

Chapter One

The Kel Nira made a final check of the warriors cramped together in the wagon bed. Most were able to sit upright, at least so long as they propped themselves against their fellows. The last she came to was a man who had lost his right eye, and much of the flesh around it. She ran her fingers over his bandages. “How is the pain?”

“Bearable.”

But only just; yet it was too soon to give him another draught of poppy syrup. She drew her hand across his forehead, saw it smooth and his remaining eye close, then lowered herself out of the wagon. “The two with concussion will need close watching,” she told her apprentices. The girls acknowledged her instructions, and climbed up to finish settling the injured men.

Steadying herself against the cart’s wicker side, the Kel Nira tried to rub the sting of sweat and exhaustion from her eyes. At the far end of the field rattled another wagon, this one carrying corpses to add to the pyres that veiled the late-afternoon sunlight with their smoke. The battlefield wavered a moment in her vision, the landscape spiked with arrow shafts and broken spears. Among the bodies that still littered the ground, the sole signs of life were the carrion crows, intent on their work.

The Kel Nira reached out with her mind, hoping to sense even a single flicker of life among the fallen. She touched only emptiness, save for a lingering restlessness of spirit. “O Mothers Beyond, give them good welcome,” she prayed, and traced a sign of release in the air. A sighing wind brushed by, stirring the strands of hair that had loosened from her braids.

She could spare no further thought for the dead; there were living, suffering men who had a stronger claim on her attention. There always were—and no end to them in sight.

One of the field surgeons cleared his throat. “Lady, does the House of Healing have room for so many?”

Behind him, another cart bearing wounded men trundled westward to make its way past the vine-cloaked hills at the edge of the field; the

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vineyards were untended now, the cottages nestled among the hillside terraces deserted, the people fled from the scene of battle.

The Kel Nira rolled the stiffness out of her shoulders as she considered. “The nearest House can take no more, but you cannot care for more men in camp, either.” She gestured toward the warriors in the wagon. “These are not so badly injured as some of the others and can withstand more travel. We shall take them across the river to the Sanctuary; the House of Healing there will have places for them.”

The surgeon frowned. “The Forstene prince has made camp on Summer Bluff . . . too close to the ford for my liking. I know you have a Guardian with you”—his glance flicked to the robust woman seated beside the wagon driver—“but still you’d better go northward and take the bridge. It’ll be a longer way, but safer.”

The Kel Nira nodded and relayed the information to the driver. As the cart lurched into motion, she and the field surgeon mounted their horses. Not altogether certain she wanted to hear the answer, she asked him, “Did we win this one?”

He cast a glance back at the corpse-strewn field. “We kept the Forsteners from advancing farther, Kel Nira . . . but I wouldn’t exactly say we’d won.”

The battle had been fought just south of the Lenasha Forest, and their route soon led them into the embrace of the ancient trees. The surgeon took his leave shortly afterward. As he headed toward one of the warbands’ hidden woodland encampments, he called back, “Be careful, Kel Nira.”

“Thank you, my friend. May you walk with the Watchers.”

She settled into her saddle, welcoming the shade and the clean fragrance of early-summer leaves—a relief after the oppressiveness of the battlefield. The two apprentices were crooning a healing song in rhythm to the creaking of the wagon wheels. The Kel Nira almost smiled as she relaxed into the lulling tune, trusting herself to her horse’s confident gait. It was a lengthy ride to the Sanctuary by way of the bridge; they would not arrive till long after moonrise. No harm in a little doze now. . . .

She dreamed. A pack of wolves ran down their prey in the forest, relentless and sure. But at the moment they prepared their final, killing rush, the hunted burst out of cover and turned on the hunters. Death came to the wolves in red confusion, and all were slain but one. He tried to drag his broken body from among his slaughtered packmates; his legs would not bear him. He lifted his muzzle from the dust and howled.

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The Kel Nira snapped awake. She inadvertently jerked on the reins, but the little mare halted without protest.

"Lady, what's wrong?" called out her junior apprentice.

She answered the girl slowly, still sorting through the dream imagery for what it was that had really awakened her. "There is something . . . someone . . . off to the right, I think . . . badly hurt." Signaling to the wagon driver to stop, she dismounted, her medicine bag slung over her shoulder. "Treska, you will stay here and tend these men."

"Yes, my chief."

"Deela, you will assist me."

Before climbing out of the cart, the senior apprentice paused to whisper something to Treska and pat her on the shoulder. The gesture was not lost on the Kel Nira. Treska was looking wan—no surprise after all she had vomited today. It was her first time on field duty, and the Kel Nira wondered if it was too much, too soon. Probably so; she tended to forget just how young Treska was—a tall girl with little of childhood's softness left in her face, but she had, after all, only just started her bleeding cycle.

The Guardian had jumped down from her place beside the driver, ironwood staff in hand. "I'd better come with you, Kel Nira."

She shook her head. "Thank you, Fama, but I would rather you stay with the wounded. We will not have to go far, I think."

Following a deer trail, the Kel Nira led the way deeper into the forest. The weariness she had felt such a short while ago had been banished by the mindcall of someone in extremities of pain. When a swath of broken and trampled underbrush cut at an angle across the narrow path, she crouched to examine the soil, saw the impress of hoofprints, and knew she was nearing the source of that call.

Not many paces on, she and her apprentice entered a clearing. Deela coughed, and the Kel Nira wrinkled her nose. The stench of carnage, enclosed by the trees, was strong here.

Three men and a horse lay contorted on the ground, impaled by arrows; one man's hand still clung to his useless shield, the metal-clad oval pierced right through.

"My chief, these are Forsteners!" Deela whispered. "What if their people come looking for them?"

"I do not think they will come into the forest now, with the sun so far in the west." The Kel Nira scanned the clearing, looking for a fourth man—the one she knew must be here, holding to life, whose pain had summoned her. "There!"

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He had been hidden from view partly by the bulk of the horse's body, partly by the bracken that edged the clearing. His right leg was dark with blood.

The Kel Nira knelt beside him. She brushed her hands over his head and down his back. "No head injury . . . no damage to the spine." She beckoned to Deela for assistance.

The apprentice hung back. She still looked fearful, and now there was something more. "After everything the Forsteners have done, how can we heal one of them? Who knows how many of our people this one has killed or maimed or raped—"

"Enough! A Healer knows nothing of a patient but the need for healing. We turn our backs on no one." That Deela, so far along in her training, would even consider leaving this man to suffer. And for what? Mere vengeance?

"But . . . he hasn't *asked* for healing."

"His pain has spoken for him. Do you not feel it? Or do you close your heart to all save those you believe to be deserving?"

The apprentice dropped her gaze to the leaf litter at her feet.

"We have no time for this, Deela. Do you wish to become a Sworn Healer or not?"

Deela's shoulders tensed. Then, without a word, she came to join the Kel Nira. They bent to their task and rolled the man over.

Deela made some remark about how much heavier the man's mail shirt was than the leather cuirasses their own fighters wore, but the Kel Nira was already engrossed in examining his chest and abdomen as she had his head and spine. "The internal organs are unharmed. It is only his leg we need worry about. Good." She unbuckled and pushed aside his sword belt, careful not to touch the weapon itself.

He stirred back to consciousness as Deela tossed the sword into the bracken. His dark eyes widened, taking in the Kel Nira's green tunic and sleeveless white overdress, stained with the blood of the other men she had tended this day. "Sharhay!" he gasped out.

"Yes, I am Sharhay. But I am a Healer; I will not harm you."

Confusion joined the fear in his eyes. She switched to his language and repeated slowly, "I will not harm. I am Healers' Order."

"A Holy Woman?" he whispered hoarsely.

She gave herself a moment to consider that. "In Sharhay, women of Orders are called Ma'Sharha. It mean 'Mothers of the People.'" Her tongue stumbled over the difficult *th* sound. "Now rest quiet. Leg is hurt."

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Deela knelt beside the man and took out her knife. He tried to roll away from the blade, but the Kel Nira gripped his shoulders and held him down. "She needs uncover wound. I give my word we not harm. Believe me, and be still."

"Why"—he paused to moisten his lips—"why do you help me?"

It was a long time since she had had occasion to converse in Forstene. Again she hesitated, thinking how best to explain. "In Order, we have—" What was the word for *vows*? "We swear to give heal where need is. This is sacred word." She smiled a bit at the similarity between this conversation and the one she'd just had with Deela.

The Forstener appeared to relax slightly. The Kel Nira reached for the water flask Deela had brought along. "Water," she said, and took a swallow herself to reassure him, then lifted his head and helped him drink.

When he was done, she moistened a scrap of cloth and gently wiped his face. With the grime cleaned off, he was revealed to be a man of twenty-odd winters, who would probably be handsome enough under other circumstances. But while most Forsteners had a coppery or golden cast to their complexion, this one's face possessed a distinctly grayish tinge.

"Oh!" breathed Deela, who had removed his leg armor and cut away the cloth beneath. "Lady, this is not good."

She was right: the warrior's femur was fractured, a jagged end of bone protruding through an ugly wound on his inner thigh.

The Kel Nira eyed Deela critically. Though small and slim, the girl was strong—but not strong enough. "It appears we will need Fama's assistance after all. You can find your way?"

After a moment's consideration, Deela nodded and darted off toward where the cart waited.

The Kel Nira removed a vial from her medicine bag. "This is for pain," she told her patient. "Not good taste, but you want drink before I fix bone."

His eyes narrowed in suspicion, then he heaved a resigned sigh and dutifully swallowed the liquid she'd measured out.

"I must clean leg now. You may feel hurt."

Chanting under her breath, the Kel Nira removed every bit of dried blood, dirt, and debris from the wound. Her patient held his body stiff and did not flinch, even though the spirits with which she washed the injury must have stung.

"Will I . . . be able to walk again?"

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"I do all I can. Then you keep leg bound, and rest for all next moon. You can do?"

"Yes, Mistress."

She gave him what she hoped was an encouraging smile. "You will walk."

He mumbled something unintelligible, his eyelids drooping. The poppy syrup was taking effect.

Deela returned with Fama, who looked none too happy. All she said, though, was, "Are you sure about this, Lady?"

"If by 'this,' you mean treating this wounded man, then yes."

"Treating this wounded *Forstener* is what I mean."

"I am still sure."

Fama started to shrug, then bowed instead. "It is my duty to serve you, Lady."

The Kel Nira ignored the fact that the Guardian's tone was nowhere near as acquiescent as her words. "It is well. Get two scabbards from the dead men so that we can use them for splints. Then I will need you to hold him and provide traction while I pull the leg into alignment and set the bone."

Fama glanced at the warrior, sizing him up. His shoulders were scarcely broader than hers, and he was not quite as tall as she was. She nodded. "Right, scabbards first."

While Fama collected the splints, Deela laid out bandages and salve, then threaded a needle with silk and set it in readiness in a jar of spirits. The Kel Nira once more examined the injury, with both eyes and mindsight. The break had just missed cutting the great artery that carried blood through the leg directly from the heart. She must be careful not to harm that artery as she brought the jagged bone ends back together, or her patient would almost certainly bleed to death.

Fama returned, wordlessly dropping two wood-and-leather scabbards beside the Forstener on her way to take her place at his head. He stirred as she lifted his torso so that she could link her arms under his shoulders and brace him against her chest. Deela spoke a few soothing words, laying her hand on his forehead, and he settled once more. His breath came deep and steady.

The Kel Nira poured a little water over her hands and said the words of purification. With a prayer to the Watchers, she reached her mind to her tree of power and felt the earth-strength flow through it and into her own limbs, like golden light showering over her from its leaves.

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She placed her hands on either side of the fracture, breathed in the breath of the nearby trees, and pushed the protruding bone into position. She moved down to the man's feet, reached again to her tree, and braced herself. She grasped his ankle in both hands and tugged on the broken leg, hard.

The Forstener cried out. His body convulsed, then stilled.

Fama's unyielding grip on his torso provided all the resistance the Kel Nira could wish. Renewing her own efforts, she pulled with steady force to move the bone into alignment, broken end to broken end. The golden light flowed into her and through her hands, pulsing warmly, and she sent her mind into the bone. She envisioned the ragged halves of the fracture joining together, the torn fabric of the bone mending.

"Splints." The Kel Nira was sweating; she had not had time to recover from her labors on the battlefield, and it took all her strength now to keep the bone properly aligned.

Deela positioned the splints and bound them into place, leaving uncovered only the torn flesh where the bone had broken through.

The Kel Nira held her mind to the bone for several heartbeats more before releasing her grip on the man's ankle.

Now to the wound. Her hand hovered over it, and she let the radiant warmth of the healing power flow through her and into the mangled tissue, driving away the impurities that could turn wounds corrupt. Then, as she had done with the bone, she drew together the muscle and the skin. Deela handed her the needle and thread. Singing a final charm under her breath, the Kel Nira stitched the skin closed.

At last she sat back. Deela reached to check her pulse, but the Kel Nira shook her off. "I am fine. Dress the wound."

She let out a long, slow breath and regathered her awareness of the outer world, trying to fend off the lingering emptiness that always accompanied the receding of the healing energy. Dully, she noted that Fama had released the Forstener, gotten to her feet, and was now gathering up the dead warriors' swords.

"We are not a sword people," the Kel Nira admonished.

"Maybe we can't use these ourselves," Fama answered stonily, "but we can keep other Forsteners from using them." Almost too quietly to hear, she added, "We ought to get at least some good out of this fool's errand."

Then Deela was finished with her task, and the Kel Nira knelt again beside the injured warrior. She brushed her hands over his leg, heart, and head. He had slipped into a peaceful slumber; the color was returning to his cheeks. "All will be well with him. Deela, get the

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cloaks from the dead men to cover him, lest he take a chill during the night.”

“We’re leaving him here?”

The Kel Nira hesitated, for the first time registering the quality of the Forstener’s garments, the wolf embroidered on his surcoat, the gold rings in his ears. His straight dark hair, escaping from the ribbon that bound it at the back of his neck, was long; his mustache and beard were precisely trimmed. All the marks of a Forstene nobleman.

“My chief?”

“We cannot do more for him than what we have done. His own people will come in search of him in the morning, in any case—of that I have no doubt.” She stood up, yet remained a moment longer staring down at the Forstener.

A breeze rippled through the tree leaves, making them whisper. The Kel Nira shivered with a sudden knowledge: by healing this man, she had somehow woven a new and unbreakable strand into the web of her fate.