

EXOTIKA

ELLORA'S CAVE

HEALER'S
Price

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Healer's Price

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HEALER'S PRICE

Simone Bern

Chapter One

Tarianna stared out the window at the sheets of drenching rain, trying to determine the boundary where the water from the sky met the dull gray mass of the ocean. She did not mind storms, when the wind lashed the mingled waters of rain and sea against her windows like a flailing whip. There was excitement and beauty in that wild, passionate energy. But these sodden, bleak days hammered away at her spirits and made her yearn for the endless sunshine and verdant fields of home.

"It's early yet," a voice rumbled from behind her. "Come back to bed."

She shook her head and pulled the silk robe tighter around herself. "No. I want to go see Greggor and then walk into town. There are healings calling out to me."

Tarianna felt strong arms pull her back against a compact, powerful body.

"Good. I like it when you come to me hungry," he said, nuzzling her shoulder where the green silk had slipped off and bared a patch of skin.

Hot lust, tempered only by the sort of possessive affection one might show a prized animal, surged through her inner sense at the touch of his lips. A hand slipped beneath the thin fabric and caressed her left breast. She stiffened. When her reserves of power were drained by a day of healing that blunt emotional offering was acceptable. Now it offended her almost past enduring.

"Enough, Blaine," she snapped. "I have work to do."

He grunted and released her with obvious reluctance. Tarianna sat down at her vanity table and began to brush out her long brown hair. She watched in the mirror as he found his clothing among the items scattered across the floor. It wasn't until he finally sauntered out of the room that the tension in her shoulders eased.

She looked into her own solemn blue eyes. She'd paled somewhat during the last five months but there was still a patina of gold warming her skin. It was a young face,

unmarred by time yet somehow worn. Tarianna sighed and continued to worry at her hair. The wavy strands had become knotted during the night and she winced once or twice as she forced the brush through. Having conquered the tangles with rough efficiency, she braided her hair into a single thick rope and tied it with a ribbon.

Tarianna dressed with the disinterested swiftness of a woman who did not care whether the chosen articles enhanced or detracted from her beauty. A simple tunic was pulled over loose matching pants. The clothing was plain but made of the softest linen and expensively dyed in a deep blue. This merchant family was dripping in wealth and even her most extravagant expenses were barely acknowledged.

Her new contract placed Tarianna in an unusual position. In most cases healers were hired by towns or countries and used their gifts to address the serious diseases and injuries within a large population. However this contract was with one family, to ease the symptoms of a specific young man. After fulfilling that obligation, she was, of course, free to offer her services to others. Still, it seemed wrong to give priority to one man. The fact that her own wishes had grown to support such preferential treatment for her client only made the nagging guilt stronger.

Tarianna left her room and walked down the steep, tight staircase to the second floor. She hesitated, considered visiting Greggor immediately and decided she was too hungry. Another cramped staircase took her to the ground floor and the dining room. Everything in this house seemed pushed in to her. It was as if the building had been squashed between a giant's hands. The house was four stories high, with so many rooms she still did not know them all, yet there was a lack of openness that oppressed her. Tarianna admitted that it could be the people rather than the house that created that smothered feeling.

"Good morning, Healer." An older woman in an elegant gray suit smiled politely from across the broad dining table.

"Good morning, Trader Joslin."

"Have you been to see...Greggor?" There was a slight pause before the name, as if she disliked the taste of it in her mouth.

Tarianna felt her face tighten but she responded calmly. "I thought I would have something to eat first."

"Of course. Healers are always hungry, aren't they?" Joslin murmured, a glint of cool amusement in her pale eyes.

"It is the price of my gift," Tarianna said without inflection.

She loaded up a plate with warm crusty rolls, sausages and eggs from the side table then took her usual seat at an angle from Joslin. Healing took energy from both her body and her spirit. She ate huge meals that seemed out of proportion to her small, slender frame. However, it was the other hunger that most amused Joslin. Every use of Tarianna's gift sucked life out of her soul and then she was hungry for more than food. She needed to touch and draw in the vitality of another body, needed to swim in the sensation of a beating heart and intimately experience the tensing and release of muscles. Like all healers, she fed that other hunger with her lovers. Joslin seemed to find the stir Tarianna created among the men in her household a source of entertainment.

Tarianna ate mechanically and then excused herself. Greggor's bedroom was at the end of the first hallway on the second floor, tucked into the far corner. It was a plain, spare room but she knew that was by choice. Although the family ignored his existence, they did not begrudge him any luxury money could buy.

"Good morning, Greggor," she said to his back.

He was dressed in a simple dark shirt and black pants. Standing by the window he looked like a shadow against the gray morning light. She wondered if his thoughts mirrored her own depressed musings of earlier. Probably. Dark moods were part of his disease. He turned and started to twitch at her greeting.

"May I touch you?" She voiced the formal request healers made to those in need of their gift.

His wide mouth lifted in a small smile and he held out a trembling hand. She took it and reached in with her talent. The shaking stopped.

"Thank you," he said softly and attempted to pull his hand away.

"Come, lie down. There is more I want to do today." Tarianna tugged him over to the bed.

He resisted for a moment then followed. His fingers wrapped around hers so tightly they pressed the silver healer's ring into her flesh. She was glad that he was behind her, glad he could not see the expression on her face. Being a silver healer, Tarianna had a gift that offered more than the lesser magic of copper healers. She saw deeper into the body and could work at a more complex level due to the strength of her gift. However, her greater vision came with an empathy that made her intensely aware of not just the physical but also the emotional responses of those she touched.

Greggor yearned for her with a muffled, hopeless desire that tore at her heart. It had been growing slowly these past few months until it now ate at him with relentless pressure. He knew she could read what lay behind his carefully placid features but he would not speak of it, would not act on it. He lay down on the bed, still clinging to her hand but with his eyes fixed firmly on the ceiling.

She sat on the edge of the mattress and resisted the urge to brush the black curls away from his cheek. Other than the hair he did not look like his cousin Blaine. His features were finer, set in a triangular face with wide gray eyes. The two men were the same height but Blaine had a wrestler's chest and arms while Greggor was built like a dancer. He would be graceful, she thought, if not for the effects of his illness.

Tarianna closed her eyes and extended her gift, stretching to see and heal the tragic flaws in his nervous system. She had not tried this before. Her work so far had focused on merely easing symptoms. Today she pushed herself across barriers never before crossed and explored territory only dimly sensed. When she withdrew, after hours of meticulous work, it was with the awareness that she had affected a real change, strengthened and rebuilt areas crumbling under the onslaught of his disease.

His eyes met hers and for an instant there was an unshuttered look of pure longing in his face. Then long, dark lashes fell across pale cheeks and he was asleep. A major healing used the patient's energies as well as her own and he would sleep for several hours.

She leaned down to gently kiss his soft mouth. She wanted to wrap him in her arms and hold him against her breast. He was too beautiful. And too proud. He would not allow it. These stolen kisses were all that she had from him.

As she left the room Tarianna assessed her ability to continue working that day. Greggor's healing had taken a significant toll but there was enough left in her to help a few people in town. The well of her power was deep, growing deeper all the time. This was her third year working full time as a healer. The demands of the real world, so different from the protected environs of the Center where she had trained, were forcing an expansion of her talents.

If only they could be enough to cure Greggor. Perhaps, her mind whispered, perhaps in time. It was an insane hope. Only a gold healer, that rare expression of the healing talent that showed up perhaps once a century, might be able to fix his fatal illness.

Tarianna went to the front door and pulled on high leather boots and an oilskin coat. The rain pounded down on her head as she marched toward the less affluent part of town. She followed the tugging on her gift to a blacksmith's apprentice with a bad burn, then to a feverish child. After that she soothed a wet, racking cough among several of the fisherfolk.

In the evening, too tired and hungry to contemplate the walk back to the house, Tarianna stumbled into an inn. A large bowl of stew and crumbling dark bread filled her belly. She closed her eyes and slumped against the chair, trying to master the other appetite that prowled under her skin.

A fluttering string of notes called her attention back to her surroundings. The common room of the inn had been filling rapidly as she ate. Her little table against the

wall was hemmed in by a sea of people. A strong baritone began to sing and Tarianna understood the reason for the inn's popularity that evening. This was a true minstrel, one with the artist's gift.

She smiled and rested her chin on cupped hands, letting his magic touch her empty soul. One song followed another and she laughed and cried along with the rest of the audience. That was his gift, to fill others with images and emotions, to cleanse, purify and educate. His songs stripped bare anger, mocked jealousy, tenderly showed a parent's devotion and made lessons of history come alive in their minds through songs filled with tragedy, heroism and pageantry. Finally he released any lingering tension with a buoyant dash through silliness. By all the gods but it felt wonderful.

Dancing blue eyes in a thin face locked onto hers and the young minstrel grinned as his fingers swept over the strings of his lute in a final chord. Tarianna smiled back with unguarded warmth. The audience clapped loudly and many voices called out for more.

"Very well, one more song, my friends," the minstrel said. "But only one or my voice will crack."

He launched into a slow, sweet ballad. It was an old love song about a youth torn between his lover and the sea. The song was filled with passion and yearning and the minstrel sang it looking directly into Tarianna's face. The music died away and a quieter applause followed. Gradually people shuffled out the door.

Tarianna closed her eyes and wiped away the moisture on her cheeks. It wasn't fair, what he had done to her. Still she smiled. He was only a year or two older than she was, decent-looking in a gangly sort of way but not a man who would normally catch her eye on the street. It did not surprise her when the minstrel's long body folded down into the other chair at her table.

"Hello, healer," he said.

"Hello, minstrel," she replied.

"My name is Tylor and I am honored to meet you."

“Tarianna. And I am pleased to meet you as well. I enjoyed your performance immensely.”

He eased into a stream of friendly chatter, probably well aware that his richly nuanced voice was his greatest asset. Tarianna allowed herself to be lulled by Tylor’s practiced wiles. She thought about Blaine waiting for her and smiled even more warmly at the minstrel.

Blaine was treating her too much like his personal property, confident of his place in her bed after so many months of exclusivity. Doubtless he believed his own skill and charms created that favored position. The reality was that she could not be bothered with the games of casual seduction that were normal among young healers. She had played them for a while at the beginning but they’d lost all appeal in the face of Greggor’s shadowed eyes. Tarianna pushed away thoughts of other men and focused on the eager youth in front of her.

She reached out and touched Tylor’s hand. Sweet, hot desire poured through the touch. Her fingers twined with his.

“I’m hungry,” she said softly and sensed the quickening of his heartbeat.

“My room...?”

She nodded and let him lead her through the maze of tables to the stairs. One of his hands held fast to hers while the other carried his instrument. He stopped before a door, clearly uncertain which precious article to release in order to open it. She laughed and turned the knob for him.

Tarianna leashed her growling hunger long enough to allow Tylor to place his lute carefully in a corner, then she drew his head down with urgent, demanding hands and drank in the delicious taste of his youthful passion. Clothing fell to the floor and they tumbled onto his rumpled bed. His mouth traced the curves and hollows of her body, teasing her nipples into hard peaks. A heavy hand ran across her belly and nudged apart her legs. Skilled fingers plunged into her and massaged her sensitive, swollen clitoris. She moaned and melted into the bed. The simple, untarnished desire surging

through the young minstrel warmed her more than her own body's pleasure. Her hand circled around his erect penis and the answering bolt of intense arousal arced through both their bodies. Blood surged into his long cock and it thickened in her hand. She lapped up the sensations like a cat licking milk out of a bowl.

Suddenly she craved the taste of him in her mouth. Not knowing or caring if that desire was her own or transmitted from Tylor, she bent her head and put her lips around the engorged head of his cock. Taking only the tip of him into her mouth, she swirled her tongue over the slick, hot shaft and sucked up the welling drops. She swallowed and pulled him farther back into her throat. Tylor groaned and she sensed his hands clench tightly. His burning arousal was a feast to her starved soul and she wanted to devour him.

"Best stop," he said, his rich voice hoarse with passion. He withdrew from her grasping mouth and she felt him gather together the strands of his ragged control. "I do not want to leave you hungry, beautiful healer."

Tylor pushed her back onto the bed. His mouth encircled one rigid nipple, licking and sucking in teasing variation. A strong hand ran up her thigh and she parted her legs to welcome his arrival. Her cunt was dripping wet and her whole body ached with need. His palm rubbed hard on the lips of her vagina while long fingers reached deep inside. Tarianna bucked and moaned on the bed. Her will was lost to both the direct physical stimulation and the jagged spikes of Tylor's intense pleasure as he watched her climax. She sobbed and collapsed in relief. The edges of her ravenous hunger had finally been blunted.

The minstrel allowed her a moment's rest then levered his long, lean body over hers and plunged his throbbing cock into her slick, hot vagina. The strong muscles of his back clenched and released, his breathing labored heavily alongside hers and the rocking rhythm of their bodies increased. Her nails scored his shoulders as she urged him on, wanting every powerful thrust of his cock, every groaning stab into the depths of her vagina. A second climax swelled inside her and she clung to him with blind,

fevered desire. She felt the approach of their mutual orgasm as a rising wave, a blackness that caught her up and slammed her into near oblivion.

Panting, she lay on the bed and gently stroked his arm. She felt satisfied in a clean, wholesome way. Tylor had given her back the sweetness of passion shared with a generous, uncomplicated lover.

"Thank you," Tarianna said softly.

Tylor murmured a sleepy reply.

She allowed herself to doze for a while in the warm, rumpled bed then rose and dressed. Bound by duty and chains of her own making, she slipped like a shadow out of the inn. The reluctant light of the veiled moon was enough to guide her past the shuttered windows along the well-trodden route to the house on the edge of town.

* * * * *

Blaine glared at her through narrowed eyes when she came down to breakfast. He said nothing in front of his mother and the other family members but followed her into the hallway afterward.

"You were not in your room yesterday evening," he said.

She shrugged. "I met a minstrel in town."

His lips tightened. "I see."

"Tylor will be around for a few days. Perhaps afterward..." she said breezily.

The square face, with its rough-hewn handsomeness, looked almost ugly for an instant.

"Perhaps," he said and walked away from her.

Tarianna saw the stiffness of his back and smiled. Puncturing Blaine's arrogance was very satisfying. These traders thought too highly of themselves and she had allowed him to play his game of dominance far too long.

She knocked on Greggor's door. There was no answer and she did not feel the usual pull on her talent that his disease created. Tarianna walked in and frowned at the empty room. He generally went outside only in the afternoon. Then, he would walk around the gardens with one of the servants watching over him. She glanced out the window and spotted a slender black-haired man climbing on the rocks, making his way down to the beach. She caught her breath and dashed for the door. Greggor's illness made him clumsy. It would be so easy for him to trip and fall.

She pulled on her boots and ran outside without bothering to find a coat. Yesterday's downpour had emptied the sky of its burden of moisture and only a few clouds scuttled across the sun. It was nearly warm today. She scrambled down the wall of boulders and jumped the last few feet onto the sand.

"Greggor!" she called out.

He turned toward her and a grin lit up his face. Greggor threw his arms out wide and spun around.

"By all the gods, I feel wonderful!" he shouted. He jumped up onto a log and ran down its length toward her. She had been right—he was graceful without the weight of the disease.

"I feel like a boy again. My feet listen to me. Look, I don't shake." He held out a perfectly steady hand. Eyes brimming over with happiness locked on hers. "What did you do, Tarianna? I was told there is no cure."

"I didn't cure you," she said gently. "I'm sorry but all I did was repair some damage. I don't know how long the effects will last."

He sobered. "Months, Tarianna? Weeks? How long dare I hope for?"

"A few weeks, I think. And then I will do it again...and again. I promise, Greggor."

She reached out and took the hand that was still held up to her. Such fierce hope and joy sparked across the connection that she buckled. He caught her before she hit the sand and crushed her against his body. His mouth descended and the force of his emotions barreled into her. Tarianna's fingers dug into his shoulders as she absorbed

the searing passion, underlain with gratitude and adoration. Abruptly shame flared in him and he pushed her away.

"I'm sorry," he muttered and ran off down the beach.

Tarianna staggered back against the log and sat down. She watched his retreating figure and fought to bring her breathing back under control. After the night with Tylor, her reservoir of power was full, yet his brief kiss had made her ache with desire. She wanted him in a way that had nothing to do with her healer's hunger. It was clear that he was consumed by an equal passion but that kiss had been the first she had not stolen while he slept. And even that gift he withdrew as soon as it was offered. Did he think it shameful to desire a healer? She had heard of people who were offended by the way in which healers fed their gift.

Wrapping arms tightly around herself against both cold and pain, Tarianna climbed back up to the house. She stepped inside only long enough to grab a woolen coat before heading into town. She needed to work, to drain herself past exhaustion. Perhaps then she could forget the promise contained in his kiss and the sting of his rejection.

* * * * *

Joslin called her into the office the next morning and questioned her extensively about the improvement in her nephew's condition. Greggor had no parents. His mother, Joslin's sister, had died years ago and no one knew who his father had been. Tarianna explained the benefits, and limits, of her repair work.

"How long do you think you can keep doing this?" Joslin asked. Her hands were clasped tightly on the dark wood of her desk. It was a heavy, old desk, much marred with scratches and with a deep gouge cut into one corner. It was not the sort of piece Tarianna expected the wealthy trader to use and it dominated the room, completely at odds with the elegant chairs and delicate side tables set out for guests.

"I don't know, perhaps years. But at some point the deterioration will likely get too extensive to patch up." Tears threatened as she talked about her inadequacy and the consequences for Greggor.

For once, there was no expression of cool amusement on the refined face. "Thank you, Healer. It affects all of us, watching him slowly fade. It hurt so much when my sister died. To have this happen again..." The words trailed away.

So that was why everyone seemed to hold Greggor at a distance. His mother had been afflicted with the same terrible illness. The family had been through such a drawn-out process of dying before and could not face it again without burying their emotions under blankets of casual disregard.

"Do what you can for as long as you can," Joslin said and waved her away.

Tarianna nodded and went to find her patient. Greggor was waiting for her in his room. She could sense him pacing before she even opened the door.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

He spun to face her, expressionless and rigid. "Perfect. Wonderful." His tone was cool and clipped.

"May I touch you?"

He frowned. "No. I'm fine. You can focus your talents on helping others for now."

"Greggor, please, let—"

"No. Leave me." He turned away, his hands clasped tightly behind his back.

Tarianna frowned then walked away, slamming the door behind her. The proud, stubborn fool. She could not monitor his condition without touching him, could not maintain the effects. Was he so offended by her, so shamed by his own attraction, that only dire need drove him to accept her touch? The unfamiliar swirl of rejection, hurt and anger made an ugly pool in her belly.

* * * * *

The next morning she found Greggor in the gardens. He was on his knees weeding a flower bed.

“Good morning, Greggor,” she said.

He looked up and she saw pleasure suffuse his features. Then his eyes became shuttered. He offered her a quiet, “Good morning.”

“I would like to check on my work from the other day,” Tarianna said in a casual tone.

He turned back to the flowers. “I will let you know when I have need of your services, Healer. For now you may assist the townsfolk.”

“Just let me touch you briefly to ensure you are well. Then I’ll go.”

“I have told you I am well. That should be sufficient.” His words were clipped and short. Kneeling in the dirt, he suddenly seemed every inch the arrogant heir to a trading empire.

Tarianna’s fist clutched the hem of her coat. “I’ll come see you again tomorrow.”

“Don’t trouble yourself. Stay at the inn. A servant will fetch you when you are needed.” His voice was colder than a winter snowstorm.

She glared back at him. So he knew about Tylor and did not approve. Her chin rose. It was not his business to vet her lovers.

“My contract obligates me to see you first and I will do so, whether you agree or not,” she said clearly. Then she turned and ran to town.

Chapter Two

The morning sun pooled faint golden light on the wooden floor of Tylor's room. Tarianna felt him kiss her hair.

"I have to leave today," he said. "There's a commission in Devlin that I can't afford to lose. I've lingered here as long as I can." She felt more than heard his sigh. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too," she murmured and then rolled over to look into his eyes. She felt only a dull sort of worry at his words but sincerely wished that her feelings could match his. Tylor's desire had grown branches of real affection over the past two weeks and his touch was now colored with infatuation. He had tried so hard to please her and deserved more than her pale gratitude. Tarianna reached out to stroke his face. "Thank you, for staying with me."

He kissed her lightly. "I wish I could have made you happy."

She smiled. "But you have, with your music and your body."

Tylor shook his head. "What is he to you? The rich man dying in his big, fancy house?"

"My patient," she said and looked away from Tylor's intent gaze.

"If he's no more than that, why do you come back from him every day looking like you've been punched in the stomach?"

Tarianna blinked. She had not thought her pain was so obvious. "He's nothing more because he will not allow it to be anything more," she admitted. Tarianna bit her lip as the longing she felt for Greggor threatened to overwhelm her. It was his body she wanted to hold, to stroke, to explore with all her senses. After a healing she ached to lie down next to him and lose herself in his heartbeat. The remembered passion of their

one true kiss had left a mark on her soul and she was certain that no other man would ever taste as sweet to her. Or leave her feeling as bitter afterward.

"He probably wants to protect you...and maybe himself." Tylor spoke, interrupting her thoughts.

She considered that. Could Greggor be pushing her away in order stop their feelings from growing even stronger? Perhaps. But that did not explain the shame she had sensed. "Greggor is...ashamed of his feelings for me."

"Ashamed of his feelings or ashamed of his need?" Tylor shot back.

She shifted uncomfortably. "I think he doesn't like how healers must live."

Tylor frowned. "I doubt it, Tarianna. More likely he knows he is ensnaring you. I have heard more than one girl sighing over him. A beautiful young man filled with need and longing—that combination must be nearly impossible for you to resist, silver healer." He emphasized the title to remind her of her vulnerability.

Tarianna closed her eyes and sighed. Tylor was right. Everything about Greggor drew her like a moth to a flame.

"Let him go," Tylor said softly. "He is dangerous to you. And he knows it. Respect his efforts to keep you at a distance."

She shook her head. It was time to be brutally honest, with him and herself. "There is another year and a half left in my contract. I have no doubt that I will fall in love with him during that time. I may already have. I would prefer to enjoy what I can of love before the inevitable pain. But he pushes me away. And I do not think it is only to protect me. There is something else driving his behavior." She laid a hand on Tylor's cheek. "Thank you for caring but I will manage."

He kissed her palm and looked imploringly into her eyes. "Ask the Lord Healer to send someone else. Surely he would support you in that?"

"Who would they send? There are very few silver healers and a copper healer could do nothing but ease his pain. No. I will stay." She felt Tylor's concern and sadness as a

giant wave that washed over her. She broke the connection and began dressing. There was nothing more to say but goodbye.

* * * * *

The town was in good shape after two weeks of intensive efforts and she was called to only one serious healing and a handful of minor inflictions that day. Still, it was enough to rouse her hunger. After an early dinner she wandered along the waterfront to watch the sun set. A stray cat came and brushed her ankle. Tarianna picked it up and the small head snuggled under her chin.

"Ah, little one, that you could defeat the beast that growls in me," she murmured into the scruffy fur. The cat's rumble of pleasure soothed her and she walked back to the house with him in her arms. At the door she released him and watched the nimble animal disappear into the gardens.

She stole some bread from the kitchens and chewed it slowly. Halfway up the second flight of stairs a sharp pain stabbed into her. She dropped the bread and dashed back down the steps to Greggor's room. He stood by a small table, staring wide-eyed at a slash across his palm. She touched his hand to stop the dripping blood.

"I knocked over the glass," he said in a hoarse whisper. "And when I went to pick up the broken piece I jabbed myself with it. It's starting again, isn't it? It's only been two weeks, Tarianna. Only two weeks..."

The cool, distant look was gone and she felt only fear and despair in his touch.

"Lie down and I'll heal you again. I'll do a better job this time," she said briskly. Her eyes begged him to have hope.

It was foolish to attempt such a deep healing at the end of the day. However, she could not leave him with nothing but crumpled dreams to endure the night. She pushed herself even farther down the paths of his body than before and worked until the last dregs of her energy were depleted. Tarianna sensed the price of overextending her

powers coming and let herself fall next to Greggor on the bed. Even as her consciousness faded she tried to pour a little more healing through their clasped hands.

* * * * *

Tarianna woke to the sound of lapping ocean waves and a man's deep breathing. Oh gods but she was ravenous. She reached for Greggor's limp hand and gently caressed each smooth slender finger, absorbing his body's quiet rhythms. It was not enough. She needed a pounding pulse and intense emotions to satisfy her healer's hunger. Raising herself on an elbow, she lifted his hand to her mouth and nibbled the fleshy mound at the base of his thumb. Her eyes were fixed on his face, waiting for the lids to lift, waiting to see how he responded.

Sleepy gray eyes locked on hers and a powerful passion radiated from him. They met in a burning kiss. For a time she knew nothing but the ecstasy of Greggor's desire. Then she felt the door to her sustenance being tugged closed as Greggor made a valiant effort to stem the tide of sensation that was gushing out of him. He moved to the far side of the bed until he came up against the wall. She followed, clinging to him. A whimper escaped her lips.

"Please, Greggor..." she begged and hated herself for it. Pride gave her the strength to break their contact. She stared into his face with a jagged mix of anger, pain and confusion. "Why?"

"It isn't right. In a year I'll be dead. Even now I'm not much of a man." His voice was filled with bitter pain.

"We'll have longer than that. My gift can give you more time, perhaps four or—"

"One year or four, what difference does it make? It's wrong of me to force this on you. I wish...I wish you had not come."

"Don't say that. I want to be here. I want to be with you." Her hand reached out to him but stopped halfway, unwilling to touch his hunched back. "Please, let's enjoy the

time we have together. I want you, Greggor, body and soul. I accept that there will be pain and grief to come but it doesn't need to destroy what we can have today."

"Don't ask me to be your lover." The words were harsh. His aversion to such a request was obvious.

"Why not?" she said through clenched teeth. "Am I not good enough for you? I suppose a soiled healer is a poor match for a wealthy trader."

He turned his head and she could see the denial etched on his features. "Gods no, Tarianna. I didn't mean...I want...but..." He turned away again and she saw a shudder move through him. The next words were so faint she barely heard them. "I can't. I can't be what you need. My body isn't strong enough anymore."

Her anger leached away in the face of his misery. She frowned. The evidence of his arousal had been clear to her healer's senses. "When? When was the last time you tried?"

"Nine months ago." The answer was muttered into the wall.

"Before I arrived," she said softly. "I've made you stronger. Can't you feel it? Listen to your body. What does it say?"

She dared to lay a hand on his shoulder. He flinched, both physically and inwardly. It was like the lash of a whip against exposed nerve endings. She jerked back her hand and suppressed the whimper.

"Curse you, Greggor," she said in a hoarse whisper and moved off the bed.

She was almost at the door when she heard him say, "Tarianna...wait."

She stopped but did not turn. He came up behind her and slipped his hands over hers. She trembled with the strength of his feelings. Love and longing reached over a deep well of shame and fear.

"I don't want you to regret this," he said softly.

"I won't," she whispered and turned in his arms to kiss him.

She unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it to the floor. Her rumpled tunic followed. Hands undid waist ties and soon they were standing in a pool of fabric. She stroked the smooth skin of his chest and tasted the sensitive spot beneath his right ear. His hand cupped her right breast and a gentle thumb brushed across her nipple, making it harden into rigid peak.

“Greggor, have you see—”

Tarianna lifted eyes hazy with desire toward the doorway. Blaine seemed frozen in mid-step.

“Get out,” Greggor hissed.

A smile like the honed edge of a knife settled on Blaine’s face “So my little cousin has some life left in him after all. Brave of you to try again after Marissa fled your room in tears.” His eyes raked over her naked body. “Come see me if you need some...real help.” He shut the door behind him.

Greggor broke out of her embrace and went over to the door. He slammed the lock shut then stayed there, leaning his forehead against the dark wood of the door.

“Greggor?” she called to him softly.

“I want you with every particle of my being, Tarianna. But it’s not enough. I’m sorry,” he said, still facing the door. “Please, leave.”

Tarianna stared at his stiff back. Blaine’s words seemed to have shattered Greggor’s fragile self-confidence. Her body was consumed by a ravenous hunger and wet with roused passion. She could not believe that he would deny her. Anger flared.

“Would you have me go to Blaine then?” she shot at him.

“He can give you what I can not.”

“You’re a coward, Greggor,” she said with bitter resignation. “And I would rather whore myself to a drunken sailor in an alleyway than suffer Blaine’s touch again.”

He did not reply and she dressed in icy silence. He stepped away from the door, keeping his back to her. She paused before opening it. "I will ask the Center to send someone else. I can not stay or this will destroy me. Already I hate the price of my gift."

There was a choked sob from his hunched shoulders but he did not turn to look at her. She yanked open the door and stormed down the hallway. Her own pain and towering hunger did not leave room for sympathy.

Tarianna walked into town like a wooden doll. The rich scent of oven-fresh bread drew her to a bakery. She spilled a handful of coppers on the counter in payment for a large round loaf. She tore into the crust with trembling fingers and stuffed the still-warm bread into her mouth. The apprentice behind the counter stared at her with wide eyes and she realized that she must look like a wild woman. Her hair loose and unbrushed, her tunic the same crumpled one she had slept in last night. She hadn't even bothered with a coat—the cutting wind meant nothing in comparison to her inner torment. Trembling slightly but unable to resist the allure of warm, blue eyes and tousled, dark curls, she reached out and touched his hand. A bright thread of desire ran through his concern.

"Come," she said and it was a command, not a request.

He trailed after her like an obedient dog, following her into a neighboring inn and up the stairs to the first empty room. Tossing aside the gnawed loaf, she touched his face and filled him with her need. The flare of astonished resistance was washed away by the desire she triggered in his body. Sloppy kisses tasting of inexperience claimed her mouth but his hands were not clumsy as he undressed her. She pulled him onto the bed, undoing his belt and wrapping her fingers around his thick, swollen cock. The sharp sparks of his arousal ignited into a burning blaze and he almost came in her hand. Tarianna used her gift to clamp down on his response and stop the ejaculation. She needed much more from him.

Lying back, she parted her legs in wordless invitation. There was pain as he thrust into her, panting and eager, but she ignored it and fed on his wild storm of

uncontrolled passion. Firm, young buttocks rose and fell with grunting precision. She held him, not just with her body but with her mind so that he did not succumb to too early a release. Slowly her spirit began to fill with the intensity of a young man caught in the throes of lust. Her body relaxed into the stiff mattress and a small, pale glow of pleasure kindled in her center.

The door opened and Tarianna glimpsed a woman's astonished face before it was shut again. The interruption had not disturbed her lover's focused efforts. However, her momentary distraction let slip the leash she held on his climax and he shuddered to a swift conclusion. She allowed his heavy weight to rest on her for a moment before she pushed him away. He muttered an apology as he rolled off. They looked at one another and his already flushed face turned a darker shade of red.

"I have to go," he exclaimed and scrambled out of bed. "Master Bedard with be angry that I left the shop unattended."

Tarianna dropped her head back against the pillow and stared at the ceiling, wondering if she could endure the day with the scant emotional feeding she had taken. "Tell him it was my fault," she replied distantly.

The sounds of his dressing stopped but the door did not open.

"My name is Kylin."

She turned toward the hesitant voice. The gray morning light reaching through the open window revealed a half-grown boy standing uncertainly in the center of the room. A shadow of remorse fell over her inner torment. She had been his first and there was no way to give back to him the wondrous process of discovery that it should have been.

"I'm s..." She stopped the apology. His pride, at least, she could leave intact. "I'm the healer Tarianna."

"I know," he replied with a small quirk of his lips.

She forced a smile for him and was rewarded by a shy, flushing grin in response. "Thank you, Kylin. I was very hungry."

He only nodded but his back straightened and he held his head high as he walked out the door.

Tears welled up in her eyes and she let them roll down her cheeks. So many miseries crowded her spirit that she did not even try to sort out which one she cried for. The pain of Greggor's rejection wrapped tightly around the still-aching emptiness in her soul and was now threaded by the poisonous guilt of having abused her powers.

Deepest of all was the knowledge that death stalked the man she loved. And she was going to abandon him to face that cruel fate alone.

Chapter Three

"I'm leaving today." Tarianna faced Joslin across the scarred surface of her desk.

Joslin frowned. "There is more than a year left on your contract and I was expecting to extend it. You've done so much for Greggor."

"He will not allow my touch. Another healer will come to finish out my time."

"What do you mean? He has been remarkably improved. Surely that is your doing?"

"Yes, but I can't continue."

"Is it Blaine? I know he can be...possessive. If my son is disturbing you I will see to it that he stops."

"No, it is not Blaine." Tarianna shifted uncomfortably on the well-padded chair. "I'm afraid I have not treated him well. Give him my apologies."

"I do not understand, Healer." Keen gray eyes pierced into her. "What are you running from?"

Tarianna sighed. "From Greggor. And from myself."

Joslin remained silent, a questioning look on her face.

"Even if he allows me near, I don't know if I can bear it. I want...what I can not have. Losing control of myself, doing harm to another. It can't happen again." She shrugged. The fumbling words did little to explain her situation.

The trader latched on to one part of her confused speech. "I will pay any reasonable amount in reparation if there has been...trouble in town."

"This is not something money can fix and the offer would only bring insult." Tarianna forced herself to meet the older woman's eyes.

Joslin shook her head. "What has this to do with Greggor?"

"Because I want him and he will not have me. So I use others without heart, taking what I need even when it causes harm. It is an abuse of my gift." She saw the other woman blink as understanding came to her.

There was a long pause before Joslin spoke again. "You are certain this can not be worked through? Perhaps you could leave for a few weeks and then return? It may pass."

She shook her head. "Perhaps, in desperation, he might allow me to heal him again. But if I try, the consequences could destroy me."

Joslin ran a well-groomed finger along a deep gouge on the desk's surface. "This mark was made by a man trying to kill my grandfather. He had made a disastrous investment and lost not only most of his own money but that of many others as well. It was a black day for our family. But he came back from that defeat, trusted his instincts even though they had failed him rather spectacularly and built a trading empire. I keep this desk as a reminder that mistakes happen but they do not need to destroy us." She sat back and regarded Tarianna like she was weighing the value of a merchant's goods. "You are a strong woman. I believe you can endure whatever you must."

Tarianna looked away. "No. Not this."

"Believe in your own strength," Joslin said softly.

"You don't understand," Tarianna said and forced her eyes to meet those of the older woman. "I stole a young man's innocence today. Took his will and used him for my need. I defiled my gift. Yet all I feel is dead inside...and hungry. I did something monstrous. And I...don't...care. Does that make me a monster? I'm afraid that it might."

Joslin's eyes remained clear. "I would prefer that you see this contract through but I can not hold you here against your will. Be assured though that the Center will pay reparation for the loss of your services."

Tarianna nodded. She expected no less from the trader. Hopefully the Lord Healer would not punish her for the many failures she had accumulated here. However, falling

in love with a patient was an occupational hazard and no amount of caution could guarantee protection. The Lord Healer would probably prefer her to leave this situation, might even admonish her more for staying as long as she had.

Tarianna left Joslin's office and went directly to the bathing room next to the kitchens. She turned on the taps and watched hot water pour into the large sunken tub. The heat from the cookstove on the other side of the brick wall kept a tank of water at a nearly boiling temperature. Buckets of cold water lined one side of the bathing closet but Tarianna ignored them.

Discarding her soiled clothing, she stepped into the steaming tub. Tarianna sucked in a gasp as millions of tiny pinpricks attacked her legs. Clenching her fists, she dropped her entire body completely beneath the scalding water. A sobbing cry escaped her as she surfaced. She fumbled for the small clay pot and dug out a handful of soap. The coarse grains scraped against the sensitive skin on her chest, leaving her feeling raw. Tears ran down her face but she welcomed the pain. Her healing reflexes would automatically repair any damage so she could not truly injure herself.

Finally, her body cleansed if not her conscience, Tarianna forced herself out of the now-comfortable heat and borrowed one of the waiting robes to make her way back to her room.

* * * * *

Braiding her damp hair, she surveyed the clothing still waiting to be packed. She had thrown all of the things she had arrived with into her saddlebags already. It was the various pieces purchased by the trader family that she hesitated over. They were hers but taking the items when she was abandoning her position seemed wrong.

Guilt at leaving her duties pricked her. Could she really leave Greggor, knowing that she was able to grant him years more life, a stronger, fuller life? Another silver healer would be able to help him but not to the extent that she could. It was not pride that whispered in her mind that her gift was stronger than any other now living. She

suspected that she was on the verge of achieving the rarely seen level of a gold healer. She knew what silver healers were able to do and she had moved beyond those limits this past month. Her intense desire to heal Greggor had forced that blossoming of power. If she stayed, yet more might be possible. If she left, both he and her gift would weaken.

Yet the thought of remaining was intolerable.

Tarianna admitted that she loved Greggor beyond all reason. Each time she used her gift on him she'd be driven to drain her soul dry. Then she would wake with a ravaging hunger and turn into a demon that stole the life force of others without sharing herself in the process. In the past the price of her healing had never been as steep and there had always been a willing lover to answer her need. Now the only man she truly wanted was Greggor. She had stayed with Blaine because it did not matter how much she despised him. Even Tylor had been nothing more than a soothing tool. But at least those two had made their choices freely. Kylin's had been a body that she usurped. Every moral principle she lived by rejected that abuse of power, yet she had not been able to stop herself from doing it. Saving one man could not be worth the damage she would do to others, and herself, if she stayed.

Tarianna picked up the dark green tunic and shrugged. No one else was likely to fit into her clothing. In an hour she'd be riding away from this narrow, stifling house and waterlogged town. She promised herself a detour to the east in order to ride through the garden lands of home before returning to the Center. Hopefully she could find solace amid the green, growing things.

A knock sounded on her door but she did not answer, there was no one in this house she wished to say goodbye to. It opened without invitation. Greggor stepped into the room. He moved gracefully, without trembling or hesitation.

"You told my aunt that I no longer want your services," he said.

Tarianna ignored him, folding a dark red shirt and fitting it into her saddlebag.

"I said nothing of the sort," he pressed on.

She looked up and gave him a mocking smile. “May I touch you?” She asked but the traditional healer words were soaked in bitterness. He winced. She nodded and said, “I spoke the truth. You can not bear my touch.”

“Not true,” Greggor replied and his gaze was steady on her face. “Tarianna—”

“I’ve heard enough apologies and excuses,” she interrupted him. His presence opened her up like a seeping wound. She could not help but be drawn to him, had to fight the urge to bury her fingers in his unruly curls and drag his frowning mouth down to hers. Why he had come after rejecting her so thoroughly that morning? “Just leave me alone. Grant me that favor at least. I want—”

Suddenly he was within inches of her. Firm hands grabbed her shoulders and held her in place when she would have stepped back. He lowered his head, his mouth clamping hard on hers. The kiss shocked her. It was a brand searing into both her body and her mind. Caught in the whirlpool of his emotions, she did not even struggle as her reason was drowned in the depths of his love and desire. He offered her everything that he was and hoped to be. Nothing was held back—no shame or fear barred her path into his soul. She greedily absorbed the glittering, vibrant stream of his being. The taste of him was headier than any wine.

Greggor pulled away but kept hold of her shoulders. It was good that he did for she sagged and nearly fell when the succulent emotional outpouring was cut off. The sharp edge of her inner hunger had been blunted earlier but his kiss reignited the fires of her need. She was drunk with desire and thirsted for more.

Sickened by her own capitulation, Tarianna lashed out in anger, “And the next time I need you like breath in my body you will turn tail and run. Go away, Greggor. I can not play this game any longer.”

“I am done running,” he said firmly. “You were right—it was cowardice that kept me from you. I fooled myself into believing that I was acting for your own good when in reality I was afraid of another failure, another rejection. But the thought of your leaving... That hurts worse than any other pain I have endured. I love you, Tarianna,

and even if we can only have one year, or one month or one night. I will take it...and be thankful."

Greggor took her hand in his and turned his head to plant a kiss on her palm.

"I fear the future," he said. "But I am here today. And today I can be everything you need a man to be."

She pulled her hand away from him.

"Pretty words," she snapped. "But when you are weak, when your body shakes uncontrollably and you feel like you are less than a man will you let me hold you then? Or will you drive me away again?"

He hesitated and she could see the way he shrank away from that question. Bitterness welled up inside her. She had almost been duped into giving in to his pleas. She turned away and put a final pair of pants into her bags.

"I promise. No more withdrawals, no more rejections," he said softly and reached out to cup her face and turn it back to him.

She wanted to believe him, wanted to trust that he would hold fast and not run from her. His touch flooded her with love and desire. However this time she pushed through the torrent, searching until she found the darker emotions lurking in the shadows of his mind. He still doubted himself, not his love but his physical strength. Fighting against that doubt was a newfound fierceness to use every reprieve from his illness to the maximum. Still grief and shame crouched in the dark recesses, ready to pounce at the thought of burdening her with the long agony of his dying.

"I'm afraid too," she admitted. "But I can only endure what must come if you put no barriers between us. When I heal you I must be given back what I need in your arms. What you feel is more important than what you do, so even when your body fails...I still need your touch. Do you understand?"

He held her gaze. "I think so. You would feed even on my agony and fear."

"And prefer it to a tryst with another man who means nothing to me."

She felt acceptance creep slowly through his body and saw it settle onto his face.

"Then when it comes to that I will not push you away," he promised softly. Greggor leaned down and nibbled her ear. "But tell me that you want these arms to hold you while they can, these lips to kiss you, my body to possess yours... Tell me that you want the man as well as the patient." His voice was light and teasing but she sensed the pit of uncertainty in his soul.

Tarianna melted against him. "You have been in my dreams for months. I have felt your mouth on mine and burned at the imagined touch of your hands. I want you even when there is no healer's hunger driving me. I have never felt that before." She ran her palms down his chest and around the slim hips, pulling him even more tightly against her. Nuzzling his neck, she enjoyed the feelings of pleased satisfaction she felt pouring out of him at her words. "Oh yes, Greggor, I want the man very, very much."

His lips captured hers and a plunging tongue invaded her mouth. Her hands rose of their own accord and buried themselves in his hair. His arms enveloped her and pressed the length of their bodies together so tightly the lump of his erection made a painful dent in her belly. She had no desire to ease that pressure. Rather she wanted to melt into him, blending their bodies the way she already swam in the currents of his sensations. Tarianna tore at his shirt, running her hands across the smooth expanse of his chest. His hands lifted her tunic and undid the ties at her waist.

Greggor pushed her back on the bed then stepped back, staring at her with hot, intense eyes as he finished undressing. She wriggled out of her remaining clothing as quickly as possible and reached for him, feeling bereft without that connection to his physical and emotional reactions. Willingly he joined her on the bed, climbing on top to press down on her with hips and thighs while lips and hands explored her breasts and belly.

Tarianna used her gift to find every sensitive spot on his body. Tongue and teeth teased the soft spot on the side of his throat, the crook of his elbow, behind his knees and at the joining between his legs. All the while she drank in his physical and

emotional responses. The surging desire mixed with love, hope and joy was intoxicating. None of her past lovers had offered her anything as powerful. She felt as if both her body and soul were glowing with the heat of the sun and she wanted to wrap that radiance around Greggor, to take him inside the burning glory of her love.

Needing more of him, she sank her mouth down over his rigid, throbbing cock. Her hands tugged at his balls and sharp pleasure spiked through Greggor as he moaned and writhed on the bed. Tarianna brought him to the start of a jagged climax but stopped his body from reaching orgasm. She was thrilled by the level of control she could exert over his body and pushed him once again to the boundary of release before pulling him back. For many long moments they hovered together in a state of near-ecstasy, teetering on the fiery edge of orgasmic relief.

"By all the gods, I can take no more of this," Greggor groaned.

"Are you sure?" she asked, smiling as she straddled him, her wet cunt hovering over his rigid cock. She was almost at the breaking point as well and yearned to drive him deep inside her. But she did not want to end the game of sweet, teasing torment either. "Do you want me to take you inside now?"

"Yes. Now!"

"Like this?" She rubbed the tip of him with the swollen lips of her vagina. Closing her eyes, she absorbed the sensation of his body quivering with need. She pressed herself down on him a little more and slowly captured the swollen, dripping head of his cock. The delicious suspense was almost too much to endure and small whimpering moans were escaping her lips as she struggled to retain control

"No," Greggor grunted. "Like this!"

He grabbed her hips and arched his back so that his cock rammed up into her. Greggor pierced into her soul as he took possession of her body and she lost herself in a torrent of passion. She was overwhelmed by his powerful physical and emotional response as the walls of her vagina wrapped around his cock. The intense union demanded her surrender and she dropped all attempts at control. Greggor used his

arms to propel her up and down his shaft. Each thrust intensified the heightened state of almost painful arousal until she was sobbing and crying out wordlessly. Her body spasmed in orgasm at the same time as he exploded in a long-delayed climax. A black wind tore into her and for a moment she seemed to shatter. Parts of her joined with fragments of Greggor and she glimpsed episodes from his childhood and youth. Then the wind passed, her being reformed and she crumpled into a sweaty heap on the bed.

She curled up on Greggor's chest, spent and satiated. Their panting breaths and beating hearts thundered in unison and neither was able to speak for many long minutes. She had never felt as content as she did in that moment, basking in the gradually settling rhythms of their bodies. Tarianna delicately licked the salty skin of his shoulder and a silent chuckle rumbled through his chest. They dozed, a tumble of damp limbs, his flaccid cock still buried inside her, as the weak rays of a fading afternoon crept across the floor of her room.

An ember of smoldering desire burned into her dreams and she felt Greggor thickening within her. With aching restraint he slowly rocked his hips beneath her, a subtle stimulation of the walls of her vagina. Tarianna shifted to accommodate his swelling cock.

"I love you," he murmured into her hair. "Beyond pain and fear, beyond all mortal limits, I love you."

Tarianna swallowed the fullness in her throat. "I love you too, Greggor. Together you and I are more than our bodies."

She imagined the paths of their lives weaving together, passing through time like two entwined threads of an enormous tapestry. Then all such fanciful thoughts were swept away in the surging wave of Greggor's need and desire. He rolled her over so that his pumping hips could have more power. Knowing the tangled emotions behind his demanding thrusts, she gave herself over completely to his possession. She tasted his bittersweet acceptance of their bound fates and clung to him until acceptance burst into joy. They climaxed in a flurry of kisses.

Tarianna stroked Greggor's cheek, losing herself in his warm gray eyes. The connection between them was so deep and strong that she felt the touch of her fingers like an echo on her own cheek.

"I feel as though I can never be hungry again," she murmured, just as her stomach growled noisily.

Greggor arched an eyebrow and she felt her cheeks flush.

"Well, we did miss lunch," she said defensively.

Greggor threw back his head and roared with laughter. Her tentative smile grew into a grin and then she too began laughing. It was true that there always seemed to be some part of her clamoring to be fed. But for the first time the price of her gift had become a reward.

The End

About the Author

Simone Bern lives in western Canada, but she typically resides in fantasy worlds of her own creation. Writing is her obsession, a passion which she willingly denies only for her son, close friends and the opportunity to dance or visit new places. She loves to travel, having explored much of Europe, Asia and North Africa. One day she hopes to ride her motorcycle across at least one continent. Simone prefers romantic stories with strong characters who are sometimes wicked, sometimes wild...and always hot.

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