

Chapter One

I pulled the shard out just as his wound began spurting blood.

“Goddess, no.” I dropped the knife, pressed my hands against his stomach, into the blood, and threw my full weight onto the wound. Biting my lip, I pressed harder still, desperate to stop the bleeding. “Hold him, boys.”

The apprentices gathered around the table grabbed tight to his arms and legs, all of them wide-eyed and pale as they tried to keep him from moving. The wooden table beneath my aged patient creaked and complained at the added weight as the room echoed with the sound of our leather shoes slapping against the stone floor and my patient’s frantic panting.

A quick glance around the large kitchen told me that there were no other healers in sight. They were all in the main hall, tending the others. Just the apprentices, clustered around the table. Blood bubbled up between my fingers, warm and thick. The metallic smell was strong and settled in my mouth. There was something wrong with the smell, but I was too busy to think on it. One of the lads frantically waved a fresh bandage before my eyes, and I snatched it, crammed it into the wound, and pressed down. I had to get it stopped. The bandage turned to scarlet before my eyes.

The man under my hands groaned and thrashed, trying to get away from the pain. One of the smaller lads was flung away. The patient’s freed arm swiped through the air, catching me on the cheek. Vision blurred for a precious instant as my head rocked back with the blow. My hair came loose, and one long brown curl floated down to lie in the blood that surrounded my hands. The felled boy scrambled up and threw himself back into the fray, grabbing the flailing arm and wrestling it down. “Sorry, Lara,” he told me.

“Hold him.” My voice was a croak. I was too harsh on the lads who were trying their best. Their bloodless faces were pale blurs. I heard the one next to me swallowing rapidly. Pray to the Goddess that he’d not spew on the wound. My shoulders tightened as I tried to increase the pressure, trying to staunch the red flow. “I need help here.” I

raised my voice to carry into the main hall that was filled with wounded and other healers.

“Lara? What's happened?” A quiet, calm voice came from behind me.

It was Eln, thank the Goddess.

The warrior surged up again, and the table squeaked in protest. We stayed with him, trying to keep him still, trying to keep the pressure on. He cried out suddenly, then sagged back, exhausted. I gulped in breath to answer. “The shard came out clean but he’s bleeding.”

A head popped in next to mine as Eln craned his scrawny neck to have a look. My teacher for years, he always moved like a gray lake-crane. He made a noncommittal noise, then pulled a deep breath in through his nose. I gritted my teeth. Sometimes he decides that I need a lesson in the midst of saving a life, even though I've held my mastery for years. Eln's head pulled back, but I could feel him standing behind me.

“Not my patient, and not my place to say.” Eln's voice was quiet, but cut through the moans of the warrior. “But what happens after you stop the bleeding?”

I slammed my eyes shut. My patient shifted again, and we moved with him, automatically.

“Stubborn child...” Eln's voice was a whisper, but I heard it. “You may have gained your mastery but you haven't truly learned, have you?”

I did not want to concede to his wisdom, did not want to face what the scent of waste in the blood meant, the scent I'd failed to identify a moment before. But experience had been a hard teacher, harder than Eln had ever been. With a nod, and a strangled sob, I released the pressure on the wound. The apprentices froze, not understanding.

“Come, boys.” Eln spoke quietly. “Come with me.”

I ignored them all as they filed out. One stopped, and looked at me.

“Why'd ya stop?”

Kneeling to wash my hands in a bucket on the floor, I looked up into his wide young eyes. “Eln will tell you, child. Go now.”

Eln would not miss a chance to give a lesson, a chance to explain the slow, painful death of a belly wound that stank of waste. Explain that a good healer knew when to let a patient go, that death wasn't always an enemy. Explain that good healers didn't stubbornly refuse to acknowledge their limits. I wished them the best of it, for it was a lesson I'd never learned.

Coward that I was, I took a moment to rinse my tunic and trouser of the worst of the blood. That might save me some abuse from Anna when I returned to the castle. She claimed that I didn't own a piece of clothing that didn't have blood on it at one time or another. The cool, wet cloth felt good against my hot and sweaty skin.

I took a fresh bowl of water and a clean cloth and bathed the man's face. The bleeding had turned sluggish. It would not be long now. The man sighed and relaxed, muscles releasing their tension under my touch.

Aye, Eln would offer a lesson. But I would offer comfort to a dying man.

The water seemed to ease him, and I put the cloth down for a moment, and steadied myself. I forced myself to rinse my hands again, working the nails to get the blood off. I took a moment to clean the one stray lock of hair and tuck it up again. My hair was a constant irritation, the curls were never content to stay neat on top of my head.

The kitchen had cleared again. It was the best room in the old barracks to use for the worst of the wounded. The large tables served well, and every counter and cupboard was filled with jars and bowls of ointments and remedies. I stared at their bright colors and the false promise of the claims that they could cure all ails. But nothing lay there that could save this man.

A noise drew my attention down. His eyes fluttered open. Once again I took up the water and cloth. As I worked, he focused on me, a question in his stare. I smiled.

“You are in the healing house, warrior. You took a wound. Rest now.”

He licked his lips, narrowed his eyes. “Lance...tip broke off...belly.”

I nodded. No need to speak. He knew.

He closed his eyes, then opened them again and for the first time he seemed to really look at me. “Fought with your father, lady.” He gasped as the effort cost him breath. His voice was soft and tight.

I paused. Few were left that could claim to have known my father. "I am sorry, but I don't know you."

He didn't seem to hear me. One corner of his mouth turned up. "You've his eyes, child. All fey blue and wise." His arm trembled as he tried to raise his hand. I caught it and held it in mine. His eyes got a strange light in them, perhaps an echo of his younger self. "Now there was a king, your father. What a warrior he was." He looked over my shoulder, seeing into the mists of memory.

"I miss him." I said quietly.

A wave of pain crossed his face. "Aye, lady," was the breathless response. "So do we all." He seemed to gather strength somehow, and he squeezed my hand and gave a slight tug. I lowered my hand to his mouth. With a rasping breath, he spoke. "My hand to yours. Bless you, Xylara, Daughter of the House of Xy, Daughter of Xyron, Warrior King." He pressed his dry lips to the back of my hand.

It had been long since I'd heard those old words. I kissed his forehead. "My hand to yours. Blessings upon you, Warrior of the House of Xy."

He smiled, slipping into death even as his hand slipped from mine.

"You care too much." It was Eln again.

His voice floated over the stone tubs that had been set aside to wash instruments. I ignored him for the moment, concentrating on getting things clean and ready for the next wave of wounded. Experience taught that the lulls in the fighting were to be used, not wasted.

"A good healer is dispassionate. Objective."

The warrior's body had been taken up for burial. He had been the last of the severely wounded. I had a small cluster of unhappy apprentices outside, boiling bandages and linens. Not their favorite chore, but a vital one.

Eln had started brewing more orchid root at the fire. The sweet scent was a comfort. Others were tending the large kettles of fever's foe outside. Everyone, no matter how tired, worked and waited. For the sounds of more battle, more wounded. I closed my eyes, giving in to my exhaustion and prayed for an end to the war that waged

outside the city walls. Prayed that the Firelanders would stop using their lances. Prayed that I'd be skilled enough that no more of my patients would die.

Eln rattled the jars and bottles, and I opened my eyes and watched him. My old teacher, his long arms stretching out, putting them in some kind of order. Slow and steady, moving carefully on tall legs, considering each step. The straight, gray hair that flowed down his back only added to the image of a lake-crane. He gave me a look out of the corner of his eye, and shook his head. "Stubborn."

"Eln, how long was I your apprentice?"

He stared pointedly at my bruised cheek. "Long enough to learn." He regarded me with a solemn look.

"And I have been a master for how long?" I rinsed more of the instruments and set them on a cloth to dry.

He pursed his lips, and pretended to study one of the jars. "Long enough to learn to talk back."

I snorted. "During that period, how many times have you said that to me?"

"More than I can count, but that does not make it any less true." He started to gather up the things we would need to check the wounded and tend them. "If you are so wise, Lara, then why do I see guilt in your eyes?"

I glanced out the kitchen window. The afternoon shadows were growing. "I should not have tried to cut it out. Should have left it alone. If I had . . ."

"If." Eln came to stand next to me. "If you had left it in, was his death not as sure? You tried. That was all you could do. All any of us can do when we are overwhelmed like this."

I dried my hands, and blinked back tears I didn't have time for. "We'd better get to work."

Out in the common room, men lay sleeping on cots and pallets, crammed close together. We moved quickly, checking bandages, dispensing medications and powders. Apprentices scurried back and forth, bringing water and cloths, supplies and instruments. Our medicines were greeted with the usual laments over the taste. We ignored the

complaints, as we moved around the room, seeing to each man. There were even more upstairs, on the second floor.

Our job was made difficult by the enemy's use of a thrown lance. Four foot long, tipped with sharp metal barbs which were designed to break off in the wound. When thrown from horseback, they tore flesh and muscle in ways that could easily cripple a man, and made healing difficult. Our warriors had seen nothing like it before. Nor had they ever dealt with an army that fought only from horseback. Devil riders, they called them, men and women who could sit on a galloping horse and shoot arrow after arrow, with deadly accuracy. We'd heard rumors that they ate their dead, and tore the hearts out of their kills. That they were black, and yellow, and blue, and that their eyes glowed with madness.

I ignored the talk, and concentrated on my work. The men were grateful, and it tore my heart, how a kind word and a cool cloth would lift their spirits. A few recognized me as a Daughter of the Blood, but most simply welcomed me as the healer that I was. Just as well. I was not particularly proud of my 'royal' heritage at the moment.

We worked our way through the men, cleaning and checking wounds. Tomorrow, we would welcome a small legion of servants who came every morning, for the general bathing, bedding, and slop pots. Volunteers from the city folk, some castle servants, since the need was so great. The healers and apprentices couldn't do everything.

It was late by the time I knelt next to the last patient. "It's well?" He rasped, peering at the gash in his calf as I replaced the bandage.

"Very well."

"It don't look well." He reached out a finger to touch it. I smacked his hand. He pulled it back, as shocked as a child.

"It will not be well if you poke at it." I frowned at him, and finished covering the wound. "Leave it be."

"Aye, Lady." He bobbed his head, looking sheepish, giving me a toothless grin.

I rose from the floor, and stifled a cry as the muscles in my back protested. I was feeling all of my twenty-five years. I picked up my supplies and moved off, trying to stretch out the tightness in my back as I went downstairs. Eln was in the kitchen, washing up. He grimaced at me as I grabbed up some soap and a cloth. "Finished?"

I nodded.

"I've no one to send to escort you."

I shrugged. "It's not the first time I've walked to the castle alone."

"It's not proper." He paused for a moment. "I suppose you are going to those tents now?" I could hear the resignation in his tone.

I avoided him for the moment and plunged my hands into one of the buckets. The familiar scents of the herbs and mixtures were welcome and I took a deep breath. The bitter smell of fever's foe came in through the window.

"The King has told you not to go there, Lara. I thought that maybe . . ." His voice trailed off, hinting at the doubt in his eyes.

"The King? Let me worry about him, Eln." I gathered my hair up and tried to tame it back in a braid. "Death and injury aren't limited to us Xyians. I can't stop the fighting, can't bring peace, but I won't neglect wounded men. We take oaths when we gain our mastery. Remember?"

He sighed, and thrust a jar toward me. "There's extra of the fever's foe. It will go bad if it's not used."

Fever's foe takes months to go bad. This jar was from last week's batch. I hid my smile and put the jar in the basket I had pulled from the corner, carefully cushioning all the other bottles inside. "My thanks."

"I wish I could do more." He made a move to follow.

I picked up the basket and grabbed the jug of liniment that I'd mixed the night before. "Eln, I don't expect you to come with me."

"I have sworn the same oaths." He tilted his head. "Xylara . . ."

"You can't get away with disobeying the King, Eln." I flashed him a smile. "He's not your half-brother."

He laughed ruefully. "That is so."

I smiled, headed outside, and paused to let my eyes adjust to the twilight. Summer was still with us, but barely. There was a hint of chill in the evenings now, the first sign of the winter snows to come. I shifted my basket and the jug and wished that I had thought to grab my cloak. It would be late before I would finish my work in the tents deep in the castle gardens.

The barracks sprawled against the southern wall of the city. I had a fairly long walk ahead of me. Even as I stepped out, my eyes were drawn up.

I have seen it nearly every day since I was a little girl, but the sight of the castle of Water's Fall never failed to amaze. The huge tower was built into the mountainside. Even in the starlight, its gray rugged granite was a stark contrast to the greenery around it. The various waterfalls that gave the city and castle its name trickled and roared down the cliffs, making a striking picture. Ten generations, the House of Xy had labored to build and expand and improve the castle at the head of the valley and its city. I bit my lip, trying to remember which ancestor had named the place. Xyson? Or was it Xyred?

I crossed the ward to the small gate that would let me out onto the main street. There was an older guard there, and he raised a hand in greeting as I passed him. I nodded back, then plunged into the hustle and bustle of the avenue. This late, everyone was starting to head for home. Rather than head north to the main thoroughfare, I went south. It was the more direct route, although it would take me past the farmers' markets. Hopefully the crowds would have dwindled, having made their purchases earlier in the day. I strode along as quickly as I could, watching where I stepped. For all the ordinances about refuse, one was never sure what might be tossed out into the street at any given moment. Of course there were fines, but the Guard had little time to worry over that issue. They had more than enough problems on their hands.

It had not been a good summer for us. Spring had brought with it what we'd thought would be the normal raiding along the border by the people we called the Firelanders. But the warriors we faced this time were led by a warlord they called the Cat. His armies had descended on our southern borders, devastating the countryside and the towns and villages that lay there. Usually the Firelanders looted and pillaged on the border and then disappear into their wide grasslands without a trace. But this warlord

had different ideas. He was seizing towns, and holding them, forcing the folk to swear fealty to him. It was said that he would kill all the men if the people resisted, torture the women and children, and burn the town to the ground. All through the summer, he'd fought his way up the valley, securing the lands behind him.

Water's Fall had filled with those fleeing the conflict. King Xymund had assured his council and the lords that this upstart would be crushed under the might of the armies of Xy. But over the months, our army had been pushed back by the warlord's thundering horses and flights of arrows. The healing temple overflowed with the injured and displaced. Many were taken in by families in the city who opened their homes. With the influx of people, the city was a crowded, unhappy place. Eln said that the crowding would bring more illness with it, and I feared he was right.

The farmers' market wasn't its normal noisy boisterous self, with vendors calling out the virtue of their wares. There was a dullness to it, fear that hovered in the very air. Still the clamor from the poulterer's was as loud as ever. Geese, tied to the stall in every way possible, honked and gabbled and beat their wings. Chickens and ducks, their legs trussed together, floundered on the ground nearby, their clucking adding to the cacophony. There were feathers everywhere, and the smell of drying blood.

Even with the armies of the warlord drawing close to the city, Xymund, Lord High King, had evidenced great mercy to his opponents. He had publicly decreed that wounded prisoners taken on the field were to be housed and cared for as our own. But his private hypocrisy was the few prisoners that had been taken were isolated in the deepest part of the gardens that lay within the castle walls, surrounded by guards and given the barest of necessities. As the days passed, it was clear that Xymund regretted his public stance. It was only the need to live up to his honorable image that kept those men alive.

Certainly no other healer dared to venture there. The King seemed to feel that caring for these men was treason of the highest order. I'd fought hard to be Eln's apprentice, fought harder to claim journeyman's status, and then defied my father himself to claim my mastery. Xymund could bully the entire guild, but I'd sworn oaths to deprive no one in need of my services, and I'd ventured to the tent, with no support, and much

opposition. I'd ignored them all, and dared any and all to say me nay, but in my heart of hearts, I wasn't sure if I cared for their wounds out of a higher ideal, or simply as a way to anger my elder half-brother.

My elder half-brother had, in turn, suggested, asked, demanded, ordered, and forbidden my visits. I disregarded him. He had cursed, ranted and shouted to no avail. He'd kept the pressure up, making it a daily battle for me to render aid to those men. Pressure had been brought to bear, and I'd come close a time or two to wavering. But each time I'd reconsider my defiance, there'd be another wounded Firelander dragged to the tent and dumped on the floor. I could not turn my back. Not when I had it within my power to heal and ease their pain.

Nevertheless, Xymund had made one thing very clear. None of the prisoners was to know that I was a Daughter of the Blood. If anyone learned that fact, he said that he would chain me in my room for the duration of the war.

Even I could see the sense in that.

I walked through the city, dodging animals and people, carts and wagons. It was very crowded on the streets. People of all shapes and sizes were moving about their business before the markets closed for the night and the Watch was about. At one intersection a cart had lost its wheel, its cargo spilled onto the street. Men were shouting at one another, trying to clear the way. I turned down one of the side streets, trying to avoid the mess. Here, the buildings were built tight to one another and leaned out over the streets, blocking the light. I was glad to turn back onto one of the wide main streets and get on my way.

As I went, I could sense a difference. There seemed to be a feeling of suppressed panic in the air. Men stood at corners, talking softly in clusters. The bargaining had a frantic sense to it. I wondered if there had been some news of the Cat. I took another detour of sorts, moving down an alley to come out in the spice markets. I paused before entering the flow of traffic, looking for colorful flags on poles and spotted Kalisa's cart, tucked in the entrance of another alley.

Bent half double with age, her back humped up, her fingers crooked and swollen, Kalisa was one of the few shorter than I was. Normally, she also had the brightest smile and the best cheese in the city. But there was no smile for me today.

“Lara.” Whatever else, her eyes and mind were still sharp. “Don't you have an escort? It's not safe, child.” She tipped her head and looked me over.

“Kalisa, I've never had any trouble—”

“Aye, were times what they were, I'd agree. Not now.” She scowled at me, even as her hands pulled out a small wheel of hard cheese. “Rumor has it that our king has hired mercenaries to guard his carcass, heathen foreigners who wander the streets terrorizing women.”

I set my jug and basket down between my feet. “The same rumor that says that the Firelanders are blue, red, and black, and belch fire from their mouths?”

She handed me a slice of her sharpest cheese, and a thin cracker, which I took eagerly. The taste flooded my mouth, making me aware of my hunger. It had been long since breakfast, and it tasted wonderful. Kalisa tilted her head to be able to look into my eyes. “Have you not heard?” Her face as serious as I had ever seen.

“Heard what?”

“The army has pulled back within the city walls. King's command. Did you not hear the horns?” She cut another slice. “Heard tell that the Lord Marshall is having fits.”

The cracker and cheese was suddenly dry in my mouth. “Pulled back? But . . .”

Her white head shook as she handed me another piece of cheese. “Child, you need to look up from your work once in a while, eh?”

“The last I heard, things were going well.” I swallowed hard. “At the very gates?”

“Everyone's frantic. Stripped my cart almost bare, they did. And the Watch is doubled tonight. You best be getting home.” Kalisa nudged me. “Aye and look there.”

I looked to where her gnarled finger, held low behind the cart, pointed into the crowd. I looked up to see Lord Durst riding by, with his son and heir, Degnan. They wore their usual haughty, sullen expressions. No fear that they would recognize me in

the press, but then my odd ways were an open secret. Xymund usually said something when one of the nobility came for a visit. What were they doing here?

Kalisa had no doubts. “Cowards fled their lands for this safety. Left all behind, so I hear.”

I scowled at her. “Such talk could get you beaten, old woman.”

She snorted. “Everyone's saying that Xymund's not the warrior your father was, and rightly so if rumor is true, that he's a bast—” I frowned at her and she broke off her words. “Never mind. I've enough cheese to fill my cart tomorrow, but after that I've none to sell.” She shook her head at my questioning look. “Anser and Mya have fled with the herds, and I've no milk to work. Talk is that with those heathens outside, the harvest is thin and food will be scarce. They say that some merchants are already raising their prices.”

I crammed the rest of the cheese into my mouth and dug for my pouch.

Kalisa waved me off. “Never you mind, child. My thanks for that jar of joint cream you gave me. It works well.” She held up her hands and flexed them.

I smiled, pleased to see that she had more movement in her fingers. “I will bring you another jar, Kalisa. I promise.”

“I'd rather you stayed safe in that castle. Off with you now. That grandson of mine will be along to get me home soon enough.” She started to pack up her cart as I continued on, lost in my thoughts.

Lord Marshall Warren had seemed very confident of his ability to hold the Warlord's men at bay. I had no mind for tactics and troop movements, but Father had thought Warren an excellent general and had every faith in him. Something must have gone wrong. That explained the mood of the city, with the enemy at the very gates. I picked up my pace.

Before I knew it, the castle walls were before me, comforting symbols of strength. The gate guards called a greeting, well used to my routine at this point. Once through the gate, I turned down toward the path that led into the overgrowth.

Xymund's mother had been a great one for flowers and plants. She'd spent many hours directing the gardeners in their work, creating elaborate pleasure gardens. That

may be why the rumors had started, that Xymund was a bastard, a result of an affair that his mother had. It didn't help that she'd come from a distant kingdom to marry our father, since my people have a deep distrust of all things foreign. Father had thought the potential alliance was worth facing their intolerance, but from the stories I'd heard, it had not been easy on him or the Queen.

Of course my father denied the rumors, acknowledged Xymund as his son and heir, and swore that he was the spitting image of his grandfather, but the story never died. Older Xyians were quick to point out that Xymund and his father looked nothing alike, a fact that stuck Xymund like a knife. Even after he was acknowledged as heir, even after ascending the throne, it was a scab that he seemed to pick at constantly.

Xymund's mother had passed and my mother, youngest daughter of a Xyian lord, had no interest in the work necessary to see the pleasure gardens maintained. The kitchen gardens were well-kept, mind, since they were of practical value. But she saw no point in frivolous pursuits. It was one of the few things I knew about my mother, as she'd died giving birth to me.

The path wound through the trees and bushes, and through a great rose briar that had grown wild. I could see that some of the rose hips were ready to be picked. I didn't stop, but made a note to get some later.

The overgrowth made the path dark and close. Finally, I broke through to the cleared area that held a large canvas tent. It was here that the enemy wounded were housed.

The first sentry did not even challenge me, just waved me through. He was leaning on his spear, looking like he was trying to nap. I continued on, puffing a little. I was tired. It always seemed to take longer for these visits than I had planned. There was a High Court tonight, but my presence would not be missed. Or noted. I rarely attended them.

The second sentry stood post outside the tent. I was pleased to see Heath standing there, and quickened my pace.

He was not pleased to see me. One hand holding his spear, the other planted firmly on his hip. His round face was marred by a frown, surrounded by curls much the color of mine.

“Lara.” He grimaced. “You are not supposed to be here.” He jerked his head in the direction of the tent. “And I don't think they really appreciate what you are doing.”

I stopped next to him, holding my burdens, and looked up at him. At first I maintained a serious countenance then slowly allowed a smile to spread over my face. As I stood there before my childhood friend, his frown faded as a smile crept over his face in answer to mine. I lowered my eyes and tried not to laugh. I stepped up to him, and he put a hand behind my neck, and pulled my forehead to rest against his. We'd done it since we were kids, a greeting just between the two of us. Of course, he now had to lower his head and stoop a bit to make it work, tall as he was. I stepped back and grinned.

Heath glanced to the heavens in a great show of patience, as if looking for guidance, then returned his attention to me. “If anyone asks, you ordered me to step aside.”

I deepened my smile. “My thanks, Heath.”

“I could never say no to you, little bird.” He sighed as he lifted the tent flap. “I already had the men heat the water kettles for you.” He got that look on his face again. “My shift ends in three hours. Arneath comes on duty after me and you need to be out by then.”

I wrinkled my nose and Heath grimaced right back at me. There was something about Arneath that made my skin itch. He'd been made head of the Palace Guard recently by Xymund, over the heads of more qualified men. I avoided him whenever I could.

“I'll be out in time.”

Heath rolled his eyes. “I've heard that before. Have a care, little bird.” With that, he lifted the tent flap.

I stepped into the tent.

The first thing to hit me was the smell. Herbs, blood, and death. The men were crammed in close, with more pallets than cots. There were no apprentices here, no

helpers to air the place out or fresh linens or help with bathing. I made do with what I had, which was precious little.

When I had first come into their midst, no one would let me touch them, much less speak to me. Their language was fluid and fast, and I'd a hard time trying to pick up the meaning. It had taken persistence and sheer stubbornness on my part, but eventually a few allowed me to tend them. While they were all so different, ranging from fair complexions to deep tan, to almost yellow, one thing held true. They all bled red, and they all responded to my medicines. Thanks to the Goddess, a few spoke the trade tongue rather well and were willing to translate.

I let my eyes adjust, greeted the two guards stationed inside, and moved further into the tent. There was a silence when I stepped in, the tension palpable. Once they saw it was me, their relief was subtle, but clear. It was the signal that they would be permitted to bathe, and wash clothes and bedding as best they could. Unlike my Xyian patients, these men preferred being clean. There was even some sort of prayer that they murmured as they poured the water.

“Lara.”

I turned and saw Rafe making his way to me, a smaller man, thin, with fair skin and deep black hair and brown eyes. His face seemed always lit with a smile. One of the youngest, he had been the first to let me treat him, and to help me learn the language. There were still gaps in my understanding, words that I missed, or used incorrectly. But I was understood most of the time. These men did not seem to believe that I could treat them. I certainly had not been able to help them deal with the strange headaches they suffered from. But I had proved myself as to other hurts.

“Rafe, I hope that you are feeling better.” I spoke slowly, trying to get the correct sounds out of my mouth. I looked carefully at the wound that ran down the side of his face. It appeared to be healing well.

Rafe quirked his mouth. “You still sound like a child at lessons.”

He followed as I moved to the center of the tent, where there was a small table. I sat down my supplies, rummaged in my basket and produced a jar, which I handed to him. “Rub this on the gash, Rafe. It will reduce the scar.”

He took the jar, but frowned. "Why so? It is an honorable scar."

"It will still be honorable if it heals flat and tight." These men had very strange ideas about injuries. Rafe scowled, but kept the jar.

The men about us were already stirring, but Rafe shifted his weight, making no move to go bathe. A shadow passed over his face.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

He hesitated and replied softly. "There is a new man here," and jerked his head toward the back of the tent. I could see some men clustered around one of the cots. "If you would please . . ."

I took my basket and headed in that direction. Best to see what I had to deal with now, before I started to see to the others.

As I approached, some of the men drifted away. But two large men remained standing by the cot. With my eyes fixed firmly on my patient, I lowered the basket to the ground, knelt, and got a good look.

He was an enormous black man, spilling over the sides and ends of the cot. Black as night, black as wrought iron. The rumors were true. I caught my breath, and for one fleeting moment wondered if he would belch fire. But common sense came to the fore, as I took in his condition. Wrapped in a cloak and blankets, his eyes were open but unseeing. Sweat dripped from his forehead and close-cropped black hair, hair like I'd never seen before. Whatever his color, it seemed he suffered as any other.

The rough bandage was down close to the groin and my mouth went dry. Please, Goddess, not another gut wound. I reached out my hand and one of the men grabbed my wrist.

"What are you doing?" His voice was hard and clipped, but I could understand him. Dark, black eyes bored into me as his grip tightened. His broad, round face was grim, and while not as dark as the man on the cot, he was darker than most. I couldn't help a brief thought - would I get to see a blue one? - before the man wrenched my arm again.

"I am a healer." I focused on his eyes.

He snarled. "You are a *bragnect*."

I did not know the word, but suspected that it was one that was not taught to children.

Careful not to return the anger, I did not pull away. "I can help him." I kept my gaze steady on his face. "I will help him."

He paused, studying me.

A sound came from the darkness. "Please, Joden. She is a healer." Rafe came up behind us, his voice soft and serious. "We fought her off at first, but she can help."

Joden glanced at him. "This? This is a warrior-priest?"

Rafe shook his head. "Even better, she is a healer." He used the word from my language, rather than his own. "When she first came, she seemed mad and we tried to drive her away, but she has persisted." He turned his face slightly, to display his scar. "See? She has helped many, Joden. I will swear it to the open sky, if you wish."

Joden looked from me to the wounded man. He released my wrist with a huff of disdain. "If you harm Simus, I will kill you."

I gestured with my hands. "Get him off this cot and onto a pallet." Joden started to pull the blankets away. "Uncover him, and use wet cloths to wipe his face, arms, and chest. We must get the fever down. Leave the wound and the bandage to me."

One of the younger men stepped forward to help. This one had skin that was a lighter color than Joden's, but his black hair fell in braids.

"Rafe?" I sat back on my heels. "I mean no offense, but does he heal as others do? Will my medicines aid him, as they do the others?" He looked puzzled, as did the men around him. I cleared my throat. "I've never worked on one such as he."

"There is no difference..." He began. I lay my hand on his forehead, and Rafe's gaze followed my gesture. "Do you mean his skin?"

I nodded, and pulled my hand back, giving it a quick glance to see if any of the color had come off on my fingers.

Rafe snorted. "There's no difference beyond looks," He cast a sly eye over at Joden. "Though there's some that say Simus has more than his fair share of charm."

Joden grunted, but I could see a slight smile. I dug in the basket, and found a small bottle of orchid root which I handed to the other man, the one with the braids.

“You are?”

“Prest.”

“See if you can get him to take two swallows of this. No more. It will ease him for when we clean the wound.”

Prest nodded.

“I will return when I am done with the others.” I stood. “Roll up the tents sides.” I called out. “Let's air the place as best we can.” We had done this before, to add some light and fresh air to the tent. The guards were not happy, but they let me do this when I felt the need. As the walls were lifted, I could see the guards that ringed the tent on the outside. Xymund was taking no chances.

As the men started moving, I got up and visited my other patients, checking wounds, using my salves and potions where needed. At first, I'd been pushed away, treated rudely whenever I tried to help. It had taken time, but I was tolerated by most, and welcomed by a few. But now there was a difference. While the men treated me well, I could tell that their attention was on my newest patient. Some who had never spoken to me before even went so far as to try to ask me about the man.

Whoever he was, I suspected he was important.

The kettles for the hot water were brought, and the bathing began. I had smuggled some old soap out of the castle that had hardened, forgotten in a storeroom. It had the faint scent of flowers, but was mild and worked well. I never made mention of this part to anyone in the castle. One could imagine the response to the idea of a Daughter of the Blood in a tent with naked men. But for some reason, it hadn't occurred to anyone that a healer at some point had to deal with the actual body.

I'd gathered old tunics and trous, so that they had spare clothing. Each man washed out his own, and the guards had been bullied into setting out a drying line. It was when they stripped down for bathing that I'd first seen the tattoos that each man had on his arms. A different pattern on both arms and I could make no sense of them. I'd asked about them but been rudely rebuffed.

Before I returned to my new patient, I went to the guards by the entrance. The older one jerked his chin toward the back of the tent. "Is he bad, lady?"

"Yes. I'm going to clean the wound. It won't be quiet."

He winced. "Aye, I would think not. I'll warn the others as to what you are about."

"Thank you." I cocked my head. "More water would not go amiss, either."

He sighed. "You know the King's commands . . ." His voice trailed off as I looked at him. "Aye. More water, then." He called through the tent flap as I turned to go back to my newest patient.

They had stripped the man and gotten him on a pallet. Prest was standing to one side, carefully folding the man's clothes in a neat pile. As I knelt, I could see that he looked better. The beads of sweat were gone, and his eyes were closed. His breathing seemed easier too. Instead of tattoos on his dark skin, there seemed to be scars, but in a pattern as the others.

"Two swallows." Prest reported. I nodded, but my eye had already been caught and held by the wound. I waved the men out of my light, and leaned closer to get a better look.

The wound had been packed with the man's cloak. It was wadded up, and the blood had crusted to the cloth. I took fresh water, and soaked the material, easing it away from the scabs. Clearly, the wound had been tended in the field, but neglected since then. I glanced at Joden. "You did this?"

Joden grunted. "It was all I had time for, before we were taken."

I grimaced in understanding and worked in silence. Once the material came free, I let it drop at my side as I got my first good look at the leg.

It was bad. The gash started at the groin and got deeper as it went the length of the thigh. The edges were swollen, and white pus had gathered in its depths. There was grass and dirt and small stones embedded in the flesh. I reached out, touching the sides lightly, and felt the heat radiating off the flesh. I bit my lower lip.

"Will he lose the leg?" Joden was standing above me.

I looked up, noticing for the first time that Joden didn't seem to have a hurt on him. But my eyes were drawn back to the gaping wound. I worried my lip, then spoke. "I don't know."

The men around us murmured, but I had no time to fuss with them. "We'll start with the cleansing." I turned to my supplies, and dug out the bottles and cloths that I needed. "It is going to hurt. I've warned the guards. But I need your help to hold him down."

Joden sank to his knees next to me but made no move to help. "I wished for something to sing of, and the elements answered." His tone was one of sorrow. "It would have been better to have granted him mercy and be done."

The men around me recoiled. "You failed to give him mercy?" Rafe asked, hushed, his eyes wide.

I jerked my head up. Joden's face was haggard and looked gray in the light. There had been tales of this practice, of the Warlord's men killing their own on the field, but I had not believed. I rose on my knees, glared at them all, then jabbed Joden in the chest with my finger, drawing his attention. "You will not. To come this far, only to have you ki . . ." I could not finish that word. "No. I will not have it so."

He considered me, and seemed to laugh behind the pain in his eyes. "You think to save him? And the leg?"

"I think to try." I glared at him. "I think to hope."

He huffed again, looking at my small finger in the center of his broad chest, but nodded slowly. "We will try, healer." The unfamiliar word caught on his tongue. "We will hope."

I sat back on my heels. He gestured to some of the others. "It will take more than me to hold him, though. He is a strong one, make no mistake." Three other men approached. Each, with Rafe, Prest and Joden, settled down, and took a hold. I moved closer and grabbed up the bandages.

The men tensed. Joden frowned at me, then muttered something about chants under his breath.

Rafe snorted. "She uses no spells, Joden. No chants to the elements."

“No?” He sounded slightly disappointed.

I ignored the comments, and went to work. We were fine for about three breaths. I had even convinced myself that the orchid root would let him sleep through it. But as I spread the wound to scour deeply, he started to thrash under our hands.

“No. No.” His strong voice rang out, and he bucked up, trying to throw us off. Thanks to the Goddess I had large men to aid me this time. The apprentices would have been flung off in a heartbeat.

“More help here. Now.” Joden’s quiet command was obeyed and more men moved our way. Joden gave up his position to kneel by the man’s head. He placed his large hands on the broad shoulders. “Simus, you’re hurt. We’re tending it. Lie still.”

Simus did not see it that way. “Warriors! To me!”

I was glad that I had warned the guards, for the man had a voice like thunder. I worked as quickly as I could, fearing to cause more injury if I went too fast. It had to be cleaned, and better that I did it right the first time than to have to do it again.

“Joden!” Simus cried out as he writhed below us.

“I am here.” Joden put his head down by the other’s ear. “I am here. Hold on, my friend.” He glared at me. “Hurry.”

I ignored him.

Prest had both hands and his full body weight pressed on the man’s forearm. “We could burn it.”

“Shut up.” I snarled.

Simus howled and arched his back. I sat back on my heels as they wrestled him flat. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the others watching us with looks of horror.

“Why not burn it?” Joden asked. He had moved his hands along side Simus’ head, and his thumbs were stroking his temples. The big man settled down and I doubled my efforts.

“Burning it will mean deep scaring.” I tried to think of the right words. “He may not walk. May not be able to ride.”

Joden grunted his understanding.

Finally the wound was cleansed. I bound the leg as tight as I dared, using fresh bandages, then pulled back, surveying my work. My audience looked as well.

Joden frowned. "You have not tied it."

"No." I glanced at him. "The wound must heal open. If I tie it, stitch it, it could . . ." I shook my head in frustration. "Sour. Go bad."

"Putrefy." Rafe had come up behind me.

Well that was extreme but I agreed with the translation.

Joden seemed to understand as he watched Simus. Now that we were finished, he had fallen into an uneasy sleep. I reached for fresh water to bathe his face, only to see my hands tremble in front of me.

"No." Joden had risen and was standing next to me. He lowered his hand and held it out. "We can look to him now."

I nodded, and grasped his hand, letting him pull me up. My legs were numb under me and I staggered a bit to the table where I had left my basket. The sun had fallen while we worked, and the tent was darker. The bathing had finished, and I could see that the men were feeling better as a result.

Certainly, it smelled better.

I found the jar of fever's foe and returned to kneel again by Joden. Simus seemed to be resting easier, his breathing a little slower and deeper.

Joden rumbled at me. "My thanks."

I smiled. "Do you need tending?"

His face seemed to close off. "No. I am not hurt."

Which was when the horn for the change of the guard sounded. I had overstayed my time.

"Joden, take this." I put the jar in his hand. Joden looked inside at the thick brown paste. "Cover your fingertip with the paste," I dipped my finger in to show him. "Then put your finger in his mouth. Do this every hour." I opened Simus' mouth and put my finger inside, spreading the medicine on the roof of his mouth. "It will fight the fever."

He listened and watched, absorbing the information. "Will you return?"

“Yes. Tomorrow.” I stood again, and dusted off my trews. “Prest has the orchid root. Use it if he becomes restless. But only two swallows and only once more this night. You can dose him again after sunrise if he needs it.”

Behind me, I could hear the guard changing. They were calling for the tent sides to be dropped, and I heard my name as well. It sounded like Arneath. I hoped not.

My patient sighed and seemed to relax a bit. Prest continued to bathe his face and arms. I reached down for the bloody cloak and the cloths I had used for the cleaning, and bundled them together. They could be boiled and used again. As I did so, I felt something cold and smooth under my hand. Through the fading light, I looked closer.

It was an onyx brooch, a large fierce cat poised in mid-spring, with yellow eyes that glared in defiance. It seemed to gleam with its own inner light. Especially the eyes. My own eyes widened as my poor tired brain took it in. I knew what the brooch meant. This man, my patient, was a general, a leader in the Warlord's army.

Goddess. Xymund would kill him.

My eyes darted to Joden's. His eyes filled with consternation at my knowledge, then narrowed. His hand clenched at his side, as if looking for the handle of a dagger. If a weapon had been at hand, I am not sure I would have left the tent alive. He opened his mouth to speak as the guards approached from behind.