matters. But here, in the ring, there are times when the cost of victory is higher than that of defeat. You lost the respect of a good many people today. You’ll have to earn that back, even it means losing contests that trickery might let you win.”

It was another lesson she’d never forgotten. If she couldn’t defeat the Aelean fairly, warrior to warrior, she would take pride in the manner of her losing. She smiled to herself. *But I have no intention of losing.*

He aimed another blow at her head and for the third time she parried. This time, however, she didn’t dance away, nor did she circle to the outside of his sword hand. Instead she

remained in front of him. The man's eyes widened and he raised his bastard sword again to deliver a chopping strike that might well have sundered her short blade. Before he could hammer at her, however, she delivered a sideways blow of her own with the shillad. The Aelian blocked it with his dirk, but by then Tirnya had struck at him with her short blade, coming in under his raised sword to cut him just below the ear.

The Aelian winced, closing his eyes, knowing that she had baited him, and that he had fallen for the ruse. But it all happened so quickly, that the people in the boxes didn't seem to understand until the Aelian lowered his blades and turned to face the center box. Seeing the blood on his neck, the spectators began to cry out Tirnya's name again and again, the timidity of her earlier attacks now forgotten.

Over the years many in the city had grown to love her. She was, after all, the daughter of Jenoe, the Eagle of the Ring, as he had once been known, for his long reach and the swiftness with which he pounced when seeing a weakness in his foe. In recent years, as she had become more skilled with her blades and more successful in the tournaments, they had given her a name as well: the falcon. Not as formidable as her father, but faster, more agile.

She heard that name now, amid the cries of her given name. They would be pulling for her to win the final match.

She turned to the lord governor, bowed with the Aelian, and then left the ring, though not before glancing up at her father, who smiled at her as he applauded with the others.

Once in the chambers beneath the boxes, Tirnya didn't wander far from the doorway. She assumed that Enly would make short work of his next opponent. Instead, she checked her shillad for notches, and exchanged her short sword for a dagger. Enly was not nearly as big as the

Aelean, nor was his reach as long, but he was as quick as she, perhaps quicker. The short sword would slow her down.

Satisfied that she had the right weapons for the final match, she sat on the floor a short distance from the entrance to the ring, closed her eyes, and cleared her mind of thoughts of her match with the Aelean. Instead, she reflected on her past encounters with His Lordship's son, scouring her memory for any pattern in his attacks, any tendencies on his part that she might use against him this time.

In truth, though, Enly was too good to be predictable. He never fought the same way twice. He was as creative as he was skilled, as clever as he was swift of hand. The first time they fought he overwhelmed her with the speed and intensity of his attacks, defeating her in mere moments. Their second battle, in last year's final match, he fought more cautiously, confounding her with feints and counter assaults. It was a longer fight, but it ended the same way.

Not this year.

Tirnya heard the roar of the crowd and then sustained applause, and she knew that Enly's match had ended. She stood and made her way back toward the door. She glanced down to make certain that her coat of mail hung correctly, though of course it did. She examined her blades yet again, though both were polished and honed. She looked at her boots, her belt, and her gloves to see that they were properly fastened, though she had no doubt that they were. Habits, all; they calmed her, steadied her breathing, slowed her pulse.

"Onjaef!" called the old guard by the doorway.

She stepped forward, stopping just beside the man, waiting for the door to open. Padar, the guard, said nothing to her, as was proper. He had once served under her father, and for the

past six years he had stood by these doors and ushered her into the ring. But he was bound by the rules of the tournament to treat all combatants the same way.

She stood for several moments, listening to the cheers of the crowd, waiting. At last, the door opened, flooding the chamber with brilliant sunlight, so that Tirnya had to shield her eyes. A tall Qosantian soldier stepped past her, scowling bitterly, blood running from a cut along his jaw line. Enly had won, as if there had ever been any doubt. The warrior paused and glanced back at her.

“Ya’d do us all a favor if ya beat ‘im, ya know. Joost this once.”

“I’ll try,” she said mildly.

He stared at her another moment before shaking his head and walking away. “Ya’ll lose,” he muttered. “Jest as ya did last year. No one can beat ‘im.”

Tirnya smiled faintly. The Qosantian wasn’t alone. Those looking to wager on this last match would have a hard time; there couldn’t have been more than a few dozen people in the entire arena who gave her much chance of bloodying the lord governor’s son. A far smaller number than that would have been willing to risk their hard earned gold and silver on her.

Because Enly had just finished his match, the rules of the tournament allowed him to take as much time as he needed to rest and prepare for this final contest. Tirnya knew, however, that he’d want to fight her immediately. A delay of any length would have been an admission of weakness. It would have given her cause to think that he was concerned about their encounter. Even had he needed some time, he never would have taken it. And chances were he didn’t need the rest.

“They want t’ know if ya’re ready,” the guard said, his voice level.

“I am.”

He nodded, held his arm up high, and gave a short, single wave to the guard across the ring. A moment later, the second guard waved back.

“Time to go, then,” Padar said.

She started past him, and as she did he winked at her once and offered a barely perceptible.

“Thanks, Padar,” she whispered, and entered the ring.

Enly hadn't yet stepped out of the other doorway. That was his way, and though she generally thought him arrogant and full of himself, she could hardly begrudge him this small extravagance. He was, after all, the champion for two years running. Still, Tirnya slowed her gait. She had no intention of standing in the middle of the ring looking like a fool as he sauntered toward her with the crowd cheering.

As it was, the cheers that greeted her entrance were loud and sustained. While few thought she could defeat Maisaak's heir, a good many of the people watching the match would have given up gold if they thought it would help her win. Enly was better thought of than was his father, but he was still a Tolm.

Perhaps hearing how she was greeted and fearing that his own entrance would be met with less enthusiasm if he waited too long, Enly entered the ring from his doorway. Immediately, the sound coming from the spectators changed. Taken together, the cheers didn't grow quieter or louder, but some who had been cheering for her fell silent, and others who had offered little response to her appearance cried out seeing the Lord's son.

Tirnya chanced a quick glance at the lord governor, and saw that he was scowling, his

gaze wandering the crowd, as if he might remember the face of each person who cheered more enthusiastically for her than for his son. She looked toward her father, who was merely staring back at her, his expression deadly serious. “Stop worrying about the rest of us,” he seemed to be telling her. “You should only be thinking about Enly.”

Right.

They met in the center of the ring, turned to face the center box, and bowed to Maisaak.

“They’d cheer more for me if you were uglier,” Enly said under his breath. “You know that, don’t you?”

“They’d cheer more for you if you weren’t such an ass,” she answered in a whisper.

“Well, that’s obvious.”

She couldn’t help but giggle.

“But I was speaking of you,” he went on, still not looking at her. “You look beautiful today, your cheeks still flushed from your last battle, your hair tied back the way I like it. Just lovely.”

“Shut up,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing more. Maisaak nodded to them, a smug smile on his handsome face. Clearly he assumed that his son would win again.

She and Enly turned to face one another, bowed, and raised their swords.

In their previous meetings, Tirnya had fought carefully, even tentatively, knowing how dangerous Enly could be with either hand. This time, she immediately launched into a ferocious assault, her blade flashing like sorcerers’ fire. Enly tried to counter with his dagger as he parried her blows, but she struck at him with both blades, making it impossible for him to do anything

more than defend himself. He gave ground slowly, grudgingly, but give ground he did.

The boxes seemed to be quaking, so loudly were the people there shouting at what they saw, but Tirnya concentrated solely on Enly. He tried to pivot to might throw her off balance and then attack her from the side, but she had seen him do this before, and she spun as well, still pressing him.

Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and ran down his temples. He wasn't breathing hard yet, but his face was reddening. Tirnya was sweating, too. The muscles in her arms were starting to burn. But she had him on the defensive, and she refused to relent.

He tried to strike at her again, using the momentum of his retreat to carry him into a spin and an assault of his own. Again, she was ready, parrying with the shillad and lunging at him with her dagger. He jumped away, and she was on him once more, her steel a glittering beast, like something called forth by the gods.

Enly tried his spin maneuver a second time, stumbled, and sprawled on the ground. Tirnya leaped forward, putting one foot on his sword and the other on his dagger, and laying the edge of her blade against his neck.

She could have won then. First blood.

A few people shouted for her to end the match, to take the crystal dagger as her own. But she didn't want to win like this. She took a step back, and then another.

"Get up," she said.

She heard someone groan in the boxes, but then people began to call her name again.

"Tirnya!" they called. "Falcon!"

Enly climbed to his feet slowly, and picked up his weapons. He stared at her for a

moment, his grey eyes ghostly pale in the sunlight. Then he bowed to her.

Tirnya started forward, intending to renew her assault, but Enly wasn't willing to let her gain that advantage again. He attacked as well, and for long moments they stood face to face, their blades lashing out, clashing loudly. And then Enly began to advance on her, forcing her back.

She tried to parry and strike, to find once more the energy she'd had when they began. But she was tired, her arms and legs heavy. Enly must have sensed her weariness, but his expression didn't change, nor did the speed of his attacks. He had been known to talk to some of his opponents. It was said that he often taunted them, hoping to provoke them into mistakes. But he had never done anything of the sort to her, nor did he now. He merely kept after her. And when she tried to spin to the side and strike over his off hand, he was ready.

Tirnya saw both attacks, the chopping blow with his sword and the thrust with his dagger. But the pivot had left her off balance; not much, but enough. She managed to parry the sword strike, but she could do nothing about the dagger as it darted out at her cheek. An instant later, she felt the sting on her flesh and the hot trickle of blood running down her face like tears.

Enly stepped back and looked at her, his brow creased, as if he had surprised himself with the assault.

"I'm sorry," he mouthed. Then he raised the dagger over his head and turned a slow circle so that all could see, stopping when he was facing her once more.

At first there was silence. No one seemed to believe that he had won. The fierce smile on the lord governor's face, began to fade as he looked around the arena. After a few moments, those sitting in the boxes seemed to realize that they ought to be cheering, and they began to call

out Enly's name. But His Lordship still didn't look pleased. And Tirnya heard her name being shouted as well.

She turned to face the center box.

"We have to bow," she said under her breath.

Enly turned smartly toward his father and made himself smile. They bowed in unison and then they walked their separate ways back toward the doors.

As she walked, not bothering to wipe the blood from her face, Tirnya looked up at her father. He was staring back at her, looking both proud and concerned. She smiled, and he did as well. But she felt her eyes starting to well. She'd come so close to beating him. And then she'd let him win. She shook her head. That wasn't quite how it had happened, but it felt that way.

Padar was waiting for her at the door.

"Ya had him," he said grimly.

She'd hear a lot of this in the next few days. "Yes."

"Ya did th' right thing."

"There are those who will disagree."

The old guard shrugged. "Wha' d' they know? Ya don' bloody a man when he's down, even if i' 'tis fer th' crystal blade."

Tirnya nodded, fearing that she might weep. The crystal blade! She'd come so close!
"Thank you, Padar." She started to walk away.

"Captain, wait," the guard said.

She halted. He crossed to where she stood and looked at her cheek.

"I' doesn't look too bad," he said after a moment. "Probably feels worse than i' 'tis. It'll

heal before ya know it.”

Tirnya smiled bravely, though a tear slipped from her eye. “Right,” she agreed. “Just another scar.” Just another tournament; just another year.

But this time, she had come so close.

Chapter 2

Before leaving the chambers beneath the boxes, Tirnya stopped by to see the healer who saw to the wounds of all the combatants. Left to decide on her own, she would have ignored the cut on her cheek, but she knew that her father would be waiting for her outside the arena, and he would make a fuss if she left the wound untended.

The healer examined her in silence, using a warm, damp cloth to wipe away the dried blood. He then dabbed a different cloth in spirits and gently patted the cut. Tirnya winced, sucking in air through her teeth.

“It cleans the wound,” the healer said, holding her chin with a firm hand. He dipped the cloth in the spirits again and dabbed at the cut a bit more.

“I know what it does,” she muttered, still wincing. “That doesn’t make it burn any less.”

The healer put down the cloth and eyed the cut, clicking his tongue as he did. He was a heavy man, only a few years older than she, with brown curls and short, fat fingers that were more deft and gentle than she would have thought possible.

“We can leave it to heal as it is, or we can stitch it up,” he said after several moments. “Either way you’ll wind up with a scar. It may be less noticeable if we use the sutures.”

She pointed at the scars on her chin and temple. “What do I care about one more scar?”

“Will you at least let me put a poultice on it?” he asked, though from the tone of his voice it seemed clear that he knew she’d refuse this as well.

“And have me walking around the city looking like Enly sliced off half my face? No, thank you.”

The healer shook his head. “Very well, then. You can go. Try to keep it clean. If it starts to hurt more, or the skin around it turns red and fevered, get yourself to a healer. Any healer. You understand me?”

Tirnya nodded sullenly and stood, grabbing her swords and striding toward the door. Taking hold of the door handle, she paused and looked back at the man, who was clearing up his medicines, herbs, and bandages. Naturally, she was the last. No doubt he’d had a long day.

“Thank you,” she said.

He looked up and smiled wanly. “You’re welcome, captain. You know,” he said a moment later, stopping her as she began to open the door. “I understand that you’re disappointed. Anyone would be. But there’s no shame in losing the final match to the lord-heir.”

Surely the healer was trying to help, but his words stung more than did his spirits. She merely nodded and left the chamber.

Her father was waiting for her just outside the arena, chatting amiably with passersby and flanked by several of his men. There had been an attempt on Jenoe’s life several years before -- a single attacker who came at the marshal with a dirk while Jenoe was drinking in a small tavern near the river. Tirnya’s father had killed the man himself and there had been no further attempts. But since then, Jenoe’s captains had each assigned a man to guard the marshal in shifts, so that he always had four armed guards at his side.

There was nothing to indicate that the attacker had been anything more than a drunken soldier who sought to exact revenge for some imagined slight, but some believed that he had been sent by the lord governor, or one of his subordinates. The Onjaef and Tolm families had mistrusted each other for more than a century, and Maisaak had long been envious of Jenoe's stature among Qalsyn's soldiers and subjects.

While Tirnya was not so naïve as to deny that the lord governor might well be jealous of her father, she didn't believe that Maisaak would resort to murder to rid himself of a rival. Jenoe's popularity might have bruised His Lordship's pride, but her father could hardly be considered a threat to Maisaak's power.

The Onjaef family had come to Qalsyn a century and a half before, during the darkest days of the Blood Wars between the Eandi of the eastern Southlands, and the Qirsi, the white-haired sorcerers who controlled the western lands. House Onjaef held the great city of Deraqor, the family seat, where Tirnya's ancestors ruled as lord governors. They also controlled the Horn, a narrow strip of fertile land between the Thraedes and K'Sahd Rivers. At the time, the Horn might well have been the most valuable land still under Eandi control. But as the Fal'Borna, a clan of fierce horsemen, who were as skilled with their blades as they were with their magic, pushed eastward, the leaders of the Eandi found themselves forced to cede territory. The Blood Wars of the northern plains were among the bloodiest fought during the long, violent history of the conflicts, and in the end the Onjaefs, led by Mehp, Tirnya's grandfather four times removed, had no choice but to abandon their ancestral home. They fled eastward, into what remained of Stelpana, settling eventually in Qalsyn. And they didn't come alone.

To this day, descendants of the other families that came from Deraqor still saw the

Onjaefs as their leaders, and they still hoped that someday the families of Deraqor would reclaim the city for the sovereignties. In the eyes of the Sovereign and most of those who lived elsewhere in Stelpana, the Onjaef clan was disgraced, a family in exile, the vanquished stewards of a lost city. Only here in Qalsyn, where Maisaak was seen by some as a strong but capricious ruler, and Jenoe was revered by so many for his prowess with a blade and his easy manner, would anyone even stop to wonder if a rivalry existed between the two men.

When Tirnya emerged from the stone doorway, her father ended his conversations and walked toward her, a sympathetic smile on his lips. He was still youthful, despite the fact that he no longer considered himself young enough to fight in battle tournaments. His brown hair and beard were unmarked by grey, and he remained trim and muscular, an imposing figure on the battlefield as well as in the city streets. Reaching her, he put his arms around her and kissed her forehead.

“You fought well,” he whispered.

She closed her eyes, fearing that she might start crying again. He wouldn’t have tolerated that -- a warrior shed tears for lost comrades and fallen leaders, not for matches lost in the arena. He had made that clear to her years ago.

“Not well enough,” she managed to say.

He pulled back and made her look him in the eye. “Yes,” he said. “Well enough. Everyone in the boxes knew that you had the tournament won, that you could have bloodied him as he lay on the ground. The rest is . . .” He waved his hand vaguely. “The rest means nothing.”

Only a father could say such a thing.

“It means nothing that Enly won?” she asked. “It means nothing that I’m going to have

another scar on my face?”

“You’re right,” he said. “That will mean something. If nothing else, it’ll mean that your mother will have a new reason to berate me for ever teaching you to hold a sword.”

Tirnya smiled, but only briefly. “What are they saying about me?”

“Who?”

She shrugged. “Everyone. Your men. The people in the boxes. Enly.”

“You think I’ve spoken to Enly?”

“Of course not,” she said. “But the rest of them. Come now, Father. You know what I’m asking.”

“They’re saying that you should have won. Some of them mean it kindly; others don’t.”

“The ones who don’t--”

He shook his head. “You shouldn’t trouble yourself about them.”

“What are they saying, Father?”

Jenoe ran a hand through his hair, and wound up rubbing the back of his neck. “They’re saying that you made . . . that you made a womanly choice.”

“Womanly!” she repeated, her voice rising. “Womanly?”

“I think they mean--”

“I know what they mean!” Tirnya said. “I was weak. I took pity on him when I just should have won.”

“They’re wrong,” Jenoe told her.

“Are they?”

“Yes. What you did was honorable, not weak. Had you struck at Enly as he lay on his

back, they'd be calling you a snake and worse." He laughed mirthlessly and gave a small shake of his head. "I know it didn't seem this way at the time, but Enly's fall was the worst thing that could have happened for you, and the best that he could have hoped for. Had I not seen it all with my own eyes, I might have thought that he stumbled intentionally."

"He wouldn't do that."

"I know. But still, it gave him a respite from your attack. It changed everything about the match."

"I can only imagine what they're saying about him," Tirnya said, her voice low.

"I don't think he could care less what anyone other than his father is saying."

She frowned. "I imagine his father had quite a lot to say."

Jenoe grinned. "Yes, well be thankful your father is such a kind, reasonable man. Because a more exacting teacher might want to know what you were thinking in your third match, when you fought with your sword in your off hand, and the dagger in your right."

"It worked, didn't it? Craevis had probably never seen anyone do such a thing before."

"You might well have lost, taking such a risk."

Tirnya shook her head. "Not to him. You saw how easily I won. Admit it, Father: it was a fine idea, and it worked perfectly."

Her father laughed and shook his head. "He did look confused, didn't he?"

"By the time he understood what I had done, and why all my attacks seemed so different, he was already bleeding."

"Speaking of bleeding," Jenoe said, his brow creasing as he examined her wound.

Tirnya pulled away. "I'm fine."

“I’m sure you are. It looks like a clean cut. The healer saw you?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Fine, then. I won’t mention it again. You’re going to the Swift Water?”

She’d forgotten. Each year, after the tournament ended, the lord governor hosted a supper at the largest tavern in the city, the Swift Water Inn. Nearly all the combatants went -- it wasn’t often that anyone offered free food and ale for as long as one could eat and drink -- and usually Maisaak himself put in an appearance. As one of the lord governor’s captains, Tirnya was expected to attend; as one who had fought in the final match, her absence would have been conspicuous. She wanted only to go home and sleep, but that would have to wait.

“Yes,” she said, the word coming out as a sigh. “I’m going.” After a brief hesitation, she asked, “Are you?”

Tirnya knew the answer already. Jenoe hadn’t gone to the supper since his last year as champion, although as a marshal in the army and a former winner of the tournament he had every right to attend. Others of lower rank -- men who had never stepped foot in the ring -- showed up every year and drank themselves into a stupor. But Maisaak hated him, and Jenoe knew it. The lord governor tolerated him as marshal because he and every other person in Qalsyn understood that no one in the city, perhaps in all the land, was more suited to command than Jenoe. But this was another matter.

“No,” he said, his smile fleeting and forced. “I should be getting home to your mother. She’ll want to hear all about your matches.”

Tirnya looked away. “Then she should come herself.”

“She doesn’t like to watch you fight,” he said. “You know that. It frightens her.”

“It doesn’t frighten you.”

“I don’t love you as much.” He grinned, to soften the gibe. Not that it was necessary; they both knew it wasn’t true. “I’ve been through enough tournaments,” he said a moment later. “I understand the risks and the strategies. To your mother it just looks . . . dangerous. But she would have been proud of you today. She will be, when I tell her about it.”

“All right,” Tirnya said, not wanting to talk about this. “I’ll see you later.”

Before she could walk away, Jenoe caught her hand and raised it to his lips. “I’m proud of you,” he told her. “You should be proud, too.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Father.” She kissed his cheek, and walked away.

By the time she reached the Swift Water, the sun had almost set, and long black shadows stretched across the city streets, darkening the stone facades of homes and shops. The door to the tavern was open, and raucous laughter from within spilled out into the lane, along with the scent of roasting meat and musty ale. Tirnya wouldn’t be the only woman there -- a few had entered the tournament this year, though she was the only one to have gotten beyond the sixth set of matches. But in all ways that mattered, she would be awash in a sea of loud, arrogant men. Her mother would have laughed had she known how much Tirnya dreaded this. “You see?” Zira would have said. “If you had listened to me, and concerned yourself less with swordplay and more with the finer crafts, you’d be home now, resting comfortably with a cup of wine.” Too late for that, by more years than she cared to count.

Steeling herself with a long breath, Tirnya stepped inside.

As soon as she entered the tavern, the other warriors began to stare at her, turning one by one as they realized who had come. Gradually conversations stopped, the din fading toward the

back of the tavern like a receding tide. Maisaak stood near the bar, a slight smile on his face, as if he were enjoying her obvious discomfort. Enly stood near him, with the Alean and several other warriors. His expression was far more difficult to gauge than his father's. Concern, embarrassment, even a touch of resentment: Tirnya saw all of these in his pale grey eyes, in the lines around his mouth. Enly resembled his father superficially. Both men had light eyes and black hair. Both were blandly handsome, though Enly had broken his nose as a boy and its crookedness made his face more interesting than his father's. But Maisaak always seemed to be scowling, and on those rare occasions when his expression softened there remained a touch of contempt and condescension, so that even his kindest smile seemed mocking. Enly was more open, kinder, softer, and thus, in his father's view, weaker. Today's victory couldn't have been easy for either of them.

After a silence that lasted for what seemed an eternity, Enly began to clap, stepping forward and raising his hands so that others could see him. Others began to applaud as well, until the sound grew so loud that it compelled even the lord governor to join in. After a few moments, Maisaak stepped forward, raising his hands to silence the throng. For once, Tirnya was deeply grateful to him.

"Yes, yes," the lord governor said, nodding as the applause died down. "She deserves no less." He faced her, the smile on his face appearing genuine. "Welcome, Captain Onjaef. We were starting to fear that you might not come at all, and thus deny us the opportunity to congratulate you on your fine performance today."

Tirnya bowed to him. "Thank you, Your Lordship, and forgive me for being late. Unlike my opponent in the final match, I had to spend some time with the healer afterwards."

That drew a laugh from all, and an approving nod from Maisaak.

“Well, you’re here now. And I hope you’ll enjoy yourself.”

“I will, Your Lordship. I intend to avail myself of as much of your free ale as time will allow.”

More laughter followed, and slowly the other discussions resumed, leaving Tirnya in the uncomfortable position of having to make conversation with the lord governor.

“You handled that very well, captain,” he said quietly. “Someone with less courage and grace would have stayed away entirely.”

It was a rare courtesy from the man, and she didn’t bother to hide her surprise. “Thank you, Your Lordship. You’re most kind.”

“Not really. I’m just not the monster your father has made me out to be.”

And there it was: the hidden knife slipped between exposed ribs. No matter the circumstance, Maisaak and Jenoe were both incapable of putting aside their animosity, even for an evening.

“Yes, Your Lordship.”

Fortunately, Enly chose that moment to join them.

“She said she wanted an ale, Father. And you know she’s too polite to get one so long as you’re talking to her. Leave the woman alone.”

A brittle smile touched His Lordship’s lips. “Yes. I think I understand. I’ll leave the two of you.”

He walked away, joining a knot of soldiers near the back of the inn, and leaving Enly and Tirnya alone, or at least as alone as two people could be in a tavern so crowded.

“Thank you for that greeting,” Tirnya said after a brief, strained silence. “It’s not often that people applaud when I step into a tavern.”

“Really?” Enly said. “I would have thought it happens all the time.”

She raised an eyebrow.

He sipped his ale, shrugged. “It was nothing.” He looked away, taking another pull of ale.

She frowned slightly. It wasn’t like him to be so diffident. Stepping past him to the bar, she ordered an ale, then turned to face him again. He was already watching her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

He looked away again and drank more. “I’m not looking at you in any particular way.”

She smiled. “You beat me, Enly. It’s as simple as that. You should be used to it by now. You should be gloating, as you do every other year.”

“Oh, I am used to beating you,” he said, with a hint of his usual swagger. “But I’m not used to winning this way.”

“And what way is that?”

He started to drink again, but stopped himself. After a moment he met her gaze, though it seemed to take some effort on his part. “By accident. By sheer, dumb luck.”

“It was a good strike,” she said, unsure of why she was being so generous. “You cut me cleanly.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. I was losing. If I hadn’t fallen down when I did, you would have bloodied me, probably with your next attack.”

“Did you fall on purpose?” she asked.

He frowned. "I'm not that clever, Tirnya."

She laughed. "No, I don't suppose you are."

Enly's expression didn't change. If anything, he looked more and more troubled by the moment. "Everybody here knows that you should have won," he said. "My men know it. Yours know it. Certainly my father knows it."

"Good," she said. "Maybe next year a few people in the boxes will wager their gold on me."

He regarded her sourly.

"What is it you want me to say, Enly? That I'm sorry I almost beat you? That I didn't mean to fight so well?"

"That's not. . ." He stopped, shaking his head.

"Then what?"

He stood still for several moments, the muscles in his jaw bunched. When he faced her again anger and wounded pride burned in his eyes. "Why didn't you bloody me when you had the chance?"

"You mean when you were down."

"Yes, when I was down! The match was yours! You should have ended it then and there!"

All around them, conversations ceased and people began to stare. Tirnya felt her face growing hot. She grabbed Enly by the arm and dragged him out into the street. The sky overhead had turned to a soft indigo, and the first bright stars shone down on the city. She could hear people singing in another tavern and two men staggered past, both of them drunk, both of

them laughing at something. This was a night of celebration in Qalsyn, and not only for those who had fought in the tournament. The harvest had begun, and it promised to be a good one. Tirnya, Enly, and Maisaak might well have been the only unhappy people in the entire city.

“You were saying?” she asked wearily, making herself meet his glare.

“Why didn’t you end our match when you had the chance?” He sounded calmer now, but there could be no masking the intensity of that look.

“An Onjaef doesn’t strike at a defenseless opponent. My father wouldn’t have done it, and neither would I.”

“So it’s all about pride. Stupid Onjaef pride.”

She threw her arms wide. “Of course it is! And so are these questions of yours! You know very well that I couldn’t win that way. You know what people would be saying about me. You won, Enly! The crystal dagger is yours again. The only reason we’re even having this conversation is that I wounded your pride when I let you get up. Well, that’s too damn bad!”

He blinked, then looked away. “This is . . .” He shook his head, looking very young. “It’s our fathers, isn’t it? This is all about them.”

“Not entirely. I’d want to beat you even if your father was a cloth peddler.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m not having this discussion again, Enly.”

“We have to--”

“Don’t!” she said, shaking her head.

“We have to marry. You know it just as I do. It’s the only way to end their feud and all the rest of this foolishness.”

“You just don’t want to have to fight me again next year.” She smiled. He didn’t. After a moment she shook her head. “That was supposed to be a joke.”

“I’m serious, Tirnya.”

“We’ve talked about this.”

A small smile touched his lips. “We’ve done more than talk about it.”

“Yes, and we saw how that turned out, didn’t we?”

He gave her a coy look. “Was it really all that bad?”

“It didn’t work, Enly. And I have no interest in being any man’s wife. Not even yours. You’d expect me to give up my command, to have children, to be the dutiful wife of the lord-heir.”

“It wouldn’t be that terrible, would it?”

She gestured at the mail coat she still wore and at the weapons hanging from her belt.

“Look at me, Enly. Do I look like the marrying kind?”

They were about the same height, and now their eyes met. It was only for an instant -- she quickly made herself look away -- but she saw enough to know that he meant what he was saying. He might well have loved her.

“I’d marry you in a heartbeat,” he said, his voice dropping to a whisper.

She made herself look at him again. He deserved that much from her. “No,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Enly, but the answer is still no.”

He held her gaze for a moment longer before shaking his head. He smiled again, but it looked pained. “Onjaef pride,” he said.

“Call it what you will.”

“You’ll change your mind someday.”

Tirnya shrugged, far less certain of this than he seemed to be. “Maybe.”

“By then it might be too late.”

She straightened. “I suppose that’s the risk I’m taking.”

They stood in silence for several moments. Enly continued to eye her, but Tirnya refused to meet his gaze again. Finally, he took a long breath. “All right, then.” He held out a hand to her, somehow managing a smile. “Shall we go back in?”

Tirnya had to laugh. However disappointed he might have been, he recovered quickly, or at least hid his pain well. By midnight he’d be in bed with some barmaid or one of the other swordswomen.

“All right,” she said. She took his hand, and together they reentered the tavern. Once inside, he released her hand and joined some of his men, leaving Tirnya to reclaim her ale from the bar. She didn’t much feel like drinking it. In fact, she would have preferred to leave, but after the way the others had welcomed her, and after her exchange with Enly, which so many had overheard, she didn’t feel that she could. Not yet, at least.

“Captain!”

Tirnya turned and searched the tavern, wondering if this was someone calling for her.

“Captain Onjaef!”

She saw a man near the back of the Swift Water wave a hand over his head. After a moment she recognized Oliban Hert, one of her lead riders. His shirt was stained red on the sleeve, from a wound she had dealt him today in the seventh match. Still, he was smiling. She waved in return, picked up her ale, and walked back to where he was standing. When she

reached him, she realized that several of her riders were there. They raised their glasses in salute and she drained hers, the proper response under the circumstances. The men cheered, and immediately one of them rose and hurried to the bar to get her another.

“Ya made us proud today, captain,” Oliban said with a grin. “I only wish ya’d been as gentle with me as ya were with th’ lord-heir.” Immediately his face fell. “Wh-what I meant was--”

She patted his shoulder. “It’s all right, Oliban. I know what you meant.” But her throat had tightened. People in Qalsyn would be speaking of what she had done for a long time. It might well become a lasting part of Harvest Tournament lore, like Stri’s first competition, or the year when Enly’s older brother, Berris, won the final match, only to fall to the ground dead a few moments after, the victim, the healers said, of a defective heart. She’d be remembered, too: the woman who had her chance to defeat the lord-heir, only to squander it.

The rider returned with Tirnya’s ale and handed it to her. She drank a bit, taking the opportunity to compose herself.

“Ya did what ya had to, captain,” Oliban said, eyeing her. “All of us knows it.”

The other men nodded their agreement.

“Ya showed ya was th’ best, an’ ya showed ya have honor.” Oliban raised his cup. “T’ th’ captain!” he said.

“Here, here!”

Tirnya grinned and sipped her ale as the others drank. “Thank you,” she said. They cleared room for her at their table, and she sat.

All of them, including Oliban, started to ask her questions about her matches. How had

she beaten the Aelean? What weapons had she used? Who was quicker, Enly or the Tordjanni swordsman she fought in her eighth match? She answered as many of their questions as she could before finally raising a hand to forestall the next one.

“Actually,” she said, smiling to soften the words, “I really don’t want to talk about the matches anymore. It’s been a . . . a long day.”

Oliban glanced around the table at the others. “Our apologies, captain. Maybe we should leave ya alone.”

Tirnya shook her head. “No. I don’t want that.” She looked at them each in turn. “You can’t tell me that the tournament is the only thing you know how to talk about.”

They laughed, but it sounded forced, a response intended to please their commander. And she understood. It wasn’t all they knew to talk about, but it was certainly all they wanted to talk about. Every other conversation in the Swift Water was about the day’s events; why shouldn’t theirs be as well? They could speak of more mundane matters every other day of the year. But today. . .

Tirnya smiled again, this time at her own foolishness.

“Enly’s quicker,” she said. “Although the Tordjanni isn’t bad. His off hand is only average -- Oliban here is quicker on the left. But his sword. . .” She shook her head, and the men all leaned in, waiting, eager. “His sword is fast. Lightning quick.” Tirnya grinned. “Not as fast as mine, of course, and no match for Enly’s. But very quick.”

They wound up talking for hours. Once Tirnya forced herself past her self-pity, she understood that talking about her matches and those of her men was just what she needed. Before she knew it, most of the other combatants had left the Swift Water, though Enly and his

father were still there, talking to separate groups of soldiers, trying to ignore each other.

“It’s late,” Tirnya said, standing and stretching. Despite all the sword work she did every day, during the tournament she always seemed to exercise muscles she had forgotten since the previous year. She’d be sore come morning. “We have training at first bells.”

The others stood as well. “Yes, captain,” Oliban said.

“We also have patrol two nights hence,” she said. “I want the assignments set by tomorrow evening.”

Oliban nodded. “They will be.”

“Good night, Oliban.”

He grinned and nodded. “G’night, captain.”

She watched her men leave before draining her cup -- her fifth ale of the night -- and starting toward the door herself.

“Captain Onjaef.”

She turned. Maisaak was watching her, and, she now realized, Stri Bakkett was standing with him.

“A word please.”

She crossed to where he stood and nodded to Stri. “Yes, Your Lordship.”

Enly looked up from his conversation and immediately joined them. Maisaak raised an eyebrow, but he didn’t order his son away.

“Captain Bakkett was just telling me that there’s been trouble on the roads south of the city. Brigands from the sound of it. Groups of them, disciplined and clever. They’ve been striking at peddlers making their way toward the Ofirean and the lower sovereignties. Have your

men heard anything?"

"Not that I know of, Your Lordship," Tirnya said. "But I'll ask them about it first thing in the morning."

Maisaak nodded. "Yes, do. And I want patrols doubled until further notice." His eyes flicked toward Enly. "All patrols. Even those in the north. I don't want anything interfering with Harvest trade. There's also talk of the pestilence to the west. Much of it seems to be in white-hair lands; the Fal'Borna mostly. But all it takes is a single peddler to bring it across the Silverwater into our lands."

"Yes, Your Lordship."

"Tournament's over now. It's time we got back to more serious matters." He seemed to direct this at his son, but he hardly looked at Enly at all. "I'm off to bed. I'd suggest the rest of you do the same."

"Good night, Your Lordship," Stri said.

Maisaak left the tavern with Enly in tow, but Tirnya hardly noticed. *Pestilence in white-hair lands . . .*

"You fought well today."

Tirnya looked up. Stri still stood beside her, his eyes shining in the lamplight.

"Thank you."

"Your father was pleased, as much by what you didn't do as by what you did, if you follow."

"I do," she said. "Thank you."

Stri was usually quiet. So much so, that many of the men in her command thought him

proud and superior. She knew better. He simply was not given to idle chatter. But since becoming one of Jenoe's captains, he had become a fixture in the Onjaef home, where he was as garrulous as Tirnya's younger brothers. He was a large man, with a broad, plain face and dark eyes. His light brown hair was long and straight, and though he was muscular, he looked soft, his shoulders rounded, his head slightly bowed, as if he were afraid of bumping it on the top of every doorway. Early on, he had doted on Tirnya, as if taken with her. But as time went on, and he came to accept that she didn't return his affection, the two of them settled into a comfortable friendship. He was now more like a big brother than a friend, and she trusted him as she did few other people.

"You probably don't want to talk about the matches anymore, do you?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Not really, no."

"Fair enough." He gestured at the door with a large hand. "I'll walk you home."

Tirnya nodded, but didn't move. "What do you know about this pestilence His Lordship mentioned?"

"Not a lot," he said. "A peddler mentioned it to me two or three days ago. Three, it was. And then I heard talk of it again today from one of the other combatants. A swordsman from western Stelpana."

"Do you know where it's struck?"

"Well east of the Horn, it sounds like. Not near Deraqor, not yet at least, if that's what you're wondering."

It was. The Qirsi had renamed Deraqor D'Raqor, as was their way. Tirnya had never seen the city, though to this day it was said to be one of the most beautiful and impressive of all

the cities on the northern rivers. But like her father, and his father before him, Tirnya still thought of Deraqor as her family's home. Though she knew no one who lived there, and cared not a whit if every Qirsi on the plains died tomorrow, she was oddly relieved to know that the pestilence had not struck there. She was tied to the place, as were all Onjaefs. One day, she had sworn long ago, the Onjaefs would take back Deraqor for the Eandi. Yes, there was peace between the races, and no one wished to return to the terrible days of the Blood Wars. But by the same token, Deraqor was theirs; it belonged to the Eandi and it was meant to be ruled by her family.

“Did they know people who were sickened by it?” Tirnya finally asked.

“Who?”

“The peddler you mentioned, and the swordsman.”

He shook his head. “Not that I know of. It seems from what they told me that it's mostly white-hairs who've been getting sick.”

She tried to muster some sympathy for them. They were people after all, and she knew, mostly from tales told to her by her father and by other soldiers, how horrible the pestilence could be. No one should have had to endure such suffering. But her heart seemed suddenly to have turned to stone. What did it say about her that she couldn't bring herself to feel anything?

“I guess that's too bad for them,” she said, feeling that she had to say something.

“You hate them very much, don't you?”

She looked at him, hearing something in his voice. “Don't you?”

“Not really.”

“But the wars. . .” Tirnya trailed off, not quite certain what she had intended to say.

“I never fought in the wars.”

She frowned, then shook her head. “No, of course not.” She started to say more, but stopped herself. She felt herself growing angry with him, and for the life of her she didn’t know why. Unlike so many men under her father’s command, Stri had no ties to Deraqor. He had come to Qalsyn from the south, near the Ofirean; his family had never lived in the western lands now held by the Fal’Borna. Deraqor probably meant nothing to him. It was just one of many taken by the white-hairs.

But for Tirnya, who had been brought up on tales of her family’s former glory, and for others whose ancestors fought and died in the battles for the Horn, Deraqor was both a wound that never healed, and a name that carried within it the promise of redemption.

Stri should have known that. Or was she being unreasonable?

“Come along, captain,” he said, starting toward the door. “It’s late and this has been a long day for all of us.”

She followed him out of the tavern, lost in thought. Stri didn’t say much as they walked. He might have commented on how clear a night it was, and how fine the crop fields outside the city looked, but that was all. He seemed to understand that Tirnya was barely listening. When they reached the home she still shared with her family, however, he turned to face her.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asked. “You’ve been very quiet.”

She made herself smile. “No, I’m just. . . I’m tired.”

“You’re certain?” He was frowning, the light of the two moons shining on his face.

“Yes.” She touched his arm lightly. “Thank you, Stri. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“All right.” He started to walk away. “You fought well today. Your father was very

proud.”

She nodded and forced another smile. But the cut on her cheek burned like a brand.