

## Chapter One

Sweat stung his eyes as Heath parried the blow.

He ignored the burn as his sword rang against the other. He was tired, yes, but to admit exhaustion was to admit defeat. To admit defeat was unthinkable.

The grasses underfoot had been matted down during their struggle, and they were slippery. He backed away, feeling for surer footing, keeping his attention on the enemy.

“Had enough, city-dweller?”

The taunt meant nothing. What mattered was the location of his enemy’s blades. Sword in one hand, dagger in the other, both to be avoided. Heath tightened his grip on his own weapons and considered any weakness he could use to his advantage. He danced back again, forcing his opponent to follow him, gaining time.

His foe gave him none, coming in at a rush. Heath braced, brought his sword up, blocking the first blade, as he thrust the dagger at his foe’s ribs.

And felt his enemy’s wooden blade crack against his own.

“Damn,” Heath swore, stepping back. He took his practice weapons in one hand and ran the other hand through his sweat-soaked curls.

“That’s better than the last time,” Rafe of the Wolf offered from where he sat in the grass, watching them. “A mutual kill, eh?”

“I’d like to live to tell of it,” Heath said ruefully.

Prest, his sparring partner, smiled, his teeth white in his dark face. “Good work.”

That was high praise from Prest, who rarely used more than a handful of words in a day.

Rafe sat up and offered Heath a waterskin. “You are improving, Heath of Xy. Since joining us, you have added to your skills.”

“My thanks, Rafe.” Heath said. Before he left Xy for the Plains, he’d been part of the Castle Guard in Water’s Fall, a fighter of adequate skill.

But the Plains demanded more.

Heath hefted the skin and drank deeply. Rafe had filled it at a nearby stream just recently, and it was still cold.

Prest stripped to the waist and started wiping himself down with a cloth. Heath glanced down the road behind them, but there was no sign of the others.

“There’s time,” Rafe offered. “They aren’t moving fast.”

Heath nodded and followed Prest’s example. He unbuckled his leather armor and stripped off his undertunic. The cool spring air felt good on his skin. The early afternoon sun wasn’t hot, but the days ahead promised to warm. They were advancing with the spring up the mountain valley that was the Kingdom of Xy. Although there were sun and new blossoms here, it was possible that there was still snow on the slate roofs of Water’s Fall.

This wasn’t how he’d planned to return to his homeland. They’d left the Plains weeks ago, traveling slow. He was grateful. He wasn’t sure what his welcome would be since his abrupt departure last fall.

“More than just your weapon skills have improved,” Rafe continued. “You have strengthened your—” The rest was gibberish.

“Say again?” Heath asked. He’d learned the language of the Plains one painful word at a time. He was fairly fluent, but sometimes words escaped him.

Rafe laughed, and looked at Prest.

“Muscles,” Prest pointed to his own body, where his stomach showed the ripple of power beneath his black skin.

Another thing that was different about the people of the Plains. Because they raided from every kingdom, their people were of every color imaginable. Black, brown, yellow, or even paler than Heath’s own people. Different indeed.

Rafe was a smaller man, thin and quick, with fair skin, black hair and brown eyes. His face always seemed to be lit with a smile.

Prest was tall, a big man of black skin, eyes and hair. He’d had long braids, but he had shaved his head after an epic hunt on the Plains. The hair was growing back now, but it was still trimmed short and close to his skull. Two very different men, yet both of the same tribe.

“Your body has more strength, with more power behind each blow,” Rafe continued. “Now you will strike the killing blow first, yes?”

Heath grunted. Standing watch at the castle hadn’t let him get fat, but the standards of the Plains warrior were much higher. To them, fighting and sparring were like breathing, something you did everyday. Plains warriors were quick to take offense unless there had been an exchange of tokens, and insults were met with steel. He’d learned hard and fast.

But a grunt seemed the only appropriate response. The Plains had other customs, sexual customs, far different from those of Xy. Everyone seemed to sleep with everyone else, and think nothing of it. He’d learned to gently refuse offers of sharing from both men and women, but it

was still embarrassing as hell when a man . . . Not that Rafe had shown any interest, but he shared a tent with four women.

Thankfully, one of their other customs was to stay as clean as possible, so he busied himself with the cloth and the waterskin.

“I hope the Warlord decides to set up camp here,” Rafe said. “That pool we found looked inviting. We could all bathe tonight.”

“Together,” Heath said, rolling his eyes mentally. That was another thing he’d had to get used to. These people had no modesty.

“Of course, shy city-dweller,” Rafe gave him a glance and smirked. “But there is only one you would chase into the pool, eh?”

Heath ignored the jab.

Prest lifted his head. Heath followed his look.

There on the road, just coming over a small rise, was a woman, walking between two mounted guards. A very pregnant woman, dressed in white, walking slowly.

Even at this distance, Heath could see Lara’s smile light up her face when she spotted them. He smiled in return. She was one of the reasons that he had left his family, his position, and his land.

They’d been friends since childhood, laughing and running about the castle’s gardens for as long as Heath could remember. Most people thought they were twins, since they’d both had brown curls and blue eyes.

They’d never tired of the surprised look on people’s faces when they learned the truth. Heath was the son of Othur, Seneschal of the Castle of Water’s Fall, and Anna, the palace cook.

Lara was Xylara, daughter of King Xyron, a Daughter of the Blood. And now, Queen of Xy, returning to give birth to the heir to the throne in the Castle of Water's Fall.

Lara raised a hand in greeting, and looked back over her shoulder. Behind her rode Keir of the Cat and his warriors. Keir was the Warlord of the Plains, the feared Firelander who had invaded Xy, defeated its armies, and then claimed Xylara as his Warprize. A man feared for his skill as warrior and Warlord.

Keir of the Cat, Warlord of the Plains, Overlord of Xy was scowling at his Warprize.

Xylara, Queen of Xy, Warprize of the Plains was blithely ignoring him.

"The Warlord looks none too pleased," Rafe said, getting to his feet.

Prest nodded and started to gather up his armor and weapons.

Heath followed suit. "That's not a surprise. Lara says that pregnant women need to walk once in a while. It's not healthy for her to ride in Keir's arms all day."

"Tell that to the Warlord," Rafe said.

"Only if his token is in my hand," Heath said.

"And you're out of reach of his blades," Rafe added.

Heath grinned, and loaded his horse. He felt sorry for the Warlord, truth be told. Lara was like a sister to Heath, or as those of the Plains said she was 'of the same tribe and tent'. But Heath knew full well that while Lara was kind-hearted and gentle there was a core of steel under that smile.

Once he'd checked his packs and belted on his sword and dagger, Heath turned back to watch them approach. The Warlord was not traveling with an army this time. The Council of Elders had stripped him of his position, blaming Keir for the deaths at the hands of the plague.

But those that remained loyal traveled with him still, and refused to drop his title.

There were only about thirty warriors in their group, and only one that Heath was concerned about. He scanned them all, trying not to be too obvious, looking for a certain golden blonde head. But there was no sign of her.

“So, what do you think?” Rafe asked, hanging his waterskin from his saddle. “Will it be a short nap, or do you think he can convince her to stop for the day?”

Heath glanced at the westering sun. “This place would make a good overnight camp. I’d guess overnight.”

“Not up to us,” Prest rumbled.

“True enough,” Rafe said.

Prest nudged Heath’s arm. “There,” he said nodding to the left.

Three riders emerged from the woods carrying the spoils of their hunt. She was there, in the center, a fat buck behind her. Sitting tall and proud, her blonde hair gleaming in the light.

God of the Sun, she was beautiful. Even at this distance he desired her.

Her head turned, as if she sensed him, and he felt the heat of her gaze. His body tightened with need and desire. But she turned her head away, urging her horse on, and the moment was gone. She and the others galloped toward the Warlord.

“Fresh meat,” Rafe said with satisfaction. “That means an overnight camp, with any luck.”

Heath just stood there as Rafe and Prest started to lead their horses forward. His attention was focused elsewhere.

He knew the truth, even if he wouldn’t admit it to others. He knew full well that he had

told all and sundry that he left Xy and journeyed to the Plains to aid Lara. And that was true, in part. But the real reason he had left?

That lovely blonde frustratingly stubborn woman warrior.

Atira of the Bear.

## Chapter Two

Atira felt Heath's gaze like a blaze of fire over her skin.

The city-dweller was on the rise, just up the road. She spotted him as she, Yveni, and Ander emerged from the woods with the spoils of their hunt. Her eyes were drawn to him before she realized it; she looked away as soon as she knew it was him.

But the image burned her eyes. Half-naked, standing on the rise, his tanned skin glowing in the sun.

Her horse snorted as it felt her legs tighten, confused by the signal. Atira forced her body to relax, even as her fingers clenched the reins.

The snows take that city-dweller, she thought.. Take his hard, sweet body, and tender whispers in the night. Take his touch, and his laugh, and those brown curls that felt so soft when she ran her fingers—

Atira cut that thought as if with a sharp blade, and urged her horse toward the Warlord's party.

Until she saw Lara walking along the road, her warlord following a distance behind. Atira took one look at Keir's face and she veered off toward the back of the group.

"Skies above, the Warlord looks about to lash out," Yveni said as she urged her horse to follow Atira's. Her black face framed worried brown and gold eyes, and Atira couldn't blame her.

“Rafe was scouting,” Ander offered, his bushy white eyebrows a stark contrast to his bald head. “He’ll have found a good camp, and with luck, the Warprize will agree to stop for the night. That will calm the Warlord. We will feast and play some of that Xyian chess. Maybe I can win a game or two.”

“Don’t count on it,” Atira said. “Lara’s as stubborn as he is.”

They both eyed her with respect, and Atira sighed inwardly. It wasn’t that she knew the Warprize better than they did. But she’d been the first that Lara had treated, healing an injury that would have meant death had Lara not brought her skills to the Plains.

Atira had broken her leg practicing her riding skills. But for Lara’s arrival, she’d been about to travel to the snows by her own hand. That was the way of the Plains, after all. The warrior-priests held all the secrets of magic and healing. Even if such a one had traveled with Keir’s army, a warrior-priest would never have aided one of Atira’s status.

But Lara had stood over her on the practice grounds and had offered healing, despite the insults Atira had given her at their first meeting. Lara had demanded that Atira have the courage to try Xyian ways, asking if she’d let Lara see to her leg. Atira had taken the risk, and the leg had healed. She’d become the living symbol of the gifts that Lara brought to the Plains as a Warprize.

Of course, everyone seemed to think it had been a miraculous thing. But Atira remembered full well the truth of healing. It had meant forty days of restriction and restraint. Forty days of patience, which was not one of Atira’s skills. She shook her head at the memory. All that had kept her sane had been the wonder of the healing and Heath’s—

“There’s Marcus,” Yveni said, pointing with her chin.

Atira caught sight of the cloaked figure toward the back, riding with the pack animals. Marcus was the Warlord's token-bearer, and claimed responsibility for the Warlord's tent. Amyu of the Boar was riding next to him, her long brown hair pulled back in a braid.

"Let's take the meat to him," Ander said. "And avoid the Warlord's wrath."

"Aye to that," Yveni said, and they headed for them at a trot.

Atira followed, even though she still felt uncomfortable around the man. Marcus had suffered horrific burns to his body during a battle. His hair and his left eye and ear had been burned away, leaving his skin ugly and mottled. The corner of his mouth was left stiff and unmoving.

He always rode completely concealed in a cloak, lest he offend the elements. Most warriors would have sought the snows after such an injury, but Keir of the Cat had demanded that Marcus live, and Marcus had obeyed.

One bright eye gleamed from the depths of his hood as they rode close. "Well, that might fill their bellies for an hour or so. Was that all the prey you could bring down?"

Yveni, Ander, and Atira all exchanged glances. Marcus's tongue was as sharp as the daggers he carried.

"It seems to me to be more than enough," the rider next to Marcus said softly. That was Amyu, another whose presence bothered Atira. Amyu was still a child, as her lack of tattoos showed. She was barren and could never meet her obligation to the Tribes and be recognized as an adult. She should still be in the care of the theas, not traveling with warriors. But she had saved the life of the Warprize, in defiance of the elders of her Tribe. The Warprize had claimed her for the Tribe of Xy, which was why the child traveled with them.

“And you know so well what it takes to feed a Warlord,” Marcus growled.

Amyu flushed, but she lifted her chin. “I am learning,” she replied.

“Barely,” Marcus said. He fixed his gaze on Atira. “Go tell Herself and Himself that I’m stopping to cook, even if Herself won’t. That might get through their thick heads.”

Amyu’s eyes went wide.

“Send the child,” Atira snapped, her temper rising.

The red on Amyu’s cheeks grew brighter, but this time she looked away.

Regret washed over Atira, dousing her anger. What was she thinking, to lash out at a child who was unable to defend herself? She opened her mouth, but it was too late. Amyu slowed her horse, dropping back to ride next to Yveni and Ander.

“What’s wrong?” Marcus asked from the depths of his hood. The cloth shifted slightly as he lifted his head to look ahead. “Ah. Your city-dweller still—”

Her rage flared. Atira pulled her dagger, only to have Marcus parry it with his own, his blade held in his scarred hand, his one eye calm as he studied her face.

“Rein in your wrath, Atira of the Bear,” Marcus said, his tone and manner even. “No offense was intended.”

Atria took a deep breath, then jerked her blade back and rammed it into its sheath. She faced forward, cursing under her breath as her cheeks filled with heat.

“We travel through the lands of Xy,” Marcus continued, as he slipped his blade into the depths of his cloak. “A people with far different customs than ours. The Warlord and the Warprize cannot afford to have one of their warriors killing Xyians unfamiliar with our ways. You’d best watch that temper of yours, warrior.”

“He is not my city-dweller.” Atira snapped.

“You’ve shared his tent,” Marcus’s voice was mild, but he was clearly intent on making a point. “And neither of you have shared with another since.”

“No longer,” Atira snapped. “Heath . . .” she paused, trying to get herself under control. “Those who dwell in the cities have strange ways. Strange ideas.” She tried to match calm for calm and failed. “All he will speak of is bonding.”

“Ah,” Marcus said.

“He wants to own me,” Atira stared at the figure on the rise, feeling Heath’s gaze. “To control me.”

She clenched her jaw, suddenly remembering who she was confiding in. She didn’t look at Marcus, preferring the silence but expecting a sharp word at any moment.

“Bonding is not like that,” Marcus said softly.

Atira gave his cloak a startled glance, but Marcus was not looking at her. His hood had fallen forward, covering his entire face in shadow. He was staring off into the distance.

Marcus had been bonded, that she knew, to the Warlord Liam of the Deer. But the ear that had held the symbol of his bonding had been burned from his head, and the bonding had been severed.

“A bond is not a prison, nor is it shackles,” Marcus continued, with an odd tone in his voice. “It can become that, if both parties do not take care. But when a bonding works, when it is solid . . .” He sighed. “It is . . . liberating . . . .”

Marcus caught himself then, as if remembering whom he was speaking to. “Here now,” he growled. “You go talk to Lara. I will speak to Himself. Between the two of us, we can

convince them to stop for the night.”

Atira gave him a sharp nod, and urged her horse forward.

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Heath watched as Keir settled Lara on a bed made of gurtle felt pads and heaped with blankets and furs. “I’m fine,” Lara said, trying to stifle a yawn. “Honestly, Keir. It’s not healthy for you to carry me everywhere. Don’t you believe your own Master Healer?” Lara smiled up at Keir, her blue eyes dancing.

Keir shook his head, his dark hair hanging in his eyes as he leaned over her, helping her arrange the bedding to support her on her side. Heath caught a glimpse of the gold ear weaving on his ear, which matched the one on Lara’s. The ear-weaving that marked them as a bonded couple on the Plains.

Lara gave into the yawn, then blinked at him sleepily. “A short nap, and then we can keep going. Another mile or so, and we should see the walls of Water’s Fall in the distance. Isn’t that right, Heath?”

“It is,” Heath agreed.

Keir shook his head, and Lara opened her mouth as if to argue, but Marcus cut her off. “No. There’s a good-size deer out there, and I’ve a mind to roast it in coals this night. We will stay here and eat well. Tomorrow is soon enough, Warprize.”

“Those that travel with us might appreciate the rest,” Keir rumbled. “Given the pace you are setting, Lara.”

Lara rolled her eyes, then put her hand on her belly. “You’re assuming your child will allow me to sleep, Keir of the Cat.”

Keir lowered his head to hers, and whispered in her ear. Lara blushed, then patted the bed. “I do seem to rest easier with you beside me, my Warlord.”

Keir straightened and started to remove his swords. “You’ll see to the camp, Marcus?”

“Aye,” Marcus said.

Lara sighed as she shifted over, making room for Keir to spoon up behind her. “You could ride ahead, Heath. You really don’t have to wait for us to make our formal entrance into the city.”

Heath shook his head. “No thanks, Your Majesty. Better that both my parents are caught up in the excitement of your arrival before they see their wandering boy.”

Lara gave him one of her looks, and Heath knew that she wasn’t done with this conversation. Thankfully, she yawned again, so Heath gave her a grin, and turned to follow Marcus from the tent.

Rafe and Prest were outside, taking up their posts.

Marcus was already gathering the others, announcing that they were stopping for the night. Amyu was kneeling nearby, digging out a fire pit. Heath headed in that direction, watching out of the corner of his eye for Atira.

Amyu regarded him with steady eyes as he approached. Heath gave her a smile, but Amyu did not return it. She was a quiet one, that was for sure. She kept herself apart and away from the others. Lara had explained her circumstances, but Heath wasn’t sure that he understood. She was no child.

“We’ll need more wood,” Atira looked at Marcus, who nodded in agreement.

“You and Heath will go. He will take that tool of his—”

Atira's face went bright red in an instant.

"Not that tool," Marcus rolled his one eye. "Get your head out of your tent. He will take his 'axe'."

"My other tool will come as well," Heath said. "I'm attached to it."

The other warriors broke out in laughter. Atira stiffened, throwing a glare at Heath, and opened her mouth to protest.

"The Xyian will not get lost," Marcus cut her off with a glare. "And you can get your arguing done out there, away from Herself. Take some bells. You can be as loud as you wish without disturbing her or us. Regardless of which tool gets used."

The other warriors stifled their laughter as Atira glared, then stomped off.

"Be certain you remember to bring back wood. At least an armful," Marcus called after her. "Make sure its dry, too."

Heath followed after Atira, not bothering to cover his grin.

## Chapter Three

Heath stopped to pull his axe from his saddle bags, which allowed Atira to slip into the shade of the forest for a moment to try and release her anger.

Here, the trees stood tall, concealing the sky with their bright green leaves. Without the sun, the air here was cooler. Heavier, somehow.

Atira shivered.

She was a warrior of the Plains, of the wide-open grasses. Yes, they had alders growing by the waters that reached the height of a warrior and a bit beyond. But nothing that grew as tall as these trees, towering over her head, blocking out all light and sound. Atira felt hemmed in by the trees, their stout trunks blocking her sight, and the underbrush hampered her movement.

How was a warrior to see, to know what was coming, to see what was behind? She shivered again, and took a step back before she caught herself.

“Ready, milady?”

Heath’s voice startled her, and she jumped slightly as he came to stand next to her. His blue eyes were warm and understanding, which just angered her even more.

“I am not your lady,” she bit the words off. “That is a—”

“I know, I know,” Heath said as he walked past her. “It is a Xyian way, that is of the city and therefore foul and evil.” He turned his head, looking around. “Nothing good here. We need to go farther in.”

“There is wood here,” Atira said, picking up some dried branches.

“Small sticks aren’t going to cook a meal,” Heath said. “If it bothers you, go back and look for dried dung.”

“There’s none,” Atira said glumly.

“What, not interested in fresh?” Heath looked back at her over his shoulder, his eyebrows arched over his sparkling eyes, alight with mischief. His lips curved ever so slightly.

Atira’s heart lurched and her own lips started up as well, before she caught herself and stiffened.

“I know you fear the woods,” Heath turned away and started down a path that only he could see.

“I do not fear it,” Atira said angrily as she followed him.

“Remember how I felt, when we were racing hard to catch up with the Warlord and his armies? When I rode out on the Plains for the first time?” Heath continued, ignoring her protest. “Couldn’t figure out which direction we were traveling, much less where we were. The open sky was a nightmare.”

“It was not,” Atira said. “It has a beauty all its own.”

“So you told me then.” Heath kept walking.

Atira stayed silent, remembering all too well when she’d spoken those words. They’d been naked, wrapped in blankets, sated and sweet in each other’s arms. Heath had spoken his fears, and she’d comforted him with more than just words.

Atira tried to forget, but her body remembered.

“I am not afraid,” she insisted following Heath as he headed deeper within the tangle. “I

am . . . uncomfortable.” She stopped for a moment, looking around. “The forest is so full. Everything moves in the wind, and there is no clear path.”

“There are deer tracks,” Heath chuckled. “We are following one now. And you need to have a care for widowmakers, that’s for sure.”

Atira stopped, her hand on her hilt. “What are those?”

Heath pointed up and off the side. “There. Dead branches held up by other branches. They can fall without warning, and hurt anyone caught below. If they kill a man, they make a widow.”

Atira stared at him. Her command of Xyian was fairly good, but that was not a word she knew. “What’s a widow?”

Heath paused. “A widow is a woman who has lost her-,” he stopped. “Maybe a better word would be ‘deadfall’. If it falls on you, you are dead.”

Atira glanced up, looking at the mass of tree branches and leaves above her head. “Deadfall,” she repeated, letting her frustration show. “So now, I need to fear ‘up’ as well as what is around me?”

“There,” Heath pointed. “That’s what we are looking for.”

It was a massive tree, lying on its side, its dead branches bare. Heath hefted his axe, and started to work at a thick branch. After a few blows, he leaned his weight on it, breaking it away from the tree with a sharp crack.

“It’s dry enough. You should be able to break it in threes.” Heath helped her drag the branch over to a clear area.

They worked in silence, broken only by the ringing of Heath’s axe. After a bit, birds

started to sing again, becoming used to their presence. There were other sounds as well. Atira stopped, lifting her head from the work to try to identify the strange rustling noises around them.

Heath paused, breathing heavily. "Mice, probably. And squirrels."

Atira looked around even more. Heath had the most experience hunting in this land, and he'd brought in a large sack of squirrels one night to camp. Lara and Marcus had conferred, and the camp had been treated to something called 'squirrel stew'. Atira would be more than willing to have that again.

The work went fast. They had a sizable pile, almost more than they could carry back to camp. If Atira was to try once again to make things plain to him, it must be now. Even with bells, there was little privacy in camp.

"I want it understood between us," she started, cracking one last large branch. "You and I have shared bodies, Heath of Xy, but this means little to me, as this is the way of our people. You are mistaken in thinking it means more."

The chopping stopped behind her. Good - he was listening for once.

"I am in the service of the Warlord and you serve the Warprize," she said. "Our paths are the same for now. But this talk of bonding needs to cease. We cannot continue to argue in camp. It upsets the Warprize and she has more than enough of a load to bear."

Atira turned to find herself nose to nose with Heath.

He was standing there, glowering, sweat gleaming from his brow. The breeze carried his scent to her. Strong, clean . . . male. And so very familiar.

Her mouth went dry. This close, she could feel the warmth of his body and the heat of his glare. Skies above, she wanted him still, even with his odd city ways. She swayed toward him,

licking her lips.

“What we shared,” came his soft growl. “was not meaningless.”

Atira started. “I didn’t mean—”

“So it was meaningless,” his voice lowered, rough with desire. “when you were lying there at Master Healer Eln’s, bored out of your mind while your broken leg healed, and I came and read the *‘Epic of Xyson’* for hours on end.”

“Heath,” Atira whispered, fighting her rising need.

“I taught you to read and write Xyian, and you taught me the language of the Plains,” Heath continued. “Lying there, your leg all rigged up. So beautiful. So determined to learn. To heal.”

“As the Warlord commanded,” Atira said.

“Meaningless, the first time I kissed you.” Heath lifted his hand and touched her lips. “I couldn’t get enough of your sweet mouth. We got those straps and weights all tangled, and Eln threatened to vivisect me.”

Atira smiled faintly. “I didn’t know what that word meant.”

“Eln explained it, didn’t he? In vivid detail.” Heath drew closer. Atira lifted her head, waiting . . . hoping . . .

“Then the day that Eln let you walk, I suppose it was meaningless that we *‘celebrated’* that night, late into the night.” Heath put his hand on her hip. The heat of it burned through her leathers. “Remember? That first night?”

“Heath,” Atira breathed, letting her eyelids droop, taking in his scent. Waiting for his kiss.

Instead, Heath knelt down, his gaze never leaving hers as he lowered himself down at her feet.

Atira caught her breath.

Heath calmly started to gather firewood.

“Meaningless. All of it. Every danger, every bedding, everything we’ve shared.”

Heath gathered several pieces of firewood as he spoke.

Atira frowned down at the top of his curly head. “That is not what I meant. You Xyians—”

Heath stood up abruptly and shoved the firewood at Atira. She took it, and then stood there as he started loading more on. “This isn’t about Xy, or the Plains. This is about you and me. It has been months since we shared our bodies. Months since you threw me out of your tent. Months since I asked you to bond with me.”

“I am of the Plains,” Atira snapped. “I do not choose to bond. I am free to sleep with any others that I choose. You—”

“But you haven’t,” Heath said.

“What?” Atira stared at the man.

“Months now, since I asked you to bond with me.” Heath repeated as he took a step closer. “Since you threw me out of your tent and your life. But you haven’t shared with anyone else in all that time, Atira.”

“I . . .” Atira raised her arms higher, as if the firewood could offer protection from the heat of those eyes.

“Have you?” Heath demanded.

“I—” Irritated at her own stuttering, Atira blurted out the truth. “No.”

Heath pressed closer, forcing her to step back. “You can protest all you want, Atira of the Bear, but you and I know the truth. I love you. I want you, in all ways. Your obligations to the Tribe are done. You are free to bond, free to choose a life with me. And that is what I want, Atira. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“No.”

“You are afraid. . . .” Heath said, his eyes flashing.

“No,” Atira denied it.

“Uncomfortable then,” Heath started to smile. “I make you uncomfortable, don’t I?” He moved close enough that the bark on the firewood brushed his chest. “Don’t I?”

Atira pressed her lips tight together, to keep from blurting out her fear. Of him. Of her feelings.

Heath smirked. “I scare you, my fierce warrior. I terrify you.”

Atira drew in a breath to deny his words, but Heath leaned in, his lips close to hers.

“Coward,” he whispered.

With a snarl Atira dropped the firewood and went for her dagger.

Heath danced back, laughing, taunting her. . . .

“Heyla, you two.”

They both jerked their heads around, to see Prest coming toward them through the wood.

“You are wanted.”

“What is it?” Heath asked, still keeping a wary eye on Atira.

“A messenger has come,” Prest said. “He carries news of your ‘father’.”

## Chapter Four

Atira fumed as she followed Prest and Heath out of the woods, clutching her load of firewood, and trying to avoid all the obstacles of the cursed trees. Roots to trip over, branches to fall on you. She wanted nothing to do with trees, with Xy, and with one city-dweller in particular.

How dare he call her a coward? She should have gutted him where he stood. No token in his hands, that smirk on his lips. Heath was making her crazy; he just would not listen to her.

It didn't help that Heath seemed to glide over the deer-path ahead of her, moving confidently even though his arms were full. Atira cursed the earth as she stumbled yet again.

Clearly, his wits had been taken by the winds. She should just ignore him, just forget him. Invite another to her tent and wash her hands of him.

So why couldn't she take her gaze off him as he walked in front of her, his leather armor tight over his—

“Wait a bit, Prest.” Heath said.

Ahead, Prest paused at the edge of the trees, looking back over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised in a question. He also carried firewood, since there was no sense wasting empty hands.

“Let's get out of these trees,” Atira urged, casting around for threats from above.

Heath gave her an amused look, then moved up to stand next to Prest. “I just want a look at the messenger before he gets a look at us.” Heath paused just at the edge of the brush.

“Why?” Atira asked, coming to stand behind him.

“Scouting the enemy,” Heath said.

Prest stiffened at the same time Atira did.

Heath gave them both exasperated looks before turning back to peer through the leaves.

“Just because they are from Xy doesn’t mean they support Lara.”

“They made no threat,” Prest rumbled.

“Not all threats are with swords,” Heath said softly. “Look at the sundering of your Council of Elders.”

Atira nodded, understanding. Sometimes words were deadlier than blades.

“Xylara is the consecrated Queen of Xy,” Heath continued. “Her word is the law of the land. But that doesn’t mean the Lords will all support her, or offer no threat, even with Keir as Overlord.” Heath tilted his head, as if to see better. “Interesting . . . . Who kept them out of the tent?”

“Marcus,” Prest said.

“Good,” Heath said. “Give her a minute or two to wake up before she talks to them.”

Atira craned her neck, looking through the branches, trying to see for herself.

There were three Xyians standing some distance from the tent. Two of them were dismounted, holding the reins of their horses. They each wore a cloth of green over their armor, and appeared to be warriors.

The one that remained mounted wore clothing that seemed to glitter. There was no sign of armor that she could see, although the man had a sword at his side. His clothing was trimmed in the same color, the deep green of a pine tree with sparkles of gold.

“What’s interesting?” Atira demanded.

“Prest, can you get some others to carry this wood?” Heath set down his load of firewood. He brushed off the dirt and bark from his leathers as he rose.

Prest nodded, adding his load to Heath’s.

“Why?” Atira demanded.

“Because to Xyian nobility, appearances are everything,” Heath said, starting to take the wood from her arms. “And that messenger is Lanfer, Lord Enali’s youngest son. A man of importance in Water’s Fall and as friendly as an ehat in rut.”

Atira let him take the firewood. “Why is that interesting?”

“Because that means that the messenger is not a member of the Castle Guard, or one of Lord Marshall Warren’s men.” Heath said. “Which probably means that the message is not from my father. It’s probably from the Council.”

Heath reached out as if to brush dirt from her chest. Atira knocked his hand aside. “So? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” Heath admitted. “But it’s something that we need to keep in mind.”

“The Warprize will know this?” Prest asked.

“I’m not sure,” Heath shrugged. “Lara and I were raised together, but once she decided to become a healer, she spent more time with her teachers than in the Castle. She’d never really been a part of Court life, like I have.”

“Ah,” Atira said. “She’s not of the Tribe’s tents.”

“Xy is not all one big tribe,” Heath gave her a sharp look. “And you need to remember that Xyians do not have tokens.”

Atira rolled her eyes. “‘Xyians do not have tokens,’ she said mockingly. “‘Xyians may use their fists if provoked, but only fists. Xyians give warning before their swords are drawn.’” She snorted. “We are to treat them as children. We are not to take insult at their words.”

Heath flashed her a grin. “Oh, you can be insulted. Just don’t draw your sword and kill them with a stroke. Like Keir did when Lord Durst insulted Lara.”

“The man did not die,” Atira said.

“Close enough,” Heath said. “But even the Warlord acknowledged that he had made a mistake.”

“True,” Prest said, then started toward the camp. Heath gestured Atria on, and followed behind.

They had the Xyians’ attention the moment they emerged from the trees. Atria focused on the mounted man. About Heath’s age was her estimate, although it was hard to tell with Xyians.

His upper garment was padded and worked with threads that sparkled in the sun. The effect was pretty, but Atira was certain that her dagger could rip right through the fabric. His hair was short and as blond as her own. She couldn’t see his eye color from here, but she could see his glare. And it was focused on Heath.

“Lanfer,” Heath greeted the man as they walked closer.

“Heath,” Lanfer dismounted, handing the reins to one of his warriors. He tugged at his clothing as he gave Atira a glance, looking down his nose. “Still chasing your Plains whore?”

Atira jerked to a stop in surprise.

Heath took two steps past her and punched Lanfer right in the face.