

Chapter One

I was terrified.

I shifted my sweaty grip on the handle of my sword, and watched my attacker's eyes. 'Watch their eyes,' they'd told me. 'The eyes will tell you their next move.'

I stared intently at him, but his eyes told me nothing. My left arm was trembling from the weight of my shield. 'Look over the rim,' they'd told me. 'Look over the rim, watch his eyes and react to hi—'

He came at me in an instant, rushing right for me. I managed to take his first blow on my shield and tried to stab at him with my blade, but my helmet shifted into my eyes and—

THWACK.

My arm went numb, and I cried out at the pain. My sword tumbled to the ground.

Rafe stood in front of me, horrified, staring at my arm.

"That's going to bruise." Prest commented dryly.

Rafe groaned, looking up at the skies as if for help. "The Warlord will gut me where I stand." He glared at me. "Warprize, you were supposed to block the blow!"

"I tried!" I dropped my wooden shield, and rubbed my arm. "I watched your eyes and I kept the shield up, but—"

"Too slow. She doesn't have the speed." Ander offered.

"The shield is too heavy." Yveni added. "She doesn't have the strength she needs."

"Herself doesn't have the sense the elements gave a goose."

We all turned to see Marcus riding up to our group, glaring from under his cloak.

“What’s all this now?” He barked.

My guards all started talking at once. I sighed, took off my helmet and shook out my braid, letting the breeze reach my damp head. Trying to be a warrior-princess is uncomfortable, sweaty work.

Marcus and my four guards were arguing at the top of their lungs. Marcus, who was covered in his cloak lest the skies be offended by his scars. He’d been injured in a battle years ago, his left ear and eye burned away. Prest, with skin of light brown and long black braids, towered over Marcus. He stood silent, as usual, his arms crossed over his chest.

Rafe, his skin even paler than normal was gesturing, trying to explain. His hair was dark against his fair skin, and his brown eyes were filled with frustration. He’d been the first in the prisoner tents to welcome my healing skills, and the first to learn my language.

Ander was gesturing as well, talking at the same time. The sun gleamed on his bald head, and his thick bushy white eyebrows danced over his hazel eyes. Yveni stood as silently as Prest, tall and thin, her skin as black as any I’d seen among the Firelanders. But she’d a smile hovering on her lips. She and Ander had replaced Epor and Isdra, who had died at Wellspring.

I heaved a sigh, and looked off in the distance, back toward Water’s Fall. The trees behind us had lost their color, and their leaves were falling fast.

It was hard to believe that it had been two months since I’d left my home to follow my Warlord. In many ways it felt like much more time had passed, what with all that had happened.

We’d left the village of Wellspring ten days ago, leaving behind our dead, both Xyian and Firelander. We’d resumed our trek to the land of the Firelanders, the Plains of Keir’s people. Another few days ride and I would get my first glimpse of that fabled place which lay

beyond the border of the Kingdom of Xy. Another few days ride, and the great valley of Xy would open up onto the wilds of the Plains.

Another few days ride, and I'd be where I never dreamed of going.

I glanced over to where the army of the Firelanders moved past us, in their long slow march to their homeland. Keir had left half of his force to secure Water's Fall and Xy itself, under the watchful eye of Simus of the Hawk. He'd brought the other half with him, to return to the Plains. It was still an impressive sight as they wound past us, all on horseback, an army of fierce warriors, both men and women.

Or at least, what was left of Keir's army, after the ravages of the plague we'd suffered outside of Wellspring. We'd left our dead, to be certain, but there were still problems, still conflicts at the heart of the army. Conflicts as a result of an illness sweeping through the ranks of a people who see illness as a curse. Conflicts as a result of the presence of a Warprize in their midst and the changes that I represented to them. Conflicts that had been set aside for the rest of this journey, to be dealt with before the Council of Elders when we reached the Heart of the Plains.

We could have reached it sooner, but Keir had held the army to a snail's pace, claiming the need to regain strength in the warriors, to hunt and replenish food supplies.

In truth, we were dawdling.

I didn't object. Keir and I had spent the last ten days together, making love at night and dealing with problems during the day. How could I object to spending time with my beloved Warlord?

The silence behind me made me aware that I was the center of attention. I turned to face

an angry Marcus, who had dismounted and was glaring at me with his one good eye.

“Apparently this was your idea?”

I glared at my guards, but they all found other things to look at. I faced Marcus. “It was.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to learn to protect myself.” I looked at Marcus and lifted my chin. “I have to be able to protect Keir.” Inside I winced even as I spoke.

“Protect Hisself?” Marcus gave me a steady look. “How so?”

I sighed, prepared for Marcus’s scorn. “When we were in camp, when Iften was standing over Keir with his dagger, that scared me, Marcus.” I gestured toward the others. “I can’t be deadweight. You said yourself that the Plains are hard. I thought I could at least learn how to—” the words came hard. “How to fight.”

Marcus considered me long enough that I blushed and looked away. “I know it must seem silly—”

“No, Warprize.” Marcus looked off, down the valley, toward the Plains, and sighed. “Death comes in an instant, and you are learning that truth. A harsh truth, but a truth nonetheless.” He shook his head. “But you are on the wrong path.”

“She wants to learn.” Rafe protested. “What’s the harm?”

Marcus turned to face Rafe. “Let me show you.” Even as the words left his mouth, he’d launched himself at Ander, with no warning or sign, so fast I never really saw him move.

What I did see was Ander ward off Marcus’s dagger with his own blade, which he drew with unbelievable speed. It all happened so fast, and then they stood there, Ander at guard and

Marcus making no further move.

Marcus stepped back, and bowed his head to Ander, who inclined his head in return. The weapons were sheathed, and Marcus turned back to me. “You see?”

I frowned, puzzled, and answered honestly. “No.”

Marcus had a patient look on his face. “Ander had no need to think of the ‘how’. He reacted. He knows the blade, knows the movements, knows in the depths of his body and blood. Has known since he cut his first teeth and his thea handed him his first blade.”

I blinked. First tooth? But that was—

“You think, Warprize.” Marcus continued his lecture. “You think, and then you tell your body and that delay is fatal. Never mind the weight of the shield, never mind that you—”

“You give babies weapons?”

Marcus fixed his eye on me. “What do you mean by ‘babies’?”

The language again. Just when I think I know the language of the Firelanders, something new comes up. “Babies. Children that still crawl and soil their—” I bit my lip. “Like Meara, the babe we found in the village.”

We’d found her crying, on the bed next to her dead mother. Meara had been the only survivor of the plague that had swept through the village of Wellspring. All of the Firelanders had tried their best to spoil the babe rotten once she’d recovered from her near-death from the illness.

Marcus shook his head. “No. First teeth.” He opened his mouth and showed me his teeth. “All their first teeth.”

I thought for a minute. He meant the first set of baby teeth - all of them. Which meant

they gave weapons to children that were roughly two and a half, maybe three years old.

“Wooden blades, Warprize. The first weapon is wooden.” Marcus looked at me closely.

“The first true blade is at the first true tooth. You understand?”

I nodded slowly, taking that in. Firelanders wielded steel at roughly six or seven years old.

No wonder they were so fast. It occurred to me that I was very glad I’d sent Meara back to Anna at Water’s Fall before we’d begun this march to the Plains.

“So.” Marcus’s voice called me back. “We will concentrate on what you can do. Not on what you can’t.”

I sighed, and let my shoulders slump. “But I can’t do anything!”

“Pah.” Marcus turned, and picked up the wooden sword and small shield that I had been using. “What did you do when that warrior-priest burst into your tent?”

I went and sat close to Prest, flopping down in the grass. “I screamed and ran.”

“And?” Marcus asked as he seated himself, keeping his cloak tucked in. Rafe dropped down next to him, and pulled out a dagger and a sharpening stone. Ander and Yveni remained standing, on watch, standing close enough to hear.

“Hid behind Keir.” I picked a stem of grass and started playing with it. “Bold warrior that I am.”

Marcus snorted. “You, with your terrible memory. You have forgotten.”

I looked up to see that Rafe and Prest were both grinning, as if at the memory. “What?”

Rafe answered promptly. “You threw that pot of muck at him. He was covered with it when he came out of the tent.”

“Wish I’d seen that.” Ander spoke, a smile of his face, his eyes still on the horizon.

“Heyla to that,” Yveni added.

Prest chuckled. “The stink clung for days.” He reached over and pulled his warclub close, preparing to re-wrap the handle with the leather strips. Of course, it wasn’t just any warclub. I looked away from the weapon. It brought back too many painful memories. Of Epor and Isdra.

Of their deaths.

“So.” Marcus continued. “What did you do? You alerted others that you were in trouble. You used what was at hand to distract the enemy. You fled to where there was help, and positioned yourself where your defenders could protect you.”

I had forgotten. I’d whipped that jar of boiled skunk cabbage right at that warrior-priest’s face before I’d fled. I sat up a little straighter. “I guess I did.”

Marcus gave me a nod. “Teaching you to fight is enough to make a gurtle laugh. But teaching you to defend yourself, to respond under attack and get yourself to safety, that can be done.”

I shook my head in despair. “Marcus, I froze when I found Iften hovering over Keir with that dagger. I didn’t have the sense to scream.”

“Fear.” Prest spoke as he concentrated on his task.

Rafe nodded, even as he honed the edge of his blade. “Fear holds you still when you need to move, and moves you when you need to be still.”

“Fear makes you silent when you need to be loud and loud when you need silence.”

Ander said, almost reciting. I wasn’t surprised; Prest had taunted Iften with a teaching rhyme

back at Wellspring. It seemed Firelanders used rhymes a lot for teaching purposes. Which also didn't surprise me, since they had no written language. Everything was memorized, and their ability to do that was amazing.

“Fear closes your throat, makes it hard to breathe. Fear weakens your hand and blinds your eyes.” Marcus took up the chant. “Fear is a danger. Know your fear. Face your fear.”

I waited a breath, but when it was clear they were done I broke the silence. “But how do I do that?”

Prest turned his head, and smiled at me, his white teeth flashing against his dark skin. “Practice.”

I should have kept silent. I'd only asked my guards to teach me to defend myself with a blade and a shield. I'd thought it would be easy; after all they handled their weapons with grace and skill.

Marcus had other ideas.

We had been waiting to join the army at the very rear of the march. Keir had that little-boy smile on his face when he'd told me that I'd be moving to the rear of his forces. I was fairly sure that he wanted to make sure that he gave me my first glimpse of the Plains.

Marcus now demanded that we use the time to teach me what skills he thought I could really use. Easier said than done.

We spent the rest of the afternoon as the army passed practicing. Each of my bodyguards would play the attacker, and then I had to work with the others to protect myself. Marcus stood back and watched while I got hot and sweaty.

Just when it looked like I knew how to handle the situation, Marcus called out for Prest to die, and Prest obligingly fell 'dead' at my feet.

So now I had to learn to move with my protectors, trying to stay out of their way, and be constantly aware of the threat I was under. Marcus was a strong believer in action as opposed to talking. When I got too tired, we'd stop and talk for a bit, get a drink of water, so that I could catch my breath.

The others never even broke a sweat.

Finally, as the sun was setting, Marcus 'killed' all my body guards, and I was facing my 'attacker' alone. Prest grinned at me as he lay dead at my feet. I looked over at Marcus, who stood there with two daggers, threatening me. "Now what?"

He tilted his head under that cloak, and glared at me. "What can you do?"

"I don't know!" Frustrated, I glared back at him.

Ander had managed to 'die' face down, and looked like he was taking a nap. "Look for a weakness," he whispered to me.

Weakness? Marcus had already proved he was deadly with those daggers, so what weakness did he have?

Marcus rolled his one eye at me.

Oh.

I darted over to his left, trying to get into his blind spot. But Marcus just pivoted to face me, keeping me in sight. I stopped, frustrated. "What good does that do?"

"Keeps him moving, keeps him from throwing his daggers." Yveni responded. She was laying on the ground, chewing a piece of grass, watching the perimeter. Rafe was seated a

distance away, watching in the other direction.

“You could try rushing him, getting him to move away from you. Use our bodies to try to trip him up.” Ander offered.

“Throw things.” Prest added. I looked at my satchel on my hip, and nodded.

“You must take advantage of any weakness.” Marcus gestured at his face. “Mine is my blind side, Warprize. If you can blind a person with one of your mixtures, do it. It may be all that stands between you and death. Yes?”

“I will, Marcus.”

“More important, if all your guards are down, where else can you look for help?”

Marcus growled.

I eyed him nervously. I still remembered the ‘lesson’ he’d given me before, when he’d overborne me to the ground, and held a dagger to my throat. “The army?”

Marcus snorted.

Rafe caught my eye and jerked his thumb in the direction of our horses.

“The horses?” I looked over where our mounts were standing, waiting patiently. They were grazing, except of course for my Greatheart. I’d named my horse, which was not a tradition of the Plains. I had to smile, since Greatheart was fast asleep, his one hip cocked to the side, his head hanging down. As usual.

“The horses.” Marcus drew my attention as he sheathed his daggers within the darkness of his cloak. The others stood, brushing themselves off. “Get to a horse, leap to its back, and it will take you out of danger.”

“If she could ride.” Prest said calmly.

I glared at him, but they were all smiling. It was an old joke now, but in their eyes, it was true. I wasn't born in a saddle, like the people of the Plains, and to them my riding skills were horrible. But I could ride. Leaping into a saddle, however. . .

“But that lesson can wait.” Marcus announced. “Hissself will be making camp soon, and the meal will not make itself.” He headed toward the horses.

Thankful for the reprieve, I followed with my guards.

Since we'd resumed our march to the Plains, Keir had made some changes to my sleeping arrangements. My tent was a bit bigger now, enough that I could stand upright in it. He'd arranged extra padding for my bedding. It was saddle blankets folded and piled high, which made a very comfortable mattress. They were made from some kind of wool that I didn't recognize, but knew from its use in camp. But the biggest change, and the best change, was that I slept within his arms every night.

When we'd left Water's Fall, Keir had continued his practice of moving up and down the length of his army, in sight of his warriors and dealing with their morale. He'd left me in the center, where he'd thought I'd be better protected. But that had meant many nights of separation.

But now, with the events of Wellspring behind us, I traveled with him. Neither one of us wanted to be apart for any length of time. He continued to work with his warriors, of course, disappearing during the day to deal with any problems that arose. But every night he returned to our bed. To my arms. To me.

This night would be no different.

Marcus bustled about, keeping an eye on the warriors that set up our tent, and cooking over an open fire at the same time. I sat close to his fire, watching as he worked. Rafe and Prest had gone off to see to their own camps but Ander and Yveni remained, keeping watch over me. Once Keir arrived, they'd leave as well. Although Keir circled our tent with guards, Ander and Yveni stayed well back now, giving me an illusion of a bit of privacy.

Firelanders had a very different attitude toward privacy than my people. For Firelanders bathing together and strolling nude was the custom, with no regard for modesty, even between men and women. As Joden had pointed out to me, there was little privacy to be found in the tents of the Firelanders.

I sighed. Joden was something else I didn't want to think about.

In the overnight camps, no one wasted time cutting down trees for seats. Instead, we used the saddle blankets as pads. Dirt and moisture seemed to fall right off the odd wool. Seated by the fire, with a cloak over my shoulders, I was comfortably warm. Winter had moved into the mountains, and while we were moving down onto the Plains, frost still nipped at our heels. The sky was clear, it would be cold tonight.

Marcus was cutting meat and brewing kavage, and would tolerate no help from me. I was too tired to do much more than sit. So I pulled my satchel close and opened the flap. I'd been using it since—

Since Gils died.

My hands stilled on the scarred leather. Gils was the young Firelander who'd asked to be my apprentice, breaking the traditions of his people. The image of his freckled face and red curls flashed before me. He'd been so young, so eager, with dancing green eyes and that cheeky grin.

I closed my eyes, and fought my tears. *Goddess, hold him close.*

And hold the souls of Epor and Isdra. The warriors who'd entered the village with me, and were the first to face the plague. Well, Epor had. Isdra had joined her bonded on the night of the mourning ceremony. Their faces, too, flashed before me. Along with the hundreds that had died of a sickness that I couldn't prevent or cure.

If only. . .

"Here," Marcus's gruff voice interrupted my thoughts. A cup of kavage was held under my nose. "Drink. Stop thinking on the dead."

I took the cup, the dark and bitter brew steaming in the cool air. "Marcus--" I sighed, cradling the warm mug in my hands. "How did you know?"

"Who does not brood over loved ones?" Marcus's voice was gruff. "Those of our hearts, that we will not see again until the Longest Night?" Marcus's voice softened and I look up at him through my tears. "We have mourned the dead, Lara. For now, it is enough."

"But, I miss them." I answered, wiping my eyes with my free hand. "And I regret--"

"Their spirits ride with us until the snows." Marcus responded. "Unseen and unknown, unless they wish it so. Yet knowing and seeing, in their own way. Send your thoughts to them, yes. But not always the sorrow. Remember the joy as well. Like when the young'un read Simus's letter to you. Yes?"

I smiled at the memory. "Yes."

Marcus grunted in satisfaction, then returned to his work. I blew on the surface of the kavage and took a sip. The heat spread through my body, and I continued to sip, remembering Gils's eagerness, and the time I caught Epor and Isdra kissing by the well.

But there was still an ache in my heart.

Still, not everyone had died. We'd saved so many, including Meara. The baby had finally fallen ill, so quickly we'd barely noticed until she'd been at the brink of death. But we'd saved her, by the grace of the Goddess. I smiled as I remembered her angry cry when we'd revived her in the cold water of the lake. She'd been so furious, her face scrunched up tight, her eyelashes thick and dark with tears. But her cries had been like music. We'd come so close to losing her.

As we'd lost Gils.

I looked down at the leather satchel at my side. It had been Gils's. He'd made it from an old saddlebag, adding a thick strap and lots of pockets for 'useful things'. I'd used it since he'd died, but hadn't really cleaned it out. Just kept stuffing things in and rummaging around without really thinking about the contents. I pulled it closer, intending to empty it out and re-pack it.

"Heyla!"

Keir was coming at a gallop. The sight brought a smile to my face, for he was quite a figure, dressed in his black leathers, on his big black warhorse, framed by the setting sun. I threw back the cloak and ran to greet him.

He pulled his horse to a stop and dismounted with one swift move. His black cloak swirled out around him as he caught me in his arms, and hugged me tight, claiming my lips in a kiss. He smelled of horse and leather and himself, and I returned the kiss with passion.

He broke off with a laugh, and swung me up into his arms, striding toward our tent. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and nuzzled his ear, certain of his intent and in complete agreement.

“And what of the food?” Marcus demanded, as Keir marched past the fire to our tent.

Keir spun on his heel, and faced him. “Marcus! Want to know the best part of being a Warlord?”

Marcus’s eyebrow rose.

Keir's mouth curled up slowly into a smile. “Getting what I want.”

I laughed as Keir turned back toward the tent.

A growl came from behind him. “The Warlord’s dinner will be dumped in the dirt if Hisself does not eat it now.”

Keir paused in mid-step. From his expression, he was torn with rare indecision.

“The meal is ready now.” Marcus continued. “It will be eaten now.”

Keir looked at me with such a sorrowful expression in his bright blue eyes. Just then his stomach rumbled, and I laughed right out loud.

We ate as the sky above us turned a vivid dark blue and deepened to black. The stars hung bright in the night sky, with the moon glowing through the trees. Marcus finished refilling our mugs with kavage, and was cleaning the remains of our meal away when he asked his question. “How goes it with the warriors?”

I was seated next to Keir, leaning against his shoulder, a cloak over both of us. But I leaned away enough to see his face as he replied.

Keir sighed. “Not as well as I could wish. Iften talks, and the warriors look at empty pack animals and empty saddle bags, and wonder if they have done the right thing in following me.” He reached over to stroke my hair. “I tell my truths, but words weigh little.”

I leaned over and brushed his lips with mine. There wasn't much that I could say to that. Keir's conquest of Xy was a break in tradition for the Firelanders. Their normal practice was to raid and plunder what they could, to return to the Plains laden with spoils. But Keir wanted to change their ways, to conquer and hold, for the benefit of both peoples.

"Fools." Marcus grumbled. "They can't see past the heads of their horses."

"But Keir, that's not quite true. They've pots of fever's foe, and that bloodmoss that we gathered." I yawned. "They know more than they did before about fevers." Goddess knew that was true. We'd pots and pots of fever's foe left from treating the plague, and everyone had aided in the treatment of the sick. I'd spread the extra out, making sure that everyone had some, and was watching for signs of the plague's return. If the Sweat re-appeared in our ranks, I wanted to know. Every warrior had agreed to carry some, and keep watch, even those who rejected my healing.

Except Iften.

Keir gave me a thoughtful look. "That's a truth I had not considered, Lara."

I smiled at him, and then yawned again, so hard my eyes watered. My stomach was full, and I was warm and growing sleepy.

Keir leaned in, taking the cup of kavage from my hand. "You are tired tonight, beloved." He moved closer, and put his arm around me. The warmth felt good, and I leaned in, putting my head on his shoulder, and let my eyes drift closed.

"She asked for lessons." Marcus answered softly. "She wants to be able to protect you."

"Protect me?"

I nodded, even as I felt sleep overtake me. Their voices continued, as the fire crackled.

Then we were moving, and I found myself under the blankets with Keir at my side. I roused just enough to murmur a question in his ear.

He chuckled softly. "Warlords also learn to wait for what they want. Sleep, Lara."

Content, I drifted off to sleep.

At some point I felt Keir slip out from under the furs. I lifted my head, my eyes half open, to see him standing there, talking to one of the guards. I must have made some sort of questioning sound, for Keir turned toward me, his eyes glittering in the faint light. He gestured for me to return to sleep.

I let my head sink down, grateful that I didn't have to emerge from my warm bed. I'd adopted the Firelander custom of sleeping naked. It made more sense to my way of thinking. Less clothing for Marcus to clean, for example. A sign of my respect for the Firelanders. Goddess knew, Keir seemed. . . appreciative.

But as convenient as the custom was, crawling naked from warm covers to dress in cold clothes left something to be desired. So I lay my head back down and let sleep take me.

Much later, I roused again when Keir slid back into bed. He made every effort to keep the cold air from me, but his arm brushed mine in the process.

His skin was cold.

He whispered an apology and pulled away. But I'd have none of that. Without really opening my eyes, I moved closer.

He was *cold*. Fool Warlord, standing outside to talk to the guards, naked. I shifted

slowly, crawling over him to press my body as close as I could.

He drew a deep breath as I covered his body with mine. A shudder ran through him as I pressed my breasts to his chest, letting my warm skin come into full contact with his chilled flesh. I lifted one hand to cup his cheek, and used the other to stroke the muscles of his upper arm.

I moved my legs between his, and tried to place my feet so that they covered his toes. With my head on his shoulder my hair spread out like a blanket over him. I hummed in pleasure at the feel of his body. The soft skin of his stomach, the coarse hairs of his legs. The occasional scar. All of it Keir. My Keir.

He relaxed beneath me, whispering thanks. I just smiled, and let my thumb trace the soft skin of his lips. The blankets and furs held the heat of our bodies and the scent of his skin.

I'd learned much in the ways of pleasure from my Warlord, since the day he'd claimed me. As a woman, I appreciated each and every moment. As a healer, I knew that our love making would have consequences, and in fact my courses had not come since we'd left Wellspring. While I had hopes, I had no certainty that I bore a child. I could do nothing but wait.

There were sounds of movement outside, probably a change of the guards. The wind was picking up, causing the tent to vibrate a little. We were coming down out of the mountains with winter at our heels. Yet within this small shelter we were warm, safe, and dry.

Gradually Keir's body warmed and I shifted off to his side, so that the poor man didn't have to bear my weight. I was careful to return to my side of the bed. Keir slept with his weapons next to him, and I'd no desire to bed cold steel. I nestled down next to him, content

Vaughan

Warlord

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with his comfort and ready to return to sleep.

But I'd warmed Keir in more than one way . . .