

Chapter One

“Bloodmoss! That’s bloodmoss, Marcus!” I leaned over, trying to get a better look. I was positive that the grubby little plant I was seeing passing under the hooves of the horse was the rare herb. “Let me down!”

The horse we were riding danced as my weight shifted and Marcus tightened up the reins. “If you don't stop wiggling, you're gonna tumble off, and embarrass Hissself and me.” Marcus grouched as the horse pranced under us.

I tightened my grip on his waist. “If you let me ride by myself, this wouldn't be a problem.”

He huffed. “You can't ride worth a damn, and your feet remain sore. Now sit still! How would it look, the Warprize sprawled in the dirt?”

“Marcus, I am a Master Healer and my feet are healing fine.”

“You know from nothing,” Marcus growled. “I will judge if the Warprize is fit to walk.”

I settled back, frustrated. I might be Xylara, Master Healer, Daughter of the House of Xy, Queen of Xy, Warprize of Keir of the Tribe of the Cat, Warlord of the Plains, but as far as Marcus was concerned I was little more than an unruly child. I sighed, and leaned my head on the back of his shoulder. “I can ride just fine.”

Marcus snorted. “About as well as you tend your own feet.”

Therein lay one of my problems. When I’d made the decision to follow the Warlord's army, I’d done so in the same garb I’d worn for the original claiming ceremony. Since tradition required that the Warprize accept nothing except from the hand of the Warlord, I had walked barefoot behind the army for some time before Keir had discovered what I was doing and reclaimed me. Following my Warlord, challenging his decision, had been the best choice, both for us and for our peoples.

Choosing to walk barefoot had not been quite so clever.

Joden, in training as a Singer, said that by choosing to honor the traditions of the Plains, I had made a powerful statement, one that would ring in the songs he was crafting. Marcus had arched his one eyebrow over his remaining eye, and inquired if the fact that my feet had sickened afterwards would be in the first verse or the second.

I straightened slowly, craning my neck to look around, careful not to disturb the horse this time. We were at the center of the Firelander Army, returning to the Plains. Not that Keir's people called themselves 'Firelanders'. That was a term my people used. Keir's people used 'of the Plains' which sounded awkward to my ears. In my thoughts, at least, they remained the Firelanders. Of course, I no longer add 'cursed' or 'evil' or thought that they belched fire. I still had hopes of seeing a blue one, though. There were brown ones, and black ones, and some even had a yellow tinge to their skin. Who knew what further wonders awaited me on the Plains?

Xy was really a large, wide mountain valley, that spread out all around us. I'd never been this far from Water's Fall before, never seen the furthest reaches of what was now my kingdom. The trees were starting to turn, their colors all laid out below us as we traveled.

Marcus and I were surrounded by horses and riders, which spilled out beyond the road as we rode. Keir had ordered that I travel at the center of this moving mass of warriors and horses. Even so, I knew that my guards would not be far away. Rafe and Prest were ahead of us, I could just see their backs. "Rafe!"

Marcus jerked his head under the hood of his cloak, and muttered. Fall was upon us, but the day was fine, and the sun warm on our backs. But not for Marcus. He'd suffered horrible burns at sometime in the past that had left him disfigured, taking away his left eye and burning his left ear completely away. So Marcus always rode cloaked, wrapped well lest the skies be offended by his scars. Yet another aspect of these people that I didn't understand.

Rafe turned and waved, and he and Prest slowed their mounts so that we could catch up with them. Marcus grumbled, but maneuvered his horse between them.

“Rafe, see that plant?” I tried to point it out to him as we moved.

“Plant?” Rafe looked in confusion at the ground. “Warprize . . .”

“The pale one; the one that looks like moss, but it’s butter-colored.”

Rafe shrugged. “Wouldn't it be easier to pick it yourself?”

I rolled my eyes in frustration. “Marcus won't stop!”

Rafe let his laughter ring out, then Prest reached over and grabbed the halter of our horse. Marcus exclaimed bitterly, but Prest guided us out of the crush. I had to smile, even in my frustration. Rafe always had a grin for me. He was a smaller man, thin, with fair skin and deep black hair and brown eyes. Quite a contrast to my other guard, Prest. Prest was much larger, and a quiet one, with skin of brown and black hair in twenty thick braids that fell to the center of his back. More a man of action than words, he calmly guided the horses off to the side, where we could stop.

I started to wiggle off, but Marcus would have none of it. “You are to stay off those feet, you are.”

“Marcus-”

Rafe swung down off his horse. “Point it out to me, Warprize and I'll get you handfuls.”

Epor and Isdra came up beside us. “Problem?” Isdra asked, her long silver braid hanging down her shoulder. Her skin was a light gold in the sun, and her slanted grey eyes were quietly amused. Epor didn't bother to hide his smile. His bright gold hair and beard shown like the sun. He always reminded me of the paintings of the Sun God in the temple back home.

“Herself wants to be picking weeds.” Marcus grumbled.

“Bloodmoss.” I corrected him. “That's the one, Rafe. Let me see.”

Epor snickered slightly as Rafe bent to the task of getting the plants. I noticed

that Isdra gave him an amused look and reached over to nudge his leg. He caught her hand, and raised it to his lips. I look away, embarrassed at such a public display.

Rafe held up a handful of leaves and plants, their torn roots tangling. “Which one, Warprize?”

I heard a pounding of hooves behind us, even as I reached for the plants. Marcus heaved a sigh. “That’ll be the young’un’.”

It was Gils, all right, riding his horse at breakneck speed along the army, grinning like a madman. It cheered me to see his simple pleasure in racing his horse like the wind. Marcus grumbled, but the others smiled and made room as Gils galloped to my side.

“Cadr came to see me, Warprize! To ask for help with a bad boil.” He smiled broadly at me, his curly red hair dancing in the breeze, his words spilling out. “I told him that I would ask you, that I had to consult with my Master.”

I grinned back at him, the young Firelander who had declared himself my apprentice. While Keir had decreed that he had to keep his place as a warrior for now, his secondary duties were to act as my helper. At least until we reached the Heart of the Plains. I’d used every spare minute to give him lessons. “Good. With any luck I can show you how to lance it. But first, Gils, remember what I told you about bloodmoss?” Gils nodded, but I didn’t give him time to answer. I grabbed the soft yellow leaves out of Rafe’s hands, scattering the rest. “It’s there, right there, Gils. Get some for me.”

The army continued past as he swung down to join Rafe in picking the plants. The others had gone on alert, something I doubt they were even aware of, moving their horses to encircle us. Even though we were traveling in the center of the Warlord’s army, their instincts were to safeguard. There was no danger in being left behind, since the army was moving at a walk, and was spread out over what seemed to me to be miles.

“Prest, do you have any ehat leather to spare?” Epor asked.

Prest cast him a look over his shoulder. “You have a need?”

“The handle of my club needs rewrapping.”

“He fancies ehat for the grip.” Isdra explained.

“Would take a piece the size of an ehat to wrap that fool weapon of yours.”

Marcus groused.

I glanced over at Epor, who had his club fastened to his back in a harness. It was a long thick piece of wood, half again as long as my arm, with metal studs along the length of the top and leather wrapped high on the handle. “What’s wrong with his weapon?” I asked.

Rafe popped up next to my leg, bloodmoss in two hands. “Marcus doesn’t approve, Warprize.”

Marcus grunted. “Too slow and unwieldy.”

“For you,” Epor responded, as if this were an old argument. “I prefer a weapon where if I hit the enemy, the enemy goes down and stays down.” Epor gave me a saucy grin and a wink.

I gave Rafe a questioning look, and he laughed at my confusion. “Warprize, a club is a two-handed weapon, best used by a big man with strength in his arms and chest. Like Epor or Prest.”

“Not you?” I asked.

Rafe shook his head. “I’m one for speed. Quicker with a sword or dagger. Isdra, Gils or I would strike twice for every one of Epor’s blows.” His eyebrows danced as he gave Marcus a quick glance. “Or once for every three blows from Marcus with those daggers of his.”

Epor laughed, his blond hair gleaming in the sun. “Ah, but in need, even you or Isdra could use it two-handed.”

Rafe nodded. “Maybe. If I were desperate.”

“Or insane,” Isdra added.

Prest dismounted, and dug through his packs, pulling out a fold of dark leather. He handed it to Epor, who nodded his thanks. “I’ll replace it, Prest, after the next ehat

hunt.”

“What exactly is a—”

Gils popped up and handed me a bunch of leaves, laughing up at me. “How much of this do you want?”

I smiled at him. “As much as I can get, Gils. Do you remember what it can do?”

He gave me a scornful look. “I’s know, Warprize.” He bent to his task, his voice taking on a chanting tone. “Bloodmoss is for packing wounds. It grows at the site of great battles. It will not bind to the flesh, will not stick in the scabs. It seems to aid healing, prevent souring of the flesh and will close the wound. It absorbs as much blood as it can, and when you are done with it you should scatter it about, for the plant will use the blood to take root and grow.” He stood, his hands full of more leaves.

Marcus groaned. “A blood-sucking plant. More knowledge than I need.”

I was pleased. But Gils’s memory had never been a problem in his lessons. Firelanders were blessed with perfect memories, since they had no written word. No, it was the practical application of the information that had been Gils’s difficulty. My feet had been a good example.

It’s one thing to talk about cleaning and treating a soured wound. It’s another to work on a wiggling patient who couldn’t help but jerk her feet at every touch. Finally, in frustration Marcus had me lay on my stomach, and he and Keir held my feet as Gils cleaned them. The boy had done the best he could, but the right foot had become an angry, red, and pus-filled wound. Which forced poor Gils to try to clean it out with an angry and worried Warlord of the Plains hanging over his shoulder, watching his every move.

I leaned forward, holding my hand in front of Marcus’s face. “It’s wonderful, Marcus. Give me your knife and I’ll show you how it works.”

“Skies above.” Marcus jerked his head back and the horse danced beneath us. “It’s more like you’ll cut your hand off. Not with my knife!”

Isdra laughed, and moved her horse closer. “Show me, Warprize.” She pulled her knife and sliced deep into the meat beneath her thumb. Blood welled up quickly.

I took the leaves and twisted them, crushing their fibers. A strong scent of mold rose into my nostrils. “Take this and press it to the cut.”

Isdra wiped her blade clean on her trouser and sheathed it, then used her fingers to press the mass to the cut. The leaves turned color almost immediately as they drank up the blood, changing to a pale green. Gils craned his head to see, and Isdra lowered her hand to let him get a good look. At my nod, she pulled the leaves away. The skin was healed, with only an angry red line left to show she’d been hurt. Isdra held her hand up to show the others, and let the used leaves fall to the ground.

Prest and Rafe were clearly impressed, and Rafe started to gather the crop in earnest. Gils squatted, staring at the bloody leaves intently. I watched for a minute, then smiled. “Gils, I don’t think it will take root while you watch.”

“Oh.” He was clearly disappointed as he started to gather more.

“And what do we have to be careful of when we use this plant?” I asked him gently.

He frowned a bit, then his face cleared. “Not to use it on a dirty wound. It will seal the dirt inside, if you are not careful.” He bit his lip. “I could not have used it on your feet.”

“That’s right,” I nodded. “And it’s dangerous to use on a gut wound for the same reason.”

Marcus grunted at that. “Does it have to be fresh?”

“I was told that it works just as well dried, just not quite so quickly.”

“I can think of other uses.” Isdra smiled slyly. “It would be handy at moon times. Would it grow on the Plains?”

I flushed, uncomfortable even as I shrugged. She spoke so casually about something that wasn’t discussed out loud by my people. At least, not in mixed company.

Epor had dismounted, and was looking at the leaves he was holding. His horse nosed his hand, but threw its head up when he offered it the leaves. “Would it work on a horse?”

“Why is it always about horses with you people?” I snapped, suddenly irritated.

There was an uncomfortable silence. The surprised looks on their faces made my pique vanish. I looked down at Marcus’s back and mumbled. “I don’t know.”

Gils, bless his youth, was oblivious. “I’s filled my bag, Warprize.” His arms were filled with his pickings. “I can fill another, if you want?”

“That would be good.” I looked around, amazed to see that the little plant was spread through the grass as far as I could see. “Two handfuls in each warrior’s kit would be useful in case of injury.”

Gils quickly handed out his crop, making sure that each had at least two handfuls. Even Marcus took a supply. Gils placed his own in his saddlebags and then mounted. “I’ll pass the word, Warprize. Two handfuls”

“Tell them to dry it well, Gils.” I called after him as he galloped off. “We’ll see to Cadr once we stop for the night.”

Rafe mounted up as well, and Marcus headed us back toward the army at a more sedate walk. “Hissself will not like his warriors stopping to pick posies.”

“They all have to pass water at some point, don't they?” I pointed out.

Rafe laughed, but Marcus just grunted.

As we returned to our position in the flowing mass of warriors, Marcus was careful to thread his way back into the direct center. Rafe and Prest rode ahead of us a little ways, and Epor and Isdra faded behind us. They didn’t really try to maintain any kind of position, since there were warriors all around us. I shifted, trying to get comfortable, and tried not to sigh in Marcus’s ear.

Marcus must have heard me, for he cleared his throat. “Epor meant no offense,

Warprize, asking about the healing of horses.”

“I know, Marcus.”

I yawned, tired now that the excitement was over. It had been a brief change from the monotony of the days since Keir of the Cat, Warlord of the Plain, with his dark hair and flashing blue eyes, had taken me up on his horse and reclaimed me as his Warprize. I fingered the leaves that I still held in my hand. Eln would be so pleased to hear that bloodmoss thrived in this area. I could send him a plant with the next messenger, dig it up, roots and all, and wrap it in wet cloth. Even his dour face would crack with a smile at the sight. I’d laugh to see it - except that I wouldn’t be there.

Suddenly, it all seemed too much. A flood of sickness rose up in my body, a sickness of the heart for which there was no cure. I was all too familiar with this feeling, for I was sick for my home, for the castle and the people that I’d left behind in Water’s Fall. For Anna’s stew and Heath’s teasing, and my old room with its four familiar stone walls. I’d lived my whole life in sight of the castle of Water’s Fall, and I felt sick at the idea that I’d never see it again. I sighed, trying not to feel sorry for myself and failing.

“You’ve not been yourself, Warprize.” Marcus had his head turned, and I could just see his nose and lips under the hood of the cloak. His voice dropped to a low, gentle tone. “You’re not eating, and I’m thinking that you’re not sleeping either.”

I watched the ground pass below us. “I’m fine.”

“Are you pregnant?”

I dropped my head onto his shoulder and groaned. “Marcus . . .”

“It’s a fair question.” Marcus replied. “Our women take precautions in the field, but you Xyians have such strange ways . . .”

“I am not pregnant.” I growled. I didn’t want to think about that, although he was right. I hadn’t taken any precautions. My courses were due any day. But the idea of being pregnant raised issues that I didn’t want to consider. Of things that Keir and I had yet to talk about.

“Then what is wrong, Lara?”

The fact that Marcus was using my name, a rare event, told me that he was worried. I opened my mouth, but the truth would not come. “I’m fine, Marcus. Truly.”

He snorted. “As you say, Warprize.” He stiffened in the saddle, and I knew that I had upset him. This scarred little man had come to mean a great deal to me within a short period of time. He was fiercely loyal to his Warlord, and I was included in that loyalty. I wasn’t sure that was by virtue of my own self, or that fact that I was Keir’s chosen Warprize. Regardless, how could I confide my worries and fears to him? He already held Xyians in contempt on general principals. My fretful complaints could only heap wood on that fire.

I settled for an obvious question. “When do you think we’ll stop for the night?”

“A few hours yet, Warprize. Hissself will keep us moving until we lose the light.”

“Why is he in such a hurry?”

“Hissself has his reasons. You’re to be confirmed when we reach the Heart of the Plains, and the sooner the better.” Marcus’s tone was a clear indication that the topic was now settled.

I looked about for a different distraction, and caught a glimpse of Epor reaching over to tug on Isdra’s braid. “Epor seems sweet on Isdra.”

“Eh?” Marcus growled. “Sweet? What means this?”

I floundered for the unfamiliar words. “That he cares for her.”

There was an unnatural pause. I leaned forward. “Marcus?”

“They are bonded.” He spoke grudgingly, almost as if the words caused him pain. “Do you not see the ear spirals?”

“Bonded? Is that the same as married?” I twisted about, trying to get a better look at their ears, but Marcus had apparently grown weary of me.

“Ask Epor. Or Isdra.” His tone was curt and he whistled, somehow catching Prest’s attention. Prest raised a hand, and started to move back toward us. Because I was

a burden on the horse, I was traded off every hour so as not to tire any one animal. The elements forbid that a horse be over-tired. I was starting to feel like a package in a trading caravan.

Marcus spoke as Prest moved into position. “Joden is a good man, Lara, valued for his wisdom. He is heard in senel, although he holds no rank, and even by the Elders when he appears before their councils. He will make a great Singer once he is recognized as such.”

Prest drew closer, preparing to transfer me to his horse, but I ignored his outstretched hand. I leaned closer, trying to figure out what Marcus was talking about.

“If you can’t confide in anyone else, you can confide in a Singer.” Marcus’s voice was so soft, it was almost a whisper. “Words spoken to a Singer are held to his heart, where they cannot be pried free. Talk to Joden, Lara. Please.”

With that, they transferred me to Prest’s horse without breaking stride, and Marcus faded back and away into the crowd.

Prest was a full head taller than Marcus and easily twice as broad. I rather dreaded riding with him, since I couldn’t see over his shoulders. That meant my stomach would be upset by the time I left his horse.

Prest also wasn’t much of a talker, which left me free to dwell on my miseries. If Atira were here, I might be able to confide in her, but she’d been left in Water’s Fall, under the care of Eln. Her leg would heal true, but the break would not let her travel. Even surrounded by thousands of warriors, I felt terribly alone. Keir had been absent now for two days, and part of me feared he’d decided that this Warprize no longer interested him. Maybe I could talk to Joden, confide in him. Joden had helped me so much when I’d been taken to the camp. He’d been the one to figure out that I’d been lied to by Xymund, my late half-brother. But I felt so very stupid and silly. Like a spoiled child with a broken toy.

Just how could I tell anyone how miserable I was? Firelanders already had a fairly low opinion of soft city folk, and if I started complaining it would only strengthen their beliefs.

I shifted my weight slightly and gripped Prest around the waist, trying to get comfortable. At least this much had improved. The first five days I'd ached so badly I'd thought to die. Spending day after day in the saddle had wearied my body in ways I didn't think possible.

"Gurt?" Prest held up a soft pouch.

"No," I replied softly, trying not to shudder as my stomach heaved. "Thank you."

Prest grunted and popped a morsel in his mouth.

'Gurt' is a kind of dried cheese, apparently made from some kind of goat-like animal. It looks like a small white pebble, which can be chewed, dissolved in water to drink, or melted over meat. Firelanders eat it at every meal. It stores easily, and never seems to spoil. They all carry a pouch of the stuff with them. While I had gotten to enjoy the taste of their kavage, gurt was another matter. It's horrid, bitter and dry, like a green apple in early spring. It was especially bad when they melted it over cooked meat.

An army on the move has a limited diet. At every meal, it was cooked meat, gurt, and fry bread. Small bits of the dough were thrown into a pan of fat. That wasn't too terrible, but eating it day after day - well, I never really appreciated Anna for her skills. Or the marvels that Marcus prepared when we were in the camp outside of Water's Fall.

But that had been a full camp. While we traveled, we made an overnight camp, which was a completely different thing. We no longer had the command tent, which was almost as big as some houses, and took a full day to erect. Now it was tiny little shelters that you crawled into to sleep. Or not sleep, as was my case. I'd lay alone in the small tent, wrapped in blankets, and stare at the covering around me. Every little sound, every step of a passing sentry, every snort of a horse, every lump in the hard ground under me had my eyes open for most of the night.

It wasn't so bad when Keir was with me. For some reason I could sleep in his presence. Well, truth be told, I could sleep in his arms. But he had duties and had to travel from one end of his army to the other, and it spread out for miles. So there were some nights when he wasn't in our shelter, and I had not seen him at all for the last two days.

Firelanders could sleep in the saddle. If I tried that, I got sick. Firelanders, in the saddle, could repair tack, or sharpen blades or argue or, Goddess help me, talk.

Which was another thing. We had horses in Xy. I'd been taught to ride as a child, and have ridden many times. But in the city I rarely bothered. By the time a groom had saddled one for me, I could be halfway to where I was going. You had to worry about tying them to things and leaving them for long periods. I'd never been really enamored of the beasts; they were a form of transportation and not much more.

But I'd learned fast that Firelanders had relationships with their animals. Horses were treated like small children, acknowledged and admired. One of the worst insults imaginable was 'bragnect', which meant 'killer of foals'. Now that I knew what the word meant, I was much more careful about how I used it.

And just like proud parents are wont to do, they talk about horses. Constantly. Obsessively. They'd discuss the details of ears and mane and gaits until I wanted to scream. They had seventeen words for a male horse and could talk for *hours* about saddles. They loved to modify saddles with hooks and protrusions and supports, and talk out the advantages and disadvantages. Their world is very dependent on their animals and it was fascinating for about the first day. After that, I tired quickly of horses and horse talk.

And that was another thing. All this talk was out in the open where everyone could hear. They had no sense of modesty or privacy that I could see. I'd had one rider come up and start to discuss the state of his bowels without a qualm, in the middle of a moving mass of warriors. You couldn't really talk to anyone without being overheard.

Ahead of us there was a shout. I peered around Prest's shoulders to see one warrior launch himself at another, carrying him to the ground. The horses shied and shifted a bit, but everyone just kept moving as the two rolled on the ground, fighting. Their horses had moved off, to eat grass as their human riders resolved their differences.

Which was another thing. These people had such fiery tempers and they had no hesitation of attacking for any slight. It was only the exchange of a token that allowed safety for the speaker of offensive words. In Xy, challenge was made clear, with a chance to prepare. Not with these people.

So here I was, Warprize to the Warlord of the Plains, acclaimed before my people and his, praised and admired for my willingness to journey to a new and strange place, to be a bridge between his people and mine. What would they think, to find out that I was sick to my stomach, hungry, exhausted, dirty, alone and certain that the Warlord had lost interest in me?

I heaved a sigh, and tried to tell myself that I was being a soft city woman. That I had no right to complain over minor problems like this. That I was being foolish.

My stomach rolled over, and I focused my eyes off to the side, on the trees in the distance, and tried very hard not to cry.

Joden was broader than Prest, but not so tall. Once I was behind him, I propped my chin on his shoulder and looked ahead, which would help settle my stomach. Eventually.

“You look unwell, Warprize. Are you pregnant?”

Goddess, was every Firelander going to ask me that? “No,” I spoke, my tongue sharper than I intended. “I am fine, Joden.”

He was silent for a moment, then shook his head. “No, something troubles you, Warprize.” Joden's deep voice seemed to resonate through his chest and right into my bones.

I sighed. This was the man who had helped me before, by explaining the meaning of my title. Perhaps he could help me again. “Joden, words spoken to a Singer are private, right?”

Joden turned his head, trying to see my face. “Yes, if told to a true Singer under the sky. You need to confide, Lara? Something private?”

I nodded. “Just between us. You wouldn't tell anyone?”

He turned the other way, digging in the pocket of his saddle bag. “I am not yet a full Singer, Lara. But words between friends can be held as private.” He pulled out a small string of bells and reached forward to tie it in his horse's mane. The soft bells rang with every step the horse took.

Without a word, the riders around us melted back and away, clearing a space around us. As I watched, I noticed that they didn't seem alarmed, or even curious as to what we are doing. “What are those?”

“Privacy bells.” Joden seemed to understand my question. “For when you wish to talk or confide without being overheard. The bells are a request for privacy. Don't you have such?”

“No.” I leaned forward and kept my voice down. “When we want privacy, we go off into a room alone and close the door.”

Joden snorted. “Alone is not easy in the Plains. There are few doors in the tents of my people. Fewer still in the winter shelters. If you hear bells, it's because the person wants to be left alone or is speaking privately with someone.”

I frowned, thinking. “Keir didn't use them in camp.”

“A command tent carries with it its own privacy, Warprize.” Joden seemed to settle in the saddle, as if making himself more comfortable. “Now, Lara, between friends, what is wrong?”

“Oh, Joden.” I blinked back tears. “This is so much harder than I thought it would be!”

“Ah,” Joden nodded. “You miss your home. That is norm-”

“No.” A sob escaped my throat. “Oh, no, that’s not-” I took a deep breath.

“Joden, it’s so boring!”