



# Feed Me to the Wolves

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Eighteen-year-old Fenli has been married for the past ten years, and she's pissed as hell about it.

The boy she was forced to marry has been away with the hunters since their ceremony, and Fenli tries to forget the bastard exists. She's content keeping to herself in the village—until he returns to bring the clan north with him.

Roan isn't a boy anymore, and the pair is at odds from the start. Whispers about Fenli not belonging continue to grow, and Fenli stumbles across a pack of wolves, causing her to question the ideologies she was raised with even further.

Fenli is pulled between her mother's clan, where she desperately wants to belong, and her father's clan, which is taking drastic measures to get her back. She's torn over the wolves she's observed and the wolf hunters she calls family. She's also getting too close to Roan, who seems determined to unravel her secrets.

No one expects trouble from the girl they think is meek, but Fenli is about to give them all hell.

Starting with her husband.

Feed Me to the Wolves is an atmospheric YA romantic fantasy filled with feminine rage, forced proximity, and a hate-to-love, slow-burn romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 94

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Fenli

I was angry about a good many things.

My mind was a mess of thoughts, but words didn't come easily around others. That was one. How I'd love to wad up my panicked heart and tripping tongue and lob them at the god responsible, but the notion gave me a painful pause. I didn't know which god was responsible for me. It was another thing to be angry about and the reason I struggled to fit into Toke's clan—my mother's clan—when my father had belonged to Runehall. It was also the thing that should have upset me the most.

It wasn't, and not by half.

I picked my way over the muddy path. It was raining out, same as it had been for days, and it steadied me. I felt like a storm; Toke was the god of them.

So why wouldn't he have me?

It was a useless question. If I knew anything, it was that the gods didn't deign to answer to the likes of me. I tried to remember it. I tried to keep my head down, and I tried to keep to myself.

I tried not to be angry.

My dog ran past just as I approached the hut at the end of the path. I glanced at him,

watching as he flopped down under a barrow. I should have been more concerned with the state of his pelt, sopping wet and splattered with mud, but I only checked to make sure he was settled before turning back to the door.

My hand hovered. In all my eighteen years, I'd never been so tempted to skip chores. For the third time that morning, I considered shirking my duties and going to the caves instead. Esska was there with some friends of hers. If I joined them, I could... do whatever they were doing. Braiding each other's hair, playing a game of truth teller, dancing nude around a fire? With Ess as their leader, they could be doing anything. And I was almost sure to hate it.

I ground my teeth and rapped twice on the wood.

I'd have to ask Esska about it later. For now, I had a job to do. A stupid, unfair, no-good job that I should never have been stuck with yet had been for the past ten years.

My mother-in-law opened the door.

The woman barely glanced at me before she slipped back into the darkened room. I followed. Closing the door softly behind me, I stood just on the other side of it, dripping water onto the packed dirt floor while I waited for my eyes to adjust. One small window on the far wall had been unshuttered, spreading a meager light throughout. A lamp was lit at the table, and I could see where she had just been sitting. Wood shavings littered the floor around a three-legged stool. A large wooden bowl sat on the table, surrounded by carving tools.

"Laundry today," Rahv said, pulling my attention back, "and the birch you brought me last week isn't big enough. You're gonna have to go out again."

She didn't notice the annoyance that crossed my face, thank Toke for small blessings. Instead, she focused on the woven sack, hauling it over and hoisting it into my arms.

“There.” She turned to her work. “Bring the birch as soon as you can.”

And that was it. The woman was done with me. I hadn’t even made to leave, and already my mother-in-law had put me out of her mind. I was meant to do the work out of sight so that she could try her best to forget that I existed. Her laundry might as well have been washed, dried, and folded by river spirits. Her wood felled and prepared by rock creatures. Wouldn’t that be so much better than the truth?

On this one thing, I had to agree. Because as much as Rahv hated our arrangement and wished better for her son, no one hated it more than me. This was what made my anger burn hot. A husband I’d never asked for to save me from the clan I’d never wanted. The elders had betrayed me ten years ago, good intentions be damned, and I’d been too young to even realize what they’d done.

Now it was too late. Me and Rahv both knew it. Our mutual disdain could have aligned us, but the marriage kept us at arm’s length. Rahv blamed me. After the ceremony, they’d sent her boy away on a longboat, off to the Hinterlands with the hunters and the boys pretending to be hunters. Others returned, stayed awhile, then headed out again; Rahv’s boy never did. It had been ten years, and the men had made sure he’d never taken the trip back home. I preferred he stayed away forever and then some; Rahv was heartbroken.

It wasn’t my fault. I hadn’t asked to be married to him. And yet, it was only then that Runehall’s clan—my father’s clan—had put away their weapons and left me with my mother. I was supposed to be thankful. The marriage ribbons wrapped around my forearms were my salvation. I knew it was true.

And yet.

And yet, I was pissed as hell.

I moved to leave, not bothering to mutter a farewell, but paused in the open doorway when I heard shouting. Rain fell steadily onto sod roofs and into puddles below, and I cocked my head. I only caught what the woman was saying when she came around the hut up ahead, a bent figure with her skirt pulled high.

“Boats!” she was yelling. “The hunters will be livid if they come home to a village of sleeping women. Get up and get preparing!”

Livid. I rolled my eyes and wished I had a wooden spoon to cram down the back of my throat in a gesture of how much I cared. It was the same every time. A couple of lousy boats made their way back, and the women had to drop everything to dote over the hunters.

The woman bringing the news was Beckra, and I thought she’d turn around when she saw that I’d heard, but she only hobbled closer. Rahv came to the door then, and I stepped out into the rain.

“Boats, Rahv, and news with them,” said Beckra. I moved to walk by her, but the woman grabbed my arm, nearly sending the sack of clothes I was holding into the mud. “You’ll want to hear this, Mute.”

She said it like it was my name; most of them did. I’d never been well-spoken, but I’d also never been mute. Still, I didn’t correct her.

## Page 2

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“They’re in the harbor now. Your husband,” she told Rahv, “he’s among them.”

Rahv nodded, her face giving away neither pleasure nor disappointment. Calm. Steady. Emotions be damned. I, on the other hand, nearly groaned aloud, my shoulders slumping. My father-in-law would cause me nothing but grief. He always did.

“That’s not all,” Beckra said. A smile cracked her worn face. “Your boy, Roan—he’s with him.”

And it was like the world went sideways. Rahv and Beckra were embracing, tears streaming down my mother-in-law’s face, before the truth of the words hit me.

The laundry fell from my hands, tipping to its side and spilling out into the mud.

I’d been married to a stranger for the past ten years—and now that stranger was home.

### Chapter Two

#### Roan

I was going to be sick. I stood in the rain on the threshold of her hut and considered what kind of omen vomiting on her stoop would be.

Likely, not a good one.

Gods' piss, what I wouldn't give to have this done and over with. I gathered myself and knocked, then promptly forgot my courage and regretted my boldness. Should I run for the woods? A quick glance told me there was a chance I could make it before the door opened and my bride of ten years found me fleeing like prey among the trees.

But it wouldn't do. I held fast and prayed to Toke I wouldn't lose my bread on my boots at first sight of her. And it seemed the god was watching out for me because no one came or made a sound on the other side.

I cracked the door open and had a peek.

"Anyone here?"

When no reply came, I heaved a breath and made my way in, dropping my wet gear off to the side before swinging the door shut. My eyes landed on the bolt just above the handle, and I hesitated. I almost didn't recognize it for what it was. Ten years living out of tents, and anything more than a flap felt like a luxury. But a bolt? Hell, I could lock myself in. Get some space for myself, some distance between me and the people who wanted to manage my every task.

I was tempted, but only for one brief moment of weakness. Then I bolstered myself and set my mind to bigger things. More than anything, I wanted to do right by my clan. Besides, I'd only be keeping out her. Fenli. The thought brought me shame. This was all hers, not mine. Her bolt, her hut.

I turned, taking down my hood and shaking out my cloak. My eyes adjusted to the dark gloom, and I took the space in.

I'd never seen such a mess.

It was the smallest hut I'd crossed on my trek out, but it felt large when compared to my tent. In the back corner was a small fireplace, and while the fire had died down, the coals were still hot and glowing orange. There was a single chair in front of it draped in a sheepskin. Beside it, a small table sat heaped with junk. A larger table in the middle of the floor held even more—ink pots, parchment, and large strips of birch bark. Strange. Gobs of crates crowded the back wall, and various items cluttered the floor. Clothes, a discarded pair of shoes, an upside-down basket, a crumpled rug. The only thing left was the bed that stood pushed against the wall.

I tried not to stare at it, but that was a lot to ask of someone who couldn't remember the last time he hadn't slept on the ground. My sleeping roll was enough for me—or so I'd thought—but looking at her thick wool pad, on its raised frame and swathed in blankets, I found myself suddenly forming new opinions.

Damn, it looked nice.

But it washers. Her door, her bolt, her hut,her bed.

My cheeks warmed as I turned to the corner beside me, the only open space with room enough for my roll and belongings, and I tried to forget the rest. This bit would be mine. My corner. I had no need for the rest of it. A hut was more than I required. If I could have gotten away with pitching a tent out by the cliffs, I would have. Hell, I'd have slept under the stars. But neither of those things would fix the mess I found myself in.

I didn't think Toke himself could save me from it now.

I had to put it from my mind lest I barf on the only bit of floor I had. Resigning myself, I moved on to the task of unpacking. My pad was unrolled in moments, my spare clothes folded and stacked neatly at the foot, followed by my mending supplies, hand knife, and whetstone. I'd just stood and pulled my larger hunting knife from its



sheath when someone threw open the door.

She came in like a squall.

“No,” she was saying. “No, no, no, no. Not now, not ever.”

And she didn’t even bother to close the door. The mangiest looking dog I’d ever seen darted in behind her, but neither saw me where I was in the corner. Her hands went to her head, fingers twining between strands of short, dark waves, and I knew without a doubt it was her. It didn’t matter that her back was to me and I had yet to see her face.

No one else would dare have hair like that in this clan.

I was vaguely aware of the dog jumping onto the bed and laying itself down on the blankets, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Wrapped around her forearms were her marriage ribbons, the same blue and green threads set to swirling as those I wore. Ten years with these bands on my arms, and only now was I seeing their match. It was unsettling, proof that this was real and happening when, so many times over the last decade, my union had felt more story or myth.

## Page 3

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Toke help me, I was not prepared. I needed another ten years, at least. I'd not even had the chance to lay eyes on a woman for all this time, and now I had to share a hut with one?

I laid eyes on her now, and I couldn't seem to tear them away. She was small, with narrow shoulders and a loose-fitting tunic the color of silt. She wore no cloak, and she was soaked to the bone. I'd expected skirts, but she was definitely in pants. I followed the lines made by her hips and thighs and barely had enough sense left over to think, that's not what pants look like on a man.

Wasn't I a clever one?

Apparently not clever enough because she turned, looked right at me... and I couldn't do a damn thing but stand there gawking like an idiot.

With our gazes locked, it was like all the ability went out of me. The smallest gasp left her. Her dark eyes shined, a slant of light falling over her face, and I found I didn't recognize her. Had I expected to? The girl from my memories was just a swirl of dark hair. I'd been a boy. We'd lived and grown and gone to bed and woken up a thousand times since then.

She was a stranger. And she looked at me like I was a stranger too. One she'd just discovered in her hut.

"I'm sorry," I started, but whatever I was going to say after that was lost to what happened next.

The dog, who I'd had forgotten about, became a fury of barking. The bed hit the wall as the beast leaped to the floor and hurdled towards me.

Instinct made me raise the knife still in my hand.

“No!”

Both were running, the dog scrambling for me, her scrambling for the dog, and she cut it off at an angle, colliding with the thing right at my feet. She wrapped her arms around its shoulders and dropped it to the planks, her body holding it down as it rioted like a hell-beast underneath her.

“No,” she said again, and the dog cut the racket, though its legs still thrashed.

Cheeks hot, I turned my blade away.

“That dog's a menace,” I bit out.

They were Baer's words, not mine, and I hated myself the moment I heard them.

Fenli looked up. This time, there was no surprise in her face. This time, she had hell in her eyes.

She rose and I took a step back, my heel hitting the wall. The dog scrambled behind her, and it was clear to me which beast demanded my attention now. Wet hair fell over half her face. At her full height, she still only reached my nose, but her shoulders squared and her jaw tensed, the one brow I could make out at a dark slant. The whole look seemed to promise me I would regret all of my choices very soon.

I regretted them now.

Her finger jabbed me in the chest.

“Don’t,” she whispered, “touch my dog.”

I gathered myself. I was a man, after all... practically. This hut felt a hell of a lot more hers than mine, but it was also the only place in the whole godsdamned village where I was allowed to bunk.

Baer had made that clear.

I had to stick up for myself a bit. Claim this corner that currently harbored everything I’d ever had.

“Tell you dog not to touch me.”

For two beats of my heart, we only stared at each other. Then she turned away and scolded the animal. To my surprise, it listened, slinking back towards the bed to lie down on the rug with a humph. It looked at me, but its eyes kept flicking back to her.

I looked at her, too.

Fenli had fled from my corner, as far as the hut would allow, and was back with the fireplace. I watched as she lifted the fire iron from its hook and stoked the coals. The glow highlighted all her edges, lighting her with warmth, and I saw more than I wanted to. The slight tremble in her hand, the grim line of her mouth, the worry in her brow.

I was an idiot. She didn’t want this any more than I did. By the looks of it, she wanted it even less.

I’d told myself it had been a help. The marriage had made Runehall’s clan stand

down. They'd relented, and the little girl my father had told me I had to marry got to stay with her mother. I'd told myself that every time the uncertainty and dread rose up at the thought of her.

At least I'd helped her.

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But she didn't look like someone brimming with gratitude and thanks. Of course she wouldn't be. I hadn't expected her thanks and praise.

So what had I expected?

Politeness, I supposed. So much for that.

I was about to close the still-open door when she turned to face me, halting me in my tracks. She fixed her fire-eyes on mine and lifted her chin. One breath—like she was preparing her words—and I stood taller, ready to meet whatever she threw at me.

She spoke slowly.

“Get, out.”

All I could do was stare. After a long exhale, I crossed my arms. She stared right back, making no move to temper what she'd said. I glanced at my things, then back at her. Baer would be furious. He'd chew me up and down. I wouldn't hear the end of his ire if I left this hut and tried bunking somewhere else.

But Fenli—she looked like she might just rip out my throat.

Finally, I uncrossed my arms and got to work rolling up my bed.

I'd have to take my chances with my father.

This one scared me more.

## Chapter Three

Fenli

Shit, I was in so much trouble. They were sure to give me hell. They'd feed me to the wolves for this. Maybe put me on the first boat pointing towards Runehall's clan and wash their hands of me.

But I'd done it. I'd looked him right in the eyes and told him to leave. The words, though they were slow, had been there for me.

And then he'd gone.

They were going to have my hide. He'd probably gone straight to his father. Baer had long past had enough of my defiance and would likely rage at my door soon. I hurried over and bolted the thing.

It wouldn't be good enough.

"Shit."

I didn't know what I was doing, kicking him out. He'd never come home before, and I'd never had to figure this part out. Oh, I was making a mess of it now. There was a list of things they'd put up with from me, and I'd gone far beyond it.

I scanned the room, and my heart sunk at what I found. There on the table were all my mapping supplies, my secrets laid bare. All he needed to do was glance. The birch bark I made my early sketches on, the parchment I'd traded with the Saik to get, straight edge, chalk, ink, and quills. I dug through the stacks, and every last one proved my guilt. Etchings of the coastline, another of the deer trails, the village, waterways, even the trek to the Saik laid out in detail.

Not a woman's work, not even close.

Surely he'd seen.

I started grabbing evidence by the armfuls. Birch and parchment went under my mattress and at the bottom of my laundry sack, all my tools in the wall behind the loose board.

But even as I hid the things, I knew I'd been too late.

Damn my laziness. I should have been hiding them all along. I'd been too comfortable, thinking he'd never come back, feeling like the hut was mine. That had always been a lie. I'd known it, and I'd ignored it. The hut was my husband's, given to me only because I was a married woman. I should never have made myself at home.

I shoved in the last bottle of ink and wedged the board back into place, wiping tears from my cheeks as I stood. On uneasy legs, I made my way to the fire and sat before it. In truth, I was waiting for the storm that was sure to come. I listened closely for the footsteps. Soon after, someone would bang on my door. They would demand that I open up, and there would be nothing to gain in refusing.

Only they never came. Eventually, I fell asleep there in my chair, the heat of the fire on my face.

When I dreamed, it was of my father's clan.

There did come a pounding on my door, but it wasn't until morning, and it was only Esska. Still, the dog barked like hell until he heard her voice.



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“Let me in,” she was saying. “Roan, Baer wants you in the meeting house.”

I fell out of my chair, striking my elbow against the side of the now-cold hearth. I rubbed it, blew the hair out of my face, and rose, my hips aching from having slept all night in the chair.

“Am I interrupting something?” The knocking continued. “Have you two killed each other, or are we getting along a little too well?”

“Hold on,” I called. I muttered curses on my way to the door and raked my hair back with my fingers. Begrudgingly, I drug the thing open. Esska took one look at me and frowned before peering over my shoulder.

“Oh shit,” she said. “You killed him, didn’t you?”

I shot her a look before turning away.

“Where is he?” she asked, following behind and closing the door.

“Don’t know. He didn’t...”

“He didn’t stay here last night?”

I shook my head.

“Where did he stay?”

Hell if I knew. I didn't even try to answer her. Instead, I went to my table and pulled out a chair. The night before came back to me in waves, and I relived the nightmare in my mind. He'd been there, in my hut. He'd laid out his things in the corner, his arms wrapped in the same ribbons as mine.

I'd hated seeing that. Our ribbons made a match, a pair.

Like we were meant to.

No, no, never, and no. That man or boy or whatever he was could not be my husband. I would dig in my heels, and I would refuse. Only as quickly as the stubborn thought swelled, the cold reality seeped back in, reminding me of my precarious place in this clan. I was in turbulent waters, and there was already a riptide threatening to pull me under.

Elsynbr, help me.

Had I really gotten away with having sent Roan away for the entire night? Baer must not have heard then. Roan hadn't told him. It was possible that he didn't want to involve his father any more than I did, and it dawned on me for the first time that maybe the old man was as hard on his son as he was his daughter-in-law.

"I can see this is going well," Esska said, hands moving to her hips. "How bad was it?"

I sighed, staring at the empty table in front of me, but my gaze went through it.

"Bad," I finally said. "He and Goose got into it. I yelled at him."

The dog perked at the sound of his name.

Esska shook her head at that. She walked up to the table and looked over my shoulder. The whole surface of it sat bare. She noticed, no doubt. I had cleaned up, and Inevercleaned up. She knew what it meant and why I'd done it. "I've never known you to raise your voice at Goose."

I frowned and gave her a sideways glance.

"The dick, not the dog. I yelled at Roan."

Esska opened her mouth to say something, then shut it. The surprise she'd shown withered into something significantly less impressed, and she sighed.

"Of course you did."

I twisted to face her. "He pulled his knife."

Esska frowned. "He did?" When I nodded, her mouth hardened. "Well. My brother is going to regret the day he threatened Goose."

"Yes. That."

"I will kick his ass myself."

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“Please.”

“And when he apologizes with satisfactory passion—maybe a little groveling for good measure—you can introduce the two of them properly. Roan can feed him a cut of meat.”

I turned back in my seat.

“You’d started off so well.”

Esska slapped me on the back before rubbing the spot she’d sent aching.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you outside where we can both think straight. I’ll snag us some food, and you can tell me everything while we walk.”

Sighing, I gave in, dragging myself up and bumping around my hut in preparation. I got myself together quickly, but I didn’t miss the way Esska kept looking at the spaces where my supplies used to be. When I’d laced my boots, we pushed out into the morning air, Goose close on our heels. Esska made good on her promise to secure us both breakfast—a hot grain porridge—and we headed out to the bluffs. It was the best place to get some privacy while I confessed my treachery of the night before, and when I’d finished the story and we’d finished our grub, we both sat and looked out over the sea.

Elsynbr seemed in a sort. The waves were choppy and rough, battering the rocks below with a fury, and I watched as the water churned into a frothy white. The wind was cold in my face, and it brought a wetness to the corners of my eyes. Goose gave

up on his attempt to catch insects in the tall grasses behind us, and he came alongside me, grunting as he laid down and pressed into my thigh.

“Where did you hide your things?”

She asked it quietly, like she was trying to leave her emotions out of it, but I couldn’t help but feel that the attempt had the opposite effect. I glanced at her. Her blond hair shone in the sunlight, braided down the back and pulled over her shoulder, and her eyes were as blue as the sky. I’d seen so much of her in Roan, and it had startled me. Same blond, same blue; that strong jaw and the Faasval nose. There was little more than a year between them, and the two could have passed for twins.

I hadn’t been expecting it.

I turned back to the waves.

“In the wall. Under the mattress. At the—the bottom of my laundry.”

She nodded before pushing off the ground.

“Well, I think you should be yourself,” she said. “I, for one, am tired of doing what I’m told. Sometimes a person needs to raise a little hell.”

I smiled, but Esska turned away without having seen it, and it was for the better. It was a sad and half-hearted thing. The truth was, Esska was in a much better position to raise hell than I was. Sometimes she forgot that.

“Anyway, you don’t have to worry about Roan having seen.” She shook out her skirt. “He won’t snitch.”

I blew a frustrated sigh from between my lips. She wanted to trust her brother, and I

could admire that. Of course I wanted her to think well of him.

But it would have been nice to have someone to hate him with me, preferably while we sat on my bed eating maple candies. I knew I couldn't ask that of her.

I looked at Goose, still pressed against my leg. "Guess that just leaves you," I mumbled, and he cocked his head at my words.

It wasn't like I had anyone else.

When we got back to the village, we found the mood had changed. The once sleepy streets were now teeming with people, and there was an excitement in the air that I couldn't place.

"What's going on?" Esska asked a passerby.

The young boy looked at her like she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, like Rynwin herself stood before him, and the blush that rose in his cheeks made my brows lift higher. Had he even begun learning his bow? I knew Esska was beautiful and considered a prize, but, Toke's bits, were even the young not immune?

"It's a meeting," he said. His hand went to his hair, trying to smooth down a tuft that had no intention of cooperating. "The men are giving some important news."

"When?"

"Just as soon as everyone can gather."

She thanked the boy and turned back to me.

"Well, this sounds interesting."

I was feeling less intrigued.

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“I’m heading back,” I said quietly.

“To your hut? No way.”

Then she had her hand around my arm and was pulling me close to her side.

“You can’t leave me,” she said. “I could get lost. You’re a mapmaker.”

I tried to pull away, but her grip was relentless. My eyes darted around the street, between and among the people, landing nowhere for long.

“He’ll be there,” I whispered.

I saw her frown out of the corner of my eye.

“Roan?”

Of course, Roan. Who else? Toke himself, god of storm and skies?

It was the kind of thing I wanted to say but held back. Words weren’t easy for me with so many people around, and it was better to keep my thoughts to myself.

“I can take care of him,” she said, and then she proceeded to yank me after the others like a mother struggling with an obnoxious child. I put up a valiant effort on my part. Unfortunately, it only made us late.

Damn and hell, Esska was strong. She shoved me through the door to the meeting



house, and I stopped resisting only as the dark and the warmth enveloped me.

“—and we grow weary,” the man at the front of the assembly was saying.

I blinked, my eyes adjusting slowly, and made room for Esska to slip in as well. We took spots standing alongside the far wall, and I didn’t miss the dirty look she shot me.

I lifted my chin, ever the defiant youngling.

“We would be foolish not to notice the changes in the land around us,” the man continued, “and we would be foolish not to change with it.”

What was he on about?

I turned my attention from my horrible friend and sharpened my gaze. It came as no surprise that I didn’t recognize the speaker. I avoided the men like the blood cough, and many were often away hunting. This man looked the same as the others: tall, burly, likely smelled. It was clear he was an elder, the silver broach of a storm cloud saying as much from its place pinned over his heart. His skin was tan with sun and looked thick and dry, like he spent his days out of doors, because of course he did. He was a hunter. He’d crewed the boats, navigated rivers, trekked the forests, and stalked his prey. His weathered face and rough hands told the story. One had only to read it.

I pushed my ink-stained fingers into my pockets and glanced about for Roan. It was useless. I’d never seen an assembly so large, and I could hardly make out one hunter from the next in the dim light.

“I will be brief and to the point,” the man said. “We hunters no longer wish to sail between the hunting grounds to the north and our village to the south. The elders have come to a unanimous decision. We intend to hunt on the same lands where our

families live and grow. The other Caed clans have moved north, and the time has come for Toke's people to move as well. We're building a new village. It's among the northern forest, in the heart of the Hinterlands, and you're all coming with us.

"We are leaving the home of our parents behind and traveling to the home of our children—together."

The meeting house filled with the din of gasps and talking, but the sound of it grew distant as I saw my future shifting. My heartbeat was in my ears, and I was only vaguely aware of Esska's hand squeezing mine. I'd hoped I could lie low until Roan sailed back away. Now that hope was slipping.

Because, when he did sail away, he'd be taking me with him.

## Chapter Four

### Roan

I'd seen the pair of them slip in—Esska a little heavy-handed with my bride on entry—and I'd seen Fenli's face after the news had been dealt, when the words settled in her mind and she understood them. I hadn't been able to get that image out of my head since. Even three days later, as I ran my knife down the length of the whetstone again and again, I kept looping back to it.

Light had flickered off her face from a nearby oil lamp, illuminating what I didn't want to see yet couldn't pull myself away from. Her dark, chin-length curls had framed a face that betrayed every thought and feeling she'd had. Her lips had parted, and her brows had flinched before knitting together. But her eyes had been the worst part, going wide, then unfocused. And she hadn't moved. When the space around her had erupted in frenzy and chatter and life, she alone had stood still.

Hopeless.

That was how she had looked.

And now I had to take her north and show her the place we were meant to share.

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I tossed the knife onto the table and groaned, dragging a hand down my face. Damn Baer and all his meddling in my life. This was humiliating. I could not think of a more painful scenario to find myself in.

Crushed between the hulls of two boats? Elsynbr have me.

Ripped apart by wolves in the wilderness? A fitting end for a hunter.

Better than being ripped apart by her. I imagined a pack would be more merciful.

“Ah, Roan,” said Jory behind me. “Our mighty hunter, brought low by a trip back home.”

I kept my back turned and didn't say a word, hoping that would be the end of it, but the boys took up the familiar conversation, all too willing to kick off the next session of pick-on-the-married-guy-bunking-with-the-singles.

“Let's not be hard on him. He's got his wife for that.”

Laughter broke out around me, from the bunks against the wall, the benches along the tables, and the chairs back by the hearth.

“He'd take on any of us without a pause, but one look from his woman had him retreating with his tail between his legs.”

“Don't know what he's afraid of,” said another. “That one's about as threatening as a mouse.”

“We can’t be the judge of that,” said Jory. “She cut her hair, after all. Took on Baer without saying so much as a word. She may be quiet and small—,” I heard his knife being slowly dragged from its sheath. “—but the quiet ones can slit your throat all the same.”

I turned to see Jory lowering his knife at the others in the room. They chuckled and someone threw a sock, catching him on the shoulder.

I wished he’d shut up.

“Please,” said Thaas. “They’re both soft, is the problem. And Roan here couldn’t figure out his marital duties even if we drew him a picture.”

I stood, pushing the chair back and coming to face my so-called friend. Everyone’s heads spun towards me, but I kept my eyes trained on his.

“I challenge you to fists, Thaas,” I said. “Let me show you what these soft hands can do to your ugly face.”

His mouth lifted on one side.

“‘Bout time you put your angst to use.”

And that was the end of the peace and calm in the bunkhouse. The men cheered, glad to be provided with a bit of sport, and hands clasped the two of us, jostling us outside the door and into the muddy street. I felt like myself again for the first time since landing on this hellscape from my past. This was what I needed. Fresh air and some sonofabitch to trade blows with. Thaas could always be counted on when you needed a good scrap, and I was going to make sure I returned the favor.

The others formed a circle around us, and someone started taking bets. Nothing

serious, just the next day's chores and stashes of salted meats. I heard a few placed in my favor and felt a swell of cocky pride. No, don't be a little shit, I reminded myself. Focus. Cocky bastards learn the hard way.

I'd learned the hard way.

I narrowed my focus on Thaas and blocked out the rest. He and I had been as close as brothers for the past five years, and I knew him better than anyone. Everything about him said he was as hungry for this as I was, and it was no wonder. We'd done nothing but pack and prepare since docking, mind-numbing jobs like counting provisions, making lists, and wrapping every stupid thing that could break in burlap and wool. Thaas had never enjoyed being cooped up, and I could see he was itching to take it out on me. He rolled his shoulders and shook the tension from his arms, finishing by cracking his knuckles and giving me a wide grin.

"Ready, lover boy?" He lifted his fists and winked.

"Ready to make you my—"

He lunged, swinging his right hook in a wide arc, and I only just ducked under it. If he'd have caught me, I'd have been blinking away stars not three seconds into this thing. I popped back up and pivoted, making him turn with me. Now my hands were up, ready to block, ready to strike.

My forearms took his next two jabs before I caught the hook that followed with my right and sent him a nasty cross with my left. He anticipated the move—the sod—and ducked, but only just. He tried to fall back, but I pressed forward, hoping to catch him off balance in the mud. No luck. Thaas had always been quick on his feet, and he wasn't losing them now, packed earth or no. He dodged my next swing and landed a blow right to my gut—not the hardest hit I'd ever taken, but it still hurt like hell. I took a step back, and he took two in pursuit, closing in on me like he thought maybe

he could finish this thing.

I couldn't let him. I ignored the boys cheering and yelling Thaas' name, thinking I couldn't come back from this. Blinking hard, I grit my teeth and focused on proving them wrong. Let Thaas think he had me. I'd use it to my advantage.

He swung, and I deflected it, winding up for a left hook out of nowhere, sure I'd caught him off guard and could land the blow.

That's when I heard him. Baer shouting my name over the thrum of the jeering crowd. My head snapped up; my attention pulled from the fight because I knew I heard murder in my old man's voice. And wasn't that Thaas' lucky day, because that cheat smoked me so hard across the cheek that he knocked me right back on my ass. The world exploded, then spun around me, and I sunk my hands down into the mud to keep from taking my descent even further. Blinking furiously, I tried to right my mind. Part of me still understood that the biggest threat here was Baer, and I needed my wits.

Damn Thaas.

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He must have felt bad, though, because it was Thaas who grabbed my arm and hauled me up to my feet, pointing me toward the approaching madman.

“You lying bit of cuss,” Baer said, just as he came into focus. He was broad shouldered and in a fresh tunic, his dark beard streaked with the same grey as his shirt. That must have been Rahv’s idea, I thought dumbly. His words reminded me to focus. “Bunking here instead of in your own hut? Have you lost your mind?”

I flexed my jaw but didn’t respond. I could meet his eyes and hold his gaze now, the reeling in my mind retreating, and I didn’t like what I saw staring back at me. Baer was as controlling now as he was ten years ago when he picked out my wife and then set my course for the Hinterlands. And he didn’t like being crossed. The tension in his dark eyes told me he was as angry as he’d ever been. I was as tall as him now—thank Toke for that—and I made sure to hold his glare. With him, it felt like the only win I could merit.

“You’ll get your things now and get your ass back over there.”

“It’s not my hut, it’s hers,” I said. “Just let her have it, and we’ll be heading north before the week is out.”

“No. You go now, or I will deliver you there myself and give both of you my wrath. The elders have noticed.”

Ah, and there it was. The real reason for his ire. He didn’t like being made a fool in front of his brethren.



“I have enough to do with this move, boy. I don’t need a git of a son causing me more grief.”

And with that, he turned and left.

Condolences started coming as soon as he was out of earshot. Someone started humming the song of last rites and another picked up the harmony, completing the effect.

“Oh, that’s very funny,” I said. “By the way, you’re all dead to me.”

Jory clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“It’s your funeral, friend.”

## Chapter Five

Fenli

It had been four nights since I’d told Roan to leave my hut, and every moment since had been too good to be true. I knew it, and I knew it was only a matter of time until my good fortune ended.

But the knowing didn’t make it any less painful.

Esska threw open the door, and when I saw Roan behind her, I understood she’d only come to try to soften the blow.

I frowned at the both of them.

“I know,” she said, coming in anyway and waving Roan in behind her. “But Roan got

caught, and Baer is in a rage about it.”

Goose, who’d been lounging on my bed, perked up. When he saw Roan, he gave a sharp bark.

“No,” Esska scolded, stepping in front of her brother. “You be nice.” Goose kept a low growl in his throat, but Esska seemed satisfied. She turned on Roan. “And you too. Goose is a good boy, and you’d do well to remember it.”

Roan arched a brow. “The dog’s name is Goose?”

I caught Esska’s scowl, happy to see she was taking offense to that. “Yeah, why?”

Roan just shrugged, but Ess wasn’t about to let it go.

“If you so much as touch a hair on his hide—so help me, Toke—I’ll make you wish our mother had never bore you.”

“Shite,” Roan muttered. “What is it with the two of you and this fleabag? He was attacking me. I had to defend myself.”

“Nonsense.”

She skirted around him to kick the door closed with her heel, not seeing the fierce eye roll he gave her, but I didn’t miss it. If he dare try to hurt my dog again—

“Fenli, you will stop giving this man that death stare of yours.”

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I fixed my face and turned back to the fire as she continued.

“The time for avoidance has ended for you two. Now you have to figure out how to live with each other and not resort to bloodshed.”

With that, she dropped an arm full of knives onto the end of my table—five of them, all different sizes—and Roan came up beside her, adding his bow, a quiver of arrows, two small axes, and a traditional battle sword to the pile. If it came to bloodshed, I feared I may be at a disadvantage. How many implements of violence did one hunter need?

Esska seemed unbothered with the idea of leaving me alone with a practical stranger in possession of so much sharpened iron. She absentmindedly fiddled with one of the smaller knives, most likely thinking something nonsensical while my life hung in the balance.

My gaze shifted back to Roan, catching on the sight of my ribbons wrapping around his forearms. That same dull ache went through my chest again, and I cringed. It was such a cruel reminder. I fought not to look at the ribbons on my own wrists.

Roan was shouldering his pack and glancing around the hut, his eyes

lingering on the once empty spot of packed earth where he'd unrolled his mat a few days before. Now the space was taken up with a three-legged stool, a wooden chest, and my heavy cloak that needed mending.

Guilt struck me.

I'd hauled those things over in a fit of rage, trying to take up every last corner for myself. Now here was this idiot, no house to welcome him home, and I'd gone and filled up the only bit of room he'd been able to find.

I said a quiet curse and stood, resigning myself to the task. I didn't look at either of them as I headed over, first tossing the cloak onto the table, then dragging the chest back to where it usually sat by my bed, and, finally, placing the stool back by the chair in front of the fireplace.

Roan unpacked without a word, and Esska caught my eye, mouthing a quickbe nice.

"Anyway," she said to the both of us. She made her way over to me and pointed to one of the drawers on the back shelves, throwing a look over her shoulder to make sure Roan wasn't looking. "Let me know if you two need anything."

I caught her meaning and started over, moving quicker when she prodded me on with her finger.

"Baer has forbidden me from babysitting, of course," she continued. I slid the drawer open, plucking two of the maple chews out and slipping them into her open palm. "But you better believe I'll be back here in the morning to make sure the both of you are still in one piece."

"Yeah, thanks a lot," I mumbled.

I turned to see Roan pulling a length of cord from his bag. It was hung with a dense collection of animal ears, and I frowned. A hunter's cord and longer than most. It was a reminder that he was favored in our clan, skilled at an early age and honored because of it. People spoke well of him. His father was an elder, and his mother came from an extensive line of important leaders. He was on the path to claiming the same impressive standing.

It was a stark contrast to my own precarious position. My mother had been a mischief-maker, and my father hadn't even belonged to our clan. My mother's pregnancy was unthinkable and deeply shameful. The clans had grappled and fought to solve the problem that was me. Even now, eighteen years later, I was still a source of tension. Many didn't think I was worth the hassle. If it came down to trouble between Roan and me, I had little difficulty determining who the elders would side with. I didn't have a chance.

He glanced around the room, then stood and hung the gaudy thing off the hook I used when drying herbs. That wouldn't be staying there. He'd hung it by its middle, the two halves traveling down on either side, and the thing still trailed nearly to the floor. I'd take it down and throw it in the woods when he wasn't looking. Better yet, I'd toss it into the fire.

He grumbled something and dragged his fingers through his blond hair, turning to face us just as we made our way back. He wore an unhappy look, and it was then that I saw the cut splitting his left cheek. Dark bruises were blooming under his skin. With his drawn brows and tight jaw, he seemed reminiscent of the warriors of old, reminding me I was in over my head. I wondered how he'd gotten it. Had there been a hunt? I didn't think so, but then again, what would I know? I'd been holed up in here like a recluse, avoiding anyone and everyone. I'd slipped out early to let out the ducks, geese, and chickens and haul them some fresh water. Then I'd sneaked into the kitchens (forbidden) and snagged two rolls, a salted fish, and dried apple slices (extra forbidden).

Perhaps he'd been climbing the southern cliffs when rocks crumbled out from under his hand. Or maybe he'd been tracking a deer when he'd fallen into a ravine and been lashed in the face by branches.

Damn him and his adventures. It seemed unlikely I'd make it back into the woods soon, and here he was flaunting scars from his glorious outings like battle wounds.

That they looked good on him made it even worse. I hated myself for thinking it, but his storm-blue eyes with that bruise blooming across his cheek...

Shut up, Fenli.

“Thanks, Ess,” he said, looking less than thankful. “We’ll be fine.”

The words made a new, hot anger surge in me. How dare he presume how I would be. Fine? Well, I didn’t think I would be fine. I was thinking more along the lines of being downright horrible.

“I’m sure you will be,” she said. She reached out and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Love you, Fenni.”

And then she was out the door and gone, popping candies into her mouth while she went, I was sure.

I turned away, my heart giving a painful squeeze as a new wash of fear swept over me. There was nothing to be fearful of, and I told myself that again and again.

It didn’t make it any easier.

I set myself to ignoring Roan as best I could, and he seemed to have the same approach. Without so much as a glance at me, he tasked himself with cleaning all the leather in his possession, polishing every piece of metal, and sharpening each blade. It used to be that I’d brew a cup of tea and pour over maps and sketches on a night like this, planning my next outing and dreaming about what I may find around each new bend. That was impossible now, and the loss of it sent another pang through my chest. I sighed and glanced around the small space. What was I meant to do now? Laundry, most likely. I rolled my eyes and tried to anchor myself in the anger lest I get swept up in the fear and grief.

It was easy, as I had an awful lot of it.

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I sat in front of the fire, the heat of it on my face, and thought of all the things that stoked the flames inside me. My list of grievances was long, and it had only grown over the years. This was how my life was going to be, I realized. My clan making all of my choices for me while I smoldered hotly before a fire—silent. My hair short in defiance. But never defiant enough.

I couldn't stand it. I'd ignored the truth while Roan was away, but now it was glaring. Was this to be my future?

Never. I'd leave before I submitted to this.

A tear slid down my cheek at the thought as I recognized it for what it was.

It was my only option.

I woke to the sound of him. He was up and stalking across the floor, Goose growling softly at my back.

“Relax, fleabag,” I heard Roan murmur, “or I'll kill you while she sleeps.”

I bristled, the haze in my mind lifting. Goose took no heed of the warning, growling still, but the tension simmered there, not yet escalating. Roan went to the window. He threw open the shutters with surprising force and sucked in the fresh night air.

He seemed... in a panic.

It was a time before his breathing evened out and he calmed. Goose had gone back to



sleep, no longer interested in the hunter in our home, but I was wide awake, all my senses piqued and attune to the man-boy invading every facet of my life.

I wondered, if he'd lived in tents and under the stars for the past ten years, what must it be like for him now, forced into a too-small hut with a wife, of all the ridiculous things. He was confined in a way he hadn't been in the past decade, thick wood and earth on all sides, my too-hot fire too close, the air too tame.

He was used to wild spaces, the kinds I craved but wasn't allowed.

I almost felt bad for him. Mostly, though—I just felt jealous.

I'd get those wild spaces for myself. And I'd get them soon.

## Chapter Six

Roan

I woke early the next morning. Hauling up to sitting, my eyes flicked to her bed, I couldn't help myself. And there she was. The night before, she'd been sure to put her back to me, burrowing under her blankets like a fox in its den despite the warmth in the room. I'd almost laughed. Sometime in the night, she'd turned. Now her limbs fanned out around her, her blanket askew, and I could see her face.

After days of fleeting glances, I admit, I took the opportunity to look at her openly. And damn it all if her unguarded face didn't set me back. Her cheeks were pink with warmth, her brows relaxed and unbothered in a way I hadn't seen before. My eyes followed the line of her nose and skimmed over her dark lips. I hadn't even known lips could be that color.

Stop looking.

But I was a moth to her flame. Gods, she looked peaceful. I wished like hell she could feel like that when she was awake as well as asleep, but I wasn't as stupid as I looked.

I screwed my eyes shut, scolded some sense back into myself, and rose from my bedroll, forcing my body to be about the day's work even if my mind wasn't. I set into my morning routine as quietly as I could—the dog watching me with shifting eyes from her bed—and when I'd finished, I left.

But standing in the doorway, before I'd closed it behind me, I was foolish enough to turn back and steal one more glance.

After that, it was to the kitchens for my morning meal only to get pulled away halfway through a plate of eggs and hot roots by Baer. He set me to work in the cellar, moving barrels of honey and mead straight through the midday meal and until I couldn't feel my arms any longer. The work was shite, but it was my father who made it nearly unbearable. He meant to break me, I had half a mind to think. With all his nagging, snapping, bellowing, and goading, he drove into my skull the one message he wanted to be certain I heard.

He was the one in authority, and I'd do well to remember it.

Damn the day they'd made him an elder. They'd ruined him with responsibility, and now he had it in mind to ruin me, all for the sake of appearance.

He'd not have me slip up and risk making himself look bad.

When Baer could hold me back from the late meal no longer, I went to the kitchens with the others. Famished, I had more than my share of stew and mead and listened half-heartedly as they carried on about everything and nothing. My eyes kept sweeping the hall for Fenli, but I saw her nowhere. Not in the kitchens or out on the hill where I'd glanced other girls our age eating. It was stupid to look, but I couldn't

seem to help myself. Since getting off the ship, my senses had been on alert, looking for her before I'd even known what I was looking for. I knew now. I knew and I couldn't forget. Wild hair, dark brows, sly eyes, and a berry-red mouth I'd yet to see smile.

Someone dropped a tray on the table, and I startled. I looked up to find Esska staring down at me.

"Tried to bring this to Fenni," she said, "but Baer caught me. He says you have to bring it. I can't come over tonight." She sighed. "Tell her I'm sorry."

I growled, thudding my elbows down on the wood and putting my face in my hands.

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“She needs to eat,” she kept on, “and she’d die before she came out here.”

“Fine,” I said, hauling out of my chair and lifting the tray, “but she hates me.”

“She does not hate you.”

I leveled a stare at her.

“Okay, she hates you, but food is a great way to bribe her into not hating you. Trust me.”

And with that, she spun me towards the door and shoved.

I cursed my situation the entire way over. When I reached her hut, I knocked and announced myself before trying the handle.

The door was bolted.

Of course it would be.

I shifted on my feet, listening to the dog barking and her scolding it while I waited to be let in. After the thing had quieted, I heard the bolt being pulled back. The door opened, and I just caught a flash of her retreating back into the dark.

I took in a breath, resigned myself to misery, and followed behind her.

The dog growled when I entered, but I did my best to ignore him. I set the tray on the

empty table and cleared my throat.

“Ess sent this over for you. They wouldn’t let her bring it herself.”

Fenli glanced my way, eyed the food, and frowned. The dog growled again.

I wasn’t sure which one hated me more, but I decided to focus on the dog. His ears were too big for the rest of him. One stood straight up, but the other had a lazy tip that bent forward. There was a line down the middle of his face, dark on one side and marbled on the other, white and brown and black all at once. He was easily the most ridiculous looking animal I’d ever seen. In that sense, his name—Goose—suited him.

Leaning over, I plucked out a chunk of meat from the stew and tossed it to him. He gobbled it up, and just like that—no more growling. Now he looked at me with alert ears and bright eyes.

Smiling, I made the mistake of glancing at my wife.

Livid.

I shrugged, and she went back to what she’d been doing. Which looked like a lot of nothing. She sat in her chair in the back and pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. I looked back down at the table.

I wondered where she’d hidden all the things that’d been cluttering it when I’d come that first day back. I hadn’t gotten a good look, but I’d begun to realize that she hadn’t wanted me to see what she’d had out. Which, of course, made me even more curious.

I scanned the room. There was no sign of where her things had been stowed, but there were certainly a lot of options. She had junk everywhere. I’d look, and I’d wonder,

but I wouldn't go snooping.

Whatever it had been, it was her secret to keep.

I considered sitting at the table to mend my shirt, but I thought better of it when I eyed her food going cold. If I didn't give her space, she'd likely never relent to eating. I could only imagine how Ess would blame me for it, so I turned back to my corner. The three-legged stool was there, and I sat while I made myself busy with a needle and thread. Eventually, Fenlidid creep over. She swiped the tray and brought it back with her to the chair and the fire. I did my best to pretend not to notice, but the painful truth was that every part of me was paying attention to her, straining to notice anything and everything she did. Like I was the hunter and she was the prey. Toke. I needed to get my ass back out to the forest and stalking deer trails so I could remember what I was about.

When I'd finished my mending (and Fenli had finished her dinner, licking each finger and dumping the tray on the end table), I set about tidying my things. I sorted through my blades and frowned.

"Did you move one of my knives?"

I glanced over in time to catch her bristle at my words, but she said nothing in return. She continued looking into the fire, same as she always did. I knew enough to know she wasn't mute like some supposed. Her lack of reply was as damning as an outright confession.

"I don't mind. I'm just gonna need it tomorrow."

Nothing.

"Fenli."

Her eyes flashed to me.

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“No,” she said, but she looked guilty as hell. She couldn’t meet my gaze for more than a moment, and she was wringing her fingers into the shawl in her lap.

I’d been trying to temper my foul mood, but it was starting to seep through. “I carried it over last night and laid it right here with the others.” I gestured to the small table. “It’s not like anyone else lives here. Just give it back. It’s my best hunting knife.”

Jory’s warning of the quiet ones slitting throats all the same came to mind then, and I wondered what her plans were for the thing.

I decided to take a different approach. “It’s okay if—”

She stood so quickly her chair nearly tipped clean over. Then, to my great surprise, she marched up to me, past me, grabbed all my knives in her arms, then hoisted them up and out the window, dumping them into the mud below.

My jaw was hanging open, but when she turned on me, I snapped it shut.

Her voice was quiet. “Leave me alone.” There was a moment of stillness, her seething mad, me shocked to silence. “I don’t ha-have,” she swallowed, “your stupid knife.”

Then she turned on her heels, climbed into her bed, and buried herself under blankets. The dog was at her feet, watching me suspiciously and with no amount of kindness in his eyes. He seemed to have forgotten about the meat I’d tossed him.

I looked at my battle sword, the only blade she’d left on the table, and I blew out a



breath. Any ground I'd thought I'd made was lost, and I found myself right back where I'd started: hated by my wife and her beast-child. Only now, I was down a knife as well.

## Chapter Seven

Fenli

I went into the forest. It was a stupid thing to do with so many hunters around. I knew it, even as I wove between trees, followed the deer trails, and took myself deeper into the woods. I could be discovered.

But I didn't care.

Making the decision to run away had changed something in me. If I was going to leave these people, making them angry now hardly mattered. Years of wanting to fit in and be accepted crumbled away. I was giving up.

The woods folded in around me, and I felt more myself with every step. I was at home. The women didn't keep track of me, not so long as I was getting my chores done, so when the men who tended to the fields and to the livestock were off about their work, this was where I came. Esska and I had spent our youths roving these wild spaces. We'd climbed trees, built homes out of sticks and sod, jumped rocks in the rivers, and made whole stories for ourselves in the process—I, the brave explorer; Ess, the mighty hunter.

Those memories weren't kind to me now. Just the thought of Ess and how I was about to leave her hurt my heart. And my mother, my gods.

I went faster, trying to escape the bad feelings, but they followed me to the place where the cedars grew the thickest and the ground under my feet became soft with

moss. There I found the earthen shelter Ess and I had made years ago, and I stashed my supplies—clothes and tools for my journey. I'd packed plenty of fire starter, a bedroll I'd grabbed from the stores they'd been prepping to move, a small hatchet, rope, and a knife. My knife. Not the one Roan had lost and accused me of stealing—asshole. I'd bring food with me when I left for good. By my estimation, I'd have more than enough to get me through the four-day journey Goose and I were about to make.

I tarried there for a long time. I didn't want to leave Ess; I didn't know what my mother would do without me.

But I didn't have a choice. I wouldn't be Roan's wife, and I wouldn't join my father's clan, so I was going to take the only option left to me. I would leave the Caed people altogether.

The Saik lived to the east, and I was in good standing with them. Umbra did much of their trading with my clan, and the woman had a keen eye for worthwhile mischief. Five summers ago, she'd caught me peeking at some maps she'd brought with her and found it in her to interfere just enough to give me a start in the work.

We'd negotiated quickly and with no common language. We hadn't needed it, and I wasn't much for words anyway, even if she had understood them. That first trade, she gave me a small pot of ink and two rolls of parchment no longer than my lap in return for three mats I'd woven from lake grass and more bundles of fire starter I'd twined together than I could hold. She'd also showed me how I could use rolls of birch bark if parchment wasn't available or I wasn't ready to commit it to being inked.

Then she'd shooed me away, before we could be seen.

Every time the Saik swung out to the coast to trade with our clans, Umbra had stopped in to see me, bringing more parchment and ink in exchange for everything I

could think to pull out of the forest for her. Rose hips I collected in the autumn and dried; chaga mushrooms I'd shimmied up birch trees to saw off, dry, and ground into a powder; I'd still made her grass mats and fire starter, and I'd added bone needles, bone beads, and whatever fresh edibles were in season when she came 'round to my supply.

She'd taught me more about mapping each time, and, when my maps were good enough, she'd traded me for those, too. The space between our peoples was largely uncharted, something the Saik had been working to remedy, and they found in me a helper from the other side.

I was a Caed, but I could live with the Caed people no longer. Toke's clan didn't want me, and I would never let Runehall's have me. Elsynbr and Rynwyn's clans would turn me out, not daring to steal away the child of a different god and tempt his wrath.

The Saik seemed my only choice.

Maybe it was a stupid plan, but I didn't know what else to do.

I made it back to the village before anyone noticed I'd been gone.

First, I visited Indi. It was the last time I would see her, and I had to say goodbye, even if I was a coward and didn't say it out loud. She'd look back later, when I was good and gone, and she'd know. She'd realize what I hadn't said.

Thank you, thank you for everything. You were the best mother I could have had. I'm leaving you, but I love you. I'm breaking your heart, but it's probably because I don't deserve you.

I will miss you the most.

She was a beautiful whirlwind, as always, so busy preparing for the move that she didn't notice my goodbye for what it was. Not yet.

It was for the better.

From there, I should have played along and made like I was getting ready to leave like the rest of them, and I did, in part. When it came to my job caring for the birds, I was a model clan member. I was quick to make a plan with one of the kitchen matrons and some man they sent over who was in charge of cargo. We decided how many birds of each kind would make the voyage north, and I slaughtered the rest in one afternoon, slitting their necks and hanging them to bleed out before bringing them to the kitchens for processing. I also double checked their crates were in good condition and they'd have plenty of food and water for the trip. On the home front, however, I was less obliging. One look at my husband carrying sacks into my hut, and my rebellion surge. He announced it was time to pack the place up, and I suddenly knew what I wouldnotbe doing that evening.

I dug in my heels; he enlisted his sister.

"Fenni," Esska said sweetly. Too sweetly. Roan stood by the window, absolutely brooding, his arms crossed over his chest. "We have to pack your things. I'll help you. It will be fun, I promise."

I smiled at her. "Kiss my ass."

She rolled her eyes and dropped the act, which I appreciated.

“Well, you can’t stay here,” Roan said. “We’re all leaving in two days’ time. You’d be all alone.”

Esska instantly crumbled in on herself. “For Toke’s sake, Roan. Do you have any idea how unhelpful a thing that was to say?” He only frowned, so she continued. “Being all alone is your wife’s dream come true. Pay attention.”

“Is it also her dream to go insane, because that’s what happens to people who live hidden away from others.” He turned his focus to me. “You’d wake up one day ten years from now and realize you’d lost touch with reality. You’d also find yourself overrun by dogs because the two you started with had multiplied into a hundred. Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” I said quickly, then turned my attention to Esska. “Yes, that.”

“You know,” she said, looking serious, “whenever you did up and die, all those dogs would eat your body down to the bones.”

I took a moment to think. “Worth it,” I decided.

She nodded slowly, seeming to come to terms with it as well.

“Never mind,” Roan said. “You two have clearly already lost it.”

Esska turned to him. “Brother, will you go and steal us something sweet from the kitchen? I’d like to talk with this one on my own for a bit.”

He looked unimpressed but headed for the door. “I’m not stealing you sweets,” he told her.

“Honey rolls are preferable!” she added, leaning forward to watch as the door closed behind him. When she was sure he was gone, she slapped her palms down on her lap and smiled at me.

“Oh no,” I said.

“You’ll never guess my plan.”

Fear and dread coursed through me at those all too familiar words. Esska was nothing if not a troublemaker disguised as the sweetest of all Toke’s children.

“Well, count—count me out.”

“That’s fine.” She leaned in and whispered, even though we were the only ones. “You’ll be missing out on all the fun, though. I’ve decided to start hunting. Same as the men.”

Well, piss and shite.

I glanced at the window, suddenly afraid she’d spoken too loudly.

“Just like Rynwin’s clan,” she continued. “Their women have always hunted, and I want to as well.”

She’d brought up the Rynwin’s huntresses multiple times over the past years, but I’d never thought those comments would somehow lead us here.

Rynwin was the goddess of land and forest, and her clan was unlike Toke’s. The clans expected a great deal of diversity between themselves. Just as people differed from one another, as were the gods. We were all Caed, but we’d been set apart for different deities, split into four when we used to be one. We were tolerant of the other

clans and their ways because the gods themselves had made them so. But inside the clans, unity was expected and enforced.

That Esska was considering something so unlike our own clan was a dangerous thing. We were to be people of the sky, Toke's children. What she was proposing: it reeked of the earth.

She read the shock on my face.

“Don’t be like that,” she said. “Hear me out. If I could prove myself, maybe I could bring about some kind of change for our clan. I could pave a way for other girls who want the same things.”

My mind was sputtering.

“Like you. With your maps.”

Like me. With my maps.

“They’d have our hides.”

“I don’t care.” She waved me off. “I can’t keep dying the fabric. This clan is stuck in the past, and I’m not going to sit around waiting for the future. In the goddesses clans, the women have choices. It’s time the gods extend the same freedoms to their women.”

Blasphemy.

I liked it, but it scared me all the same.

“I agree,” I confessed. “Of course I do.”

And she nodded. “You’ve been wronged more than any of us.”



But I wasn't thinking of myself just then. Realization was dawning as I put the pieces together.

"You stole the knife." Of course it had been her. She'd helped carry them in, and I'd seen her toying with one. "Roan's hunting knife."

There was that smile of hers again. "He noticed?"

I gave her my most withering stare. "And blamed me."

She laughed. "That's ridiculous," but she didn't seem bothered by my marital stress because she breezed over it. "It's a great knife. Nothing like the fingernail scrapers they give us girls. The blade is—"

But she was cut off when the door opened and her latest victim walked back in.

"Honey rolls?" she asked.

He tossed two across the room and she caught them both.

"I didn't steal them, just so you know." He glanced at me and looked away just as quickly. "I asked for them."

"You're too good for the likes of we miscreants," she said with a mock bow. She handed me one and tore into hers, a look of utter satisfaction on her face.

And it dawned on me that this was exactly the outcome she'd been counting on. Roan, who was too honest for his own good, would use the opportunity to teach her that stealing was no way to get what you wanted. In doing so, she would get exactly what she wanted.

Damn, she was clever. It was part of why she was so beloved, despite being an absolute fiend.

I hoped, for her sake, that the streak wasn't nearing its end. Maybe she could make a change here in this clan. Maybe she could carve out a place for herself and for the girls who came after her.

As much as I wished it, I knew I wouldn't be here to see it. There might be hope enough for her, but it was too late for me. There was no reconciliation coming that could right the wrongs and clear the way for the kind of life I wanted. I was already in too deep, a thorn in the elder's heels. I was tolerated, not beloved, and the gap between what I had and what I wanted was too great a chasm to bridge.

I was leaving my clan and heading out on my own.

And I was doing it in just two days.

## Chapter Eight

Roan

After ten years away from my home, I'd gotten a lousy handful of days back before we abandoned it for good. It should have been easy for me to leave, and I pretended it was. But the truth was more complicated.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:39 am*

I'd spent the last decade thinking that the southern village was what I wanted. I missed my family—Rahv and my sisters—and I missed the places where I used to run as a boy. The cliffs had grown larger and more impressive in my mind, the open spaces vaster and the sun brighter. They were the things that the Hinterlands bore less of, so it made a kind of sense that I'd exaggerate them in my memories.

I'd thought home was going to bring me back some piece of myself, something I had lost or forgotten about—but it hadn't. The cliffs had just been cliffs, the sun, just the sun. The open spaces had tickled the memories of the boy I'd once been, but it felt distant. Almost out of reach. This was no longer home, I realized. I felt it like a cold rock in the pit of my stomach. At some point, this place had lost its familiarity to me, and there would be no getting it back.

We were sailing away again, this time never to return.

This time with Fenli.

Except that she was missing.

When it came time to board the boats and head north, she alone was nowhere to be found.

We searched everywhere.

“What the hell?” Baer ground out. “How do you just lose your wife?”

“It's not like I misplaced her,” I shot back.

She'd been in her bed when I'd woken early and headed out to see to the last of my jobs. When I went back for her later, both she and the dog had been gone.

"You'll deal with this yourself, and you'll do it quietly." He took a step closer and lowered his voice. "There's been talk. No one dares say it to me, but I have ears all the same. There are those who think she shouldn't be here, that we should send her back to Runehall, and if they knew about this—"

He didn't finish the thought.

"But we're married."

"In word alone."

And I knew what he wasn't saying. I grit my teeth.

When he spoke again, his voice was quieter. "Axl has been made an elder."

Her uncle, back in Runehall's clan. Shit.

"He might let it go," he went on, then, for the briefest moment, he hesitated. It was so unlike the old man, and I felt my heart pick up its pace against my chest. "Or he might come for her."

I didn't dare open my mouth. My anger was suddenly a living thing, and I didn't trust myself to let it out. I glared back at Baer and waited for him to hurry up and spit out what I could see he wanted to say.

"If we send her back, we separate the girl and her mother. She'll be taken in by the worst people in Runehall's clan. Submit to their rules or be as good as wolf meat, that's what it would come to, and maybe it would be good for her." He'd said the

words, but the grimace on his face made me think he didn't believe them. I didn't believe them either. Fenli? She'd buck every rule they gave her and march herself into the dark forest just to spite them all. He went on. "If that's what you want, fine. There are few who would blame you. Otherwise, find her. Find her and drag her to the Hinterlands, if that's what it takes."

He turned to go.

"Wait, you're leaving?"

"I have to. If I let her slow us down, it will only cause her more trouble. Stupid girl."

"But how will I—"

"I'll leave you the small sails," he said, referring to the smallest vessel in the fleet, able to be manned by one and still stay mast up. "Hope you're not tired."

Then he turned and left me to it.

With my arms crossed over my chest, I looked back to the empty village and frowned.

I'll leave you the small sails. Hope you're not tired.

Well, I was tired. Tired of being married to a woman who hated me, tired of everyone's expectations, and, more than all of that, tired of the old man who'd dropped me in this situation in the first place. And now I was supposed to find Fenli and bring her north myself, just like that? Had he met her? He might as well have sent me out after a wildcat.

I didn't know where to begin. Sighing, I set out to sweep the village once more.

When Esska caught up to me, she was panting.

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“There you are,” she said. “I heard about Fenli. Baer won’t let me help, but someone said they saw her leaving the village and going east. We have a shelter out there, her and I. That’s where you should check.”

“Someone saw her?”

She nodded. “One of your friends. Thaas? He thought nothing of it until now.”

My stomach clenched. “Did he tell anyone?”

“We’re keeping it quiet. Only a few know, and they’re not talking. Roan—,” she forced me to look at her, “—bring her back, no matter what. Promise me.”

I sighed, silently cursed the skies I’d been born under, then finally nodded. “I promise.”

“Good.” She reached out a hand and squeezed my shoulder. “She’s stubborn and impossible, but she belongs with us. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Good luck convincing her.”

“Good luck finding her.”

Then she laid out the path for me in detail, giving me the kind of instructions that made me realize my sister knew these woods better than most. When she finished, she turned and headed back to the harbor while I set off to the east.

Her directions didn't steer me wrong. By mid-day, I'd reached the cedar forest and soon found the shelter the two of them had tucked away there. Fenli wasn't inside, but her tracks were clear enough. I followed them, running, until I caught sight of her up ahead.

"Fenli," I called.

She flinched at the sound of her name, her shoulders pulling higher. Thank the gods she didn't run. She slowed until she was still, her dog before her looking back, and after a well-heaved breath, she turned to face me.

I drew up in front of her, at a loss for words. Her eyes met mine with a challenge in them, and I was unsettled. Finally, I pointed in the direction she'd been heading.

"What's that way?"

I expected her not to answer which was why I was doubly surprised when she said, "The Saik."

I gawked.

Her eyes held mine for a moment, then she turned away, heading, apparently, for the Saik.

I scrambled after her.

"Why would you go there?"

This time she didn't answer, instead leaving me to my guesses.

"Do you speak Saik?"



“No.”

“Have you ever even met any of them?”

“Yes.”

This was getting me nowhere.

“Fenli, I don’t want to tell you what to do but—”

She wheeled back on me, and I nearly plowed right into her.

“Then d...” She heaved a breath. “Don’t.”

Everything about her was daring me to cross her. The set of her jaw, the line of her mouth, the cut of her brows. For a moment, I forgot myself. My reason for chasing her down, my argument—it all died on my tongue.

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“Is this why you took my knife?” I said stupidly.

If looks could kill, holy shit. I was an idiot for bringing it up, and I tried to focus on what was important.

“I—” I stammered. “Why go with them and not us?”

At that, she stilled. Maybe she wouldn’t answer, but I waited all the same. When she did speak, she said it quietly.

“Toke doesn’t want me.”

Her words served to surprise me, then anger me. I also found them to be complete bullshit. Here she was convinced she wasn’t one of Toke’s, and why? All because her lousy father belonged to Runehall? Piss on it. Her mother was one of ours, and that was good enough for me—for anybody—and I’d fight any shit-lip who said differently. Esska’s voice rang in my ears—bring her back, no matter what—and I committed to my next action before I’d taken the time to consider it.

I snatched her right off her feet and tossed her over my shoulder. Ignoring her yelp and protests, I swung back around and began the long walk back. Her kicking and cursing could not dislodge her from my hold, and she wasn’t about to convince me to put her down.

She might kill me later, when her feet were under her again, but I’d worry about it then. For now, I was getting the two of us back with our clan.

Where we both belonged.

## Chapter Nine

Fenli

To say I was angry would have been an understatement.

The decision to run away had been an agonizing one to make. I'd already been emotionally spent by the time he'd caught up to me out by the cedars, and I'd battled myself more than he could have known to make it there. Then I'd had to deal with his arguing, right up until the moment he hoisted me over his shoulder and carried me back to where I'd started.

All my efforts, taken from me.

Only this wasn't where I'd started.

Our small vessel was quick in the water. Too quick. It had been a long time since I'd been in a boat like this one—with real sails out on salt water—and my nautical experience was slim. Ess and I had kept to canoes and fresh water, on rivers and lakes near the village. This ride was something else entirely, and I didn't like it.

I spent my time near the bow with Goose, giving Roan as much space as possible. He was busy running the lines and—I don't know—steering the thing, and so we settled in to ignoring each other. It was fine for a while. Until I heard him taking a piss off the stern.

I swore and turned to face the way we were going. He must have heard me because his chuckle was not far behind. I didn't give him the pleasure of seeing the blush that colored my face.

Later it was Goose's turn. He lifted his leg and painted the mast, much to Roan's displeasure.

It served him right.

I held out as long as I could, but by nightfall, I was nearly sweating, I had to pee so badly.

Roan handed me the pot he'd been offering for a while.

"Stop being so stubborn."

I took it, annoyed. "Turn around."

He did, walking back to his side of the boat or ship or whatever it was, and I took a moment to curse my fate up one side and down the other. After checking to see if he was still turned away, I heaved a sigh and yanked down my pants.

Gods above, did it ever feel good to take a piss.

I quickly put myself back together and sent my sunshine over the side, leaning into the hull to rinse my pot in the salt water as best I could. Roan didn't say a word.

We sailed into the night. Sadly, one discomfort seemed only traded for another. Soon my stomach was pitching with each wave and surge, and I started vomiting. The contents of my stomach splashed into the dark, swirling waters below as I heaved and heaved again. Roan brought me a skin of water and asked how I was.

"I hate you," I said before I'd even considered the words.

And I did. I wanted none of this—not him, not my clan, not this gods-scorned sea.

And I hated him for tossing me over his shoulder and dragging me here. I reminded myself of that again and again, and I tried not to think of the other part of me that had been...relieved. That part that had swelled and said He's come for you. You belong with your clan. That was the foolish voice deep in my mind that would only see me hurt.

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The clan had never fought for me before, not like Runehall's people had prepared to do. Toke's children had been the warriors among the Caed generations ago, back when our lands had been threatened and fighters had been needed. When other nations had come out of the trees and demanded our shores, it was Toke's men who had stepped into the fray. We'd beaten back our foes, and the other clans had lauded us for it. It was our glory, even now. The stories we told and the heritage we were proud of.

But when it had come down to me, it was Runehall's who had come with weapons raised. A Caed clan willing to fight another Caed clan. Unprecedented and unimaginable. They would fight to see a dead man's daughter returned to his home.

The clan of warriors past had not found cause to do battle.

They'd formed a union instead.

A girl and a boy, a rushed ceremony, an easier way out.

And I could hardly blame them.

This was why I could not expect more. I reminded myself of it as I heaved into the waves once again. My clan wanted to keep me with my mother and out of Runehall's grip, but they didn't believe I belonged enough to fight to keep me. Roan was all they'd offered me. He was their gift to me.

But I didn't want him.

Still cloaked in darkness, we caught up to the rest of the fleet.

By the time we reached the Hinterlands three days later, I was exhausted. I stood in the center of the new village, and I hated every inch of it.

It was too big. The sheer size of it was enough to make me nervous, and the buildings were so new that I realized for the first time just how old our past village had been. This one was all fresh wood and tight stones and bright paint. While most of the huts had been built with sod roofs back home, the men had favored slate here. And the main road had to have been twice as wide.

Damn and hell. They'd been at this build for months, probably since the thaw, and they'd kept it quiet the whole time. They'd decided amongst themselves. They'd done all the work and laid all the plans. Then they'd come for us, breaking the news and expecting us to smile and abide. They'd not been disappointed.

I glanced at the faces on the surrounding road. Every way I turned I saw the joy, heard the excitement as friends talked of new huts and better barns and lush pastures. Children ran by laughing, one shouting to his companions about the size of the smokehouse. Worst of all, proud men walked hand-in-hand with wide-eyed women, pointing out details and telling stories that did their fair share to charm.

I was quick to look away.

I trailed behind Roan, both of us with our things slung over one shoulder, and Goose followed me. I was sure we made an odd procession, a contrast to the warmth and celebration surrounding us. We seemed on our way to a funeral while the rest of the village planned for a festival. It felt fitting.

Roan led us through strange streets like he'd walked them a hundred times before—because of course he had—and it was a trek. He didn't speak, and neither did

I. When we were on the far outskirts of the village, as far away from the hustle and bustle as could be, he walked up to a hut with a front door painted a color that was both blue and green.

“This is it,” he mumbled, readjusting his pack so he could grab the handle. He hesitated. His eyes tracking the sky, he pulled his hand back and straightened.

I shifted my weight.

“What?”

He looked back at me like he was surprised to find me still there.

“Just waiting for the ravens to pass,” he said, looking back to the skies. “They’re a bad omen.”

I tilted my head and caught his meaning, three black birds making slow circles high above us. Oh, this man would be the death of me.

I reached around him, grabbing the door handle and pushing it wide myself.

“Your name means ‘raven’,” I told him. “Stupid, superstitious ass.”

He frowned. “Really?”

He considered the birds one more time before giving in, ducking under the door frame and sinking into the dark.

Despite all my bravado, I hesitated on the threshold as well. The last thing I wanted to do was follow Roan in there, but it was the only thing I could do. Goose darted in while I hummed and hawed, apparently curious to see what was inside, so I



followed behind him.

And I'd be damned if my mouth didn't drop before I could think better of it.

It had two beams instead of one, and there was a ladder that led to a loft. The floor was not packed earth but actual wooden planks, as if this were the elders' meeting house and not some simple hut. Roan was unshuttering a window in the back, then made for the side wall, unshuttering yet another. Two of them. There was a nice sized fireplace and some logs set up for seating. In front of me, a table, not quite finished. It was twice the size of my old one, and I could see it was in the process of being sanded.

Gods, how I wished I could stretch out map after map over that surface with no husband around to see it.

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“I wasn’t able to finish everything before we left,” he said, turning to face me, “but it shouldn’t take much longer.”

He slid his hands into his pockets and looked around.

“The bed’s up in the loft. I’ll move things around and sleep by the fireplace.”

There was only one bed, I realized. He’d built this place with only one bed because of course he would have. I was supposed to be his wife. I eyed the ladder.

“There’s no way Goose can get up that.”

“Yeah,” he said, and he rubbed the back of his neck with his palm, “I didn’t exactly plan on you sleeping with your dog.”

Gods above.

I tried to change the subject as quickly as I could.

“It’s big.”

“Baer decided everyone’s measurements ahead of time.”

“But it’s only the two of us.”

He stiffened his jaw, and I saw a blush racing across his cheeks before he could duck his head to hide it. He made busy with the inside of his pack, and I pieced it together

like the slow-ass idiot I was.

Babies. Lots of them. That's what Baer wanted.

And he could go to hell.

I moved to the ladder and ran my hand over one of the rungs. It was sturdy, well made. I left my dog and my bag behind on the floor and headed up for a quick look, pausing when my shoulders passed the platform. It was... beautiful. Another window drew my eye right away. It was under the roofline, the beams rising on either side, meeting at their highest point just above it. It was a cute little thing, and the frame had been engraved with hatch marks and swirls. It faced east, away from the village, and I thought to myself that it would probably catch a nice sunrise. I almost moved to pull back the shutters, then stayed my hand. I'd better not. The mattress was beside it, already heaped with wool blankets. The chimney from the fireplace downstairs was running along the side wall, and I could imagine the heat it would give off, warming my feet on cold nights.

I heard a whine and looked back down at Goose. He had his head cocked, staring up at me with his big ears pointing out either way, and he was a sad sight to behold.

I headed back down the rungs.

"You can have the loft," I said, and I grabbed my stolen bedroll, carrying it back by the fireplace so I could claim a bit of floor there. I supposed it was my turn to be the stranger in his hut. Roan didn't respond. He'd made himself busy putting his things where they went, always the organized one. His axe hung from two nails by the front door, the scarf Rahv had made him for winter beside it. Next, he was at the small table in the front corner, laying out his knives and tools, hanging his bow on the wall, stashing something I didn't get a good look at into a crate he tucked underneath. Wholly focused on his task of placing everything just right.

There was a ruckus at the door. Goose had his ears perked, and I turned to look just as Indi came through, her hazel eyes gleaming.

“Fenli Wyn,” she said, “this is the prettiest hut I’ve ever seen.”

I tossed my roll and ran my palms down my pants. Her smile said she hadn’t heard about my attempt to run away, and relief swept over me. I hadn’t wanted to hurt her. I glanced at Roan, willing him not to rat me out, but he didn’t look my way.

“You did a fine job, love,” she told him, inviting herself in and pulling him down into a hug. “It’s good to see you again. Toke, are you ever tall. Fenli, isn’t he tall?”

She spoke as if she’d seen him recently, and I wondered what I missed. She also said the last bit with a sly edge to her voice, looking at me with a smile that made me want to crawl in a hole and die.

“Ma,” I hissed.

She waved me off like I was being silly, then came and pulled me into a hug as well.

“Roan came to see me last week. Did you know that?”

I glared at him from over my mother’s shoulder and he shrugged.

“No.”

“Yes, and he brought me this.” She let go of me so she could reach her hand into her pocket, pulling out a knife. The sheath and handle were made from the antler of a deer, flowers carved into each. When she slid the latch, the blade pulled free, a smooth and gleaming thing.

“Indi flowers,” I said, finally recognizing them.

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“That they are.” And I knew he had won her over. My own mother, another one of his many admirers.

Damn and hell.

“Well,” I said, looking back at Roan now. “He is m-mad about knives.”

He frowned at me, but my mother didn’t notice. She slid the blade back into its sheath and busied herself snooping around the place.

“Are you two getting along?” she called over her shoulder, inspecting the shelves on the side wall.

Roan waited for me to answer, but that never happened. Unable to let the question hang any longer, he caved.

“Yeah, we’re just fine,” he said. His first lie? I was intrigued. “Things have been hectic with the move, but I think we’ll get to calm down and get to know each other better once we’re settled.”

Hmm, he’d tempered it.

“Good, good,” she said. “Fenli, baby, I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you. I was so busy with the kitchens, and Iver’s brother has been in such a bad way. We had a hell of a time with it all.”

I nodded.

Iver was her partner, and his brother had long been sick. I hadn't considered the trouble it would be to move him north, but now that I thought about it, I was sure they'd had their hands full.

"I sh-should have—I should have—"

"Nonsense," she said, turning back. "It's nothing for you to worry yourself about."

She looked at me from across the room and smiled. Her age was written in the lines on her face, but she was still as beautiful as ever. Her auburn hair was several shades lighter than mine, and her hazel eyes were radiant. With her high cheekbones and peaked lips, it was no wonder she'd raised all manner of hell in her youth.

I'd heard it said that her good looks had gotten her into a lot of trouble; they'd also gotten her out of some.

"I'm going to go check out the bed, and you can't stop me."

"Ma!" but it was too late. She was already heading for the ladder, never one to heed me. "You could fall," I said after her.

She only cackled at that. When she got to the top, I heard her gasp.

She stood there for many long moments before she headed back down. When her feet reached the wooden planks, she turned to Roan, her hands over her heart. "You did such a beautiful job."

"Thank you," Roan said, "but it's nothing."

"It's a beautiful home for my baby. To me, it's everything."

She hugged him again, and I could have beat my head against the wall, I was so frustrated. Was that truly everything to her? That I had a nice hut?

She peeled herself from Roan and came after me. There was no fighting her. She wrapped her arms around me, and I knew the embrace wouldn't be over until she said it was.

"I love you," she said, drawing in a deep breath like she never wanted to forget the way I smelled. "You mean the world to me."

And it cracked open my hard little heart to hear her say it. I knew it was true. I'd never doubted it. But I let myself get so wrapped up in my anger that sometimes I forgot to remember it. My mother loved me fiercely and always had. In that, I was lucky.

Guilt and shame wrapped their way through me. I wished to Toke I could be happy enough with what I had. Maybe I was as selfish and stupid as I knew some said. I gave in to her embrace.

It was a time before she let me go and pulled herself together. "Alright, well. I'll leave you two to it." She straightened and headed for the door. "Have fun in that bed of yours, children."

"Ma!" I hissed again.

She swung around and winked at me.

Then she was gone, Roan and I floundering in her wake.



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After an awkward moment, he said, “She’s nice.”

My gaze cut to his. “A knife? Really?” Maybe I imagined it, but it seemed like a bit more color filled his cheeks. I turned away and headed for the door. “Where’s the nearest shat hut in this h-hell hole?”

He frowned. “First of all, gross. Second, the outhouse is northwest, between here and the trees. And third—”

I was out the door before he could say another word.

### Chapter Ten

Roan

I’d taken everything from her, and I felt like the biggest ass in the world. The home she’d carved out a place for herself in? Gone and replaced with a hut that felt shamefully mine.

It’s what I was thinking as I knelt before my sizable bed in the loft while she slept on the floor in front of the fire she’d made.

How the tides change.

It was almost humorous except for the part where it wasn’t at all and I was miserable. I dragged a hand down my face, tired of wrestling with my thoughts. I had not laid on a mattress since I was a boy in my mother’s hut, before I’d been married and before

Baer had separated me from everything I'd ever known. It had been tents and bedrolls for ten long years. When others had gone back and enjoyed village life, I'd stayed in the Hinterlands with the few who were keeping the camp. When it had come time to build my own hut and move in a mattress, I'd refrained from even trying it out.

It was stupid, I knew, but I was a stupid and superstitious ass.

Wasn't that what Fenli had said? She'd been right.

I just had this idea in my head that laying on it for the first time together and having good sleep (along with, I don't know, possibly more?) would bring good luck. Good luck for me, good luck for her. Good luck for our time together.

I groaned too loudly, winced when I heard the dog huff from below, then grabbed a blanket right off the bed. After wrapping myself in it, I hit the floor, curling up next to the mattress but not on it.

Toke above, I hated being a stupid, superstitious ass.

But I didn't know how to be anything else.

I woke the next morning when the early shreds of light were just starting to filter in through the cracks between the shutters, untangling myself from my blanket on the floor and hauling myself into a sitting position. My shoulder was aching, and my neck was tight. I rolled and stretched them both while blinking sleep from my vision, first leaning against the mattress, then thinking better of it and scooting away.

I needed to get out of this hut.

Goose perked up from his spot curled up against Fenli, watching me as I descended the ladder's rungs. I could tell he was warming up to me, and I was unworried as my

feet met the floor.

Then his tail wagged, and I stopped cold. He froze as well, watching me with bright eyes.

Did he want to play?

I made a quick jerk, and he mirrored it. When I went still, so did he, only his tail swinging back and forth.

An opportunity was presenting itself, I realized. The dog seemed willing to let me into the little pack he and Fenli had created, and I could take him up on it right here and now. And the best part? There was nothing Fenli could do about it. She could not glare or berate me until after her dog was eating out of the palm of my hand, and then it would be too late.

I smiled, then bolted for the table.

The dog exploded in a frenzy of barking, scrambling after me like the hunt was on. I swung around to stand my ground—"Come on, you beast!"—and laughed when he launched himself at me with all he had. I just got hold of the scruff of his neck, slowing his momentum and pushing him from side to side while he growled like a lunatic, his mouth open in threat, his tail wagging like a pup's.

The dog scrambled back, knowing he'd been had, when I glanced up and caught Fenli's gaze.

She'd sat up and was looking on in horror, like her heart was in her throat, like maybe I was really going to hurt her dog. Only I'd been smiling, laughing even, and when that registered across her face—she looked lost.

I hesitated, just for a moment, looking her in the eyes and feeling everything that was swirling behind her stare.

Then the mutt surprised me, launching himself at me once more and this time sending me back into the wall.

I laughed.

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“That’s it.” I put a hand on either side of his face, twining my fingers in his fur, and shook his head from side to side. He wiggled loose and scampered back. “Is that all you got?”

Then we collided again, a quick tussle, and Goose broke off, turning and racing around the table with me in hot pursuit. When we were both on either side, staring and panting, the tides turned. He was suddenly desperate to catch me while I made a valiant effort to keep the distance in between us. He raced around the table to the left, and I didn’t let him gain on me. When he swung to the right, so did I. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing while he barked his frustrations from across the furniture.

“You’re about as smart as you lo—”

Goose leaped up onto the table’s unfinished top and jumped for me, landing in my arms and mock biting my cheeks, which deteriorated into fierce licks.

“What a beast,” I said, rocking him in my arms like a babe.

When I looked back at Fenli, I saw a different face meeting mine from across the room. She’d put aside her fear, her surprise, and her woe. Now she was just plain pissed.

I couldn’t help it. I smiled at her.

For the next few days, I couldn’t get Fenli from my mind. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she was furious with me, and I didn’t like it when I wasn’t on good terms with people. Or maybe it was just that she’d been avoiding me and

ignoring me with such fortitude that it was doing a number on my brain. Whatever it was, when the day's work was done and the smells of the night meal were just starting to creep from the kitchens, I went looking for her, hoping to make amends, to try and convince her to let me start over.

Only I couldn't find her anywhere. Not in the hut (where Goose had been tucked away) or by the cliffs. Not by the barns or at Indi's or in the gathering house. When I'd run out of ideas, I headed to my family's hut, hoping she was there with Esska. Instead, I found my sister alone.

She paled when I told her of my search.

"She's still not back?"

I frowned. "Back from where?"

Esska's eyes shifted around the room, not keen to meet mine.

"Ess. Where did she go?"

She gave me an untrusting sort of look, the kind that made me think she was judging me (and finding me lacking) before she rose to her feet and grabbed her cloak.

"She's gonna kill me," she said. "Come on. Back to your place."

I followed her. Whatever was going on, it was obviously trouble. Guilt was etched all over my sister's face, but there was a hefty portion of defiance there as well. They were up to no good, these two. And they didn't give a damn either.

It made me nervous.

We wove between huts. The sun was dropping fast, the shadows stretching across the ground, and it wouldn't be long before all color faded and a thick black descended. When we reached my hut, we slipped inside quickly. Goose greeted us, his tail thumping into the side of a chair, and the lack of fire in the fireplace made the space feel immediately void of Fenli.

She still wasn't back.

"Shit," I heard Esska mumble as my own heart picked up a faster rhythm. She stood in the middle of the space, her hands on her hips as she looked back towards the too-cold hearth.

"Tell me where she is."

She swung back to face me, her arms crossing in front of her, and she leveled me with the same damn look Baer gave me when he was full of threats. Of all the things for her to have inherited from that man, really?

"You will not rat her out," she said, telling me rather than asking. "Promise."

I hesitated. What the hell could Fenli be doing that would—

And then it came to me. I had seen little of her the past few days. She was never around, and she hated me. She resented our marriage. Now Ess was covering for her like it was important she not be caught.

Fenli must have found someone. She had a secret lover, and they'd snuck away.

The blow felt physical, hitting me so hard in the chest I winced. I knew our marriage was shite, but... an affair? Gods above, that hurt.

“Is she—?” I started, but I found I couldn’t finish the sentence. Not yet. I took a breath and tried to train my face back to something indifferent.

I was humiliated. The only thing that could make it any worse would be to show it, but how could I not?



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I straightened and turned to the side, tight-jawed.

Esska misread my pause.

“No, I mean it,” she said. “You can’t tell. Baer would feed her to the wolves if he knew, and she doesn’t deserve that.”

I nodded, unable to do anything else. I had to agree with Esska, though I hated to do it. Fenli had never asked to be stuck with me. If she’d found someone she truly cared for, how could I blame her?

I swallowed and tried to gather myself.

“I know,” I said, my voice too rough. I tried to soften it, to act casual. “I know, Esska. It’s fine. You have my word.”

The door opened then, and Fenli all but tumbled in. When she saw us standing there, our attention fully turned to her, she froze. Her eyes flicked back and forth between us—her cheeks flushed pink and her hair a wind-blown tangle—and I looked down at the floor. It hurt to see her like that, wild and entirely too beautiful. She’d hate me for thinking it. I hated me for thinking it, too.

That pain was back in my chest, and I just caught Ess gesturing her in. Fenli resumed her entry and closed the door behind her, none too quick to turn back and face us.

She’d been caught, and she seemed to know it.

I should have kept my mouth shut, but I was too much of an idiot for that.

“Who is he?” I asked. “Or she?” I’d long wondered if Fenli was even attracted to men, since we’d both been too young to know when we’d been married. “I won’t tell. I just—I need to know who it is.”

When I brought my eyes back up to meet hers, I caught the moment her brows furrowed. She looked at Esska and asked a silent question.

I felt left out of their loop. They seemed to have devised a language constructed of eyebrows and lips and shoulders. I glanced at my sister to see her communicating some mystery reply.

“Roan,” Esska said, hesitant. “Do you,” a note of humor entered her voice, “do you think Fenli is having an affair?”

Fenli’s cheeks bloomed with a deeper blush than even the wind had left, and Esska gave a laugh.

“Oh, Toke,” she said. “Fenli, we have to tell him.”

“No.”

“He knows something’s up. For Toke’s sake, put him out of his misery. He thinks you’re having an affair!”

Fenli looked back at me for a beat, and I didn’t miss the concern in her eyes. “No,” she said again. “I... I can’t.”

Ess encouraged her. “It will be okay. He won’t tell.”

Fenli was stiff with resistance. Everything about her was tight, from her shoulders to the set of her jaw, and she clutched the strap across her torso with brittle fingers. Finally, her posture softened. She looked miserable, like she may be sick. After a moment, she walked to the table, pulling the pack from her back and swinging it to rest in front of her.

“Fine,” she said on an exhale, and I realized that one of her secrets was about to come out in the open.

Fenli and her secrets. I braced myself to hear the truth. Instead, she showed me. From her pack, she pulled a large sheet of parchment. She unrolled it and laid it out on the table, her hands smoothing out the creases as the inked lines came into view.

It was a map.

My eyes landed on the village, huts shown in hatches, and followed a winding trail north. There was a river flowing west, which the trail eventually crossed, and past that was the coast, the suggestions of islands just starting to form. I tried to catch up.

“It’s a map.”

Fenli said nothing, didn’t even seem to draw a breath, but Esska piped up.

“Fenli makes maps. Has been for five years, and she’s good at it.”

“Ess stole your knife,” Fenli spat. My sister gasped. “She’s going to hunt like the men.”

The two eyed each other down in a standoff, and I tried to wrap my head around—ah, shite.

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I blew out my pent-up breath and ran two hands up my face and through my hair. My wife snuck into the woods despite a multitude of rules to make maps, and my sister was going to upset every tradition our father held dear and try to hunt.

“You two are gonna be the death of me,” I said, and I headed up my ladder on uneasy legs, ignoring Ess when she said we should talk about it.

Like hell, I wanted to talk about it.

Baer would have their hides if he found out. When he found out.

Then he’d have mine for good measure.

Still, relief was washing through me, making my hands wobble and my head spin. I needed to lie on my floorboards for a moment while I pulled myself together and let the truth seep into my mind.

Fenli was not having an affair. It shouldn’t have come as such a relief, considering our relationship.

It shouldn’t have.

But it did.

Chapter Eleven

Fenli

I woke to rain on the slates above. It was still dark, pitch black in the hut, but I'd never needed the light. I heaved myself up from my bedroll, and then I was making my way to the door. Fresh air greeted me on the other side, rain-scented and rich with the fragrance of earth and sky, Rynwin and Toke both at work. I filled my lungs with it. Then I stepped out from under the eave and let the rains have me, same as everyone born of Toke.

This was how we worshipped, and I could never tire of the act. Stepping into his downpours felt like as much as a receiving as it did a giving, and it woke something in me each time. That bit of the god that had been planted inside me upon my birth, if the stories were to be believed.

I said the words I'd been taught as a child, the words my mother had whispered to me, even when I'd been tiny, and we'd lived as Runehall's.

"The skies have spoken. This, an ancient tongue. Storm awoken. Let this witness come."

And the rains cooled my eyes, licked my cheeks, ran rivers down my skin. The god of storm and sky met me there, or so they said, and I tried to feel his presence. I thought maybe I did. I could never be sure. I wanted to believe it, like I had as a child. Still, there was a voice in my head that said I was being stupid, that he was myth and story. That, if he was real, he wouldn't care about me.

I tried to quiet that voice.

When I was good and soaked, I sat myself down on the wet earth to witness what Toke was doing. What was more fitting for a worshiper than to take notice of the acts of their god? I started to hum. The sounds I made were as old as our clan itself, six notes passed down through the generations. The song was a haunting thing, as deep and foreboding as thunder, and I loved it, loved venturing out under the wet skies to

feel its vibration in my throat. I may have been a person of few words, but I'd never been without this—not even when I doubted.

There were no rules to how long the worshiper stilled. It could be for a few moments, or it could last for as long as the storm did. I was already soaked down to my underthings, and the rain was warm enough. I stayed. I felt a peace there, and peace was something I desperately needed.

When the winds picked up, chilling me and pulling goose bumps from my skin, I decided it was time to go inside. Once through the door, I ran smack into Roan.

“Shit,” he said, his voice thick with sleep. “What are you doing?”

I stepped away from him, pulling my elbow from his hand.

“I—I'm...”

Wasn't it obvious? I wrapped my arms around my waist and moved past him. He had lit a lamp, and I could see that Goose had woken up enough to claim my spot and my pillow. Gods, I was cold. I needed fresh clothes.

I turned back to Roan. He stood there, stretching his back long and rumpling his hair.

“Do you mind?”

He stopped his lazy preening and looked at me like an idiot, his eyebrows high.

“What?”

“Don't you think you should worship?”

The words tumbled out. I'd rather not have said anything at all, stayed quiet instead, but arguing with Roan was proving irresistible.

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He stood there blinking, then said, “Is that what you were doing? In the middle of the night?”

I stared at him. He was a clan favorite. Old women slipped him extra honey rolls and men reach out to slap his shoulders as he passed. This ass who couldn’t even deign to worship outside of normal waking hours. That made me hot. And here I was struggling to feel like a part of Toke’s clan, despite my devotion. What bullshit it all was.

“I have to dress,” I said through gritted teeth.

He took in air to argue with, then stopped short, looking at my wet hair and clothes once more. Then he just floundered. His jaw was unhinged. His face looked conflicted or maybe dazed; I couldn’t tell.

“Hello?”

He narrowed his eyes on mine. “Fine,” he said. Then he stalked out the door and into the rain.

I didn’t know how long he was planning to give me, and I didn’t want to be caught with my drawers down, so I hurried. I peeled off my wet pants and my shirt and wiggled into a new set as quickly as I could. It wasn’t easy. My skin was still wet, and the linen wanted to stick and not slide. I swore as I stumbled.

Roan rapped on the door.



“Don’t you dare,” I growled, fighting to get my arms into my sleeves. When the shirt was over my head, I breathed a sigh of relief before heading over to let him in.

What I really wanted was to pull the lock and climb into bed with Roan stuck out in the storm. It would serve him right. I turned the handle instead, let the door swing open a bit, and headed back to the fire.

He came in behind me.

“We have a problem.”

I turned back. He stood with his hands at his side, all of him soaking wet. The storm had picked up.

Shit.

“I’ll just—” go outside, I was going to say. But then I’d get wet again. And it hit me. One of us was going to have to change in this hut while the other sat close by.

My cheeks burned.

“Do it in your loft,” I said. “I’m hide—hiding in my bedroll.”

He smiled at that. I turned my face away so he wouldn’t see, but—dammit—so did I.

Roan must have ratted out my maps, because I’d been found tending to the birds and was told to make for the meeting house to see Baer.

My heart dropped. I didn’t want to, but I knew I had to go. Like a lamb to slaughter, I followed the hunter they’d sent to fetch me back through the village.

He cleared his throat. “Roan’s a good friend of mine. I think of him as a brother.”

He said it casually, like he hoped to pick up a conversation with me. He must have known I wasn’t mute, but that didn’t change the fact that I had nothing to say. I gave him a sidelong glance. He was studying me intently.

“We started hunting at the same time. Now we’re both being considered for positions as wolf hunters. I’m Thaas.”

Wolf hunters? The news shocked me, though I supposed it shouldn’t have. Of course they would consider Roan for a position as wolf hunter. Of course they would.

“Fenli,” I said quietly.

He smiled at that. “I know who you are, Fenli.”

Embarrassed, I looked away, but he seemed unbothered by my awkwardness. He carried on, leading me to the place where I’d surely be made to pay for my transgressions, and I thought about what he’d said.

If he and Roan were chosen as wolf hunters, they’d be set apart from the others and lauded. It was a high honor for the men in Toke’s clan, who had a kind of hierarchy amongst themselves. Those who stayed with the women to tend to the animals and the crops were either the average sods, or they were older, having already had their glory in the woods. The hunters were the ideal, and to be elevated to wolf hunter—they were the best of the best. The only greater honor was to become an elder, and most of them had been wolf hunters first. I should have been proud to be the wife of someone achieving so much.

I was not.

Toke's children versus the wolves had been our story for ages. First our men had been warriors, defending all four Caed clans from the raiders who had tried to take our coastal lands. When our enemies had been beaten back, Toke's warriors had turned to hunting—and to eradicating the wolves. I'd grown up on tales of the beasts, same as everyone else, but I'd never seen one. Just pelts hung on walls and ears strung on cords. They'd been close to wiped out near the southern village when I was just a babe. Once, during my fifteenth winter, I'd heard one howling deep into the night, but never again. The wolf hunters had done their job thoroughly.

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But things were different out here. The Hinterlands, with its many islands and deep forests, was rife with wolves.

I tried to keep up with Thaas while still keeping my head down. He didn't make it easy, veering towards the crowds where he could jostle up against other men, laughing and exchanging words back and forth.

In truth, I was intimidated by all the hunters. I told myself that it was silly, yet it grew worse by the day. At first, I just skirted around them and avoided their looks. I kept my hair behind the hood of my cloak, hoping to remain unrecognized and kicked myself—first, for having cut my hair and set myself apart so obviously, then, for giving them the power to make me regret my choice. I should have been flaunting my hair with pride—wished that I would—but I was afraid. How bold I could be in my own hut, alone, with a knife in my hand. And how feeble I became in the face of others.

We reached the big door of the meeting house and Thaas hefted it open, sinking into the dark with me on his heels. When my vision adjusted on the other side, I didn't know where he'd gone in the throng of men.

My heart hammered away in my chest, and I cursed myself, wending through the gathering to get to my father-in-law at the front. Skirting and looking at the floor was no longer enough. I felt small, yet somehow, I stood out. Heads turned, eyes lingered, and brows arched.

I could hear their thoughts like they were my own.

This is the girl? Roan's wife? Poor guy.

How strange. Doesn't even talk. Won't consummate her marriage, either, from the sounds of it.

Doesn't belong here. Roan could have had much better.

It was all I heard. My mind was throbbing with the words, all of them and more. I wove around two more men and found myself standing before Baer. I lifted my gaze to meet his face and did not feel that same boldness I'd felt two years ago, when I'd cut my long locks for the first time and then paraded right past him on purpose. Before he'd been made elder, before I'd realized there was a chance they'd send me back to Runehall's. That Fenli was gone, missing from my person entirely. Instead, I was very much the Fenli who'd watched her own father hit her mother, then cried in the dark.

More shame flooded my cheeks.

I stood quietly. It took the big man a moment to notice me. If not for the hush that went through the lodge, he may not have. He'd been leaning in to hear what another man had been saying but straightened when his eyes met mine. As if he hadn't been tall enough already. I had to look up to meet his stare.

He folded his arms across his chest, careful not to cover the silver broach that marked his status in our clan.

"Fenli." It was all he said. He watched me in silence, his grey brows drawn together, his jaw working back and forth. I was like a particularly annoying puzzle, a problem to be fixed. Maybe he wanted me to say something in return, I realized. But he couldn't expect that, not in front of all these men. I hadn't thought he'd put me to the test in front of so many. Did he mean to embarrass us both? He would have to be a

fool.

Finally, he relented.

“I trust my son showed you the hut, and it was to your satisfaction?”

He worded it like a question, but didn't give me pause to answer, not that I would have.

“I haven't gotten to see it myself, but I gave him clear instructions for it.”

I nodded, at a loss for anything else. I'd expected a scolding. Public humiliation. Banishment, perhaps.

He pressed on.

“We'll need to find a more appropriate job for you now. You're a woman, or soon will be. Tending the birds ought to be passed on to one of the children.”

It took me too long to understand his meaning. When it came to me that becoming a woman meant consummating my marriage, I flushed. My eyes swept the faces of the men in front of me, and I found them all staring back. Behind me, there would be many more, all of them watching.

Baer said, “Is there a task you'd like? Something you have in mind for yourself?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it.

“Kitchens, perhaps, with your mother? Textiles? Caring for children? It would be good experience.”

Hunting, I thought dumbly. Esska came to mind, and her words repeated in my ear. In the goddesses' clans, the women have choices. It's time the gods extend the same freedoms to their women. She'd been right, and she'd realized what was coming when I'd only been concerning myself with what was.

Again, I opened my mouth to speak, and, again, I closed it.

"Think about it," he said, disappointed. Then he waved for me to leave.

In this, I didn't hesitate. I spun on my heels and retreated into the sea of men that stretched between me and the door. Halfway there, I heard it. It was barely a whisper.

"Fire blood."

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I tripped over my own feet and fell onto my hands. My palms smarted when they hit the wood boards, and one of my wrists gave a pang. Someone took my arm in his hand.

“Are you okay?”

It was another hunter, the odd one the girls laughed at behind their hands, and I pulled my arm away from him. I scrambled to get up on my own. I couldn't get out quick enough. When the door opened and Roan appeared in the door frame looking surprised to see me, I didn't slow. I pushed through him, our shoulders hitting so that he had to step back, pivoting on his foot.

“Fenli?”

I hurried out into the dark night.

Fire blood.

I'd heard those words before. Would I never be rid of them?

I wore them around my neck the way the men wore the animal ears. They pulled on me, weighing me down. I stumbled under the weight of them.

When I reached Roan's hut, I saw myself in, sure to close the door tight behind me. There was nothing to be done, so I headed back to the hearth and built a fire. I felt the heat on my face, watched it consume whole logs, and I let the tears I cried wash my cheeks.



My father's clan, the clan of fire and forge. Burning away all that was corrupt and leaving only the pure behind. Merciless. Passionate. Flames licking. Ash and smoke.

Oh, how I craved the rain. How I needed the forgiving water to run down my skin and put out the fire inside.

Whoever had whispered those words thought I deserved fire. Maybe they all did.

But what did I deserve?

Storm and sky, rain and wind.

I wanted it to be true.

But I didn't think it was.

## Chapter Twelve

Roan

All I knew was what Jory had told me, that Baer had called on Fenli and embarrassed her in front of the men who'd been in the hall. She'd retreated when he'd dismissed her, fallen, and Jory had helped her up. Then she'd struck shoulders with me on her way out.

And I was furious with my father.

I headed straight for him.

"Whoa, let's think this through—" Jory was saying behind me, but I ignored him.

“Baer,” I said, drawing his attention from the man beside him.

He looked me up and down. “It’s about time you show up. We’ve been going over the plan for the salmon run and—”

“Why would you do that to her?” I said, cutting him off. I never cut Baer off. I never came to him with so much anger pounding through me, and I never questioned him.

His brows pulled together, and he almost smiled.

“Do what?”

“You brought her in here and embarrassed her in front of everyone.”

He sat in his chair. “Nonsense. If she’s embarrassed, she embarrassed herself. All I did was talk to her about a job. She can’t keep caring for the birds.”

I gritted my teeth. The surrounding hall had grown quiet. Men were listening, and whatever I said would be spread far and wide through the clan.

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“You should have spoken with her in private.”

He shrugged, barely listening to me now.

“She’ll be fine. Honestly, Roan, you should be thanking me. This is your responsibility, but I know why you hesitate. I’m helping the two of you get your feet under you.”

I glared at him. “You’ve helped enough.”

For just a moment, surprise flashed in his eyes. It didn’t last long. My old man was nothing if not relentlessly in control.

I turned to leave, the men parting as I made my way to the door, but I heard the words when he spoke them.

“Careful, Roan. You’re starting to sound like a man.”

I slammed the door on my way out. It was foolish and only showed what a child I still was. I knew it, but if I’d had one hundred doors, I would have slammed every last one of them. I wanted to break something. And then I wanted to break the nose of every bastard in that hall who thought embarrassing Fenli was a fine thing to do.

I hauled ass to our hut, hoping she had gone home. When it came into view, I saw her leaning against the door frame, Indi on the threshold.

“Roan,” the woman said as I drew nearer. She came over and pulled me into a hug. I

tried to make eye contact with Fenli from over her shoulder, but she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were closed, and her jaw was stiff, her hands tucked tightly to her sides with her arms crossed over her chest. "I've caught you both, lucky me."

Indi let me go and smiled. Fenli broke from the moment she was having and tried to look nonchalant, but she wasn't fooling me.

"I just came by to see my girl," Indi said, turning back to Fenli, though she kept her arms wound in mine. "Isn't she beautiful?"

I blanched. When I glanced at Fenli, I found her looking equally horrified. She met my gaze, and we both stood there like idiots for too many moments too long. The sight made Indi laugh.

"Oh, you two are perfect for each other," she said. At this, Fenli broke her stare-down with me and glared at her mother instead. Indi didn't notice, or, if she did, didn't care. She went on. "Married and still so precious about the smallest of things. Of course she's beautiful. It was an easy question." She bumped me with her shoulder. "Right?"

I looked between the two of them, then nodded dumbly. She was beautiful. Of course she was. Indi was right, it was an easy question. The hard part was answering it in front of my wife, who would most certainly want to kill me over such a confession.

Fenli looked at her feet.

"Is that all, Ma?"

"No, are you coming to the Wool Moon celebration tomorrow night?"

Fenli shook her head.

“Well, you have to. Everyone goes.”

“No one will miss me.”

“What is it?” I asked, drawing Fenli’s eyes. There was discomfort there, and I wasn’t sure what I’d done to earn it.

“Nothing,” she said. “Just—it’s dumb—the women—we spin the wool and, and...”

She was staring at her feet again, her forehead lined with tension, and I waited for her to regain her words. When it looked like she’d composed herself and she opened her mouth to speak, Indi cut her off.

“We spin wool late into the night, tell stories, eat sweets, and drinkfartoo much mead. It’s to celebrate the wool that’s been sheered, cleaned, and carded, and it’s always a wonderful night. But it’s just us women, Roan. Can’t let you boys have all the fun.”

I looked back at Fenli and tried to catch her eye, but she had turned away again.

“Anyway, think about it?” Indi said. “I’d love to have you there. We could sit together with Esska and be the troublemakers, just like old times.”

At this, Fenli gave a small smile.

“There’s my girl,” Indi said. “I love you, baby. See you tomorrow.”

“See you, Ma.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Fenli let herself in, and I followed behind her.

“Baer is an asshole,” I started once the door was closed, but she cut me off with a raised hand.

“Don’t,” she said. “Just stop.”

“You should tell him you want to make maps.”

Her jaw dropped open and hung for several moments before she snapped it shut. I’d done it now. I could see it in her eyes. She thought I was an idiot, a fool, but it was more than that. Just the suggestion of coming out with her maps made her nervous. She was afraid of what I might do.

“You would see me fed to the wolves.”

“For mapping?” I was an idiot. Even I could hear the stupidity in my words, but I wanted them to be true, so out they came.

She shook her head slowly, as if in disbelief. “I’d get shipped off to—to Runehall’s clan for less. You think I’m w-wanted here?”

She refused to talk to me for the rest of the evening. I spent the night lying on the floor in the loft, thinking about her words. They reminded me of what Baer had said when she’d run away.

There are those who think she shouldn’t be here, that we should send her back, and if

they knew about this—

I wondered how Fenli knew that there were members of the clan who thought she belonged with Runehall's people.

And I knew I would not like the answer.

## Chapter Thirteen

Fenli

I wouldn't stay with my clan, but I wasn't sure where I would go. I was too far from the Saik now, thanks to my idiot husband, and if I showed up at either Elsynbr's or Rynwin's clan it would only lead to more problems. Among the Caed, clan jumping was a shameful thing. It was the scandal of the ages when Indi fell in love with one of Runehall's and left her own people for him. When she came back a few years later, bruised and cradling a baby, it only served to prove the tradition right.

There had to be something, somewhere I could go, someone who would take me in.

I checked over my shoulder, making sure there was no one around to see me slip off on my own into the forest. When I was sure I was in no one's sight, I headed between the tall pines, into the shadows, my pack over my shoulders and my boots laced tight.

I had meant to hate the Hinterlands. Desperately, I tried to.

But my resolve slipped more and more each day.

I hated the village, hated being with the hunters, hated having Baer watching over my shoulder and Roan under the same roof.

But I was finding myself bewitched by the land itself.

I found the deer trail I'd used a few days back and meandered through the woods, checking my progress against the tentative map I'd sketched, making adjustments as I went and pausing to collect my bearings more than once.

I fell into the rhythm. I lost myself out among the cedars and pines and spruce, but I found myself as well, or at least found where I was in all that uncharted space.

Uncharted to me, anyway. The clan had a map maker by the name of Gaert, but he wasn't about to share shite with any of us women, let alone me, young and dumb as I was.

I cleared my mind and focused instead on myself and where I was in the sprawl of all this wilderness surrounding me.

The trees seemed ancient and thick with age. They were so tall their tops were often lost to sight. Down below the canopy, the light of the sun was sometimes so dull it slowed my progress, forcing me to peer into every shadow to find my footing and my way. Then the clouds would roll over and the rains would pour, exasperating the issue.

"The skies have spoken," I whispered. "This, an ancient tongue. Storm awoken. Let this witness come."

I didn't mind it. The rains penetrated my other sense even as my sight dulled. The musk and spruce scent of the forest rose all around me. Drops pelted the bits of skin I'd left uncovered—on my cheeks and my hands—and I welcomed them even as a shiver ran across my shoulders. My lungs filled with the cool air. The sound of the battering rains rang out from every leaf within earshot, and I felt caught up in the middle of it all. There was a rumble of thunder, off in the distance. On instinct, I



hummed the notes, offering my worship even as I made my way through the trees.

After a time, the storm ebbed to a slow. When I came out from the tree line and onto a secluded bank maybe two miles from the village, it was a quiet drizzle. There, under a shelter, was a stash of canoes. Four of them in all with oars leaning against the back wall.

I hesitated for only a moment. Then I stole one.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

The waters were as calm as I'd ever seen them. If not for the smell of brine, I could almost have imagined myself out on a lake, headed to some opposite shore instead of into the unknown and unfathomable.

I was feeling reckless.

The islands that scattered out from the shoreline gave me confidence, unwise as it may have been. They made me feel like I had not completely untethered myself from the land, and I kept looking for that next outcropping of trees, feeling comforted when it appeared and directing my vessel further and further still.

I'd always heard about the Hinterlands, but it was another thing to behold for myself. The forest was pregnant with flora. Trees pierced the clouds that hung low in the sky, and there seemed no end to the inlets, and the coves, and the outcroppings, and the islands. I'd never seen the ocean and the land play back and forth with each other like they did here, Elsynbr and Rynwin blending the lines of their domains like it was a game, or maybe art, or maybe both.

It encouraged me onward.

The terrain unwound in my mind's eye. Even when the rain moved on, I left the map rolled safely away. I didn't need my parchment or my lead. The space before me was giving itself up to my knowing, and I wanted to feel it first. I would start laying down the shapes on my way back.

The low-lying clouds did not lift, and it wasn't long before a fog rolled over the face of the water. It was not too dense to navigate, but the wiserside of me knew what

could come if I let myself get more caught up than I already was. It was time to turn around, while I still could.

But before I set my sights back home, a movement on a nearby shore drew my eyes. There on the banks of an island, nosing through rocks and driftwood—was a wolf.

It lifted its head to look at me, and my oar stilled. In that moment, it was like the rest of the world had fallen away. The wolf and I studied each other over the short stretch of water that lay between us, and there was nothing else.

The wolf's cheeks and legs were a ruddy brown while the tips of its tan fur grew black, giving a stunning backdrop to its golden eyes. Long-legged, wet from rain, and bigger than I'd imagined, with alert ears and a steady gaze. It was a sight, impressive and stern, but it was not ominous. It watched me carefully, but I could find no threat in the creature's stare.

The stories swelled in my mind. Wolves, the hunters told us, were the enemy. They were competition for our food sources; they were mangy and wicked, and they would kill any man who failed to kill them first. And kill them the men did, felling wolves wherever their exploits brought them. One wolf, one ear on your cord, one more demon of the trees culled by the strength of men.

And I'd never once questioned it.

The wolf blinked, and my heart was at ease in my chest. Then it turned and retreated, its pace careful and unhurried as it slipped into the forest with barely a whisper.

I turned as well, telling myself I'd never head back to that wolf's island again.

But it was a lie.

That night, I went to the Wool Moon celebration with Indi and Esska, and I thought of nothing but the wolf I'd seen. I thought maybe I'd sleep it off, but the next morning came, and my mind was on that wolf again and all day after.

Two days later, I was back at the wolf's island.

This time, I ran my canoe up on the shore. Unthinking and possibly possessed by forest spirits, I climbed the rocks and treaded the place I'd seen the wolf, unable to say why.

In the end, I followed the ravens to find them.

I ventured back in the direction I'd thought was my best chance, and the sound of the birds drew me in from there. Had it not been for the noise they made, I'd have never veered off to the east, and I would have missed what I sought altogether.

I approached cautiously. The first thing I saw was a flutter of black wings up in an old cedar, the branch dipping with the weight of the bird. As the space in the trees opened up, I caught my first glance at the ruins. Ancient beams holding up a roof that had long since succumbed to the forest floor. The walls remained, however, overgrown on the north side with moss, and trees grew up from between them. It was the carving over the empty door frame that gave it away. Two diagonal lines intersecting, setting apart four distinct spaces. Four clans for four gods.

It was an old Caed dwelling, built before the split into four separate clans, before the moves to the south.

It had been generations upon generations ago, but our kind had lived here once.

Now it was a home to wolves.

I knew it, though I didn't see one. Still, the proof was there. Bones. Scattered across a well-trod piece of bare earth in front of the dilapidated hut. Paw prints the size of my hand, pressed into mud and left to dry. The scent of them, sharp with a heavy tang. I felt the signs like a warning rippling across my skin. There was no denying it. I was in their territory now.

I edged away from the site. A wiser person would have left and not come back, but I'd not forgotten why I was there, nor had I lost the rebellion that had propelled my legs over all the miles to begin with. I backtracked to the place I'd seen a small rise that came to the base of an old cedar, and I settled in.

I had no weapons. I had no plan of needing one. I sat with my back against the tree, and I waited for the wolves to return home.

I waited for what felt like forever; I waited for what felt like no time at all.

They moved like ghosts through the trees. Long and lean, they streamed into their small clearing and slowed, panting as they came to rest. One wolf peered into a gap at the base of the hut. Moments later, a line of pups came pouring out, tails wagging as they toppled over one another.

I nearly gasped. Pups, and I had stood right there, so close.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Oh, I was going to get myself good and killed. Wandering around near a pack of wolf pups in the middle of nowhere. But the stress that swelled in me loosened as I continued to watch.

Most of the adults chose to lay down, their bellies on the cool earth. One stood, presiding over all the rest. The pups came to lick that one's chin, their tails tucked then wagging then tucked again, and the big wolf responded with decorum, letting them pay their dues. The others received similar visits from the small mob. The youngsters seemed truly elated, and the adults took it all in stride, dolling out a few licks of their own. One wolf fell to her side, and a feast of milk ensued. The pups nursed with a vigor I could see even from the distance I was at, and I nearly winced.

Clearly, the mother.

One wolf stood abruptly. He was still for a moment, nose in the air. Then his head began to swivel. I froze. He dropped his long muzzle to the ground and sniffed, walking small steps in my direction. He paused and scratched at the dirt. Then he looked up, directly at me.

It was the wolf I'd seen just days before. I could barely think straight, and my heart was hammering like a drum, but I knew that much for sure. Same eyes, same stare. The long legs and ruddy coat. I remembered him.

But would he remember me?

His comrades saw the change in him. I'd counted five adults, the pups too busy for me to get a clear number on, and every one of them found me in the trees. The mother

quickly stood, disrupting her babes and their meal.

I'd been discovered.

"Toke, help me," I breathed.

I thought it would be a frenzy. I thought they'd be at my throat any moment, lunging, biting, seething for my flesh. The stories ran through my mind, the vileness of the wolves and their all-consuming love for blood. The bane of the Hinterlands would snuff me out, then spread my bones among the trees, along with the rest. But they only watched me—alert, tense, patient.

It was the wolf who'd seen me from across the water who acted first, and he set the tone in my favor, thank all the gods and goddesses in sea and sky and on earth. He wandered closer, bit by bit, and he showed neither aggression nor fear. He was hesitant, unsure, but also curious.

Halfway between me and the pack, he stopped. He sniffed the air, watched me intently for a few beats, then seemed to grow bored. He sat and his ears swiveled, taking in other sounds. Some of the tension I'd been holding fiercely in my shoulders and jaw ebbed. I let out a slow breath. I tried to calm my thundering heart.

The wolves gave me plenty of time. Even the ravens quieted, stilled, and watched as the wolves did.

"I'm a friend," I whispered. The wolf cocked his head. I did not know if I was comforting the beasts or heralding my death, but I did it anyway, if only to keep from losing my mind to the fear. "I jus-just came to watch."

Apparently, we both had.

## Chapter Fourteen

Roan

During mid-day meal, I went to the hut to talk with Fenli. More than anything, I wanted to make things right between us. I hoped that with a little understanding and a lot of humility, I could point us in that direction. Start us on the path to reconciliation.

But she wasn't at home.

Strange, because I was sure she always brought her food back to the hut. There were dishes left out, but they were from days past.

Deciding she must be finishing up with the birds, I swung out to the barns. Nothing. It was then that the search started to feel all-too familiar. I had a feeling where this may lead, but I went through the actions, regardless. I checked the kitchens, my family's hut in case she was there with Ess, out to the coast, and finally through the streets, my head swiveling this way and that.

I found Goose, but it was like she'd disappeared.

Into the woods, I imagined.

Eventually, I went back to the hut, Goose trotting behind me and slipping in the door when I opened it. It was still empty, save for her messes everywhere, no space untouched by her chaos. The fire was dead in the hearth, and I stood there in the doorway, shoving my hands into my pockets and watching while the dog climbed on Fenli's bedroll and made himself comfortable. He looked at me with high brows, his chin on his paws.

"Which way do you think she went?"



His ears perked, but he gave no response otherwise. I sighed and looked around the room. I wasn't looking for anything in particular, but something stood out all the same: her leather pack was gone. It usually sat on the floor leaning up against the back of the chair she claimed each night, but it was missing now.

She was definitely in the forest, then. But it was fine. She'd gone with Esska. They'd partnered up, and they'd take care of each other.

"Hey," said a voice behind me. "Have you seen Fenli?"

I swung around to find Ess coming up the path. She'd braided her blond hair into two long plaits that trailed down her shoulders, and her blue eyes were sharp as she drew up in front of me.

"Shit. I thought she'd have taken you." I ran my hand over my face. "She's gone again, and her bag is gone, too. She's out there in the woods. Why wouldn't she ask one of us to go with her?"

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Ess frowned and folded her arms across her chest.

“She hasn’t been acting herself lately,” she said. “At first I thought it was just the move and, well—” she gestured at all of me, “but now I’m not so sure.”

“Hell if I know,” I said on a sigh. “I try not to be an ass, but it’s done nothing to improve her opinion of me.”

Ess didn’t respond. Her gaze caught on something beside me, and she seemed to forget we were having a conversation. I turned to see what had her attention so rapt... and my stomach dropped.

“Is that—?” She stepped under the eave and grabbed hold of the door. Dropping to her knees, she came face to face with what I’d been able to see right away. There—etched into the blue-green paint I’d covered the wood with months before—was a single flame the size of a hand. Its tip licked upward, an unmistakable image with an unmistakable meaning attached.

Esska swore.

“Who would do this?” I said, my voice betraying my anger.

Ess only shook her head, rising to her feet and staring at the mark.

She swore again. Snapping out of her haze, she wheeled around.

“Did she see it?”

“I don’t know.”

Each time Ess swore, the words grew more colorful and more offensive. This was not the kid sister I’d left behind on the shore those ten years ago, not even close. I could see it in the way she held herself, the way she interacted with the world around her. And I could sure as hell hear it in the way she spoke.

“These woods are more dangerous than what you two were used to. I told her that, but she doesn’t listen to me.”

That earned me a scowl. “We know they’re more dangerous, and your wife is not stupid.” She turned her back to me and started to pace the room. “She’s cocky, though, and rebellious.”

Damn, she was mad at me. I supposed I deserved it. I was trying not to be an ass, but it seemed I’d been one anyway. Maybe there was more of Baer in me than I cared to admit.

She gestured back to the door. “At least one person is harassing her. It could be more. Maybe she’s seen this, maybe she hasn’t. But this might not be the first incident either. She’s been distant lately. I’ve barely been getting a few words out of her each time I see her, and that’s when I can find her. At the Wool Moon celebrations, she was,” she hesitated, shaking her head, “she was somewhere else.”

Esska’s face showed her worry, lines etched in between her brows, shifting over the room, never staying in one place for long. After a sharp sigh, she said the words I could tell she hadn’t wanted to utter.

“Maybe there’s been more. Maybe she’s been putting up with this shit alone for longer than we’ve realized. If Fenli is getting abuse from the clan, it could—it could cause her to be more reckless. She already struggles to feel like she belongs here. If

she's being harassed on top of that? She might take risks she wouldn't have otherwise."

I nodded, grim. "I'm going to find out who it is, and then I'm going to kill them."

"We're going to kill them," she added. "You got any paint for that?" I looked back at the door and nodded. "Good, cover it up, and then let's go find her."

We shirked our responsibilities for the entire rest of the day and still did not find Fenli. I worried she was dead, pulled apart by wolves somewhere, but Esska only grew angrier, worried she was going to kill her herself when we found her. She swore up and down that Fenli would be fine; she wouldn't get lost, would stay safe, would keep her blood inside of her body. But I knew what could happen out in those woods.

Sometimes, the forest came for a person, and no amount of skill or care could keep you from it.

Esska knew it, even though she wasn't saying it. I watched her as we went, staying a few paces behind, and it was as clear as a cloudless sky. She had a way about her as she moved through the forest. She was not brutish, blundering through, just as she was not meek or mild. She moved with purpose and understanding. I could see she was no stranger to wild places, and it struck me that she shouldn't be.

"Tomorrow morning," I said. We'd turned back for home, and I could tell she was worrying about Fenli.

"Huh?"

"Early. Just before sunup. Meet me in the bit of woods behind my hut, and we'll start training."

“Training to hunt?”

I nodded. Then I stumbled as she crashed into my side, wrapping her arms around my neck and squeezing me tight.

“You’re the best brother. You won’t regret it. I’ll make you proud, I promise.”

“We’re both going to regret it when Baer finds out,” I said, but I smiled. “And I’m already proud of you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

We got back to the village as the sun was losing to the dark and headed to my hut, hoping we'd find Fenli there, but Ess never made it. Rahv found us as we passed the meeting house and gave Ess a tongue lashing for skipping out on her afternoon job and evening chores. Ess whispered for me to let her know the moment Fenli showed up, and I gave her a single nod. Then I continued alone.

When I reached the hut, it was still empty. I let Goose out to pee and headed back to start a fire, thinking of all the different ways Fenli could have been killed, when she appeared in the doorway.

We both stared at each other for many moments, like we were surprised to be eye to eye once more. Then she shook it off and continued in, closing the door behind her.

I nearly started in on her. All my fear and worry and frustration threatened to spill over and bury her, but I refrained, if only just. Instead, I said, "Where have you been?" as innocently as possible.

She shrugged and tossed her bag on the table. She hung her jacket on the back of a chair and kicked off both boots before she realized I was still waiting for more.

"Lake Haus," she said. "Just exploring a little."

Liar, I thought, and while I meant to keep it as that, just a silent thought in my mind, my anger wouldn't oblige.

"Liar," I said aloud. She lifted her head and met my eyes. "You're such a liar."

Her face hardened, and even though I knew I was messing up, was going about this the wrong way, I couldn't seem to help myself.

"You could have been killed. There are a thousand ways to die out there, and any one of them could have had you."

She didn't respond, just glared at me, so I kept on.

"Ess and I went looking for you. We were out for half the day. Lake Haus? Nice try, we were there. And we were every damn place around there, so don't try to deny it. Do you ever tell me the truth?"

"No."

She wasted no time answering that one.

I nodded, believing her.

"Have you ever met a wolf, Fenli?" Her tough composure faltered. "How about a bear? You could have been attacked. You could be at the bottom of a cavern, and no one would know which one because you didn't take a partner with you."

"And what do you care?"

"I care."

"Why?"

"Because—because I'm responsible for you."

Wrong thing to say. Stupid, stupid thing to say. Gods, why did I keep doing that? I

was only making the divide between us wider, but my fear was on my back, pushing me blindly forward. I turned away from her and tried to get myself under control. I was being an ass. I knew it, and I had to stop. I should have been asking her if she was okay, if she was taking hate from others in the clan. I should have been making sure she knew without a doubt that I was on her side, that I would bring down hell on anyone who was giving her grief.

“The hell you’re responsible for me,” she growled, and she scooped up her boots.

“Fenli, wait,” I said when she moved for the door. She stopped with her hand on the knob. “I’m sorry. It’s just—you scared me.”

She didn’t move a muscle, and I searched for what to say next.

“Look, it won’t always be like this. The bear will move on eventually and we’ll hunt the wolves until they’re gone. When this area is better settled, it will be more like the southern village. Until then, well, you just can’t go out by yourself. It’s not safe. I was worried. It’s why I acted like an ass, and I’m sorry.”

I thought maybe she’d take her hand off the knob, come in and start in on her evening routine.

She made to leave instead.

“I made you a battle sword,” I blurted. She stalled so I went on, heading to my pack in the corner to pull it out. “I didn’t know how to give it to you. I was waiting until—I don’t know. Anyway, it’s yours.” I pulled it from its sheath and held it out to her. It was a traditional battle sword, short and designed for close contact fighting. They were part ceremonial, part useful—given to young men to celebrate their strength and provide protection in the forest. Making one for Fenli had been a mad endeavor, but after hearing yet another story of how she’d bucked Baer’s authority,



I'd had the idea and hadn't been able to shake it. I'd started on it last year, with the help of the blacksmith, and I'd dreamed of the moment I would give it to her every day since then.

This was not how I had imagined it.

For just a second, her gaze skipped over, peering at the blade I held between us. Then she looked up at me. Her eyes were everything, all at once. It was like she was feeling a million different things, and I could see them all, right there in her face. Surprise, worry, hatred, longing, hope. But most of all, fear.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Without another word, she pushed her way out the door.

I turned and set the sword on the table.

### Chapter Fifteen

Fenli

We'll hunt the wolves until they're gone.

His words rang in my ears for days after he'd spoken them. He'd meant for it to be comforting; I found no comfort in words like those.

The wolves changed everything for me. Without them, I'd been adrift. There was no purpose for me in the clan. I wanted to explore and map but was forbidden from it. I was given a husband and a job, but I'd refused them both. I'd felt like an outcast in my own home; a stranger in my own bones.

But the wolves.

I cut through the lapping waves, aiming decidedly towards the bit of stony shore where I always landed.

This time, there was a purpose in every move I made. My whole body hummed with it. I could feel the rightness of it running the length of my nerves.

When I'd banked and dragged my canoe up among the boulders, I paused for a few

breaths. It was reckless, doing this. Madness and treachery all wrapped up together. And at long last, I was happy. This made sense.

I made my way out to the wolves, resolve deepening the further as I sunk into the forest. The closer I got, the slower I went, cautious and attentive. When I reached the tall cedar where I'd camped out at before, they came into view before me. The pack was home, resting near their den, but they hadn't seen me yet. I stilled, patient, and let my eyes track through the trees.

There were other remnants of a village, I had realized. Other huts, fallen and overgrown with forest. They all but disappeared into the sanctuary of trees, invisible until you saw them, and then you couldn't believe you'd missed them. I was surrounded by the ruins of my people, a village that used to be alive and thriving with the Caed.

Slowly, I lowered myself down so that I was sitting with my back to the tree. This bit of movement caught the attention of the dark male, the father. His whole body went rigid, his ears and tail alert. The others copied him, and four wolves stared me down. I sat still and calm, but my heart picked up its rhythm. I couldn't help it.

Many long moments passed. They stretched on with nothing but the chatter of the ravens overhead to mark the progression of time. Then the watcher broke from his place among his family. He trotted to the same boulder as before, between his den and my post, and he trained all his focus on me.

When the pups whined inside the den, the others let their attention flicker, but the watcher was faithful to his job. His eyes and ears never left me, and the others seemed to find some peace in the fact. The mother slipped into the dark and the father sat, his ears rotating as he took everything in. The omega seemed unworried, finding a patch of sunlight to lie down in and lick her paws, the uncle joining her.

When the watcher sat, I felt like I'd passed a test. He would allow me a measure of trust, and I was grateful for it. It felt like a gift.

I couldn't say why.

They had not accepted me, and they would not; I wasn't foolish enough to imagine they would. I did not belong in their pack. I could watch from the outskirts, but I was less a member of their family than the ravens who floated down to clean up their camp and rest among them.

I would not be one of theirs, and that was fine. Because, for the first time, I imagined that I had a purpose in my clan.

I would not be a wife or sit with the children who needed watching. I would not cook the meals or sew the garments or card the wool like any had hoped.

I would serve a different purpose.

I would alter the maps. I would hide the wolves' island from my clan.

I would protect the wolves.

That evening, I slipped out of the hut to walk the little dirt path along the outside perimeter of the village.

It was going to be a cool night. A breeze was already blowing down from the north, and I took in a lung full. It eased some of the tension in me. My gait got a bit longer and my body began to unfurl. It took the edge off, worked out some kinks, and mostly helped to clear my mind.

When I heard the voices, I slowed. I didn't want to be seen, but I was curious enough

to want to know what had so many men gathered outside of the village center. I continued until they came into view, a large group of hunters just down the slope. There was a larger group in the center, huddled together, but others had broken off, forming their own smaller clusters. I caught sight of Roan and Thaas. They both had their bows and were knocking arrows, aiming and sending them sailing to land with thuds into targets, shooting as many as they could before the dark swept in and forced them to stop. Roan's lips were drawn tight. He looked agitated.

When I glanced back at Thaas, I was startled to find him already looking at me. He smiled in that lazy, confident way I'd begun to associate with him—and then he winked.

I faltered. There was nothing lazy or confident about my response to that, and I turned away on an impulse, back the way I'd come. Maybe I was being stupid. Maybe my awkwardness was running away with me again. But I couldn't feel comfortable in this new village, with all the hunters home and milling around—my husband first among them—and I didn't like Thaas.

Relax, I told myself, heading back to Roan's hut but trying to slow my pace, not be a fleeing, bumbling mess.

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A mistake, because that was how he caught up to me.

“Fenli, wait,” I heard him say.

I turned to find Thaas jogging up the narrow path, surprising me for the second time in so short a span. He came to a halt in front of me, his easy grin crooked across his face, and when I took two steps back, his one closed the space I’d made. He winked again.

Was there something wrong with his eye? A chronic twitch I should be made aware of before I unjustly wrote him off as the most ego-ridden dirt-bag to walk through Rynwin’s green earth?

Relax, I told myself again. You’re probably wrong.

We were on the backside of a smaller hut and to my left was the fence that kept in the sheep at night. It was just the two of us, and I wondered if he could see how uncomfortable it was making me. He showed no discomfort himself and leaned in when he said, “I’ve been trying to catch you alone.”

Not words I’d ever wanted to hear.

“Why?” The question slipped out before I’d thought better of it.

He turned to glance over his shoulder, then took another step toward me, closing the already too-small space between us. I didn’t move—couldn’t—and my heart picked up in my chest.

“I wanted to let you know I see you. I know about how you ran away, and how Roan hauled you out here, and I know you don’t want to be married to him.”

When his hand rose to my arm, fingers dragging lines up and down my sleeve, my insides clenched, every part of me drawing in, wanting to shrink away.

“I just think maybe there could be another way. Your marriage hasn’t been sealed—in the natural sense—” he clarified, “and Roan isn’t the only one who could help you out of your mess.”

Your mess.

Those were the words that jolted the sense back into me. I jerked away from his touch.

He laughed. “Sweetie, you have options. I’m on track to become a wolf hunter and an elder, same as Roan. I could give you the security you need in this clan. I could give you everything.”

“Leave me alone,” I whispered, taking a step back.

“You can’t possibly want to stay married to the clod you’re stuck with. Let me help you.” He took another step closer and lifted his hand to my cheek, holding the side of my face. “You’re beautiful, you know that? I’d make you a true member of this clan in no time.”

I slapped him across the cheek.

“What the hell—” he said, but I turned and fled, not waiting to find out what his next words would be.

With my palm stinging and my legs shaking, I rushed down the fence line, between buildings, and to the front stoop of the hut with the blue-green door. Once inside, I bolted the lock. Alone, I couldn't help the tears that cut paths down my cheeks.

"Shit," I whispered. "Shit."

I pulled a chair out from the table and sat, trying to slow my breath, wondering where I'd gone wrong, if I'd done something—anything—to make Thaas think I'd say yes. He was a fool, I decided. It was the only explanation.

So why did I feel guilty?

There was a knock at the door, and I flinched, my fingers wrapping around the seat of my chair. I didn't dare say a word. I waited, breathless.

When Rahv's voice came from the other side, I exhaled.

"Fenli, it's me. I saw you come in. I want to ask you something."

Standing, I wiped the tears from my cheeks, blinking hard.

"Jus—just a moment."

I shook out my hands, cleared my throat, and tried to pull myself together. After a few breaths, I drug the bolt back. The sky at dusk would help to hide my recent cry, I hoped. I opened the door.

"Been a while since I've seen you," she said, "now that you've no need to make stops by my hut." Her face was tight, and she looked over my shoulder at the space behind me.



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Had she seen the hut before this, I wondered? I didn't think she had. She wasn't like Indi.

Something about her voice set me on edge. I wrapped my fingers tightly around the knob, debating whether I should say something back.

"Would you... like to come in?"

She looked away quickly.

"No. No, not so much as all that. I just wanted to talk to you." She cast a glance at me, then let out a sharp sigh. "Do you know Runa?"

The question was so strange, my brows furrowed on impulse. Rahv took that to mean no, though she was wrong. Of course I knew Runa. Everyone did.

"She's about your age," she went on, "and her mother is a good friend of mine. Roan grew up with her, before he left. I thought they'd get married one day. We all did."

My stomach started to roll, and I wasn't sure why.

"I think she still pines for him, poor thing. And then there's you. Stuck in a marriage you never wanted."

She fumbled with her next lines, opening and closing her mouth several times, which only brought me more unease. This was not the mother-in-law I was used to. Rahv did not temper her words around me.

“Fenli, I’m just going to say it.” She took a deep breath. “I think it would be best for everyone if you left the clan. You could have your freedom then. And so could my son.”

My heart was pounding in my chest. It was all too much. I was still reeling from Thaas, and now this. Not a moment to get my thoughts untangled. I wished she’d stop talking, but she wasn’t finished with me yet.

“You don’t want to be here with us. You never have. There’s a settlement nearby of Caeds who have left their clans and banded together. They’re called the Godless, and I think you could be happy with them.”

I shook my head, trying to understand.

“The elders won’t null the marriage. I’ve already tried. This is the only way. The Godless would take you in. I know they would. You’d be happier away from us, and they’re good people. Caeds, just no longer with their clans.”

“The Godless?” I whispered.

She nodded.

“Will you consider it?”

I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of my answer, so I turned away and closed the door.

But the answer was yes.

Chapter Sixteen

Roan

I headed out early, making my way into the forest while it was still dark. The sun would lighten the sky soon, but it would take longer for the light to reach here under the canopy. I peered into the gloom for Esska, thinking that perhaps I'd left too early when she snuck up on me, jabbing my side and barking.

I swore, dropping a handful of arrows to the ground.

"You jumped a foot," she said, laughing.

"You scared the shit out of me."

"Just practicing my stalking through the underbrush. Look at me, a huntress already."

I could just make out her smile in the dim.

"Let's see how you manage a bow."

I had taken care of acquiring the weapons last night, and it dawned on me that I'd somehow become the person arming the two most rebellious women in Toke's clan with blades and arrows. I lifted the bow off my back and handed it over, knowing that when all hell broke loose around my sister and my wife, I'd be right in the middle of it with them. Esska's fingers wrapped around the wood, and I heard the laugh in her voice when she commented on how good it felt in her hands. She seemed to hum with the kind of energy that reminded me of when I'd been learning, handling the bow for the first time, following the trails, readying for a kill. I smiled, knowing what she was feeling.

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And I hoped to Toke it didn't end too badly.

She was already keenly aware of the forest around her, I knew that much. She understood its signs and had a good sense about herself inside of its borders. That was the hardest thing to teach, I thought. Her and Fenli's treachery over the years had not been in vain.

On to the bow.

As the light of morning slowly sifted in through the leaves, we worked on stringing and unstringing, safety, form, and the most basic principles of aim. She hurried me through none of it, but drank it all in. She was at a disadvantage, starting so late. If she was going to catch up and compete with the boys her age, she seemed to recognize her need for a firm foundation.

"There's more weight on this bow than I'd like," I told her as she readied to pull an arrow back. "You'll probably need something lighter, but I'll find you a new—"

I stopped talking when she pulled it back easily, her hand coming to her jaw.

"Damn."

"You'd be surprised how much muscle goes into my dye job," she said.

Iwassurprised.

"Now look down your arrow, pull up slightly, and release."

She did, letting the arrow sail through the air. It missed its target, grazing just to the left of it and low, but she was off to a beautiful start. She lowered her bow and smiled.

“Feel good?” I asked.

She nodded. “And it will feel even better when I put my iron tip right into that target’s heart.”

“Better keep practicing, then.”

She drew her next arrow.

When Esska was good and sore and her forearm was welting from an unfortunate whack of the string, we gathered our things and headed back to my hut.

It was empty, save for Goose. And that was how I knew Fenli was gone, heading into the woods, no doubt. I said as much.

“How do you know?”

“If she was only grabbing a meal or finishing her chores, she’d have brought him with her.” I sighed. “The only reason she leaves the dog in is if she doesn’t want him following her into the forest.”

My gaze moved to the table, and there was the sword I’d made her, still discarded, still refused.

The more I tried to make things right between us, the more Fenli ignored and avoided me. I hadn’t gotten a word out of her in days, and that was when I could find her. I’d hoped coming in with Ess would lighten her up this morning, but that was a lost

cause now.

Feeling helpless, I considered my options: try reasoning (arguing) with her again the next time I saw her; convince Ess to start arguing with her (unlikely); abandon my responsibilities and stalk her wherever she might go; give up and let her tromp off on dangerous excursions all by herself, knowing she was bound to run into trouble sooner or later.

I hated everything on the list.

The worst part was that I knew the clan had forced her into this. They wouldn't support her mapping, so Fenli's only options were to give up and give in or find her own way forward. I couldn't blame her. In truth, she inspired me. But I just kept thinking that the stakes were too high. If she didn't have to hide what she was doing, she wouldn't be in this situation. There would be others who could go out with her, have her back like she had theirs, and there would be materials at her disposal, help from the clan.

Instead, she had to figure it out all on her own, putting herself into dangerous situations day after goddamn day.

"I don't know where she's sneaking off to," I said, unloading bow and arrows in a heap on the table and sinking into my chair.

Ess shook her head. "You can't keep her in the village, Roan."

"I know, and I don't want to. But she shouldn't be going out alone."

She only shrugged.

"There's no good solution," I finally said.

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“Maybe you and I can find time to head out with her here and there. It won’t be a lot, but it will be something.”

I nodded, but I imagined Fenli would rather take her chances with a pack of wolves than head out with my sorry ass.

“Anyway.” I stood and set about hauling the bow and arrows up to my loft—not hiding them, because I hadn’t stolen them—but putting them away where they wouldn’t be seen because I hadn’t exactly gotten permission to borrow it all either.

“Anyway,” Ess echoed. She turned to go, then stopped in the doorway and looked back at me. “Jory is taking me out fishing later today. It would be fun if you came.”

“Oh.” I hesitated. “Today, huh? I don’t—I don’t know if...”

“Why don’t you hang out with him anymore?” she asked, cutting me off from my floundering. “When we were kids, you two were bestfriends. You, Jory, and Tovin were inseparable. Now it’s like there’s nothing there.”

I shrugged, searching for anything to say. I didn’t know how to have this conversation. She’d even brought up Tovin,shite. The three of us had been like a band of brothers. Then Jory and I had woken up one day to learn that Tovin had left in the night with his brother. Gone. No one willing to tell us why. Like the two had never been Toke’s to begin with.

“I don’t know, Ess. It just happened. Tovin left and then Baer moved me into a different hunting group. We weren’t around each other very much and—I don’t

know.”

It was lame, but she nodded along. I could see she was thinking, weighing my words with something else she had spinning around in her head.

She pressed her lips together, then said, “He thinks maybe Baer told you to make some new friends.”

I blew a long breath through my lips. Damn.

“It was something like that,” I finally admitted. “Baer said it in fewer words, but that was the gist of it.”

Tovin had abandoned us, just like that; and I’d turned around and done the same thing to Jory. The shame of it burned in my chest.

“Jory doesn’t meet Baer’s standards,” she said, nodding. “If you ask me, that’s only because Baer sizes people up on the wrong set of scales.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I ended up saying, “Yeah, I guess.”

Esska shook her head, then left. I had disappointed her. Just like I had disappointed myself.

## Chapter Seventeen

Fenli

I didn’t speak a single word to Roan for the next three days, not even when I found an honest to gods mattress where my bedroll had been. It frustrated him to no end, but I was proud of myself, up until the moment it all came back to bite me in the ass.



Baer had caught wind of our issues and made it his place to get involved. He was sending Roan and me on a trip together. We'd been instructed to paddle down the Crow Wing River to where it met the North Channel. From there, we were to take the channel west towards the ocean, looking for favorable inlets where our clan could build a variety of ships. The inlet needed to be protected from the hard north winds, have easy access to preferred woods, and be large enough and deep enough for the vessels to maneuver and exit once completed. It was the kind of trip that would take up one whole day, at least, as well as require a good deal of communication between us.

And I hated Baer for it. Surely, he had men better suited to the job than the pair of us. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure he didn't give a shite about our findings. He just wanted to get us in a canoe together, and this was the excuse. He'd have the real scouts out later.

We walked through the woods for miles as we headed to the river, and we walked each mile in silence. Roan had one of his larger knives strapped to his back, and I kept my attention on it, thinking. It was no wonder Esska had been so quick to swipe one when the opportunity arose. A useful blade was a far cry from the stubby things they gave us girls, helpful only for cutting foraged goods, herbs in the garden, bits of thread or, in my case, chunks of hair. Ess had been right to steal that knife, I decided.

Then my thoughts turned to the battle sword on the table, the one Roan had made for me and I'd refused. No matter how many times I turned it around in my head, I couldn't imagine why he'd done it. Battle swords were an honor for the men. Part of me thought it was a joke, and another part thought it was a ploy to make me feel indebted to him. Either way, I didn't like it. It was still there where he left it, waiting for me to pick it up. I'd only caught small glimpses of it before forcing my eyes away.

I'd rather steal something out of the supply hut.

When we'd made it to the river, Roan brought us to a small covering made for the storing of canoes and oars. It was just like the one I ventured to each time I snuck out to see the wolves, and it reminded me I was missing my outing today. Roan chose a canoe suited to the two of us, and together we carried it down to the water's edge.

"I'll take the rear," he said, gesturing for me to get in first.

I already had hold of the front, so I guided it into the water's edge and climbed in, taking up my oar. He pushed it out a bit further, took his blade off his back and tossed it in, then climbed in himself. We wobbled back and forth until we found our balance and were off, heading towards the channel, the village at our backs.

I smiled. I couldn't help it. I loved canoeing, and it always felt good to be on the water, even if I had to share a vessel with a husband. Besides, I was in the front. As much as I could, I was going to pretend that the wolf-killing man-boy I was shackled with wasn't there.

As soon as I'd settled on the idea, he spoke up, ruining the effect.

"You hungry?"

I swung around to look at him.

“We just ate. Before hiking out here.”

“I know.” He drew his shoulders up defensively. “It was a long hike.”

“And I saw you eat the better half of a loaf of bread on that hike.”

“I eat a lot!”

“I noticed!”

Somehow, we were fighting, and about nothing worth fighting over. So, he ate a lot. I didn't care about that, not really. He was obviously big and manly and consumed food like a bonfire. That's how they all were.

I was mad about other things, and the truth of it brought me shame. I was always mad about other things. There was no end to my ire. It fed me and fueled me, kept me going, but if I was being honest with myself—sometimes I tired of it. Sometimes, my own rage annoyed me. I wished I could put my anger down now and again, but the thought scared me.

Would I become complacent? Would I cave to their wants and forget my own, become the wife they wanted me to be and take a nice job doing sensible work?

I didn't know, but I didn't want to risk it.

I went back to rowing. My husband, thank Toke, kept his mouth shut while we traveled the river and navigated our way out onto the channel. I got into the rhythm of my paddling along to the channel's pull, which was stronger and steadier than the river's had been, and once again tried to imagine myself alone.

It was a long time before we came across the first inlet. It was too small, and we didn't even exchange a word of discussion about it. The next inlet was better, and we paddled into it for a better look, but soon we were paddling right back out. It wasn't big enough.

That's how it went for what felt like a few hours while the big channel twisted and turned back on itself like a snake. My stomach was growling with hunger, and I considered the best way to ask for the food in Roan's pack without bringing up the memories of our latest fight. There was no way, of course, and I relented.

"Throw me some food, will you?" I said, putting my oar down along the bottom of the canoe.

Roan did not let the moment pass easily.

"Ah, the higher being deigns to eat," he said, tossing his oar down as well and reaching for his pack. I ignored him and wondered if he'd been just about writhing in hunger, waiting for me to ask. I supposed that made me a bitch.

He handed up a small loaf of bread and a wrapped cloth containing dried venison and fruits. I ate, content as we floated. By the time I was done, I had to pee like a moose.

"Let me off, will you?" I said, gesturing to the shore and lifting my oar.

He looked confused.

“I have topee.”

That got him moving. He grabbed his oar as well and steered us over. I hopped out when the bottom started to drag and pulled the canoe into the grassy shoreline. Then I headed off towards the trees.

Roan sounded nervous when he called out, “Don’t gotoo—”

“Far!” I said, cutting him off.

When I got back, his arms were crossed over his chest.

“Is that why you’re so mad at me?” he asked, a crease between his brows. “Because of what I said to Esska and Indi?”

I wracked my mind. I had no idea what he’d said to the two of them, and unease fingered its way up my spine.

“What did you say to Esska and Indi?”

He hesitated. “That’s not why you’re mad?”

“What did y-you say to them?”

“Look, it doesn’t matter. But you’ve been furious with me for days, and I can’t figure out why. I thought things were getting better and then—”

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“What did you say to Esska and Indi?” I said again, forcefully this time.

He blew out a breath of air and looked off into the forest.

“I told them to stop interrupting you all the time.”

“What?”

He looked back at me. “They both interrupt you a lot, finish your sentences for you, things like that. I told them they should be patient. Give you the room to speak for yourself, that’s all.”

My face went flush with heat. I was horrified and embarrassed. The next thing I knew, I was close to bursting into tears—too close—and I turned away from him, marching myself in among the trees.

He called after me, but I didn’t listen. He’d talked to them about me? I found my anger and latched onto it. If I stayed angry, I wouldn’t cry. I could rage and spit and stomp, which was infinitely better than falling into a puddle of tears in front of Roan.

He followed me. I wasn’t going anywhere except for away from him, but he followed relentlessly, not letting me gain an inch.

“Leave me alone,” I said, pushing a branch aside and letting it snap back at him.

That gave me an inch.

“Well, you can’t just go marching into the woods alone.”

“Watch me.”

“Fenli, you shouldn’t head off by yourself,” he said, taking up his familiar tune. “The two of us are supposed to stick together. Let’s just talk about this.”

“I’d sooner join—sooner join the Godless.”

“That would be just like you. Running away instead of facing—”

“Shut up.”

“—your problems. If we could just work things out together and—”

I stopped and swung back around, so quick he nearly ran into me.

“Leave me alone, you boar-headed, reeking, ball-sack of a husband I never wanted!”

There were a few moments of stillness between us, our eyes fixed on each other’s while the words hung in the air. Then he straightened.

“Honesty suits you.”

I was a heartbeat away from offending him further when something moved in the side of my vision, and I startled. Looking past a group of fallen trees, I could just make out a bear cub, watching us through the branches. He was small and golden-brown, and I let out a breath, thanking Toke it was just a babe.

But I’d thanked my god too quickly.

There was a deep huffing sound coming from my right, and I knew what I'd done before I'd even turned my head: I'd led us right between a mama bear and her cub.

## Chapter Eighteen

Roan

She was massive. I'd seen brown bear before, but never one this close.

Her head was a wonder, wide with a long snout, ears flattened. It did not seem a friendly gesture, and when she huffed again, tossing her head side to side, the sight of her teeth made me certain we were going to die.

"Shit," I breathed.

We were motionless, both of us, staring at the beast who stared back. The seconds dragged, and the three of us stood as if entranced.



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The bear broke it when she stepped forward, lowering her head and swinging it once more. Fenli and I startled, and we both reached for each other, grasping for something to hold on to. I wrapped an arm around her back, hooking her waist and pulling her closer. She reached across my stomach, scrambling to grab hold of my side.

“Your knife?” she whispered, never taking her eyes off the bear.

I shook my head. “I left it,” I said quietly, “in the canoe.”

We were taking small steps backwards, and I watched as the bear watched us.

“You left it?” she hissed.

My grip tightened on her. Was she really going to scold me, here and now? “Because I was too busy running after you, remember?”

She huffed, which was a mistake. The bear, who’d relaxed slightly, flattened her ears again and slapped the ground with an enormous paw. We both flinched, and I pulled her more tightly to my side. My breaths came out ragged, and I hurried our backwards steps, but little good it did. The bear’s strides ate up any distance we’d made in moments, and she towered before us, impossibly wide, hulking shoulders, paws the size of baskets. She used those paws to strike the earth again, and I felt the force travel the length of my shaking legs. She was chuffing now, blowing air through her nose and shaking her head violently. Her neck rippled with the display, and I felt her breath across my face, hot and rank.

“So sorry,” Fenli said to the bear, her voice shaking but clear. “We’re sorry. We’re

leaving. We mean your baby no harm, I promise. I promise.”

Backwards steps, backwards steps. We were desperate to get away.

She charged.

“Nonononono,” Fenli pleaded. She closed her eyes and clung to me. “Don’t you dare kill us, so help me, Toke.”

I closed my eyes too, turning into Fenli’s hair and wrapping my arms around her. Then the bear was upon us, and I felt a heft of air as she cut to the side and streaked off, her hairs brushing my godsdamnarm. I was gasping and shaking, I was so scared. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw her angling towards her babe.

“Shit,” I choked out. “We gotta get out of here.”

More back peddling. I wanted to turn and run—everything in me screamed to run away—but I had a feeling it would be over quickly if she decided to give chase.

She didn’t let up. Twice more, she caught up with us as we made our desperate trek back to the canoe. Each time Fenli talked to her, and each time the bear charged. She’d pound earth to get to us, then angle off, blowing by and throwing her head from side to side as she went. Fenli tripped and fell. I helped her up and my hand came back bloody, though I couldn’t say why. I had my face lashed by branches, and I limped, having twisted an old knee injury.

We were lucky. She could have ground us into the earth. She could have had her teeth in us in a heartbeat and had fresh meat for her meal. But she didn’t, and we made it to the canoe, and she watched from the tree line as we scrambled to get inside of it and push off down the channel.

She chuffed from her place among the trees.

With my oar in hand, I paddled furiously away from the shoreline, my heart in my throat and my everything shaking. We'd nearly died. She could have had us. We could have been dead on the forest floor, bear chow for a mama and her cub.

Fenli, who'd been on her hands and knees in the hull of the canoe, straightened and looked back at the beast on the shore.

"You," she told the bear, lifting her voice so that she'd hear, "are a complete asshole."

## Chapter Nineteen

Fenli

We were both banged up and reeling. I had gashes on both my knees that bled all the way to my boots, and the fleshy part of my palm had been sliced open when I'd fallen. Something was wrong with my wrist, but I had no idea what. Roan had been lashed across his forehead and cheek by branches, and both bled down his neck. He'd also gone and messed up his knee, an old injury he could never heal from because he was always re-injuring it. He said as much as he sat in front of me, gripping his thigh to try and hide the tremor in his hands but failing. My hands were shaking too.

"It's a miracle I didn't soil myself," he proclaimed. "I thought we were dead."

He had abandoned his seat and laid out on his back with his legs kicked up and his arm over his eyes. I was on my side in the fetal position, staring about the canoe like I could hardly believe where I was.

"Found your knife," I managed.

“Oh, right. The one I left behind to go chasing after you.”

“And to think, you survived that bear attack just to die in your sleep.”

“You know,” he said, clearly feeling bold after surviving the she-bear, “it’s too bad you don’t have a knife yourself. Maybe a sword? Could have come in handy today.”

“You’re dead, Faasval.”

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When we weren't panting so badly, and the bear was long behind us, we righted ourselves, nearly having floated into the rocky shore on the other side. Roan reached for his oar and found his seat, cussing his knee up and down the whole time. I moved to do the same, only I struggled to hold the oar in my injured hand. The end of it dug into my palm and my wrist flared in pain when I tried to lever the paddle through the water. I switched it between my hands, but the results were no better. I fumbled and hissed through my teeth as I bled on to the wood.

"What is it?" Roan asked from behind me.

Damn.

"I—it's my—I can't—"

Oh, for the love of Toke. I was hurt, but I couldn't spit it out. My face went hot.

Roan got us to the center of the channel, the current pulling our small vessel along, and I heard him put down his oar. When I glanced back, he was crouched low and making his way up to me, a furrow in his brow that betrayed his worry.

"I'm fine," I choked out, swinging my legs around to face backwards.

"Where does it hurt?"

I gestured to the wretched thing. The cut was obvious, so I said, "The wrist, too."

He drew in a long breath and then whistled.

“Have you ever had stitches before?”

I blanched. I was about to answer that, no, I’d never had stitches and never intended to either, when he reached out his hand and brought his fingertips to the back side of mine. The whisper-soft touch landed like lightning. He drew so close all I had room for was surprise. He brought his other hand to the inside of my wrist and gently tugged at the end of my ribbon, working it loose and unwinding it back a small bit.

And I could scarcely breathe.

Roan was oblivious as he ran his fingers over my skin. He took my hand, mindful of the cut, and lifted it slowly from one side to the other. He watched my wrist carefully, yet he didn’t see me falling to pieces right in front of him. When he tried moving my hand up and down, I winced. Finally, he looked at me.

And it was like he couldn’t look away.

I was pink with blush. My breathing was shallow and staggered. I didn’t know what my eyes were like, but I was sure it was nothing good. He saw it all.

His fingertips pressed deeper into my skin, and goose flesh rippled up my arm. His other hand abandoned its place, and he slipped his fingers up into my hair. I shuddered.

All I felt was want.

“Fen.”

He said my name like it was holy, like it meant more than just me. I was unraveling. He was closer than he’d ever been and suddenly not close enough.

Kiss me, I wanted to say.

“Stop,” I said instead.

He hesitated for only a moment, his expression flickering between disappointment and worry. Then he slipped his hands from my skin and into his lap.

He just sat there, looking at me. Some kind of storm was brewing behind his storm-blue eyes, and I could see a riot of thoughts and feelings having their way with him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought—I shouldn’t have done that.”

I swallowed. If there was something to be said, I couldn’t think of it.

He was careful when he wrapped my ribbon back around my wrist and tucked in the end. Then he reached for one of his own, unwinding it into a ball. When his wrist was bare, he took up my hand once more and began wrapping my palm, covering my gash, not saying a word, not looking at my wild eyes.

When he finished, he pulled back his hands.

“Who told you about the Godless?” he asked.

I couldn’t tell him the truth. “It doesn’t matter,” I said, my laugh strained, more nervous than the easy thing I’d meant to give him. My focus landed everywhere but him.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

It mattered. He had to see that it mattered. But he didn't press.

"You can't row with that," he said, rising to his feet. "Come sit in the middle of the canoe, and I can get us back just fine."

Something had happened between the two of us, and I didn't like it at all. Gods, I was more animal than I'd thought. I'd wanted to press my mouth to his and then some. I blushed just thinking about it.

How could that have been in me? That desire, and for Roan of all people?

It was everything I'd never wanted. I tried to remind myself again and again.

It would have been easier had we not been living together.

"I'll never sleep again," he was saying. "I'll see nothing but those long, yellow fangs each time I close my eyes from now on."

We'd been back for hours, and he was still sky high, pulsing with energy like it had just happened. Which it hadn't. It had taken us hours to get back. We'd gone with the channel until it'd brought us out to the salty sea. Roan had pulled us up along the shore and hauled the canoe onto the bank. We were meant to portage it back, carrying it together on our shoulders, but we scrapped that task on account of our injuries, leaving it behind for some other sap to fetch. The walk back was awful enough without the extra weight.

My palm throbbed, and I'd taken to holding it up to my chest to try to slow the blood.



That meant that when I'd bled through Roan's ribbon, I bled right onto my shirt. By the time I realized it, I looked like the bear had opened my chest and someone should start in on my pyre. Even Roan had startled when he'd turned back to glance at me.

He'd limped the whole way, a slow and grueling march away from the she-bear.

Most had been at the last meal when we'd finally made it back, and thank Toke for that. I did not want an audience, though Roan looked like he wouldn't have minded one right about then.

I'd headed for Yeshi's hut, and Roan had followed. We'd found the healer at home with her wife, and when I unwound the ribbon and showed her my hand, she shook her head and set about boiling water and gathering supplies.

I was a mess. I'd never had anything stitched in my life, and I had so badly not wanted to start.

When it came time to sew the skin back together, I put my hand on the small table like Yeshi had asked and reached for Roan with the other. He sat with me, the two of us side by side, and when I squeezed him, he squeezed right back. Yeshi's wife stood behind me, and she rubbed a hand up and down my back.

I was a sweating, shaking mess. It hurt like hell—bright, hot pain—and when Yeshi announced it was done, I responded by vomiting onto her floor.

Roan had gotten me settled back in our hut with a cup of tea. When he was satisfied with my state, he'd gone to share our experience and get us food. I'd been mauled by Esska shortly after he'd left and the moment she'd gotten the news. She fussed over me like she was a new mother and I was her mewling babe. My clothes were no good, and she had me out of them. Then she helped me wash (I didn't need help) and saw me into a fresh change. She put another cup of hot tea in my hands, and when I

assured her I was not dying, she only hushed me.

“Just wait until Indi finds out,” she said. “When she’s back from the coast with Iver and hears about this? You’ll think my reaction is mild.”

I groaned because I knew it was true.

Roan told his story far and wide and eventually came back with food from the kitchen. Being attacked by a bear had an upside, it turned out, and that upside came in the form of all the goodies the women in the kitchen sent to try to make up for it.

We ate. I was starving and so was Roan, but there was still too much, even with his monstrous appetite. We pawned food off on Esska, though she’d just eaten as well, and Roan took to telling the story again.

Now Ess was gone, and my belly was full, and I was spent to the point of exhaustion. I sat in the chair by the fire, Goose curled up beside me, and listened to Roan carry on.

My eyes were closed when I heard him say, “You should have come with me, Fen. You deserve the glory they’d bask you in, and then you could tell your side of the story, the one where I almost shat myself.”

“No thanks,” I said dryly. “I don’t talk in groups.”

I could hear the smile in his voice. “Have you noticed how much you talk when it’s to a raging bear?”

I opened my eyes. It gave me pause, and I thought back. The bear had been charging, and I’d been more scared than I’d ever been in my life, and the words had just been pouring out.

We're sorry. We're leaving. We mean your baby no harm, I promise. I promise. Don't you dare kill us, so help me, Toke.

It'd all been easy to say—I hadn't even been thinking.

But it was like that sometimes. With Indi, with Esska. The wolves. Even with Roan. But that ease came and went. It couldn't be counted on or expected.

I shrugged. It was easier than trying to explain, and I didn't want Roan picking up Indi's tune, that if I just tried harder, practiced more, thought about what I wanted to say more carefully—then I'd be able to speak with ease like everyone else.

That was not the case, and it never had been.

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Roan didn't press it. He went right back to talking about the bear—how big she'd been and how close—and I listened while he wound down. When exhaustion finally caught up with him, we both sat and watched the flames in the hearth.

"I'm happy to be alive," he said quietly.

"Me too."

"Also, I'm never stepping foot into the forest again."

I laughed. "I'm sure they'd have you in the kitchens."

"They love me," he said with certainty. "I'll let Baer know first thing in the morning, and I'll be making sweet hand-pies with Indi by sundown."

I snorted before I could stop myself. Because the truth was, Baer would rip him a new one, and we both knew it.

"He'd say...say I was a bad influence on you."

Roan smiled. "Yeah, he'd be right."

I rolled my eyes, but he didn't see it. He'd looked down at his hands, and his face took on a serious quality, brows drawn and gaze focused. He was thinking hard about something. It made me nervous.

"The elders—" he started, still looking at his hands, "—they're a different generation.

They think differently than us, experience the world differently.” He looked up, stared right at me, and I couldn’t look away. “But the elders won’t be around forever, Fen. We’ll be the elders one day. We’ll be making the decisions.”

I swallowed. “Maybe you will. Women can’t be elders.”

One side of his mouth slowly rose. “Not yet.”

## Chapter Twenty

Roan

She’d never looked at me with so much honest surprise on her face before. Her mouth opened like she was going to say something, but then she closed it again. Her brows furrowed. Finally, she just sighed, her shoulders falling.

“You really think so?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer.

“Fenli, baby!”

Indi’s cries drove a wedge through the moment we were having as she came through our door, her hands soon wrapping around Fen, pulling her into her chest.

“Oh, my girl! Just look at you!”

Fenli tried pushing her away, but the woman was strong.

“Ma, a little air. Please.”

“A bear, Toke above! Yes! I told me you’d been torn to pieces! Let me see your hand.”

“Ouch!”

“Stitches! And look, you’re bleeding through your bandage. We need to change this.”

“It’s a speck of blood. We’re not changing anything.”

“And you broke your wrist.”

“Isprainedmy wrist.”

“Are those bruises under your eyes?”

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Fen lost it there. “Those are my dark circles. They’re always there. Stop fussing over me, I’m fine.”

“Fine,” Indi echoed, disbelief lacing her voice. “Fine? A bear attacked you. A bear. This isn’t just you coming home with a scrapped knee from playing with Esska.”

At that, Indi turned to me.

“Hi, son,” she said, reaching out to pat my shoulder. “Can you believe my girl? Ripped to pieces by a bear and still not letting her own mother fuss over her? I swear, I knew I’d given birth to a wonder when I first laid eyes on her.”

“Alright, Ma, that’s enough—”

“I was all by myself, two miles out from Runehall’s village, when she decided to make her grand entrance. By myself! Two miles out! Did you know that, Roan?”

“No,” I said. “What happened?”

It was only after I’d uttered the words that I caught Fenli’s face—alarmed, shaking her head like our lives depended on it—but it was too late. After the question was out, my wife crumpled, glowering at me like I was the biggest ass she’d ever had the agony of meeting.

I had made a serious mistake.

Indi started in. “I’d been having contractions for days, but they were so light that I’d

never even realized what they were. She's my only baby, after all. I didn't know what the hell was what." She waved her hand, dismissing the ignorance of her past. "When the real stuff hit, holy gods, I was crawling into the ditch and praying for death. If you ever hear some old lady talking about how she was tilling up earth, paused to push out her baby, then wrapped it to herself and went back to tilling, don't believe the ol' hag. That's nothing but bullshit, and she's just too damn old to remember the truth."

Fenli sighed and said, "Here we go," but I thought she was overreacting. Indi's account wasn't that bad.

"Labor is like having your body ripped in half."

I grimaced.

"Anyway, when she finally came, it was like meeting a little elf covered in blood. She was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen, and I loved her from the very beginning."

She turned back to her "elf" and ran her fingers through her curls. Fenli, for her part, encouraged none of it. She also fought none of it. She sat there, passive, and let Indi gush. I suspected there was no point in resisting. Caed women didn't take well to their children fighting them, and it seemed even my wild beast of a wife had had that instilled in her.

"I held her in my arms and cried, deliriously happy to have given birth to this wild beauty."

Wild beast, wild beauty. When it came to Fenli, they were damn near the same thing.

"I got up to walk home, but then the placenta started coming, and it was everything all over again. What a bloody mess that was."



“The pla-what?” I sputtered.

“Good gods, Ma.”

She ignored us both. “It’s like giving birth to a whole other child, but this one’s a sack of meat. It hurts like hell and stinks like blood. No one prepared me for that, so considered yourselves warned.”

Well,shit. That couldn’t be true, couldit?

“Eventually I got the cord cut myself, got up, and got going with her. I’d made it about a mile before clouds rolled in out of nowhere and started a down pour. We walked a mile in the rain. Can you believe that?”

It wasn’t until Fenli glanced at me that I realized the face I was making. Eyes wide, mouth hanging. I blinked and tried to act natural, nod thoughtfully, not look like such a boy, but I knew I’d already failed.

“You’re a lucky one, Roan,” she said, giving my cheek a pinch. “She’s as tough as they come. Been roughing it since she was a sopping wet babe in a poor girl’s arms.”

“Thanks for the story, Ma, but you better get going before, you know, you freak out Roan any more than you have.”

“And she’s clever. And beautiful. Some people think you’re no good with words, but no one can put a bear in its place like my girl.”

She pinched Fenli’s cheek then and took a step back, towards the door.

“Love you, baby. You look tired, so I’ll let you sleep. But I’ll be back first thing in the morning. Yeshe’s not as vigilant as she once was. I’ll make sure you’re cared for

properly.”

“Love you too,” she said, sighing.

“Bye, Son.”

I waved and said, “Bye, Ma.”

The words earned a terrible glare from Fenli, but I only smiled and shrugged. It was what I’d been counting on. But her expression was gone too quickly, replaced by something like worry and regret.

“What is it?”

She shook free of the look and rose from her seat.

“I’m just tired,” she said. “We should go to bed.”

The whole ordeal must have made me bold because I found myself saying, “I don’t know, Fen. When we were out there, you said you’d kill me in my sleep. How do I know I can trust you?”

I’d hoped for a smile, maybe a shake of her head, or an eye roll. A wink would have been amazing, and for a split second I imagined her fingers hooking mine and drawing me onto her mattress with her—

Idiot.

Instead, I got what I deserved. With a straight face and plenty of bite to her words, she said, “You can’t. And it’s Fenli.”

Then she climbed into her bed and under her covers.

With her dog.

We woke up late the next day. I made us both a cup of tea and delivered Fenli hers where she sat, still on her mattress, petting the dog in her lap. She lifted it from my hands wordlessly, taking a sip and finding it to her liking. She smiled, and it was better than a thanks.

As we went about our lazy morning, we were quiet in that comfortable way people can get when they know one another. I never wanted to see that she-bear again in my life, but if the encounter had brought me and Fenli closer—I supposed I was glad we'd run into her.

I didn't rush away to take care of my usual jobs, knowing no one would come to retrieve me when I didn't show up. It was a day off from responsibility, and I wasn't going to give that up.

I caught Fenli in a grimace and asked her about her hand. It was aching where she'd gotten the gash and stitches, so I made her another tea, this one with herbs Yeschi had given her for the pain. Then I tried to distract her, unrolling a map and asking questions about the forms she'd sketched out and the things she'd seen. She joined me at the table, eager, it seemed, for the topic. The more she shared with me, the more I learned just how good at mapping she was, how much she loved it.

"It's beautiful," I said, looking at the rolled-out parchment between us. A lot of what I saw was like the maps I'd been using for years, the ones Gaert made and distributed to groups of hunters. But Fenli's map was also different. She'd based a portion of her style on that of the Saik traders who'd first gotten her into the trade. It was more artistic, but also more helpful. A detailed border offered visual appeal while simultaneously containing information on scale, elevation, and a guide to

understanding some symbols used in the map itself. Likewise, various styles of script were used to differentiate between different places, allowing the viewer to quickly determine what was what. It was more intuitive and more readily understood. My fingers itched to take it out, to retrace her steps and try to see the world the way she saw it. “You have a real talent.”

There was a knock at the door. Before I could think to act, Fenli had the map off the table, rolling it up and stashing it under her blanket while I headed across the room to see who it was. I was surprised to find Baer on the other side.

“I just wanted you to hear the news from me first,” he said in the doorway, turning me down when I invited him in. “The Elders met this morning and came to a decision. You’re to be made wolf hunter, same as Thaas. You boys have,” he hesitated, uneasy with his words, “well, you’ve served your clan well. You deserve it.”

High praise, and from Baer no less. I stood stock-still. Unsure of what to say, or how to proceed. Baer had never expressed pride in me before, not a single time. Now here he was, on my doorstep because he wanted to be the first to let me know that I’d done well.

“Thank you,” I managed.

He reached out a hand and clasped me on the shoulder. His eyes met mine, and he nodded. Then he turned and left.

I’d made him proud. That impossible, stubborn cuss of a man.

I closed the door as a smile tugged at my mouth. I turned back to Fenli.

“They’re making me a wolf hunter,” I said, unable to keep the surprise and the joy

from my voice. “Baer is—he’s happy with me for the first time in forever.” I laughed.

But Fenli turned away.

She wasn’t the same after that. Whatever space we’d traversed in our relationship was lost to us now. She closed herself off to me once more. When I tried to understand, to ask her what was wrong, she denied a change. When I asked her if she was okay, she claimed tiredness or a headache.

But I knew they were lies. She was pushing me out again, regretting the few hours we’d had when she’d let me in closer. No bear could fix this, I thought bleakly.

Fenli was determined to keep me at arm’s length.

And I didn’t know how to change her mind.

### Chapter Twenty-One

Fenli

I couldn't stop thinking about the wolves. Roan was being made a wolf hunter, and I was falling apart inside over the news. I shouldn't have been surprised. I'd known it was coming, and yet I'd still let myself forget. Like an idiot, I'd gone and opened up to him, in that space we shared after the bear attack. I'd let my defenses down, and then I'd paid for it. Not a day had gone by—then this. This honor. This reminder that Roan and I were not alike. He was for the clan, admired and loved. I was for the wolves.

The wolves. For the rest of the day and the one after that, my nerves chewed at me. I didn't want to see them killed, and Roan's elevation in the clan brought the possibility to the forefront of my mind. I was sharing a hut with a man who would soon be tasked with their destruction. He'd head into the forest each day with one job to do, and I'd be meant to stay here, waiting for him to return with blood on his hands.

I couldn't do it. I knew it in the very marrow of my bones. That could never be my life.

It was all I could think about until the clan received visitors and wolves were pushed from the forefront of my mind.

Fear. That was my initial reaction when news of the visitors landed on our doorstep the morning of their arrival. For the better part of an hour, as I sat in the far chair and

listened to Roan talk to several elders, I was nothing but cold dread. As time moved on, however, I'd found the means to land on annoyed and angry instead. The change was much more tolerable, and I supposed I had Roan to thank for it.

The stupid ass.

I watched him from across the long hall. He was in a corner with Iver, and both men took turns talking, keeping their voices low. Roan's brows were angled over sharp, blue eyes, and his jaw was tense as he listened to the older man. His arms were folded in front of him, showing off the muscle in his chest—not that I cared—and the sight of the two men taking everything so damn seriously made me curl my fingers into my palms. I wanted to march over there and tell them to lay off the dramatics, thank you very much, but Indi piped up and made things even worse.

“Aren't they sweet?” she said, looking at the same two men but seeing something completely different. “Our boys.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course that would be her take on the whole thing.

“They're insufferable,” I countered. “I can take care of myself. And you can too, for that matter.”

She waved me off in a gesture that both conveyed her annoyance at my perspective and her unwillingness to get into an argument on the matter. Then she went right back to staring back down the hall, smiling at both of them like they were pure as rain.

Our boys, as Indi had called them, hadn't done a damn thing all day that I couldn't have done myself. As far as I was concerned, the clan was being dumb. Honestly, I could hardly believe they were taking up such protective measures.

At that thought, my heart squeezed, and some of the dread slipped back in. They



weren't without their reasons, I reminded myself.

It was Runehall's clan, after all.

Gods, how I hated it.

Runehall's clan had made the move out to the hinterlands first, three seasons before Toke's clan. Now, having heard that we'd settled in, they'd sent two men to give their clan's official welcome and pass along whatever messages the elders had for each other. Elsynbr's clan had done the same, and Rynwyn's would be around eventually. It was no surprise. Most of it was just for show, I was sure. Brotherhood, strong bonds between the clans, blah, blah, blah—but there was an underlying tension this time around that the elders wanted to keep hidden away so it didn't cause any problems.

Me.

My stomach was in knots again, and I cursed under my breath. I should have gone back to thinking about Roan and how frustrating my day had been, forced to stick with him for the entirety of it by instruction of the elders. We'd risen, received the news, and he'd not left me since. He'd kept by my side when I'd headed to the shat hut and waited outside for me while I'd done my business. We'd eaten our morning meal together, lying low while Esska fetched us all we needed and ushered us back to our hut to have our meat and bread like a couple of shut-ins. Lunch and dinner had been the same, and we were only out slinking around now because we'd been told the visitors were going door to door in greeting and we ought to head out for a bit. Indi and Iver had had a similar day. The clan was trying hard to keep this thing concealed and the old wounds out of sight.

“How's your hand?”

It was hurting like hell, but I said, “Fine.”

Tomorrow, I’d have the stitches out, and I was nervous about it. It was one more thing unsettling me, one more thing I was dreading.

“I’m sorry you have to go through this, Fenli baby. This mess between the clans. It’s all my fault, Toke forgive me.”

“C’mon now. None of that. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“I know, I know.” Her eyes got glassy as she stared down the hall. “Still. I just—I was so ashamed, and I wanted to do better by you. It’s why I—”

But she didn’t continue. She didn’t have to. I knew what she meant to say. It was why she agreed to my early marriage. The union was good for us, showing the rest of the clan that the elders fully accepted us back into the fold. It also set me up for a good future, supposing all you were concerned with was bloodline and a family’s standing. It was bullshit, but I found I couldn’t fault her. After everything she’d been through, it was no wonder she’d agreed. In her eyes, and in the eyes of most, it was more than she could have hoped to offer me.

I put a hand on her shoulder.

“I know.”

I didn’t know what else to say. Lucky for me, Roan and Iver started walking back to us and I didn’t have to say anything. Indi pulled herself together and beamed at both of them. She stood as Iver drew up to her, and it was like watching a fly to honey. She was stuck to him in an instant and he was wrapping her up in his arms, the two of them kissing and cooing back and forth to each other. I made the mistake of glancing at Roan. He stared at the lovebirds like he’d never seen such affection in all his life.

Then his eyes slid to mine uncomfortably. The slashes across his face from our run-in with the bear were as prominent as ever.

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Honestly, had he ever met Indi and Iver?

I all but glowered at him, then turned for the door. I had to leave before I lost my mind, in part because of the three of them trying to suffocate me, but also because those cuts made him look so good I wanted to scream.

“It’s been long enough,” I said as I went. I yanked the door open and headed out into the cool night air, making it only to the corner of the building before Roan caught up.

“Slow down, will you?”

I didn’t. The truth was, ever since he’d touched my hand and run his fingers through my hair in the canoe, I’d been too aware of him in every way, and it was driving me mad. I thought of him entirely too much. If he moved or spoke or drug a hand through his hair, I was noticing it. My eyes kept seeking him out, and my body hummed in response to every little thing he did.

I just wanted to get away.

“You’ve been trying to lose me all day,” he said, his shoulder coming side by side with mine.

“And you’ve been trying—trying to stick to me.”

“You know I have to. Baer wants—”

“Roan Faasval, ever the obedient one. Tell me, why do you try so hard to make that

man happy?”

That surprised him. His gait faltered, and I used the opportunity to get back ahead, leading the way through huts to get to our own. It was overcast and raining off and on, and it brought cold air with it. I liked this weather. It fit my mood.

He didn’t hesitate long. In a moment, he was back on my heels, whispering loudly.

“Why are you doing this? Why are you pushing me away again?”

I frowned. “What?”

“This is always how it is with you. You push me away. Then something happens, and we start to get along. Next thing I know, you’re closing yourself off again.”

I stopped and whirled around on him, my finger digging into his chest. Touching him for the first time. My body flared with heat, and I tried—desperate—to tamp it down.

“How dare you,” I hissed. “I am angry. And I have every reason to be. Don’t make it sound like I’m unreasonable.”

“I didn’t mean that you’re unreasonable—”

“And stop acting like a husband.”

At that, he stilled, a strange energy humming between us. There was a wild look in his eyes, and he took a step closer, showing off the height he had on me. I had to tip my chin up to hold his gaze, and my finger pressed harder into his chest.

His voice was low when he said, “If I was acting like your husband, I’d pull you into my arms and kiss you senseless right now.”

The words seemed to surprise him as much as they did me. We stared at each other. After a few moments, I pulled my hand back to my side. His cheeks flushed with color, and I felt a bit like he had kissed me senseless. I let out a frustrated breath and shook my head, then turned and walked back to the hut.

“That came out wrong,” he said, following.

I didn’t want to hear it. I threw open the blue-green door and stormed in, heading straight for the kettle—until I saw the two men by the hearth and stopped dead. Roan hadn’t seen them yet. He shoved the door shut and huffed.

“Fine. Don’t listen. That’s—”

There was a moment of silence as the four of us looked between each other. One of the men stepped forward, smiling.

“Apologies for surprising you. We’re from Runehall’s clan and are going around starting fires in all the hearths. It’s a sign of goodwill from our elders and clansmen, and we hope you’ll accept our offering.”

Normal enough, but the other man—the one with the dark hair—stared at me with a look I didn’t like. It was recognition, and he walked towards me slowly.

“We appreciate it. Thank you,” Roan said, coming around and standing just in front of me.

The man stopped short. He wore the silver brooch of an elder over his heart, but instead of clouds, his bore flames.

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“I can see him in your eyes,” he said, still looking at me. “You may have your mother’s features, but you’ve got your old man’s eyes.”

I whispered, “Axl,” and he nodded.

This man was my uncle, my father’s brother. I hadn’t seen him since I was six, since the time my father had come to Toke’s clan and—

“I promised him I would bring you home.”

“No thanks,” I said, my voice shaking with so much anger and fear I was surprised I’d gotten the words out. He was an elder now. Axl, an elder.

Why had no one told me?

His jaw flexed, the only sign of his displeasure. “It’s what he wanted,” he said, “why he came back here looking for you like he did. It was his one desire, to have you back in the right clan. A man’s child ought to be in his own clan.”

Roan pushed me more squarely behind him and stepped closer to the man, pulling my uncle’s gaze from me.

“Alright, we’ve heard what you have to say,” Roan said calmly, “but surely this is not the time or the place. We thank you for the fire. Runehall’s people have done us an honor.”

He had my uncle by the shoulder and was gently encouraging him out. Axl hesitated

under Roan's nudging, but his companion echoed the sentiment.

"That's right, let's be on our way," he said.

They all moved past me towards the door, and I could see Axl cool a bit, his temper receding under the men's persuasions. I could hardly believe he'd have such strong opinions about me and how I should live, this stranger who was also my father's brother, and I wanted him out, never to step back into my world again.

I was about to get my wish when his idiot friend had to go and open his mouth.

"This is a matter for you and the other elders anyway, like I said to you before, and when you're all gathered is when you need to make your case."

And my blood thrummed with rage. They reached the door, Roan was about to open it, and I should have just let them go. I knew what I should do, but I was suddenly full of myself.

I was going to do what I wanted.

"It's not a matter for the elders," I said, a bite to my words and heat in my chest. "I've decided for myself, and I don't want that piece of shit's clan. The two of you can go to hell."

The words had poured out; of course they had.

The ones that got me into trouble always did.

There was one moment of pure bliss. My defiance was thick in the air and the awe on the faces of the three men before me made what was about to come worth it.



And holy thunder, did it ever come.

Axl lost it. He lunged for me, and it was all Roan could do to get a hold on his tunic and haul him back. Roan threw him against the door and yelled at him to stand down. Axl tackled him, cutting off his words and sending them both sprawling across the boards.

“That bitch needs to be taught a lesson!” he said, but he seemed to be giving the lesson to Roan on my behalf. He was pissed at me and taking it out on him.

They were scrapping. The reasonable man tried to talk Axl down, but my uncle wouldn’t have it. It was a flurry of fists and arms as both men clawed to be on top. That was when Roan took a hard cross to the cheek. I covered my mouth with my hands, I couldn’t help it. When Roan looked back at the bastard, it was with hell in his eyes.

Axl threw a jab, but Roan managed to block it. Then he slammed his fist into my uncle’s nose so hard he sent him flailing backwards. Blood was streaming from both nostrils, and Axl blinked dumbly as Roan hauled up to his feet, opened the door, and dragged the son of a bitch out into the dark.

“Thanks again for the fire,” Roan said to Axl’s friend as they shimmied around each other in the doorway.

“Yeah, go burn off your dick.”

Roan closed the door, drug the bolt in place, and turned back, his hands on his hips. He was breathing heavily from the exertion, his chestrising and falling under his rumpled shirt. The skin was split at his cheekbone and blood trickled down to his jaw. A bruise was already blooming there, and his hair was more disheveled than I’d ever seen it.

Then there were those slashes from the bear and the trees.

“Really?” he huffed.

It was all he asked.

I didn't respond. I couldn't. My body sang with energy and emotion. My heart pounded. Reckless, I grabbed the pitcher of water and tromped over to the hearth. I poured it out over their stupid fire and watched it all go up in a hiss of black smoke.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Roan

Fenli had made her stand, and I knew there would be hell to pay.

We waited for the storm. I wanted to go out and face it, but there was no way I was going to leave her by herself, not even for a minute. Her uncle could come back, or others could be along to give her grief.

So, we waited for the sky to crack.

We waited for the reckoning to come.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Fenli

Saying those things to Axl had felt like such a victory, but it ended up being my undoing. I'd started a swell of unrest I couldn't control, and it quickly spiraled into something none of us could.

Not even Baer.

“Could you not have deescalated the situation?” he was asking Roan.

We were in our hut. The guests from Runehall’s clan had left not long before, and the first thing Baer had seen fit to do was march over here and pound on our door. Goose had raised unholy hell at that, and it’d sent us into chaos, leaping from our beds, me getting Goose under control, Roan getting to the door and unbolting the lock.

First the big man had ranted about the dog, then about my mattress on the floor and had we still not moved past this? Then, finally, about what had happened with the men.

“Do you really think I didn’t try?” Roan shot back. “It was a tense situation, and her uncle was an asshole.”

He hadn’t fed me to the wolves. That was nice.

“And what about her?” Baer said, turning to me. “Those men told me what you said, word for word. You won’t speak when you should, and then you go and say all that at the worst moment possible?”

And just like that, it didn’t matter that Roan had tried to play down my part, because, of course, the other two men had not. I clenched my jaw.

“She was only sticking up for herself,” said Roan.

Baer laughed, though it wasn’t a nice laugh. “Is that what you call that?” he asked. “I heard she disrespected the elders, called her own flesh and blood a ‘piece of shit’—” I winced, “—and told those men they could go to hell while they stood here and tried to honor her with a fire in her hearth. I think she did a little more than stick up for

herself. In another time, that would have started a war!”

Roan lowered his voice. “No one is going to war.”

“You’re damn straight we aren’t,” Baer said. “Not while I’m alive, and not over the likes of her.” He looked at me then. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

I lifted my chin in response.

“Marriage was your salvation from Runehall, and yet you fight it. We sought to help you, and you threw it back in our faces. We ask you to lie low, and instead you pick a fight.” His fist came down on the table, and I flinched, the pottery shaking.

My anger rose, and I grabbed hold of it. “I won’t be tread upon,” I said, voice shaking. “That man—that man was a-aw—”

“Awful? Like your father, no doubt! Why do you think we took your mother and you back? Your father was a violent drunk, and that is exactly why we tried so hard to give you a future here without picking up our metal. Is that what you want? A war fought for you?”

I shook my head—of course I didn’t—but he wasn’t letting up.

“Because I can tell you right now, it will not happen. I have done everything I’m willing to do to save your ungrateful hide. I gave you my son, for Toke’s sake!” He took a step closer, Roan still between us, and lowered his voice. “If it comes to bloodshed, we stand down.” He shook his head. “They can have you.”

Roan put his hands on Baer’s chest and pushed him back.

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“That’s enough,” he growled. My pulse was pounding in my ears. “She heard what you had to say. Now get out.”

Baer kept his eyes steady with mine. Then he turned and went out the door, just as quickly as he’d come.

I sat back in my chair. My mind was a blur, everything hazy. I looked at the table before me but saw through it, unfocused and unbelieving.

How had things gotten so bad? Why was I so foolish?

“Are you alright?” Roan asked.

I looked at him and blinked. Saw the split near his eye, where Axl had hit him, the bruise blooming under the skin.

He said, “He didn’t mean all that.”

I whispered, “Yes, he did.”

My shirt was red with my father’s blood, and I was screaming.

“Leave it,” someone was telling me.

The world had gone black, and my arms were being pinned down. I fought back with all I had, twisting and pulling, trying to get away but being held still. I only wanted to be away from the blood. I had to be. I needed to wash it off, scrub my skin raw,

submerge myself in the river until I was clean.

It was all my fault.

“Leave your shirt on. Please. It was just a dream.”

I slowed down and shook the fog from my mind. I was on my mattress, and there was no blood. It was only my own sweat. Hands loosed from around my wrists. Only then did I notice Roan.

He was kneeling beside me, leaning over, his knees pressed into my side. I could see his face, lit by the candle he placed on the floor next to us. His eyes were bright. He let out a careful breath and pulled his hands back slowly.

“You alright?”

“No,” I gasped.

He nodded. “You were dreaming of your father.”

“It was all my fault,” I said, choking down gulps of air, “when he died.”

“No, it wasn’t.” He leaned in closer, as if he wasn’t close enough already. His nose lined up with mine, and his hand went to my cheek, pulling my gaze to his, not letting me look away. “He was drunk. He was hurting Indi. He fell and got what he deserved. He fell and hit his head.”

“It’s not true,” I whispered. “I pushed him. Indi didn’t tell anyone the truth, so I didn’t either. But I pushed him. I’m the reason he’s dead.”

I told Roan everything. It was madness to confess after all this time of secrets and

getting away with the death of my own father. But I was feeling mad. It was pressing down on me, had been suffocating me for years, and I had to let it out.

He'd come to Toke's clan looking for us. He'd started hitting Indi. I hadn't thought about anything but helping her. I'd shoved him. Came from behind and put my shoulder into his side with all I had. He'd tipped, arms wheeling briefly, and then he'd fallen. His temple met the edge of the table.

Like all the stars had aligned.

Like the universe and all the gods had conspired.

To help a six-year-old girl kill a towering man.

The guilt had been instant, and it had been overwhelming. I'd killed my father, and my mother had had to lie to hide the truth. I'd burned with shame ever since.

But now, something was different. I listened to the story as I told it from my own lips—and I realized what I never had as a child: I'd done nothing wrong. I'd stepped in to save my mother. His death was not on my hands.

It was on his own.

"Toke," I said, breathless. I found Roan's eyes and stared. "It's not my fault."



He didn't even hesitate. "Of course it's not your fault."

I heard the rain then, loud on the roof. It was a wonder I hadn't noticed it before, a testament to how racked I'd been with the dream and the past come back to haunt me again and again.

I rose to stand on shaky legs.

"What are you doing?" Roan asked, but I didn't answer.

I walked to the door, and he followed behind, watching my every step. My palm shot with pain as I grasped the handle and pushed, but I hardly cared. I stepped out into the rain and felt the shock of cold it brought.

I let it soak me. Until my clothes and my skin were wet through. Until my hair was dripping.

When I finally turned back, blinking, I found Roan still in the doorway. There was a blanket in his hands, but he didn't usher me in. He waited, watching me, like he understood my need for this. Like he couldn't pull his eyes away and never would.

I faltered, then felt my legs carrying me towards him. When I reached the hut, he made room for me in the doorway, wrapping the thick wool around me and rubbing my arms as I came under the protection of the roof and the walls.

He said, "You're a wild thing and not for taming."

And my heart gave a sad pang.

Why?

I looked up into his eyes, and I knew.

“Maybe that’s why the clan won’t have me.”

He took my shoulders more firmly and pushed me back just enough to look me full in the face. “This clan will have you, Fen. This is where you belong.”

And I almost believed him.

The next day, the delicate lie we’d been trying to preserve came apart and crumbled into ruins.

It was a crowd. They were at our door before the sun was at its height.

“Is she even trying to abide by our ways?” asked a woman. “No.”

I’d gone up into Roan’s loft, and it still hadn’t been far enough away. I could hear them all, gathered together and discussing the problem at hand: me. Roan had gone to meet them in a fury. And he’d come face to face with his own mother.

“We just want to make sure we’re doing what’s best for the clan and for Fenli. What if she’d be better off with her own people, Roan? What if you’d be better off?”

“We are her people,” he insisted.

There had been a sharp increase in voices until Roan’s voice rose above all of them. He took them all to the meeting house where they could discuss me far enough away

that I couldn't hear.

I didn't know whether to be relieved or furious.

I was both.

I headed back down the ladder and tended to the fire, growing it until I had an inferno I could watch rage and burn. Yeshi came over then, and I let my anger anchor me as she went to work cutting out my stitches, not so much as flinching. She applied the salve, wrapped the hand, and gave me instructions I nodded along to but didn't hear. Then she left and I was back at the hearth.

This wasn't me. I was made of rain, not fire. But even as I thought it, I felt the heat licking inside my chest.

I wanted to prove them wrong, to make them eat their words. I wanted to be a child of Toke's—undeniably, unequivocally. And I wanted to go to bed each night and rise each morning knowing that I was where I belonged and among the people I was meant to be with.

But it felt out of reach.

I'd just started in on my hair, spitting mad and sliding the blade through a chunk on the right, when Roan came through the door. My hand stilled, and he drew to a halt when he saw me, still holding the knob. He blinked, taking in my state, then entered, swinging the door closed behind him.

All the fight went out of me. All the rage and boldness that surged up inside when I was alone dissipated. I drew my hands into my lap, my cheeks heating. I looked down at the floor.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

I didn't know what Roan would say or do, but I braced myself for a scolding. Why, at a time like this? Do you want to make things worse?

I wouldn't know what to say.

He walked to the table, dropped his bag, and from the corner of my eye I could see him hesitate. After a moment's pause, he walked over.

"Do you mind?" he asked. His hand reached out, hovering in front of the knife in my own.

I bit my lip and slid the handle into his palm. I felt so small in that moment—foolish and irrational—like a child caught doing wrong.

I thought he'd take my knife and slide it into his belt, but I was wrong. Instead, he moved to my side and took up the hair I'd been cutting.

His touch sent a shock through the whole of me. He was slow and careful as he eyed my sloppy work and started in himself. He ran the blade down my hairs like he'd done this before. After a few cuts, he mussed the locks, his gaze sharp.

And my insides lit like fire.

I felt every touch, each tug and brush and cut he made. I didn't know if he could see the gooseflesh that he caused me, but I felt it all like a storm across my skin.

Against my best judgments, I relaxed. Whatever fight I'd been considering upon his

first touch had fled by his third. I was too far gone.

He made me dizzy with it. Stupidly relaxed, blissfully indulging. I wished he would never stop. I hoped he would do more.

Run his fingers down my neck.

Trail the curve of my spine.

Gods above, what were these thoughts?

I didn't know, and I didn't care.

A different part of me had taken over. I closed my eyes and lost myself in it.

Too soon, he'd made his way around my hair and was standing back in front of me. He tousled it a few more times, checked again for evenness, and smiled, meeting my stare.

"Looks good," he said.

I was without words.

He flipped the knife, catching it by the blade, and held out the handle to me.

I took it.

And just like that, everything came to a head in my mind. Those who wanted me gone were growing bolder; I had never belonged here; I was starting to feel things for Roan.

Rahv was right.

I needed to leave.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Roan

Baer in the meeting house when I found him and pulled him out the side door, into the back alley so we could speak in private.

“I don’t have time for this,” he said.

“You’ll make the time.” I tried not to regret my boldness.

Why do you try so hard to make that man happy?

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Fen's words had taken up too much space in my mind, and I couldn't seem to shake them. She'd been wrong—Baer's concerns had had nothing to do with my actions the day her uncle had come to the village, following her like her own shadow, never letting her out of my sight. That had been my own worry and protectiveness, to hell with Baer's. But she'd been right, too. I had been trying to make Baer happy since I was a snot-nosed boy half a world away from home and missing my mother.

But not today.

Baer narrowed his eyes but didn't argue. I took a breath and got right to it.

“This clan is thinking with its ass. We're making enemies of our own, and for what? To make Runehall's happy? Fenli is not a risk to us, and we need to stop thinking of her like she is.”

“It's not that simple.”

“Is it not? Ten years ago, our elders committed to keeping Fen and Indi here.”

He cut me off. “We did, and you were the solution. Now look where that's gotten us. She won't even accept you, and you're too dumb to see her rejection for what it is.”

“It was a lousy solution!”

“It was the only one we had.”

I raised my chin. “I don't believe that.”

He scoffed at my words. “Well, do enlighten me on how better we could have handled it. In the meantime, I’ll be in there,” his finger jutted to the door, “trying to solve actual problems.”

I grabbed his arm when he tried to leave, and he looked down at the hand I dared to lay on him.

“This clan treats Fenli with no respect, but it’s more than that. It’s not just her. It’s Esska, too. It’s anyone who wants to do anything that doesn’t fall neatly into the perimeters of our traditions.”

I’d never spoken out against my father and our clan like this before, and it gave me a kind of heady rush. I didn’t think before I said my next words.

“Fenli makes maps, you know. Meticulous, accurate maps. That’s what she wants to do. Not care for the birds or dye the fabrics. And Esska! She wants to hunt. I’ve been teaching her, and she’s damn good—”

He ripped his arm from my grip.

“You what?”

“This clan needs to change, to allow people to take interest in more than what they’re assigned.”

“Fool,” he spat. “You’re a damn fool. We have traditions for a reason, and if you drug me out here because you imagined you were doing those girls a favor, you were mistaken. When are you going to wake up to the world and stop dreaming this nonsense?”

It was then that it dawned on me what I’d done, the secrets I’d divulged. My heart



sank.

“Don’t follow me into this hall,” he said. “And never repeat those words you just told me again.”

I didn’t grab for his arm this time. He went back to the others, and I stood in the alley alone.

Shit.

I left, needing to talk to Esska or Fenli or both of them, but it was Ess I came across first. She was in front of the dye house, talking to some of her friends, and she frowned when she saw me.

“What is it?” she asked as I came closer.

I glanced at her friends, then back at her.

“Can I talk with you?”

She gestured to the narrow path that wound between structures and out to the brush, and I followed her down it. I wondered what I’d tell her—how I’d tell her—and when she turned back to hear what I had to say, I still didn’t have an answer.

“I’ve made a mistake.”

“I figured that,” she said. “What did you do?”

“I told Baer.”

She shook her head, not understanding. “Told him what?”

“I told Baer too much. I didn’t mean to. I was angry, and I hate the way this clan forces people to—”

“Roan,” she said, interrupting me. I could see on her face that she knew what I’d done, but she asked me anyway. She said the words slowly, like she was hoping she was wrong. “What did you tell Baer?”

I hesitated, but there was no way out of this. I couldn’t take it back, and Ess needed to hear it from me.

“I told him about Fenli’s map making. And about your hunting.”

She screwed her eyes shut, her jaw tight. “You promised,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry. I know. I was trying to help.”

“Help? I’m not ready to prove myself yet. And they’ll take all Fenli’s things! She’s already in enough trouble as it is. Are you honestly trying to make everything worse?”

One hand was on her head and the other gestured wildly. Her words felt like harsh blows, bearing witness to my foolishness and my shame.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “I was trying to stand up for you two. I thought if Baer could understand—”

“If only you could understand. You are naïve, brother. This clan works against anyone who would imagine a different path forward, and our secrecy is our greatest advantage. It’s all we have.”

“But you want to be a hunter. With the clan, not in secret.”

“And I’m not ready for that, am I? You think they’ll let me try to learn?” She turned away from me, shaking her head like she couldn’t believe how stupid I was. “My only hope was to really prove myself, when I was ready. One shot.” She stopped and her shoulders, which had been high with tension, fell as she sighed. “Even that was just a dream,” she said, quieter.

“Ess, I’ll fix this.”

“Just stop,” she turned back to face me. “Don’t try to help now, and don’t pretend like you thought you were helping when you told my secrets.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she lifted a hand, silencing me.

“You finally stood up to Baer, but who did you risk? Not yourself.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Why didn’t you tell Baer about how the clan has held you back? A marriage you didn’t ask for. Being kept in the Hinterlands for ten long years when all you wanted was to go home. You traded your friends to make Baer happy. Dropped Jory like a sack of wet linens—didn’t even look back—and picked up with Thaas because you took the hint. Thaas! Dull, boring Thaas who has the personality of a slug!”

“That’s—”

“But you didn’t bring up any of that, did you? You went to Baer on our behalf, and you kept your own business out of it.” A long pause stretched out between us. “Well, thanks for nothing.”

She walked past me, her shoulder striking mine as she left down the narrow path. If I could have thought of anything to say, I would have said it, but there was nothing that could help mend what I’d done.

If that had been Esska’s reaction, how much worse would Fenli’s be? I wished to the gods I could go on without telling her, but I knew what I had to do. I was an idiot, but I wouldn’t be a cad. I resigned myself to the hell she’d raise.

Then I struck out to find her.

Finding Fenli proved much harder. I often wondered if she’d been drawn to map making so she could better find places to hide. Explore to her heart’s content, find a hide-away all to herself, then strike it from the maps so she could keep it all to herself. It sounded like something she would do.

And like something I wished I could do.

In the end, she was out by the surf, leaning up against a boulder and watching the waves. In another hour or so the sun would besetting over the ocean, coloring the sky. For now, it was blue with a wash of fine clouds.

“There you are,” I said, coming alongside her and taking a seat. “You haven’t talked to Ess this evening, have you?”

She shook her head, still looking out over the horizon.

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I nodded. “I don’t know how to tell you this, so I’m just going to say it.” That got her attention. She looked at me for the first time since I’d joined her. “I told Baer about your mapping. I was trying to help, but—but I made a terrible mistake.”

She stared—not saying a word—for too many agonizing moments. I waited for the floodgates to break. I braced myself for it. But then her eyes slid away, back to the sea, and she sighed.

“Why in the world would you think that was helpful?”

“I—” I faltered. “I don’t know. I was trying to tell Baer that he was wrong about you, about more than just you, but...”

I trailed off, and Fenli didn’t fill the space.

“I made things worse.” I thought about what would happen next. They’d come for her things. All her materials, her maps, taken away. Rumors would spread. Life for her would be even harder. “Gods, Fen. I’m so sorry.”

She rose to her feet and dusted the dirt from her palms, wincing. I snatched her wrist and held her injured hand between us.

“You got your stitches out?”

“This morning.”

“Damn, I meant to be there with you.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Fen, I’m sorry. I’ve ruined everything.”

She pulled her hand away.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said again, and then she turned, heading back toward the village.

“How can you say that?” I scrambled after her, trying to glimpse her face as I drew up beside her. “It matters.”

She smiled. It was a small, sad thing, and I couldn’t understand it. Where was her rage? Her ire?

Where was Fenli?

“Fine, it matters.” She looked at me. “But I don’t care anymore, Roan. Don’t worry. I know you meant no harm. You were trying to help.”

I stopped in my tracks, but she kept right on ahead. “Why are you not angry?” I called out over the wind.

She turned and walked backwards, her hair flying around her face, lashing her cheeks. “Anger is exhausting,” she said, “and I’m tired. Will you do me a favor, though?”

“Anything.”

“Don’t hunt the wolves. I couldn’t bear it—you, being a wolf hunter.”

Then she turned back and left me there with nothing but her words.

I wasn't even sure I'd heard her right. Nothing made sense to me, not her request for me to bow out from the wolf hunt and not her detached reaction to the secret I'd told. I thought back to the first time I'd met her, how mere moments in her hut had prompted her to hide every scrap of paper and drawing nub from sight. She'd been desperate to keep her things, keep the private life she'd made for herself. And now, she wasn't.

She acted like she didn't care at all.

It would have been better if she had yelled, I realized. I wished she'd raged and fought and swore. What did it mean that she hadn't?

I glanced at my feet and startled. There, by the tip of my boot, was a long bone. It was the femur of a deer, broken cleanly into two halves.

It signified an ending.

And it was a bad omen.

Chapter Twenty-Five

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Fenli

Before I left the clan for good, I decided to give the wolves I'd found the best chance I could.

I was going to sneak into Gaert's hut and alter the maps. Where he'd etched out their island, I would put harsh seas instead.

The time had come to make the wolves invisible.

The cover of dark would have been nice, but I couldn't do the deed when he was in his hut sleeping, so I went in the early morning, not long after he'd left for the kitchens to get his first meal. Soon he'd be back, and he'd be going for his maps. While it would have been ideal to have a bigger chunk of time to work with, I couldn't afford the risk that he'd take along one of the maps I needed to alter with his day's work. I had to act now, in this small window of time. I had to move through them as quickly as I could, changing each place where he'd made even the slightest gesture of the wolves' island, and then I needed to run.

I took a steadying breath. After checking to make sure the path was clear, I pushed off the side of the log pile I'd been crouched beside and headed for his door, slipping inside the gloom.

I held up my lantern and turned the nob carefully. Light stretched across the clutter, and my stomach sank.

It was a mess.



There were tables and papers and spools and notebooks spread everywhere. Shelves along the walls held even more. I caught sight of a large satchel slung across a chair with rolls of parchment sticking out from under the flap. Tall cylinders in the back corner that might hold gobs more.

“Shit.”

How could I be sure I’d gotten them all when there were this many?

Resolving myself to try, I went to the table and started flipping through the drawings piled there first.

Nothing. All of them focused on the forests inland, and I moved on to the satchel.

It took me too long, but it was the same. Maybe the clan wasn’t interested in the islands? I felt a bit of hope rise up in me.

The notebooks were the hardest to look through. They kept rougher sketches, which I supposed made sense, but they were annoying as hell for me to decode. Most of them were innocent, but a few started ordering the islands. When I came across the first sketch with the wolves’ island indicated, just a loop of space against the sea, I bit my lip. Heart pounding, I pulled out my tools and set to work. First, I carefully eased his marks off the page with my scrap of wool, spreading it across the sea. Satisfied, I took a moment to steady my hand, then continued Gaert’s style lines for waves.

I was moving too slowly. I’d wasted too much time and not gotten far enough in this mess of a hut, and I knew it. Pushing myself, I grabbed the next notebook and flipped the pages as quickly as I dared.

I made my way through several more notebooks and the maps in the back corner, removing them from their leather canisters, spreading them across the floor, and

sweeping over them at a furious pace. I found four more maps to alter, dripping sweat on the last one as I worked.

That was when I heard it. Footsteps approaching the door.

I had seconds. I rolled the map with one push of my hand, leaving it on the floor against the wall as I slipped under the back table, extinguishing my lamp. I hunched behind a canvas sack just as the door swung open and light poured in from outside. It lit up the wall next to me and likely some of the sack I hid behind, if not all of it.

I scarcely breathed.

Gaert came in and closed the door behind him, pitching me into darkness. Better, I thought, but he seemed to change his mind. A moment later, he kicked the door back open, and the light was flooding around me once more. I squeezed my eyes shut.

He stomped around the hut in a hurry. I could hear him shuffling through papers, lifting things up and down, and I imagined him grabbing what he needed for a day spent in the woods.

I prayed it didn't bring him back by my corner, but I prayed in vain.

The next moment, he was at the table I hid under. The map I'd left discarded on the floor was at his feet, rolled up against the wall, and all he had to do to see it was glance down. Besides that, the leather canister I'd pulled it from was uncovered, its top resting on the table he was now surveying.

I was seconds away from being discovered.

Only then he turned and left, just as quickly as he'd come. I heard him grab a few more things before his footsteps retreated and the door swung shut.

Darkness. Relief swept over me. I would have imagined a map maker being more observant than that, but I was glad to be wrong. I thanked Toke again and again, too afraid to leave my hiding place, unable to manage anything else.

When I'd gathered myself enough, I crawled back out and returned everything to its proper place.

In the dim light (I couldn't bring myself to use my lamp after that), I looked over the hut once more. I hoped I'd left no signs of my unwelcome visit. Aching to check all the maps more carefully, but not daring to try my luck further, I turned for the door, forcing myself to leave.

Sure that the street was empty, I closed the door behind me and made my way to the outskirts of the village. I went back to my hut and pulled my prepared pack from under my blanket. Then I rolled up the bedding and bedroll and grabbed the axe I'd stolen from the storehouse yesterday evening. After putting a note on the table, I let my eyes trail the inside of the hut one last time. They came to rest on the battle sword, still sitting where Roan had set it all those days ago, after he'd held it out to me, and I'd left instead of taking it. My thoughts spanned several moments. I made to leave it behind again, then hesitated.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

I'd been wanting to pick it up for weeks. Whenever I'd caught sight of it, my curiosity had swelled. Now, the draw was overwhelming.

I shouldn't take it. It had been a gift, and I was leaving him. But it would be helpful to have on hand. I could defend myself better with it than with the axe, and it would be like taking a piece of him—I buried that thought, grit my teeth, and marched over, picking up the battle sword and leaving before I could contemplate it any more.

I was taking it because I was too smart to turn down something I could protect myself with—that was all.

Without a backward glance, I slipped into the woods.

For good.

I wasn't ready to join the Godless so soon after losing my own clan. I wanted to be alone for a while, to gather my thoughts and try to figure out who I was if not Toke's.

I left Goose safe within Roan's hut and went out to the wolves' island. Iver's brother had passed into the afterlife just a few days before, and I didn't think anyone would be collecting on his canoe anytime soon so that was the one I took from the lodge. It was unique for a person to have their own canoe, but the man had been one of the clan's lead scouts as well as a craftsman. He'd made it himself and cared for it himself. It would not be missed for some time, and I hoped it would keep my tracks covered. I didn't need long.

When I reached the island, I found the hut that was in the best repair, and I moved in

my things. It was about a mile east of the wolves' den, and I hoped it was far enough to give them the privacy they needed. The earthen roof was decent. The stone face was crumbling in one corner, but I thought I could repair it. The door needed replacing as well.

I thought about the blue-green color Roan had painted the door of our hut. His hut.

I bit my cheek and pushed the thought from my head. It was time to make my own life for myself, here now, and, when I was ready, with the Godless. Looking back would only hurt.

I needed to adjust. Day by day. Step by step. I'd figure this out. This was what I wanted.

That was what I was thinking when slid to the floor, my back against the wall, and cried into my knees.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Roan

The day was long and miserable. I hadn't caught a glimpse of Fenli since leaving the hut that morning, and I wasn't sure where she was hiding. If she was anything like Esska, she was avoiding me. I'd seen my sister twice, and each time she'd glowered at me before turning and putting as much distance between us as she could. I could take a hint.

By lunch, word had gotten out and rumors were spreading. Fenli's maps, Esska's hunting. It was news, and it was catching like wildfire. At first it had been only whispers; by the last meal, many had moved on to outrage.

It was then that Esska, defiant as ever, made her trek through the village with two rabbits slung over her shoulder. She brought them to the kitchens, ignoring the looks and the words spoken behind hands, same as every other hunter offering his day's work.

A small crowd gathered. I pushed my way through towards the front just as a kitchen matriarch came out, blood on her apron and a rag thrown over her shoulder.

She blocked the doorway, not allowing Esska to enter.

"We don't want your rabbits," she said. "Your meat won't be coming into my kitchens."

"It's good meat," Ess said.

"We won't have it."

I'd seen enough.

"Her catch is just as valuable as the next hunter's," I said, but Ess didn't let me get another word out. She turned and thrust her rabbits into my hands.

"You've helped enough," she said quietly. Then she shouldered through the men that had gathered.

I went to the bunkhouse and gave the rabbits to Jory. He didn't ask why when I told him to pretend they were his, and I knew the story must have reached his ears.

When I got back to my hut, Fenli still wasn't there. I made a fire and tried to make sense of the mess I'd made. Goose sat with me, and I ran my fingers through his fur absentmindedly. It wasn't until the sky had darkened to black that I realized Fen

wasn't coming back.

My heart pounding, I began to search the hut. Her sack was gone, along with the bulk of her possessions. Even the battle sword I'd made her, the one she'd refused to so much as look at, was missing from its spot on the table.

Shit. How could I have missed it all?

And there sat a note, waiting for me. It had been there all along.

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I'm leaving the clan.

I'm sorry.

Tell my ma and Ess.

I'm sorry.

The words were a blow, leveling me until I found myself sitting in the chair, my head in my hands.

She'd packed, and she'd left. Maybe I should have known to expect it, but I was a fool.

Goose came and pressed his head into the crook of my arm.

"She left you, too."

He thumped his tail pathetically.

"I knew she didn't want me, but you? Why would she leave you behind?"

It didn't make sense. The Godless would have had him, and surely that was where she had gone. Yet here the beast was, tucked away in the hut, the only thing she'd left me.

Would she make it there safely on her own? After everything we'd gone through with



the bear, and she was still slipping through the forest by herself, no one at her back.

It was more than I could handle. Shaking myself out of my stupor, I packed my sack and set off to get Ess. The two of us would head to the camp where the Godless lived, and we would find her. She would be fine.

Esska needed no prodding. She took one look at my face, glanced at the note, and was pulling her boots on before I could even finish asking her if she'd go with me.

"We're bringing her back," she said, no question in her voice. "She belongs here. Damn it. Damn this clan for making her feel otherwise."

We told no one that we were going. We left in the dark, went for a few hours, then made camp. The next morning, we were up with the sun and cutting our path through the forest without a word. As the sun set again, we came upon the camp of the Godless.

A small group came out to meet us, and I found Tovin's face among them. Even after all these years, even with how much he had changed, I still looked him in the face and recognized my friend, like all the time between us meant nothing.

"Roan," he said stepping forward, his voice punctuating his surprise.

We clasped hands and knocked shoulders. I wasted no time asking about Fenli.

But she wasn't there.

It was a bad sign.

If she hadn't made it to the camp, then the only explanation was that she'd run into trouble along the way. The thought hollowed me out.

Tovin took us to his hut, and it wasn't long before food and drink arrived from the kitchens, the small table between us filled with hot bread, a crock of stew, and more mead than we needed.

"The Godless are generous," I said, but my mind was on Fenli.

Tovin grunted a laugh. "The Godless still, huh? I'd forgotten they called us that."

I looked up. "That's not what you call yourselves?"

He shook his head, and I should have known. It had just never dawned on me.

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're fine," he said, ladling the steaming stew into a bowl and handing it to Esska. "Anyway, we refer to our clan as the North Clan or the Star of the North."

And it made sense because they'd come here to the Hinterlands long before the rest of us.

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We ate and stayed up late into the night, talking of Fenli, Tovin's family back with Toke's clan, and—finally—of why Tovin had left all those years ago.

The reason was nothing I had expected.

“Not my brother,” he corrected me when I spoke of who I'd known of as Aeric. “My sister. Her name is Helva.”

Then he'd told me their story, Helva's confession to her family and to the elders, their nonacceptance of who she told them she was. A girl, not a boy. They'd told her to forget the notion or leave.

The notion.

Tovin had spat out the words.

All those years, and I had never learned the truth of why they'd left. All those years, and it had been kept a secret.

Of the four tribes, only Elsynbr and Rynwin's people made space for their members who felt differently about their genders than what others had first supposed. I'd heard whispers of it, but nothing more. And I'd not thought much about it, not thought that there would be people in Toke's clan who'd needed that same space offered to them.

And who hadn't gotten it.

Helva had been forced out, and Tovin had gone with her.

The North Clan was full of members with similar stories, people from the four different clans who found a new clan for themselves here. Most of them still worshiped the deity to whom they'd been born. Our problem was never with Toke, Tovin said, and his words struck me—too late, but finally, at last. There it was, and I saw things with new eyes.

What was our clan doing? Clinging to the old ways at the expense of real people, and for no reason save our ignorance and our fear.

Fenli would be accepted here, I realized, and my chest ached at the thought.

If we find her.

"I'm glad you two found a clan worthy of you," I said, and Tovin smiled.

He offered us lodging for as long as we needed, but Ess and I turned him down quickly. We had rested and replenished enough.

We had to find Fenli.

We prepared, thanked everyone who came to send us off, and hugged Tovin and Hevla.

"We'll be praying to Toke for Fenli's safe return to you," Helva said to me, and I hugged her again.

Then we left.

I couldn't stop myself from imagining the worst. "We'll find her," Ess kept saying, but I saw the tears that washed her cheeks, and I knew she was just as torn up as I was.

We searched, and we called, and we cut new paths, but in the end, we showed up to the village without Fenli. She'd not turned up while we were gone.

So began the miserable days of unknowing and searching in vain that stretched into weeks.

Esska had put her animosity towards me aside. She never mentioned my betrayal, and she gave up her grievances with me. We were dealing with something bigger now, and we threw everything we had into finding Fenli. We both gave up hunting and went searching every day. When one of the old wolf hunters tried to collect me for training, I refused, the two of us trading harsh words until he threw up his hands and stormed off. Fenli's strange request echoed in my mind. I couldn't bear it—you, hunting the wolves. I wanted to ask her what the hell it meant. I kept searching, making a list in my head of all the questions I had and all the things I wanted to say. Soon Jory joined us, the three of us refusing to stop until we found her. Or found what was left of her.

Every night, I lost myself in mead.

"One moon cycle," Baer said one night, me already well into my cups. We were in the meeting house, and I could feel the eyes on us. "If she's not back by the full moon, then she's not coming back. Your marriage was never consummated, anyway. It will be null."

I looked over my rim at him, my blood heating to a simmer. I'd been growing more and more heated in the past few weeks, and it was bitterly that I'd realized I'd waited until Fenli was gone to join her in this unbound anger. She'd fought against what I had blindly accepted. And how many people had my clan violated and denied? How many Fenlis? Esskas and Helvas? How many Jorys, undervalued and treated like jokes?

I was done playing the role I'd blindly filled for them.

"This isn't about our stupid marriage," I said. "This is about finding Fen. Making sure she's okay."

"You might never get that closure," and it would have made me angry if it hadn't been for the way his voice had softened when he said it.

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I met his gaze and held it for many beats.

“I know,” I finally said.

He nodded. He took one glance around the hall, straightened, and left the way he’d come.

And I knew—as unlikely as it had seemed—that I’d seen grief in his eyes as well.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Fenli

I pulled myself together. It wasn’t like I could sit around crying all the time (though part of the time seemed to work out just fine). I needed to get busy. For starters, I needed food. I’d stolen a bag full of grains from the kitchens that would last me until I joined the Godless, but there was no point in eating only that when there was a river full of fish not far from me. I set out my clay pitcher to catch rain along with a wooden bowl Rahv had carved me as a wedding present and struck out. I’d helped build the fish traps as a child, and I picked the skill up again easily, finding the saplings I needed and weaving them together just so. Satisfied, I set my first trap and got started on the next.

Soon, I decided I needed a door. I had no boards or nails but gathered heaps of saplings and grasses. It took me the better part of a day, but I figured out how to weave them into a tight and thick manner, reminiscent of the way my mother had taught me to weave a mat when I was little. I didn’t like thinking of her. My

loneliness would rise like a wave out of nowhere at the thought, hitting me and dragging me under. I sat in my shelter, working and sipping a pine needle tea I'd made in my solitary pot, and I tried to think of anything else.

When I had a strong, square door, I stretched it across the opening on the inside, overlapping with the stone walls on all three sides. After that it was time for the easy part—chopping down a tree to use as a bar, dropping it into the two metal cradles that had been built into the walls for the very purpose.

Thank you, ancestors.

A draft could slip in between the saplings and grasses, no matter how tightly I'd woven them, but I had an extra wool blanket, and I hung it over the door. It would fail me in winter, but I would have moved on by then. For the time being, it was good.

My first night there was cold and rainy. The next day, I turned my sights to the large fireplace against the back wall of the shelter. It took me the first half of the day to clean it out and make sure it would vent well. When I was satisfied, I moved on to chopping wood for fires.

The axe I'd swiped from the storehouse was my constant companion. I felled trees and split logs with it; stripped kindling and took the branches off trunks. Strapped across my back, it brought me comfort.

Then there was the battle sword on my hip. Once on the island, I'd pulled it from its sheath and looked at it carefully for the first time. And I almost wished I hadn't. It was beautiful, with clouds and sheets of rain carved into the hilt and swirls of wind blowing down the fuller, between the two edges of the blade. I'd strapped it to my waist, and once I'd reached for it, my hand kept going back, resting there on the pommel.



It made me think of Roan. Every time I felt it bump my thigh, every time I wrapped my fingers around the smooth grip, every time I drew it out from its sheath just to slide it back in.

But not for long. There was always more to do, and I threw myself into the work.

I found small trees that had been blown over, and this was where I started chopping and splitting. It seemed there had been a big storm in recent years, and I found more than enough to keep my fires burning for the time I'd planned on spending with the wolves. In a few days, I was well-stocked and sore as hell.

I was a part of the forest now. It was like slipping off one self and stepping into another—a part of me that had always been there, tucked away and waiting.

I didn't know how to feel about it, so I tried not to feel. I didn't think about it either. I just let myself be, out there in the woods with the wolves, and things were simple for a little while. I carved a poem, short and eerie, on a tree near my hut, hardly thinking. When I wondered how far it was from one end of the island to the other, I set off hiking it, never questioning my choice. I just did the things that came to me. I saw myself through my own eyes, for once, and I didn't stop to question how others viewed me. I felt the wildness under my skin, and it felt good. I was glad to have it, and, for a handful of days, I was just that wild bit inside of me. I held onto it and blocked out the rest.

When I started coming back to my full self, it was in dreams. I'd wake to sobs, and I wouldn't realize they'd been mine until I felt the tears on my cheeks. I missed my people so much it nearly broke me, always in the dark of night, when my hands weren't being kept busy and my guard was down. Eventually, I started thinking through my pain during the days as well.

Then I began to grow scared.

It was unreasonable. It was paranoia. I tried to tell myself again and again, but I found I couldn't reason with my own mind. From the moment I first had the idea that I'd removed myself from Toke's protection—maybe even made an enemy of him—I couldn't shake it. Were two gods angry with me now? I'd been taken from Runehall and had now run from Toke. Would he abandon me as I had him?

It was stupid. The gods cared nothing for me and wouldn't notice if I were here or there.

But the thoughts remained, nagging. Persisting. Growing louder.

When I wasn't at my hut or watching the wolves, I liked to explore the island. It helped to keep my mind off too many questions I had no answers for, but it ended up getting me into trouble. I was crossing a river, hoping to climb an embankment and map what I saw below, when I slipped off the rock I'd been standing on and fell into the frigid waters below.

The current was undeniable. I fought to stay above the surface, my gear weighing me down, and I scraped against several rocks, scrambling to grab hold and failing, before my fingers finally held. I hauled myself onto the bank—coughing and sputtering and shaking with cold—and pulled myself up to my feet.

It didn't matter that it was the warm season; it was never warm enough when the sun was setting and you'd been submerged in the icy waters of a river. By the time I made it back to my hut and my fireplace, my fingers felt brittle. Teeth chattering, I fumbled with the morning's coals, trying to feed them and fan them with shaking hands. I was not as effective as I normally was, my own fear creeping in and threatening to make me unsuccessful. In a move that was equal parts desperation and rage, I abandoned the coals long enough to rip off my dripping clothes and throw them at the far wall. Naked as a babe, I turned back to the work, shouting encouragements until I'd managed a small fire.

I squeezed out my hair again, grabbed my wool blanket, and wrapped myself in it, shuddering into its warmth.

It wasn't until my hair was mostly dry and I was sure I would survive the fiasco that I realized what I'd lost to the river. My axe, which I'd taken to carrying on my back, was missing. I feared it'd been dislodged from its sheath on my shoulder strap when I'd been dragged along the rocks in the water. I prayed I was wrong.

The next morning, I was up early, scouring the path I'd taken the day before, hoping it was on dry land somewhere.

But it wasn't.

It was at the bottom of the river, too deep and the current too strong to retrieve.

I couldn't stay on the island without an axe. Trying not to panic, I considered my options. There weren't many.

Leave the island early and show up before the Godless without an axe? I couldn't; I wasn't ready. The idea made my heart race and my stomach squeeze. Besides, I would not be a burden to what I hoped would be my new clan. I had to arrive ready to carry my own, to take care of myself, and that meant showing up with my own axe.

That left me with only one choice. I needed to sneak back to Toke's village. I knew exactly where Roan kept his axe.

And I was going to steal it.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Roan

Tovin had promised to send word if Fenli showed up.

So far, there'd been nothing.

I'd become more pathetic than I'd ever thought I was capable of. I spent my days looping through the underbrush, not even pretending to hunt game, just searching for

her. And I spent my nights a mess, drinking too much, Jory cutting me off and depositing me into my too-big hut to sleep it off.

“I don’t deserve your friendship,” I told him as he dropped me into a chair. “I was an ass. I abandoned you like you meant nothing to me.”

“Yeah, I know it,” he said, “but we were kids. Kids are asses. And you have plenty of time to make it up to me.”

The nights alone in that hut were the worst. I took to spoiling the dog and telling him all my woes until I noticed he’d nodded off and it hit me I was just talking to myself. I’d abandoned the loft and slept with him in her bed, smelling her on the blankets and in the place where she had laid her head.

It had been two weeks since I’d seen her last, since she’d rolled her eyes at my foolishness or scoffed at me to my face, even longer since she’d yelled at me, told me where I could go and what I could do there.

Gods, I missed it. I wanted nothing more than to get scolded by her.

Every day, the odds seemed less likely.

I couldn’t get that image of the deer femur—broken in half and laying in my path as Fen walked away from me—out of my mind. I couldn’t stop thinking about the ending it signified, the omen it proclaimed. She’d succumb to the forest. A bear or wolves. Maybe a twisted ankle or broken bone. Fever. Exposure. It was getting colder at night. She wasn’t the type to get lost, but it could happen to the best of them.

The woods could be cruel.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to think of something else, but it never worked.

Laying there on her mattress, Goose pressed into my side, I promised myself one thing.

If I saw her again, I wouldn't hesitate. I would take her face in my hands, and I would kiss her for all I was worth.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Fenli

I needed to go back to Toke's village, and I needed to steal Roan's axe.

I went over it again and again in my mind. The hinges were silent. If I was slow and careful, I could open the door without a sound. The axe would be hanging right there on the two nails. I only had to reach in with one hand and take it off the wall, then close the door and slip away into the night. He'd be up in the loft, anyway. He wouldn't hear a thing, and in the morning, he'd be scratching his head when he found his axe was not where he'd left it. And I'd be long gone.

I could do it.

Goose would pose the biggest risk, I thought. But he slept like the dead most of the time, and I wasn't even sure if Roan would still be putting up with him this long after my departure. He'd likely sent him out on the streets, another dog in the pack.

The thought made my heart squeeze, and I tried to shake it off. I couldn't have brought him out with me, not so close to the wolves, and they'd take good care of him whether or not he was in the hut. Roan would still play with him, and Ess would make sure he was well fed. I would swing back and get him before I headed off to join the Godless, quiet and unseen.

It would have to be enough.

I made it through the water by the light of the gibbous moon. I didn't bother trying to hide my canoe in the brush. I needed to get in and out as soon as possible; if I wasn't back before someone discovered my stolen vessel, it was already too late.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

I went quickly, finding my way to the village easily. When I saw the dark forms of the huts, I slowed, edging towards ours.

No—his. I cursed myself.

It was strange to be back after two weeks away. Part of me felt like it had been ages. Another part felt like only yesterday I had been stalking through these streets.

When I reached the door, I took a deep breath. Ease it open, take the axe, ease it shut. That was all I needed to do. Easy. It would be but a moment.

There were no lights coming through the window, and I could hear no sounds from inside. I wrapped my palm around the knob and turned it, slow and steady. No sound. I edged the door forward. Perfectly quiet. But when I reached for the axe, I found it was missing from its home on the wall.

Damn.

Roan had always been so particular about putting his tools exactly where they belonged. Where was it?

I wrestled with myself right there in the doorway, uncertain of what to do next. But I had to have that axe. I couldn't go back to the forest without it. I needed it for now, and I needed it for when I joined the Godless. I needed to be able to take care of myself.

I sharpened my resolve. I could do this. I had to.



I looked deeper into the space before me. The moon proved to give just enough light as my eyes adjusted. I could make out the table, the ladder to the loft, and the cold hearth. No fire. That struck me as stunningly stupid. On a cold night like this? I would have had it roaring, and I found myself yearning for a fire right then and there, in a tightly sealed hut instead of the drafty hovel on the island. Oh, the comforts of home. How had I forgotten?

Focus.

I scanned the floorboards for Goose but didn't see him. Relief swept through me at having been given at least one blessing tonight. He was likely with the pack, and it would make sneaking around without being caught much easier.

Carefully, I moved inside, leaving the door slightly ajar behind me.

It was a shock to see what a mess the place was. I thought he'd have cleared my junk out by now, but I could see all my things still in their places, almost like I'd never left. But it was more than just that. He'd gone and made messes all on his own. Roan. The same person who hadn't left out so much as a sock since I'd met him now had boots strewn across the floor, dishes piled on the edge of the table, clothes hanging off chairs, and were those mead bottles? There were several—all empty—scattered around the place he'd always sat.

And for a moment, I wondered if he'd switched huts.

But no—that was the scarf Rahv had knitted him hanging by the door. This was his hut still, and he was here.

My gaze darted up to the loft. Then I heard it. The sound of deep breathing—coming from my bed.

My heartbeat picked up inside my chest. He was in my bed. My eyes caught on the lines of his shoulder, highlighted by the moonlight through the window in the back. I could see the steady rise and fall of his chest, and I knew I was too close. But there was the axe. It was lying on the floor—unthinkable. I could not imagine a world in which Roan Faasval would leave a tool like that discarded and underfoot.

I took a quiet step, then another. I focused on the axe. I tried to keep myself calm. But my eyes kept straying back to him. In my bed.

Settle down, I told myself. All that matters is the axe.

Not the mess, uncanny as it was. Not the empty bottles, not him in my bed.

I only needed the axe.

And I might have gotten it, if only I'd kept my attention off him. But I didn't. From where I stood, my heart so loud I thought it could wake him up, I spied another person in bed beside him. And all the good sense flew out of my head.

I was shock and rage and heartbreak all at once. Not only had he gotten himself a girl in the brief span of two weeks, but he'd taken her into my bed. Forget what I'd thought before about this hut being his now and not mine. My mattress was still on the floor, and he shouldn't have brought a girl into it.

Gods be damned. How could he?

I should have left, but I was a fool. I had to see, had to know if it was Runa or not, so I crept closer when I should have been creeping away. His bare arm was wrapped around her, and I bit the inside of my cheek. I could see his shoulder, his collar bone—gods, was he completely naked?—but the girl was a dark swirl of hair, and I couldn't find her face in the shadows.

I need to leave, I told myself. I should get the axe and go because it doesn't matter who she is.

It was half-hearted. I didn't even try to pull myself away. I had to know who she was.

But then my eyes adjusted, and the picture became clear. Suddenly, I knew exactly who I was looking at, and my heart all but fell out of my chest. There was no girl in that bed.

It was my dog.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

I was taking backward steps, and I didn't even know why. It was Goose he was sleeping with, and I had been all wrong. He was in my bed when he could have been in his. He was sleeping with my dog when he could have kicked him out with the pack. The hut was a mess. Roan was a mess. And I was suddenly in a panic.

I needed that bloody axe. I turned back, my pulse in my ears, and my hand hit the side of the chair. Goose woke. One heartbeat later, he was barking.

I bolted, the axe forgotten. I only had it in my mind to flee. I couldn't let him find me here. I couldn't face him. Not now, not ever.

But I'd sealed my fate when I'd crept back into that man-boy's hut, and now I didn't get the choice.

He caught me. My hand was on the knob when he snagged me by the shoulder and jerked me from my escape.

"Who the hell," he started, but he never finished his words. With a strength I could never possess, he spun me around and shoved me back into the door. It slammed shut, my back smarting at the impact, and I gasped.

His face was one of hard lines, anger clouding his features. Then his eyes found mine. And it was like a crack ran up the whole of him, something else entirely coming out of the depths. His brow softened, slacked, and his lips pulled apart. His fingers unclamped from my shoulders and his posture sagged.

"Don't you dare," I said, thinking he would hand me over to Baer for reckoning.

“Don’t call for anyone.”

But he didn’t say a word. His eyes were as wide as oceans, and I wondered if he was even hearing me. The bruise was gone from his cheek, but I could still make out where Axl had broken the skin. He was close. I shifted, uneasy on my feet. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and I could see that as plain as day now. I prayed to the gods that he was wearing pants.

"Am I dreaming?"

He searched my face for an answer.

“Roan, just let me—”

“You’re alive. I thought you were dead.”

“Sorry to disappoint—” but then his fingers were in my hair. I couldn’t speak, not while he was so close, while his touch ran over my skin. All I could do was feel, and I felt it all.

The shiver that ran down the whole of me.

The heat in my cheeks.

The prickling pleasure.

And the flame that came to life and raged inside me. I thought it might burn me to the ground; I found I hardly cared.

“Roan,” I whispered, and I didn’t know why. I didn’t know what I was thinking. I wasn’t thinking. I was just heat and want. I reached out, bringing one shaky hand to

his chest.

He shuddered, the reaction to my touch wracking his whole body. Then his fingers curled, pressing into my skin with more need than before, and his arms tightened around me, bringing me closer still.

It was madness, and I was mad with it. Hell if I knew what we were doing.

I flattened the palm of my other hand on his stomach, and he hesitated. One hand on his chest, the other on his abdomen. His eyes sharpened, a question there. He wanted to know if I was holding the space between us. He wouldn't breach it if I didn't want him to. But I felt unable to communicate a thing, so muddled was my mind. He waited, watching me, his chest heaving for breath under my hand, his heart racing mine. My own desire shook me from my state. I slid my hand around his back, pressed my body to his, and got lost in his arms as he wrapped them around me, folding me into him. In that place, my lips found his. Soft. Gods, his lips were soft. He was soft and slow and so gods-damned gentle that it woke the beast in me.

Forget my running with the wolves.

This kiss—it was the wildest thing I'd ever done.

I pressed harder into him. Everything he did with care and quiet, I did back with fervor and fury. I kissed his lips again and again, and he let me. I pushed back, my body flush against his, and he conceded a step. I drug my fingers down his back. I growled into his mouth. And I felt his smile against my lips.

It shocked the sense into me. I gasped, pulling away just enough to find his eyes. I'd never seen a man look hungrier.

"I was a mess," he said. "I was a mess with worry. Don't you ever do that to me

again, Fenli Wyn Faasval. I thought you were dead.”

“I...I left a,” but the words weren’t coming. I straightened, pulling my chest away from his though he still clung to my arms and my hands were still over his ribs. He took the opportunity to spin us around, placing himself in front of the door. I shook my head. “I left a note.”

He huffed a laugh.

“Yeah, I got your note. Ess and I went north to make sure you’d gotten to the North Clan safely, but you weren’t there.”

I pulled my hands away.

“You and Ess went...” I trailed off. “Why would you do that?”

He frowned at me. “You had us worried sick. We were going to drag you home. Where have you been?”

I was taking backward steps without a thought. Just that old familiar warning in my head, telling me to flee. Roan’s hand reached out to snag my elbow just as my heels hit the heap of rugs, tripping me.

I got my feet under me and shook him off.

“Shit,” I said, turning away.

What the hell was I doing?

“Fen, slow down.”

“No, I have to go.” I scanned for the axe. Back by the bed. I headed for it, Goose trotting happily beside me.

“Go where?” He sounded upset.

“Just...just go. It doesn’t matter.” I bent down, wrapping my fingers around the worn, wooden handle. “I just came for this. You can get-get another, right?”



He gawked at me.

“Okay.” I tried to shuffle past him. “D-don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

But he stepped into my path, the tension in his jaw catching my focus.

“Tell me why you didn’t join the North Clan.”

“The North Clan?”

“The Godless. Why didn’t you go there?”

What could I say?

“I... I’m going to. I just haven’t yet. I wanted to be,” my words jammed up, and I paused, taking several breaths, “alone for a little while.”

He raised his voice. “Alone in the wilderness?”

“I-I found another group. For the time being.”

“That’s a lie.”

Well, that brought out the ire in me. I leveled him with a look and said, “It’s not a lie. And to hell with you, anyway. I can—can do what I want.”

He let out a sharp breath of air and raked his fingers through his rumpled hair.

“I’m not trying to control you, Fen. I just—”

He took a step toward me and tried to put his hand on my arm, his movements slow. I

let him. When he saw I would not pull away, he ran his palm up and down.

“Fen.”

I met his stare.

“I’m not alone,” I said. “You don’t have to worry. Please. Just let me go.”

Several long moments passed, his eyes running over my face betraying all his troubled thoughts. Finally, he set his mouth into a grim line. He pulled his hand away and stepped aside.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re right, you can do what you want. I’ll let you go.”

### Chapter Thirty

Roan

There was no way in hell I was letting her go.

Fen had lied to my face every day since the day I’d been forced to share a roof with her, and it was time I returned the favor. I’d told her I’d let her go, and I’d stepped aside as she’d left. Then I’d grabbed my bag, crammed some things inside, and took off after her.

She was up to no good. Each time she threw glances behind her, it proved it to me more. It also made it hard as hell to trail her, but I managed, if only just. I had to hang back, catching only glimpses of her dark shadow, hoping she caught no glimpses of me. I wore my dark green hood pulled over my head and kept my face down as much as possible. When she snagged a canoe from nowhere and started across the choppy waters, I almost lost her for good. I had to run down shore and swipe one of off an unsuspecting fisher (he’d be scratching his head later when he came for it), paddling harder than I’d ever paddled in my life to find a slice of her on the horizon once more. Where was she headed? I’d made my home in the Hinterlands for the past ten years, and even I didn’t know what was out this way. There was too much of everything to know it all. The forests were endless, and the channels wound forever on, begetting rivers and streams as they went. There was no end to the islands that cropped up, even miles and miles from the shore.

She'd get lost.

Yet she didn't look lost. She paddled without rest, navigating around outcroppings of rocks when they appeared. Small bits of land were becoming more frequent, then decent sized islands. And just like that, miles out, a large island grew up out of the water, directly in the path she had been cutting.

Like she'd known it would be there all along.

Fenli and her secrets, I thought.

I lagged behind, unwilling for her to see me when I was so close to figuring her out.

I watched closely, noting the trees she pushed between, then rushed to bank my own canoe and pick up her trail again. I could hardly believe what she was doing. It was unheard of, unthinkable.

And yet, there she was. Alone. Traversing miles of water and running up on wild islands to slip between trees in the dead of night.

But why?

There were no answers to my questions, and so I pressed on, following the depressions her boots made in the mud, same as I'd done with deer a thousand times before. It was a challenge in the moonlight, but my senses had piqued, and I wasn't about to lose her now.

"What are you up to?" I whispered.

I could never have guessed the truth.

She finally drew to a stop in front of—I wasn't sure what it was. It looked like some kind of structure, but it was so old there was moss and trees growing on top of it and one corner looked to be collapsed. But there was a door, of sorts. She ducked under the eave, and I knew I had her. I wasted no time, and there was little need for caution now. Whatever her secret was, I'd caught her in it. It was time to learn the truth.

I moved quicker between the trees, drew up to the shelter, and knelt in the doorway just as a bit of light flickered in the space. She was trying to light something, but the spark her flint had made died without catching.

That must have been when she saw me, because she screamed. I heard a swift motion of her reaching for something. Likely the axe.

“Easy,” I said, raising my hands in defense.

“Roan?”

“Fenli.”

“What the hell...”

I stepped into the space with her but found it too dark to see. The moon couldn't offer much here, surrounded by trees, and I didn't think this hut of sorts boasted a single window.

Still, I decided to be polite. “Nice place.”

“Shit.” She dropped the axe and knelt back down to her lamp. “Shit, shit, shit.”

And hearing her alive and cursing was a song to my ears.

It took a few tries, and I could see her hands shaking, her face grim, every time the flint sparked. Finally, the tinder caught, and she lifted it to the lamp's wick, creating a soft glow of light throughout the room. Stone walls, a dirt floor, her bedroll in the middle, right in front of an ancient fireplace. Everything generations old.

She'd done this. Truly, this was where she'd been all these days away. But, for the life of me, I couldn't imagine why.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

She lifted the lamp and turned to me, her face lit with the warmth of the flame, yet there was no warmth in the look she gave me then.

“You told me you’d let me go,” she said, angry.

Shrugging, I said, “I lied.”

A fire stoked behind her eyes, and I knew I was in for a hell of a fight. I smiled. She was alive and well, I’d kissed her and she’d kissed me back, and now I’d get the pleasure of verbally sparring with her. This day couldn't get any better.

I was ready.

“You have to leave,” she said.

“I think I’ll stay.”

“You don’t get to stay.”

“No? Will the others mind?” I saw her jaw tighten. “You said you weren’t alone.” I made a show of looking around. “Do they not like visitors?”

Her voice was low when she said, “They most certainly do not.”

“It’s time to stop lying.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I won’t leave until I have the truth.”

Only I'd never get to hear her response, because as soon as she opened her mouth, a howl sounded in the distance. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I heard the response, maybe half a dozen more on the night wind, surrounding us.

I snatched up the discarded axe and gripped it close, my heart picking up in my chest. But when I looked at Fen, expecting to see a mirror to my concern, I was instead met with hot contempt. She glared at me, then marched back to the open doorway. Grabbing hold of a woven barrier leaning up against the wall, she hauled it over to cover the space, then dropped a birch into two cradles set on either side, barricading the thing shut.

"You're an idiot," she told me, "and you ruin everything."

## Chapter Thirty-One

Fenli

I'd have given up my right arm if it'd meant I could be rid of him, but Roan would not let it be that easy. Now I was left with two choices: tell him the truth about the wolves... or kill him while he slept.

I looked down at him where he lay. No bedroll or blanket. Just his bag propped under his head and his hands tucked under his arms. Peaceful. Vulnerable. Ripe for the murdering.

I heaved a sigh and kicked his boot.

"Wh-what," he stammered, pushing up on his palms and blinking at the space around him. He met my eyes for a moment before shaking his head briskly in an effort to wake up. He took a deep breath and pulled himself into a sitting position, raking his hands through his mop of blond hair. He looked out the door, which I'd opened, and



into the dusk of early morning. “What the hell are you waking me up for?”

“The truth,” I said, grabbing my small bag and tossing it over my shoulder. “If you want it, you’d better keep up.”

He reached for the axe.

“No.” His gaze slid up to meet mine, his hand on the handle. “Leave your metal behind. No axe, no knives.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because I’m not talking otherwise.”

I thought maybe that would be it right there. He’d refuse, I’d refuse, and he’d give up and leave. But he’d heard the wolves last night, I reminded myself. He could tell the others and come back for them. I had to show him.

I decided to soften. “Trust me,” I said. I patted the battle sword on my hip.

With his eyes still on the sword, his mouth set in a grim line, he dropped the axe. Then he pulled the small blade from his boot and another from his belt, tossing them to the floor as well. Satisfied, I turned, ducking under the doorway and heading north towards the den. He scrambled to catch up, then fell into a steady pace at my heels. I felt crazy, leading him straight to my secret. But there was something else there as well. Something I couldn’t unpack, something pressing up on my chest. I tried to ignore it.

When we got to the old cedar, I had a quick look around. It was the early shreds of dawn, but I could see enough to know that the wolves hadn’t made it back yet.

That was lucky.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

I swung the pack from my shoulders and sat, gesturing for Roan to do the same.

“Don’t make me regret this,” I whispered.

He looked at me like he was nervous and more than a little confused.

Good.

We waited in the quiet of the early forest. When the scene around us had lightened into true day, I heard them. Roan perked up beside me, reached for his knife, then stiffened when he came up empty.

“You wanted the truth,” I said.

The first wolf broke through the underbrush. It was the mother, and she headed straight for her pups. The father appeared behind her, followed by the watcher.

“This is the truth.”

The watcher looked for me and found me. Immediately, his eyes shifted to Roan, and he stilled, tail alert.

“I told you you wouldn’t like it.”

Roan’s fingers found my forearm and wrapped tightly around it. He didn’t take his gaze off the wolves. The two others emerged from the trees, saw the watcher’s tight posture, and found us as well. The father was next. Four pairs of eyes watched us,

wary.

“What the hell, Fenli,” he whispered.

“Relax.”

“You want me to relax right now? Give me the sword.” He reached for it, but I smacked his hand away.

“No! Just do what—”

The father had seen enough. He growled and his hackles rose.

That stopped our squabble. I grabbed Roan’s hand and squeezed, warning him and pleading with him in the same gesture. He stilled, thank Toke, and the father watched us for many long moments before his ear finally flicked, his tail lowered, he looked away.

“What the hell is this, Fen.”

The father turned away from us completely and moved closer to the den.

“It’s what I’ve been hiding. Where I’ve been going during the days. Now it’s where I’m staying.”

“You told me you were staying with people. You’re such a liar.”

“No, I said I’d found another group. It’s not my fault you assumed they were people.”

He swore.

I shrugged.

“I’ve taken to them. We’re comfortable with each other, and I like it here.”

“That big one could have killed us!”

I scowled and waved him off. “That. That was your fault. It was only a warning.”

He rubbed a hand up and down his face before swearing once more.

The watcher cocked his head at that, and I smiled, leaning back into the tree. Gods, I was tired. We’d barely slept last night, and all the nervous energy I’d been running on was coming up empty now. Sunlight was filtering through the treetops, and I was in a delicious spot of it. It warmed my clothes and my skin.

“Just watch the watcher,” I told him, “while he watches you. When the pups come out, your patience will be rewarded. Shouldn’t be long now.”

“You aren't going to sleep.”

“It's just a nap.”

He hissed, “We are a stone's throw away from a pack of wolves, and you are going to sleep?”

“If you ever shut up, yes.”

He would have to sleep later. I knew how he felt, every bit of himself humming with the need to survive, to find safety, and I knew it would take him time to truly relax. I'd give it to him.

I hugged the sword tightly to my chest and curled around it so he wouldn't get any bad ideas, then settled into a bed of needles and earth. In that half-coherent space between awake and asleep, I finally understood what I was feeling, what that thing was pushing up on my chest.

It was relief.

Because I wasn't just a tangle of secrets anymore. One person knew.

And it felt good.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Roan

Wolves. This was her secret. A pack of wolves.

I couldn't understand her. I sat there—tense, ready to spring to my feet—and looked back and forth between the pack and her. The one wolf watched, just like she said it would; she slept, like a baby.

Next to a pack of wolves.

She was even wilder than I'd thought. That was scary to come to terms with.

My eyes slipped back to the wolf. He looked on intently, but I had to admit there was nothing threatening in his body language. The wolves behind him went about their business, even the big alpha who'd nearly scared me shitless. Some lounged, others preened. The lighter one who'd trotted in first was still hidden under what I now saw was a dilapidated structure, probably built around the same time as the hut Fen had made a home out of.

What was this place?

My heart was settling some, maybe giving in to the ridiculous notion that these wolves would not attack me and rip me to shreds the moment they got hungry, and I looked around, taking in my surroundings more fully.

The forest was thick with the old growth evergreens that were prominent in the region. They were wide, tall things that made a person stop and peer up into the canopy, wondering what the world was like when these trees were young. Roots pulled from earth to snake along the forest floor, tangling with each other before they slipped back under the soil and took their secret paths underground. Hidden among it all, half sunken in and half overgrown with moss and saplings, were the ruins. The Caed used to live here, and now the wolves did. They made their den under the old foundation of a Caed dwelling and lingered in the spaces where the Caed used to

roam.

As I sat, trying to imagine my ancestors of long ago, pups came tumbling out of the mouth of the den. They were a jumble of brown fur, too-big feet, and mayhem. In an instant, they fell upon everything in their camp. One gnawed on a branch, another on an elder's ear. Two approached the dark male, crouched in submission and wagging their tails, and fervently licked his jaw. The last ran between the others, tripping as it went.

I found I was smiling. I tried to scold myself back to sense but couldn't make it last. The pups were a whirlwind of antics. Even when I straightened, it was only a matter of time before I settled back into a smile.

The adults took turns regurgitating meat, which the pups descended on enthusiastically. Once full, I watched them wrestle with each other, wrestle with the adults (who merely lounged and half-heartedly protested), and I watched them get tired. Finally, they laid in the bits of sunlight that filtered through the trees and slept.

Fenli had found this. She'd stumbled upon wolves and hadn't fled, hadn't hurried back to the hunters and told them where she'd seen them. She'd stayed. She'd watched. She'd gained their trust—though how far it went, I couldn't say—and she'd given hers as well. She'd kept them a secret.

Fenli and her secrets.

So, this was why she'd told me not to hunt the wolves. When she'd disappeared and I couldn't find her, she was way out here. When I'd worried day and night about her being lost or torn to shreds, she'd been sitting quietly watching a pack of wolves.

I looked back at the wolf who seemed responsible for watching me, and I found myself growing uncomfortable. Not because I was afraid of him. It was worse than



that.

When I looked him in his face, I couldn't shake the feeling that Toke was looking back at me. Not that the wolf was the god—just that there was a piece of him there, in those eyes. Like the wolf was born of Toke just as much as I was.

I didn't like it, and I looked away.

After some time, I nudged her awake. She led us back through the trees to her shelter, and we sat in silence as she brought the fire back to life. When the glowing coals had become proper flames, I watched as she cooked up some grains she'd stolen from the storehouse in a pot she'd stolen from the kitchen. Liar, wild woman, thief. I added it to the mental list of character traits I knew of hers, right next to 'stubborn, sneaky, rebellious', and 'infuriating'.

Right next to 'resilient'. Right next to 'bewitching'.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

We held up our silence throughout the meal. When we'd finished, I collected the dishes.

“Where can I wash these?”

At the words, she spun towards me. “What did you think? Of the wolves, I mean?”

“Oh.” What didn't I think, more like. “I...I thought a lot of things.”

She nodded, a nervous energy drawing her brows in. She licked her lips and gathered her courage.

“What are you... going to do?” This came quieter. Now she was looking me right in my eyes, and it wasn't difficult to see the fear in hers.

“Fen,” I said quietly. I wanted to drop the dishes and pull her into my arms right there, but I held back. “I thought you were going to get us killed. Then I thought you were mad. Then I thought—I think you see the world more clearly than the rest of us. You're braver. You were able to sit with wolves when I would have been carried away with my fear. Fear that would have led to bloodshed. I'd have called it self-preservation. Defending myself and my clan. But I can't say that anymore.” I frowned. “I don't know. They were supposed to be aggressive. I don't know what it means that they weren't.” I waited until she met my eyes again. “I don't know what it means that you're as wild as those wolves out there.”

She hesitated, her gaze flicking to the side and back.

“You won’t tell?”

What a question. I was supposed to be a wolf hunter in Toke’s clan. Yet I heard myself saying, “Your secret is safe with me.”

At that, her shoulders seemed to lighten. She nodded, then gestured north.

“I’ll t-take you to the river,” she said.

I followed her down the path I could see she’d laid from her shelter to the water’s edge, watching the way she moved over the terrain. She would have slugged me in the arm if she had seen me openly staring, but she was focused ahead and I was shameless.

When we reached the side of an impressive stretch of rushing water, we paused to look out over it.

“I erased it from the maps.”

I looked over at her. “What?”

She didn’t answer right away. She kept her eyes trained on the current, and I watched her profile, her hair blowing in the wind, chin up.

“I took it off all the maps.” She turned towards me. “In Gaert’s hut. I took this island off each one.”

“You...tampered with the maps?”

She nodded and looked back out at the current. Defiant. Not a shred of guilt. And it was everything I’d told myself she’d be likely to do, right before I’d laughed the

thought off as ridiculous.

“Damn.”

“I wanted to make it invisible. At least for a little while.”

I turned back as well.

“Makes sense,” I said. “It would take the clan a long time to make it all the way out here again. Our attentions have been mostly inland, only a few of the southern islands.”

She nodded once more. “Especially if they think it’s all water.”

And she wasn’t wrong. In truth, it could take decades.

I chuckled, a smile spreading wide across my face.

“What?” When I didn’t answer right away, she bumped her shoulder with mine.

“What?”

“Everyone underestimates you, Fenli Wyn Faasval. And they pay for it in the end.”

She didn’t try to deny it.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

After we washed our dishes in the river, we meandered back.

Everything felt different. We were separated from the clan and relieved of the expectations of others that had weighed us both down. Now—alone in the wilderness, just us and the wolves—things came easier. There was a lightness that hadn't been there before, an ease of being, and the very comfort of her presence surprised me. I thought I could have gone on living like that forever.

I wasn't sure what had come over me, but that evening, eating fish and grains around the fire in the hearth, I started telling stories.

I told her about the forest all around us. The rainfall. How the salt water met the fresh water, and the oddities I'd seen in those stretches of waterway.

There were rumors of a humpback whale as white as a cloud. A moose in the mist who was one hundred years old and could only grow one antler. She found my tales ridiculous and wholly captivating, and I enjoyed her attention.

Then I saw her marriage ribbons. I was going on about the witch who lived in the cliffs north of here when I stopped mid-sentence, my mouth fallen open in shock. She followed my eyes to where she'd strewn them up to hang laundry over. At that particular moment, her underwear was plain to see.

I closed my mouth, pointed, and asked her, "Your ribbons are now a clothesline?"

"For what it's worth," she said carefully, "the under things are clean."

We laughed together. When I'd settled into a smile, I looked down at my own forearms, still wrapped as they had been for the last ten years.

"I've had them on for so long," I said. "Was it strange taking them off?"

She hesitated just a moment, but she was telling her secrets now, so what was one more?

"I put them back on three times."

My smile deepened at that. "Really?"

"Yes," she said, rolling her eyes. "I was falling apart as it was. Unwinding them felt like it was letting even more of me spill out, all over this floor."

I nodded. I almost started unwinding mine right there, but something stopped me. It felt like a big gesture, and I wasn't sure I was ready. The moment ended, and we finished eating. Sometimes we were quiet; sometimes we talked. She told me a few stories of her own. We spoke of Ess and everything that had happened since I'd betrayed her secret, of what could be, if only the clan would be willing to change.

And the time slipped by.

She had been remade out here. Or maybe it was that she could finally be herself. Whatever the case was, the Fen I watched now felt true.

She moved with comfortable ease. I'd seen her smile more in the past day than I'd seen in all our weeks before. Most confusing of all, she wasn't pushing me away. She held my gaze, brushed up against me without flinching, and spoke to me without suspicion in her eyes. I loved seeing the sword I'd made her at her hip. She reached for it often, her hand resting on the pommel, and I pretended not to notice, but of

course I did. When it started raining, she started humming Toke's song. She'd left his clan but not him, I thought to myself. Turning away, I stoked the small fire she had made in the old stone hearth and fed it into an almighty blaze. She wrapped up in her blanket and sat beside it, just like in our hut. When the wolf song started, she left her place behind and padded to the open door. I watched her lean against the frame as she listened. Then she tipped her head back and howled, and I felt the sound of it in my core. She turned back to look at me then, the smile across her face unhindered, her cheeks flush with heat, and I felt my eyes prick painfully, felt the lightning that tore through my chest. She turned her focus back to the night when the wolves answered her, and I watched, dumbstruck.

She was a wild thing. I'd known it all along, but now I knew it to my bones. She belonged to herself. The clan could never take that from her.

More than ever, I wanted to belong to her as well.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

Fenli

We spent our mornings with the wolves. I let myself forget that Roan was meant to be a wolf hunter now. With our backs against the big cedar, our shoulders touching, we'd watch in comfortable silence. When the wolves had tucked themselves away for a long sleep and our stomachs were gnawing in hunger, we'd rise and make our way back to the hut. Once there, I'd gather the wood and start in on the day's fire. Roan would prepare the meal, and we'd eat while talking about the pups, the forest, anything other than our past or our future. Roan had a flair for stories. He'd speak of forest spirits, the king of the salmon, and a haunted island that muddies your mind the moment you step foot onto its shores, causing you to hallucinate.

I half wondered if we were there.

I had become some base version of myself. Where there had been thought and reason before, there were now only feelings and longings. My entire body took part in it, conspiring against my better judgment and filling me instead with the need, need, need of desire. His touch, his heat—it was all I could think about. How could his skin feel so perfect against mine? I only knew that I wanted it. No amount felt adequate. I wanted more, and I wanted it all, and I wasn't sure if even that would be enough.

Long fingers, eyelashes, the knot at his throat that bobbed up and down. His shoulders—so wide—, ridiculously long legs, and that way his brows knit together when he thought. The twin peaks of his lips. The way his eyes slid to me, sharpened, then reluctantly slid away.

I was obsessed. With all of it. With all of him. Like this absurd part of me had awoken and refused to be put back to rest.

Get a hold of yourself, Fenli, I told myself in the mornings when I kept sneaking glances of him as he pulled on his socks and boots.

What the hell is wrong with you? I thought while walking the deer trail, sure I could feel the heat coming off of him as he followed behind me.

This is exactly what you don't want! I reminded myself when he flashed me a quick smile during one of the wolves' songs and my insides caught fire without my permission.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

I fought my lust at every turn. When my hand almost reached for his skin, I balled my fists. When my eyes trailed the lines of his back, long and muscled, as he changed his shirt, I let myself look for too many moments before turning away and pinning my eyes shut. Toke almighty, he was gorgeous. His messy hair, his too-blue eyes, that stubbled jaw and every last inch of his golden body. Long, lean, begging me to touch it.

It was not begging me to touch it.

Oh, how I scolded myself and my wayward thoughts. I did not want to kiss him again. Except that all I wanted to do was kiss him again. Hell, I realized with mortification, if I wasn't careful, I'd consummate our union.

I groaned aloud with pent up frustration.

"Something wrong?" Roan asked from the door frame where he stood leaning against the stone like a god.

"No."

"Anything I can help you with."

"No," I snapped.

"Fine, fine," he said. "I just think that, whatever it is, I could maybe help you with it."

Yeah, he could help me with it. He could help me right under the covers and into a

heap of trouble with it.

I woke to tears streaming down my face and Roan's words in my ears.

"Fen, wake up. Fen, you're alright."

But I wasn't alright. Something was broken. I was losing myself. I felt it slipping away.

"Hey."

I opened my eyes. He was in front of me, kneeling down, and he ran his fingers through my hair, gently pulling through the snarls. I held his gaze, gasping, trying to calm my racing heart.

I'd been dreaming about the gods. I worried they were both watching me, unhappy with my choices. I'd left to remove myself from the constant pull between Toke's clan and Runehall's, but what if I had earned myself the wrath of both gods instead? Runehall had been after me, and in fleeing I'd not only taken myself out from under Toke's protection, but I'd earned myself another angry god.

I couldn't help but think it was true, and it sent an unholy fear through me. Once, I'd loved the flash of lightning and crack of thunder; now, I flinched at the sound, sure Toke would strike me down.

What a coward I was. Never had I felt the absence of my god. I'd wondered and I'd doubted, but when I'd quieted myself, I'd always sensed him there with me.

Was it gone?

I felt lost. Runehall was coming for me, and, for the first time in my life, I couldn't

feel Toke at my back.

Had he truly abandoned me, or was I letting fear seep in where faith should be?

I didn't know. I tried to shake the thoughts, but they stuck. I could ignore them during the day when the sun was up and my hands were busy, but I was at their mercy in the dark.

Roan searched my face, and his fingers sifted through my hair.

“What scares you?” he whispered.

I didn't answer—couldn't. Maybe he hadn't been expecting one. He'd said it quietly, almost as if he'd been speaking to himself.

I shook it off—the dream, my fear. I pushed it all away and tried to right myself. I swallowed, took steady breaths, blinked the daze from my eyes.

“I'm fine,” I lied. “I don't even r-remember what the dream—what the dream was.”

Enough lies to choke on.

He didn't look like he believed me, but he let me lie to him all the same.

Chapter Thirty-Four

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Roan

Isat outside on the evening of my fifth day on the island and waited, looking towards the east.

“What are you doing?” Fen asked, walking out and sitting beside me.

I gave her half a smile. “You’ll see.”

It didn’t take long. There, between the branches, came a bright, full moon.

I began unwinding the ribbons at my wrists. Fen watched, her eyes gone wide.

“Baer said that if you weren’t back by the full moon, the marriage would be null,” I told her, dropping the first ribbon on the ground in front of me and starting in on the second. “We’re tied to each other no longer.”

“He—he said that?”

It came out of her like a whisper, and I slid my eyes over to hers. They were unfocused, like she was hearing me from somewhere else.

“Yeah.”

She looked at me then. Emotions seemed to come and go quicker than I could discern them. It was like constant lightning illuminating her face, then plunging it into darkness, then illuminating it again, and each time, with a new feeling to show. I

couldn't keep up, couldn't understand this reaction of hers.

"Are you happy?" I asked.

Her brows were furrowed, but they rose with my words.

"Yes," she said several beats later. "Of course."

Then why did she look like she might cry?

"Fen—" I started, hands gripping the last ribbon tightly, ready to wind it back around my wrists and kiss her a hundred times in apology.

But a smile broke over her face. "Yes, I'm happy," she said. "Finally. The clan gives me what I wanted all along."

My fingers loosened.

She stood abruptly. "All I had to do was leave," she said, and I heard the hardness of her voice. "That's it. Just give up everything I've ever known, and half the shit I love."

She walked away several strides, then swung back, shaking her head.

"Well, they can forget it," she said, looking reckless. "I'm going down in flames, and I'm taking their golden-boy with me."

Now it was my turn for my brows to raise.

"And look at you. So happy to rid yourself of those ribbons." She drew up in front of me where I sat, and I had to crane my neck to see her. "I guess you'll be eager to get

back to the village now, huh? Maybe try your chances with Runa?"

"Runa?"

"Well, too bad. Put those ribbons back on now."

She wanted me to...oh, this was too good. I rose to my feet. Now she had to tilt her head up to keep my gaze. I took a step closer, so we were a hair's breadth from touching, and I looked down into her moon-bathed face.

"Or else what?" I murmured.

She blinked up at me.

"What will you do if I refuse?" I asked.

Her mouth opened, then closed. After a moment, her brows furrowed. I'd done it now. She looked ready to thrash me.

She kissed me instead.

Her fingers in my hair, she pulled my mouth down to hers. She may have been small, but she was as fierce as any of Toke's storms. Her palms slid to my cheeks, and she was reaching on tiptoe, pressing her chest to mine.

I wrapped my arms around her. She was giving herself up, and I took, took, took whatever I could have of her. My mouth at her lips, my hand on the small of her back. Her hands fell to my abdomen, and I shuddered. I kissed her harder. She slipped fingertips up my shirt and across my skin. I gasped. She growled.

I wanted.

She gave.

### Chapter Thirty-Five

Fenli

Gods help me—I was a fool.

A brash, senseless idiot. I'd claimed him and kissed him and now I was senseless with it. I loved the feel of him under my hands. I slipped under his shirt and felt his skin, pulling a gasp from his lips even as they pressed to mine. Heat stoked up my body, and I was feverish with it. With him. He swam in each one of my senses, the feeling of him making me hot, his smoky scent making me dizzy, the taste of him making me hungry for more.

“I want you,” I said into the kiss. My fingers raked down his sides and he groaned. I pulled his shirt over his head, and he was bared to me once more, like in the hut when I’d gone back for the axe. Like when we kissed for the first time.

As soon as he was free of the fabric, tossing it to the ground, his hands came back to me. They wrapped around my sides, one around my waist, the other under my shirt and drifting higher, covering my ribs. I felt small in his arms, yet limitless. A wisp of a person, and the only person—at least, the only person to him.

Gods, he made me feel everything. Maybe more than everything. The steady rain of his kisses brought out the lightning in my veins. I shuddered like thunder in the wake of his touch. Gone were his gentle lips and easy caresses. He held me tightly and kissed me deeply, pulling me to him like it could never be enough. Like I wasn’t close enough, even though I was pressed up against the whole of him.

When I started pulling at my own clothes, he faltered. He broke the kiss. His hands went to mine, stilling them.

“Please,” he huffed. “I won’t be able to stop.”

“I don’t want you to stop.”

He drew back enough to look me in the eye better.

“Fen, we can’t. We—we finally got the marriage revoked. They’ll see this as consummation.”

For too many heartbeats, I just stared at him. When his words settled, I pulled away.

“Gods,” I said, turning my back. I was trying to keep him from seeing the war that was raging on my face. I was humiliated.



“Fen, wait.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Of course you wouldn’t—I just...got carried away.”

“Fen—”

But it was all coming together in my mind. He really didn’t want to be tied to me if he had the choice, of course he didn’t. And there he was, under the full moon, finally getting to choose. Of all the days for me to throw myself at him, what was I thinking?

I wasn’t, and now I was paying for it. Roan had his pick of futures for the first time in ten years, and he was smart enough to not get himself stuck with me once more.

Did he think I’d been trying to trap him? Blush flooded my face at the thought. I’d fought this marriage for ten years, only to fall apart right at the end, right when I’d been given what I wanted. Only I didn’t know what I wanted any more, and I’d very nearly tied Roan to me against his will. Only, he’d had enough sense to refuse me.

I’m going down in flames and I’m taking their golden-boy with me.

My face flushed anew. I was so embarrassed, so mortified, and I needed to get away. I pointed myself in the opposite direction of Roan, which happened to be south, and started walking.

“Wait,” he said from behind me, but I didn’t heed him.

He wore no shirt, thanks to me, and his boots were off. He couldn’t follow.

I left him there and headed in between the trees, nowhere in mind. Eventually I met the shoreline and halted, looking out over the stretch of salty water before me, the moon reflecting off the bobbing waves. It started to rain.

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Fitting, I decided. I sat on the bank, pulled my knees to my chest, and watched the rings spread across the surface of the deep.

He did follow, though, the asshole. He came up beside me. I could see his boots in my side vision. I assumed he had a shirt on now as well.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“I think you’re misunderstanding me,” he started.

And I couldn’t bear another word, so great was my humiliation. “I’m not,” I assured him. “I just got carried away. I don’t want to be stuck with you either. I was just being stupid.”

“Ouch,” he breathed. “Let me down gently, will you?”

“What?” I squinted into the rain to see him.

But his eyes caught on something out in the water, and his expression shifted.

I turned to look. There, coming across the water for us, was a canoe.

### Chapter Thirty-Six

Roan

It was all my fault. I hadn’t meant to lead them to the island, but my intentions didn’t

matter. There they were.

And there was Fenli.

That wasn't even the worst of it. As Baer and Thaas ran their canoe up along the shore and Baer started his tirade, ripping into me for having left, having had them all out searching for me for days, Thaas saw it. Tracks. Wolf tracks, there in the mud, lit up by the light of the moon. Unmistakable. And I watched as the hunter sparked to life in him.

I'd ruined everything.

Fenli stood in the rain, eyes unfocused, stone still. Baer scolded me more. That was how the truth came out, and I realized all my stupid mistakes.

Fenli had stolen a dead man's canoe, and no one had noticed.

I'd stolen the canoe of a fisherman, which was how they knew to look to the water in their search.

She'd stuck to building small fires to cook on.

I'd insisted on building big fires because I knew she liked to be warm, sending plumes of smoke into the sky and not thinking twice about it.

She'd hid her canoe under the cover of ferns.

I'd headed after her in a rush, leaving mine visible to all.

"And you," Baer said, turning his gaze to her when he'd had enough of me. I was ready to defend her, to force his attention back, but that didn't happen. He said,

“Runehall’s are in the village. They arrived yesterday, and you’ve caused a world of grief being gone.”

I heard the words but didn’t want to believe them. “Runehall’s?”

Baer nodded, and Fen squeezed her eyes shut.

“Well, we shouldn’t bring her back. We should hide her. Keep her here.”

“No,” Baer said, his voice like thunder. “The clans are upset. Our relationship with that clan is the worst it’s been in my time and my father’s time before me. We face this head on. We resolve the issue for the good of the clans.”

“That’s bullshit,” I said, and I was opening my mouth to say a lot more when Fen broke from my line of vision. I watched as she walked to the ferns and hauled her canoe out, dragging it down to the water’s edge.

I glared at Baer, daring him to follow, then went to join her. For a moment, my attention caught on a large cedar nearby, words etched into its side, but I looked away. Drawing up by her side, I spoke in a hush.

“What are you doing?”

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“He saw,” she whispered. “The one who already doesn’t like me. Thaas. He saw the wolf tracks.”

I looked back at Thaas.

“What makes you think he doesn’t like you?” My voice was calm, but my blood was thrumming. If he’d done one thing to—

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You look like it matters.”

“For Toke’s sake, Roan,” she hissed, “I said it doesn’t matter!” She wrung out her fingers. “What am I going to do about the wolves?”

“We’ll figure something out.”

But she was shaking her head before I’d even finished the line.

“There’s nothing. We’ve led the hunters right to them.”

And I wanted to tell her it would be okay and that the wolves would be safe.

But I’d never been a good liar.

It was nearing dawn when we arrived in the village. Baer left for the meeting house to call together a quick assembly, and I wasn’t sure what had become of Thaas. Fenli

paced on the outskirts of the village, not even wanting to go back to our hut.

It was like she'd been in the woods for too long.

One look at her face, and I could see that I was losing her. Her expression reminded me of a cornered she-wolf's, ready to fight, and—when the chance came—flee. I knew I might not find her next time.

“Fen,” I said, drawing her gaze. “We’ll work it out.”

She turned her back on me, walking away to put distance between us.

“Fen—”

“This is hopeless.” She swung around, and her eyes were wild. “Don’t tell me it’s not.”

“Hopeless?” I’d never agree to a word like that. It was so wholly far from the truth. She belonged here, but the hardest part wasn’t going to be convincing the clan—it was going to be convincing her. “Slow down. You need sleep, both of us do, and all of this won’t look as bad once we’re rested.”

But she wasn’t hearing me. “I have to join the North Clan. I should have done it already. I—I was stupid.”

“But what about—”

“Roan, Runehall’s people are here now, making demands. My enemies among Toke’s children are bolder than ever. Everything is falling apart.”

“Running away won’t solve any of that.”

“Why is it so hard for you to understand that I don’t want to live in a place where I’m neither wanted nor respected?”

I hardened. I wanted to argue, tell her shewaswanted,wasrespected, but I held my tongue. I understood what she meant. A person needed more than what Toke’s people had afforded her. She deserved better. Who was I to deny her that?

“I’ll come with you,” I said, barely considering the words before they were out. I’ll come with you. I knew without a doubt that I’d meant each one. I’d go with her without question. I could never regret that choice.

But she flinched at my words like they caused her pain. Her brows pinched in together, and she swallowed.

“You belong here,” she said. “You need to stay.”

And it made my anger burn to hear her say it. I moved to her, trying to close the distance she’d put between us. “Don’t tell me where I belong and not give me a say in it.”

“Roan, this is your clan. You fit in here, and they love you. You can’t just give that up.”

“And what about you?”

“I’ve never belonged here.”

“That’s not true!”

“It is true, and everyone knows it but you!”

“Oh, since when do you give a damn what those people think, huh?” I gestured to the meeting house. “You want to know what I think?”

She shook her head, and I took another step closer, close enough to touch.

“I think I love you, Fenli Wyn Faasval. And I think I’d follow you anywhere, if you’d let me.”

“Shut up,” she whispered. “You can have your choice of women now. You’re not tied to me anymore.”

I blinked at her. “You think I don’t want you.”

“Of course you don’t! I practically threw myself at your feet, and you had the sense to stop me. Go find Runa and let me go.”

“Runa again. What is it with you and Runa?”

“Rahv told me. And she’s beautiful—sweet as a lamb, long hair.”



She bit her lip and looked down at her feet.

I was shocked. Sweet as a lamb. Long hair. That was what she thought I wanted?

“You’re not mute,” I told her, “but you’re blind as hell.”

I closed the distance between us, forcing her eyes to look at mine.

“Runa wouldn’t give me the time of day because she knows what a waste it would be. Rahv is mistaken.”

But she didn’t look like she believed me. Somehow, I needed to make her believe.

“I never got to come back to the village like the others, so my friends would bring me back stories about you. Ever since I was ten, I would wait for those stories. They all knew I wanted them. They’d watch you on their trips back and find things to report to me.”

She blinked up in surprise.

“I heard about when you started caring for the birds, and when you and Esska started spending more time together, and when your curves came in.”

Her jaw unhinged.

“Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned that one. The point is, I’ve been eating up stories about you for the past ten years. Baer, of course, came back grumbling more and more. Then there was this one day. It was the middle of summer, and it was hot as hell out. I remember because we were inland and wishing we could swing out towards the coast. Baer and his men came back from a trip home, and the old man was furious. He stalked up to me and told me I was in over my head with you. I’d

never seen him so mad. The guys came in behind him and told me the story, that he'd been bossing you around the entire visit and was never happy enough with your work. They said that you and Baer made silent battle just with the looks you'd give each other. Then, one night, Baer was at the fire going on about Elsynbr's clan and how he hated the short hair their women sometimes wore. You left the fire and came back a little while later," I ran my fingers up the back of her neck and over her scalp, "with your hair like this."

She shivered.

"I've never known anyone to stand up to Baer like that, Fen, and if you think I'd take long hair over your short curls," my fingertips pressed harder, "gods, you're wrong." I swallowed. "The only thing I want more than being tied to you is for you to want me as well. Stopping us earlier was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. And I only did it because I hate the idea of you not getting to choose what you want. I've made my choice. It's you. It will be you every day of my life, no matter what happens. But I won't trap you."

For one hopeful moment, I thought she was going to kiss me. It was right there in her eyes. But then it dissolved. I watched as her exterior hardened.

"You told me to put my ribbons back on," I said. "Tell me you meant it."

She shook her head.

Louder I said, "You told me I wouldn't be rid of you."

Her jaw clenched, and her eyes lost focus.

“Fen,” I whispered. “Say something.”

But she said nothing.

“Don’t sink into that forest and never let me find you again.”

But she turned and left me where I stood.

### Chapter Thirty-Seven

Fenli

He had poured his heart out at my feet, and I’d left him standing there. I wasn’t going anywhere specifically, just away, just to catch my breath for a moment and try to settle my racing thoughts.

I couldn’t understand what was happening to me. Roan had told me he loved me. And I’d very nearly said the words right back.

Did I love him?

I was an idiot. Of course I loved him. I was crazy about him. As much as I tried my damndest not to, I’d given my heart to him.

And now he was squeezing the life out of it.

How dare he tell me he loved me. How dare he give up everything to follow me into

the woods and act like he was getting the good side of the deal. And how dare he put me in this place of temptation, damn near begging me to wind those ribbons around his wrists and lead him into the forest like some kind of fae creature.

He'd really follow?

There was a chance I was going to be sick, so I pointed myself in the direction of our hut and started through the streets. The sky was lightening into morning, and I hurried for cover, hoping not to be spotted. I didn't get far. Someone hooked my elbow, and I went wheeling back.

"Not so fast."

It was Thaas. My skin prickled at the sound of his voice. I tried to pull away, but he gripped me tighter. I whirled to face him.

"Let go."

"She speaks," he said, and he pulled me closer to himself. "Look, I have to bring you over to the west hut, just for a bit. Some of the elders think it best we detain you until we can figure out what comes next. Don't want you running off again."

"I'm not going," I said, trying to wrest myself from his grasp.

He laughed and easily swung me in front of him, his hands closed firmly around each of my wrists. Then he pushed me forward.

"You don't have a choice, wolf-lover."

Thaas had brought me to the west hut—the building that had sheltered them while they'd built the village up all those months ago—and he pushed me in, locking the

door from the outside. I pounded on the wood with my fists, but it served no purpose but to make my hands red.

Finally, I turned away.

The hut was dark, only the occasional Saik shingle made from pressed goat's horns to filter in some light high above. The table was long, built to seat many. There was something of a makeshift kitchen along the backwall with a cooking stove in the corner. There was no back door, no window even.

I was trapped. They'd thrown me in a hut and locked me in. Runehall's were here arguing for me as I stood stupidly, unable to even help myself.

The door rattled. I heard laughing on the other side.

"Hello in there," someone said. "Just wanted to thank you for finding those wolves for us."

This brought about a new wave of snickering from what sounded like a small group of men, and my heart dropped to the bottom of my chest.

"We're planning on taking care of them soon. Maybe tonight, yeah? Take the pups first and wait for the rest to return."

He paused, giving me a chance to respond, but I had nothing to say. Maybe he'd hoped I'd yell and bang on the door some more. I could imagine they'd love that, but I wasn't about to give them the satisfaction.

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Another one piped up. “We owe you, Mute,” he said. “I’ll put the ears on a string just for you.”

I pressed my eyes shut and listened to their laughter, listened to it as it died down and they meandered away.

And I knew this was all my fault. I’d gotten too close to the wolves, and now I’d led the clan right to them. They’d be ambushed tonight, and I was trapped with no way to help them. The children of Runehall were here in the village, and that was my fault, too. The clan had long been trying to put those embers out, and they’d nearly done it. Then I’d gone and fanned the flames, stoking the fires with a few careless words. I’d had every opportunity to take my place as Roan’s wife—who I’d gone and fallen in love with, no less—and spend my days quietly, caring for birds or peeling potatoes, and I’d refused.

Every action I’d chosen had brought me here. Runehall was demanding me back. And the wolves would soon be gutted. It was all unraveling around me while I remained locked in a hut with no say in any of it. They were in the meeting house now, no doubt, deciding my fate without me. All these years later and they still weren’t going to give me a lick of say.

Everything I hated, everything I’d never wanted, and here I was, caught up in the middle of it all.

No.

No, I realized, as clear as a loon call over still water. I couldn’t let it happen.

I wouldn't let this happen.

Last time, I'd been a child. I hadn't understood what was going on around me or the weight of the decisions they made in my place. Now, I was grown. My years were not impressive to some, but I was woman enough, and I'd come to know myself as well. I'd not stand idly by and let the elders of the clans resolve my future without me.

To hell with running away. I was going to get myself out of this cage they'd put me in and make every last elder rue the day he tried to plan my life. If they were going to discuss my fate, they'd do it with me at the center of the discussion. I was not mute, the way some supposed.

They were all about to find out just how much I could say.

I scanned the walls around me, looking for a weak spot. The hut was made of thick logs. When I found nothing, I turned my gaze upward. The roof was new and well-constructed. The horn shingles would be weaker and possibly breakable, but I had no way to reach them. There was no ladder and nothing to fashion one out of. Frustrated, I swept my eyes over the space again. There had to be a way out.

Then I saw it. The pipe coming up and out of the cooking stove rose to the lower part of the ceiling and vented out. If I could dislodge the pipe and open up the space, there was a chance I could fit through it. If I got myself onto the edge of the roof, I thought I could drop to the ground safely. But first I'd have to get the pipe out of the way and get myself up there.

I walked up to the stove, and my heart beat harder in my chest as I scanned what I was working with. The vent was high but not impossible. I'd have to be smart. And careful.

A quick brush of my fingertips confirmed that the stove and pipe were cold with

disuse. I grabbed the end of the table and drug it over, then went back for the chair. Climbing upright on the table and gripping my chair tightly, I lined myself up with the pipe, took a quick breath, then swung.

The pipe barely dented.

I widened my stance and readied once more. This time, I swung harder. Again, only a dent.

I cursed and swung. Aiming high, I bludgeoned the thing again and again, each hit bringing only a small progression over the last. When the pipe had bent enough to reveal a cloudy sky through half the vent, I tossed the chair to the side and climbed up onto the stove top itself. Grabbing the pipe with two hands, I pulled backwards, putting all my weight into it. The pipe didn't give in the least, which was why it caught me off guard when it suddenly gave altogether, pulling away from the roof entirely. I sailed backwards, airborne for only a moment, then hit the wooden floorboards with a crack. My tail bone and the back of my skull both bloomed with pain, but it was my wrist that bit into my thoughts more than the rest. I'd reached one hand back to break my fall, but I'd injured my wrist in the process. It was the same one that I'd sprained when retreating from the bear, and I cradled it to my body as I sat up, wincing as I did.

Gently, I ran my fingers over the area. It was tender and throbbing, but I'd not broken it.

I got to my feet, still holding the arm close, a tear streaking down my cheek, and looked up at the hole I'd put in the roof. It looked small. My stomach squeezed as I thought it. Here I'd gone and damaged the west hut and hurt my wrist. I was probably lucky I hadn't broken my neck.

This needed to work. I needed to get myself up to that opening, and I needed to fit



through it.

I was small, I reminded myself.

I just hoped I was small enough.

Getting the chair onto the table with one good hand was cumbersome, but I managed it and climbed up. From there, I put the chair on the stove. It barely fit. I had to move carefully or the whole thing would topple down to the floor and me with it. I didn't want to repeat that trick again.

Slowly, I climbed onto the chair. I rose to my full height and looked up. The vent was painfully far above my head. A dark, sinking feeling washed over me once more. I reached up with my good hand, and my fingers just barely got a handhold.

Despair snaked through me. I'd have to pull myself up the vent with an injured wrist.

Damn the gods and all their children.

I didn't think I could do it. But I'd already done so much just to get here, and the wolves had little time. If I was going to get out of this hut and do something to stop the storm I'd created, this was my only chance. My resolve strengthened. I set my jaw and reached both hands up, grabbing the edges of the vent on either side. My bad wrist shot with a hot pain, but I held onto my handhold all the same. Gasping, I grit my teeth and readied myself.

Then I sprang. The jolt of hurt was nearly blinding, but I got my elbow and one shoulder through the vent. Holding on with everything I had, I swung my head through. Panting with effort, I blinked in the bright light. Now I just needed to get my other arm and shoulder through. From there, I could plant my elbows on either side of me on the roof and pull myself up.

But I couldn't fit myself through the space. The edge cut into the top of my collarbone, halfway between my neck and my shoulder's point. I pressed up, growling with effort, trying to crumble the roof edge under the pressure of my force. It was strong. It didn't so much as bend.

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Frantic, I hung there, unsure of my next move. I had to get myself back through the vent and drop onto the stove. I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing. I pictured what I would have to do, holding on to the edges, ducking back though and letting myself lower until I was hanging. When I was steady, letting myself fall back onto the stove. The chair had clattered to the floor when I'd leaped, I thought. Had I heard it? I hoped I wasn't wrong.

But I knew the chair was not the biggest of my concerns. The real problem was my wrist.

This was going to hurt like a bitch.

I took a few more settling breaths, imagining what I needed to do—and then I did it.

I was through the vent and falling, my hands gripping the roof tightly, and then I hit the end of my arms.

Bright pain made tears spring to my eyes. Then my bad hand lost its grip entirely. I hung by one hand, swinging in the darkness, when I felt my fingers slip.

There was nothing to do but fall.

### Chapter Thirty-Eight

Roan

I found Baer in the meeting house. They were in between discussions about Fenli, and

I grabbed him by the arm.

“I need to talk to you,” I said.

He hesitated a moment, then followed me out the door. Eyes watched us as we slipped away, and I tried to look confident. This was my one chance. If I could convince Baer to let Fenli decide her future for herself, I’d earn her a powerful elder to help sway others to her side. I had to make him see reason. Somehow, I had to convince my father to say to hell with tradition and bury his pride long enough to give Fen a chance.

And my odds weren’t good.

He closed the door behind us, and I turned to face him. It was true morning now, and I could hear the sounds of the village coming to life around us, but we were alone in the alley.

“We’re about to start again.” The slant in his brows said he was unhappy with my interruption. I hadn’t expected any different.

“They’ll wait for you.” I pushed my hands into my pockets, then pulled them out again. After a moment of awkwardness, I settled on folding them across my chest. I needed to look like someone to be reckoned with. “It’s about Fenli.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“You can’t give her to Runehall.”

He crossed his arms over his chest as well.

“You know,” he said, “the two of you are so adamant that she stay here, yet you don’t

do a damn thing to help your cause.”

“She shouldn’t have to earn her place among us by submitting to each and every one of the elders’ wishes.”

His hands shot into the air at that. “She hasn’t submitted to a single one! She cuts her hair, refuses to consummate her marriage, won’t take on a woman’s work, tampers with our maps,” he was livid, “and runs off for weeks at a time to live on an island full of wolves!”

I opened my mouth to defend her, but he plowed on.

“I have tried to keep her here with us. There is not an elder in the clan who has tried to protect her more than I have. I fought for her from the start and even gave my only son to the cause. It was the best I could do, and it was everything to me. You were everything to me.” His eyes bore into mine, and all the lines of his body were tense. The confession was like nothing I’d ever heard from him before. I didn’t know what to say. “Since then, I’ve tried to give her time, reassure the elders, keep everyone happy. I’d hoped she’d grow into the clan. Instead, she’s only made things worse. I cannot take us to war for her.”

I stiffened. “Runehall would go to war for her.”

I’d wanted him to argue, to fight me, but instead he sighed, and his body slackened.

Finally, he said, “Then maybe that truly is where she belongs.”

Then he turned. “Go home, Roan,” he said over his shoulder, heading back to join the others. “Your vision is clouded by your heart.”

“Some warriors we turned out to be,” I shouted after him.

He closed the door behind himself and left me alone. Clouds were rolling in overhead, darkening the morning sky, and I cursed them, cursed the clan, then, finally, cursed myself. It couldn't end like this. Baer had his reasons, but his reasons were shit. I didn't care anymore. To hell with the elders and all their careful considerations. The truth was plain. Fenli had been wronged.

And they were damn-well going to fix it.

### Chapter Thirty-Nine

Fenli

I laid on my back with my arm cradled to my chest, looking up into the rafters above. I was fine. That was what I told myself, at least. I'd not broken a leg, or bashed in my head, or lost consciousness at any time. I'd just hurt my ass and worsened my wrist. Big deal.

The wolves would not be fine.

When the door finally opened, I shot to my feet, thinking—foolishly—that it would be Roan, come to let me out.

I stopped cold when I saw those dark brows and ruddy cheeks.

It was Axl.

“Niece,” he said. Then his eyes flicked to the vent, the busted pipe, and the scattered furniture. Finally, he looked at my arm cradled against my chest and back up at me. “Trying to go somewhere?”

I said nothing in reply.

He nodded. “Bad idea. You seem to be full of those.”

Then he slipped in fully and closed the door behind him. The lantern in his hand helped to fill the space with light. He studied me, and I tightened my jaw under his gaze, refusing to show this asshole any fear.

“You could end all of this,” he said. “The clans are arguing in the meeting house, the two growing further and further apart, and you could end it all right now. We’re going to get you eventually, one way or another. Come with us willingly. You belong with us.”

“Never,” I spat.

He smiled. “Why do you hold on to this clan so tightly? You cause nothing but problems here. They’re all upset with you, if you haven’t noticed, and it’s been made clear to me you don’t fit in. You see that, don’t you?”

And damn it all, my face broke just long enough for him to see the truth.

“This is your last chance. When my brother laid on his pyre burning, I made him a promise. I told him I’d get you back under Runehall’s care, and I will not fail in this. Come with us or you will regret it.”

“Go to hell,uncle,” I said.

He bristled, his shoulders tensing and lips raising into a sneer.

“Wrong answer.” He looked at me in a new way then. I felt hopeless under his stare, like I’d never amount to what anyone wanted me to be, like I was worthless. He was giving up on me, I realized. And it didn’t sit well.

He’d said he’d get me back to Runehall no matter what. He wouldn’t fail.



That's when I saw his hand tighten on the handle of his lamp.

I stilled.

"I promised I'd see you back under Runehall's care," he repeated, "and that's what I'm going to do. Runehall will have you. One way or another."

"No," I whispered.

He pulled the glass from over the flame and tossed it to the side, shattering it against the wall.

"Bastard," I said, louder.

"Runehall always has what is his."

Chapter Forty

Roan

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Baer had told me to go home, but I'd stood in this alley before and made the mistake of letting him walk away from me. I wouldn't do it now. He would listen. And, as it turned out, so would the two clans.

I followed him into the assembly. Shouldering my way to the front, I listened as they began their talks, a thin man from Runehall's clan laying down the terms they wished our elders to agree to.

"We do not accept," I said aloud, cutting him off in the middle of his bit on what they expected to be sent along with her. "Toke's clan respectfully declines. Fenli stays with us."

The man's eyes narrowed on me as a murmur ran through the hall. He scowled and turned his head to Baer.

"Is this the boy?" he asked.

My father nodded once, and my attention shifted to him. I had disobeyed him. He'd dismissed me like I was still a child, and he was still towering over me.

But I wasn't a child any longer, and I hadn't had to tip my head back to meet his gaze in years.

I tightened my jaw and looked my old man dead in his face.

"We don't accept," I said again.

Everyone watched silently as the two of us stared each other down. The moment was heavy with tension. I was no fool. I knew the hell I was tempting.

And it was about damn time I tempted it.

I raised my voice louder. “The elders have done enough damage in Fenli’s life, and yet here you all are, sitting around discussing her future as if it were yours to decide. And where is she? She wasn’t even invited. The problem has never been that she won’t speak. It has always been that we don’t listen.”

Someone said, “She was just a child when—”

“She is not a child any longer.” I spun a full circle, meeting as many eyes as I could. “She is not. Whatever reasons you had in the past are obsolete now. You’re lying to yourselves if you think this is about helping her, about finding the best option for her amongst yourselves. This is about control. It’s about a hut full of old men refusing to give a young woman what’s hers. It’s about puffing yourselves up and keeping her small. Are we so insecure, brothers? What exactly is it we’re afraid of?”

“I know what it is. We’re afraid of her strength. I’ve seen it. Been leveled by it a time or two. Fen would cut my throat soon as kiss me, and she has me so wrapped around her finger I wouldn’t know which one I was in for until I was good and kissed or dead.

“That’s why we’re afraid. Of Fen. Of Esska. Of Helva! Of any woman who tries to make space for herself in our clans. We want the space for ourselves. It’s our weakness under the guise of strength.”

There was a hum at the mention of Helva’s name, hushed explanations being given by those who were old enough to know to those who were not. Then the room fell quiet, and I stood alone in the middle of the silence. No one spoke up with excuses.

No one moved to agree or disagree. It was what I'd been afraid of for so long. And it was—fine. I found I didn't care. I was finally telling the clan what I thought. No amount of backlash could undermine what I was gaining in getting the truth out in the open.

I turned towards the elder from Runehall's clan. "You won't take her if she doesn't want to go." I turned toward my father and the other elders from our clan. "And you'll let her out of this marriage."

"It's not that simple," one of them started.

"Then it will cause you a lot of grief until it's done. I don't care. But she doesn't suffer any more for the sake of your comfort and ease. She can get some peace of mind for once, while you all wrestle with the problems you've made."

I turned back to Baer. "I'm going to find her, and I'm going to tell her all of this. Do I have your blessing, or is this going to be a battle of wills? Because I'm willing to go to war for her."

He ground his teeth and considered his reply.

"I see that you are," he finally said. "Strange, because it's obvious you love her. I thought you'd want her to remain your wife."

"If that's what you think, then you don't know what love is."

His eyes narrowed on me. There was a cool silence between us for many moments.

"He's right," I heard Jory say from behind me. I turned back, as did most of the men gathered, to find him standing near the back. "Everything he said. Our clans have mucked this situation up from the beginning, and it's time we all step back and give

Fenli the choices she should have had from the start. We are not better than this, and we never have been.” He looked at those around him, then up to where the elders sat. “But we could be. We could be better. I think it’s time we start.”

“Aye,” said another, and soon there was a small chorus of them, a few brothers of mine who agreed and stood behind me. I didn’t want to show it, but inside a wave of relief was sweeping over me. I’d have been hard pressed to sway the elders in Fenli’s favor if I had no supporters, despite my boldness.

“Well, I disagree.”

I knew who it was before I’d even turned to face him.

When we were eye to eye, he said, “Nice to see you finally acting like a man, Faasval.”

“Thass.”

“She doesn’t belong here,” he said, and it made me wonder.

He’d been one of the ones who’d brought me stories about her. He’d spoken well of her, laughed as he’d told me all the trouble she was causing, never said an ill word of her. Not once.

Now he stood before an assembly, passionate about sending her away.

What would cause such a change of heart? So Fenli was a troublemaker. None of the other young hunters cared. It was the old men who held so fast to the old ways you’d think tradition was the only thing getting them hard at night. Why had Thaas taken up this cause? What had happened between him and Fen?

Fenli had said he didn’t like her. I was starting to suspect that wasn’t the truth.

“She’s never belonged here,” he went on. “If you had some space, brother, I think you’d see it. Let her go back with her clan. In time, she will see that it’s what she needs.”

“What she needs, brother, is for her own people to support her.”

He shrugged. “They will.”

“We will.”

He had the nerve to laugh and shake his head. “You’re as stubborn as her. It’s probably why the two of you are forever at each other’s throats. Can’t you see she’s wrong for you?”

I tried to cross the space between us, but others stepped in my path, their hands on my shoulders. “You wish,” I said. “Rejection’s a bitch, isn’t it Thaas? Tell us why you really want her gone so badly.”

His jaw tightened and every muscle in him seemed to go still. I’d guessed right, I realized. He’d tried something. He must have. And Fenli had rejected him.

“She’s a nuisance,” he said.

“She’s too good for you, and it eats you up inside.”

He glared at me, biting back whatever he thought in favor of his icy silence. Then he turned to the elders. “She’s in the west hut,” he told them. “Let’s put this decision to rest while we have her and before she bolts again.”

“She’s where?” but he ignored me.

“Toke’s clan has tried and fallen short where she is concerned. She’s unhappy, she sneaks off, tampers with our maps, and disregards authority at every opportunity. Why? Because she was never meant to be here in the first place. She isn’t a child of Toke’s, and this clan could never be an adequate home for her. I say we vote, and we put her back with the clan she was meant for. Once she’s settled among her own people, I think she’ll find that she’s happier as well. She’s Runehall’s. We’ve tried. But it’s time to give her back.”

“Bastard,” I said, pushing past the others. “You think a speech like that gives you the right to hurt her? You’re sore because she never felt the same way for you that you

did for her, and now you want to make her pay.”

I shoved him in the chest, and he stumbled.

With his feet back under him, he said, “No one in their right mind would want that stupid bitch.”

I swung, but he was ready for me. He blocked my punch and drove his fist up into my stomach. I blinked in surprise and coughed the air back into my lungs. I had attacked in a rage and without thinking. Now I saw this for what it was. We were going to finish the fight we started back in the old village. Only this time, there was something at stake.

I caught my breath and straightened. I needed a level head. I needed to focus.

“You don’t want to do this, Faasval,” Thaas said. “Remember last time? It didn’t work out for you so well. And your emotions are running high.”

I widened my stance.

“Shut up and fight me.”

I swung and he ducked under my fist. This time my head was in it, and I blocked the next punch he tried to land. I advanced on him as he took steps back, unwilling to let him get away from me.

We traded blows. Thaas was quick on his feet with a damning cross, and I couldn’t let my guard down for a moment without him taking advantage of it. This was not a half-hearted spar, and I felt myself rising to the challenge. Everything I had, I threw at him. Finally, I caught him in the jaw, his teeth cracking together and head snapping back.



There was a murmur that moved through the room. After he blinked a few times, Thaas looked at me, and it was with hell in his eyes. He rushed me. I blocked the first two punches he threw, but the third bashed me in the ear, making my head spin. The next thing I knew, he had his shoulder in my hips, tackling me to the ground.

We were brawling. He had the higher ground, and he was quick to take his advantage. He pummeled me in the face like we were a pair of boys. With my forearms taking the battering, I shook off the hit he'd gotten on me and pulled my thoughts back together. Then I bucked him off and spun, launching my foot at his wrist and sending him crashing to his elbows.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

“Careful, Thaas,” I said, jumping to my feet. He was quick to follow. “Your emotions are running high.”

He swung twice. I dodged the first and blocked the next, then smoked him in the cheek for everything I was worth.

He staggered back. I watched as his eyes lost focus, and he blinked. After a moment on his feet, he crumpled to the floorboards.

“That was for Fen,” I said.

Then I turned and ran out the door to find her.

### Chapter Forty-One

Fenli

He threw the lamp to the floorboards between us, oil soaking the wood and lighting in a blinding swell of flames.

“I’ll see you on the other side,” I heard him yell over the whoosh of fire. I held up my arm to protect my face and tumbled backwards into the table. “Tell your father that I did as he would have wanted.”

I squinted into the light just in time to see him slip behind the door. It closed, and I heard the damning sound of the lock.

“Axl!” I shouted. “Axl, don’t!”

But I knew my pleas would be in vain.

“Help! Someone!”

But they were all in the meeting house, debating me, and I would be too far away for them to hear.

I had to get myself out.

I looked for something I could use to smother the fire. There was no blanket on the bed, but there was the mattress. I grabbed the thin pad and threw it on the blaze, moving it by the corner to try and put out as much as I could. But the stupid thing was too small. The flames licked high wherever the mattress wasn’t covering, and the boards relit as soon as the mattress was moved. Then the whole thing caught fire.

I cursed, stumbling back. It was hot on my face, fueled by the oil, and I knew it was too late for me to put it out.

I looked back at the vent. I hadn’t been able to fit before, and now the ceiling was filling with smoke.

It wouldn’t work.

I scanned the hut frantically. I found no escape, but the fire was growing quickly, spreading across the floor and up the far wall.

I couldn’t die like this. Not by fire, not as one of Runehall’s.

I looked for loose boards. Everything was new and tight and secure. I needed a flaw. I

searched for one frantically, but all I could come up with was a small gap where the floorboards didn't quite meet.

It was all I had.

There was a fire poker back by the stove, and I grabbed it. My hurt wrist was no help while I jammed the tip into the space and tried to pry it wider.

The poker was almost too big. Again and again I struck the gap and dug my iron in. When I'd earned a small bit of space and the sweat was running into my eyes, I rocked the bar back and forth.

It gave slowly. I glanced back at the roaring fire.

Too slowly.

It was hot on my face, sending my hair back as waves of heat poured over me.

I doubled my efforts. Looking at the board I had yet to pull up, I put my whole body into the work. I ignored my wrist and heaved with everything I had, both hands, both arms, all my weight. I grit my teeth with effort. Panic swelled in my chest, and I swallowed it down, tried in vain to calm myself, swallowed it down again.

Bit by bit, the board began to pull up.

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Angry tears were streaking with the sweat on my face by the time I got the first row of nails free. I slid the bar down in the gap, adjusted my angle, and pried again.

My arms shook with effort. The fire was up the wall and licking the ceiling across the small hut. The sounds of crackling and popping wood grew louder in my ears, and when the fire roared, I roared back.

I was losing control of my breaths, my heart beating furiously in my chest. I didn't want to die. I could barely see through the tears as my body shook, in fear or effort—I wasn't sure.

Gasping, I worked the board up little by little. The flames came close enough to scorch my leg. My pants caught fire, and I wasted too many moments beating the flames out with my palm. Pivoting, I tried to distance myself, tried to ignore the pain and focus on my only shot at saving my life. I tried like hell to remain calm.

When the next row of nails pulled free, I was able to pry the board up and hold it while pushing one arm and shoulder through, followed by my head. The wood rested heavy on my back when I released it and brought my other arm into the small space. It dug at my skin as I drug myself forward. My torso was mostly through when my hands found the cool ground. The relief I felt with the fire no longer heavy on my face and arms made me feel a desperate hope. I tried to follow with my hips and legs, but the board caught the top of my pants. I pulled with no give. I scrambled, frantic. Still, I was stuck. I felt the heat on my legs.

“No,” I growled. “I will not burn.”

I pushed back a bit, then tried again.

Still caught.

“Runehall!”

I pushed back again.

“You cannot have me!”

I shot forward, kicking and scrambling like a wild animal. I caught once more, my skin burning when the edge cut me, then broke free, collapsing onto the dirt. My chin struck the ground, and I fell into a crumpled heap, kicking my legs to straighten myself.

I was in the crawl space under the hut. Coughing, I shuffled away from the place where I’d broken through the floor and went to the far end of the small space, as far from the heart of the fire as I could.

It wasn’t far enough. Slowly, the boards overhead caught fire and began being eaten by the flames. When I reached the end of the crawl space, I met with the stone foundation. What would normally be cool was now warm and growing warmer.

I wasn’t out yet.

Desperate, my fingers clawed the stones, looking for a weak spot. If I could pull out even a few, I would have a chance at crumbling enough to work myself out.

The foundation was solid.

“Damn it,” I whispered, then coughed.

I drug my hands over the wall once more. Nothing gave. I tried to claw something out, anything. They were wedged in tightly. I drove my shoulder into the foundation until the pain was dizzying. It didn't help.

I pressed my forehead to the warming stones and tried to gulp down air, which only made me cough. The fire drew closer behind me, and I wanted to cry. That was when I heard the voices. People outside, yelling for others.

I rallied.

“Help!” I shouted. “Here!”

My lungs spasmed, and I was back to coughing.

“Help,” I gasped, too quietly. “Help!”

But I didn't think anyone could hear me over the roar of the fire and their own shouting.

“Assholes,” I said, my voice shaking. “You never hear me.

“Down here!” I tried to shout. “Down here!”

It was no use. No one heard my cries, not when everyone else was crying out and yelling, not when the fire was roaring in all our ears. I coughed, and wheezed, and no one heard that either.

I pressed my back into the stones and pressed my palms into my stinging eyes. I had to think. I had to make it out. I couldn't die here, not like this, not by fire. Runehall wouldn't have me, I wouldn't let him.

“Where is she?”



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

My head snapped up. That sounded like—

“Where the hell is she?”

It was Roan, shouting on the other side of my prison.

“Roan!” I scrambled to my knees and pressed my mouth to the stones. “Roan, I’m—”

I broke off, coughing.

Nothing.

“Roan, help,” I tried again. “I’m here!”

But my throat was damaged and weak. I was gasping, coughing, unable to shout. I’d taken in too much smoke. My voice wasn’t loud enough.

“Help,” I whispered.

“Fen!” he shouted. “Fen, are you there?”

I couldn’t die like this.

That was all I could think. And then I knew what to do. My heartbeat slowed, and a tear slipped down my cheek, even as the hope surged in my chest. I tipped back my head, sipped a small breath—and howled.

The sound was smother on my blackened lungs and my raw throat. I could sustain it, and I could grow it louder. I sputtered a cough and started again, picking up the note once more.

“Fen.” I heard him say. “Quiet! I can hear her.”

I howled with everything I had. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I wobbled between notes, between coughing fits, between fear and hope.

“She’s in the crawl space,” I could hear him say, his voice growing closer. “Fen, don’t stop.”

I howled until I heard his voice was just on the other side of the stone.

“Roan,” I squeezed out. My throat burned. “I’m here. Help.”

“I’m here!” he echoed. “I hear you. I’m gonna get you out. Hold on, just hold on.”

I leaned against the stone and listened to the sound of him fumbling and cursing. The fire was painfully hot on my back, and the smoke was building, despite my low vantage point.

“Someone get me a maul!” he was shouting.

I wasn’t sure how much time I had left and if he would get to me before it was too late, but it felt good to know someone else was working to help me, that I wasn’t all alone.

Then his words were in my ears.

“Fen, you need to get back.”

I barely had time to scramble to the side before the first strike came. The crack made me flinch. The fire roared to my right, and the smoke poured, thick and black. It burned my eyes. I coughed violently, and the second strike came, followed by another and another. I couldn't see for how blurred my vision was, and I couldn't tell if it was working, if he was getting through the rock. All I could feel was heat on my skin and smoke in my lungs until I felt—him. His hands. They wrapped around my arms and pulled me forward, towards the foundation, until he was pulling me out, into cold air and—rain.

He pulled me into the rain and into his arms.

## Chapter Forty-Two

Roan

The hut had been nearly engulfed by the time I'd reached it. Only the backside had a wall that wasn't a wall of flames, but I knew it was only a matter of time before it was taken too. One door on fire, no windows. Sides made of logs, as thick as a man. A stone foundation that rose to my waist where the hill sloped down, rocks so tightly stacked my fingers could find no weak spots.

I'd never felt so hopeless in all my life, so worthless. A light rain started up. It did nothing to soothe the angry flames. Everything stretched before me, and it felt unreal. She could not be in there; I could not be losing her.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

I'd shouted, circling the hut in vain, looking for a way in that wasn't there.

Nothing. I couldn't see a way to get her out. She couldn't be in there. The roof was engulfed. It would all come down soon.

I could not be losing her.

I kept shouting her name. There was nothing else.

Then I heard the howls. Howls? I blinked against the slanting rain in my eyes, then heard another. They were coming from the crawl space.

I followed them to the back of the structure, where the fire had not yet consumed everything and the foundation was at its highest, the ground sloping away. Someone got me a maul. Then I'd taken it to the side of that foundation again and again and again, until my arms and shoulders burned with the effort, until I'd gotten through, until I was on my knees in the mud prying away stones, until I was reaching in, finding her and pulling her out.

She stumbled over the stones and into my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her, my face in her smoky hair. I pulled her away from the blaze and sank to the ground with her. She was coughing, and I ran my hands over her back.

"You're out," I kept saying. "You're out."

Slowly, the fresh air worked its way inside her, and the coughing lessened. She could get a decent breath, and her coughs no longer wracked her so forcefully. Her head

came up, eyes blinking, and she met my gaze. Her face looked dazed, like she was struggling to believe she'd made it out. She'd be okay.

I put my hands on either side of her soot-streaked face and nodded.

Her shoulders sagged and she let out a sputter of air, sinking until her forehead was pressed into my shoulder. I ran my hands up and down her back.

“You’re hurt,” I said, having seen the skin of her arm. “Tell me what hurts.”

She didn’t tell me, but she leaned away, and both of us tracked her body. The burns on her leg and arms, a hand she cradled to her chest.

“I’ll take you to Yeshi.”

I stood and bent to pick her up, lifting her gently to her feet. But when I tried to scoop her into my arms, she squeezed my shoulder, stalling me. A glance at her face showed she wasn’t focused on me anymore. She was looking at the people gathered around us, and there was something new in her eyes.

She looked like she was preparing to do something.

“No,” she said, one word spinning circles in my head.

“No?”

Her gaze was sharp. The soot that streaked her cheeks took on a fierce look, and she squared her shoulders.

“Fen, you’re hurt.”

But she turned away from me. When she spoke, it was to those gathered around us, Toke's and Runehall's alike. Baer was shouldering his way through the crowd, one of Runehall's elders trailing him, and there was horror in his eyes. He looked at Fen, burned and streaked with soot and rain, and his mouth fell open.

"Axl did this," she said, her voice small and jagged, and I went cold. "He—he..." she struggled for the words, struggled to be heard with so raw a throat, "wanted me to—"

But then she broke off in a fit of coughing.

"Let's get you to Yeshi first," I said, coming beside her, my hand encircling her ribs. "We'll find Axl."

And kill him.

But she shook her head. There was that look again, wild and angry.

"He tried to give me b-back to R-R-Runehall," she said, louder now, "but I won't let R-Runehall have me."

A murmur went through the crowd. I had wanted to scoop her up and carry her from this burning hut and these gathered people, but I saw what she was doing. She was standing up for herself. She was coming head-to-head with the people who had tried to dictate her path, and she was telling them no.

She was speaking out.

"I will not be—be yours to command," she said quietly. She found Baer and Runehall's elder when she said, "Stop your meeting. Forget your arguments. I am my own, and...and I will—will have myself."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Her voice was hoarse with smoke, and she tripped over her words like she often did, but she was loud and clear and sure. Anyone who thought she was mute learned the truth of the matter. And anyone who'd been debating about her in the hall earlier lowered their head in shame now.

She lifted her face to the rain and said, quieter, "And Toke will have me, too."

The rain on her cheeks shone like his blessing, and I remembered Indi's story, of Fenil's birth miles from the village and how it rained as she walked back with her newborn child in her arms.

Toke's blessing, even then, even so close to Runehall's clan. She'd always been his.

"As for the wolves," she continued. "We were wrong about them. They are not our com—competition or our enemies. The rumors are true. I've been living w-with them, like I've lived...with all of you. In that time, I've come to understand...that we are not so different, the Caed and the wolves. Devoted to our clans. To each other, those we love."

The words lingered. She coughed again. "That's how the wolves live," she finally said.

"I don't care what any—any of you think. I call an end to all of this, here and now. Toke will have me," she said louder, and she looked up at the rain to make her point. "Maybe you don't like that, but I won't be moved."

"And I'd like to see you try to feed me to the wolves."

## Chapter Forty-Three

Fenli

Runehall's clan left in the night, but not before the elder promised to never come for me again. I went to Yeshi's. She chased her own family from her hut and washed me quickly, taking careful inventory of all my wounds. Her apprentice was the only one allowed to come and go, but Roan, Esska, and Indi waited outside. Sometimes I could hear their voices, asking how I was when the apprentice headed out, before she had the door closed.

There was a salve for my cuts and scrapes and another for the burns. Gods almighty, the burns hurt. My skin felt like it was burning long after the fire had been put out. I bit my lip until it bled, until Yeshi noticed the red that dripped from my chin and scolded me, rushing to get a piece of leather.

I bit the leather strip so hard I thought I'd bite right through.

When she finished the wrappings and said that was all she could do for me for now, I started to cry. The burns were nearly unbearable.

"But the pain," I whispered.

She shook her head, regret in her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

She'd already given me what painkiller she'd had.

Then she took my arm and helped me out the door, delivering me to Roan who diligently took her place.



“She needs sleep,” she said. “Tomorrow, we scrub the burns and change the bandages. It’s gonna be hell.”

The three of them led me back to my hut and worried over me until they seemed to remember that they were supposed to be letting me sleep. Indi and Esska left, and Roan poured me a cup of mead. My hands shook as I lifted it to my lips, but I drank deeply. I hoped it would help me.

But the mead was not enough.

I was up throughout the night, catching only bits of sleep before waking in a panic. There was always the pain, like my skin was still burning, and so my dreams were ones of fire as well.

“Listen,” Roan whispered, stroking the hair from my forehead while I tried to get my breathing back under control. “It’s raining.”

I heard it then, coming down in sheets against the roof.

I listened, and I let it anchor me.

## Chapter Forty-Four

Roan

I hated to leave her. I almost didn’t. But after one week, it was time to take Baer to see the wolves.

It was my one shot at getting him to understand. For her, I had to take it.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

Baer had been eerily quiet since the night of the fire. Once, when the elders had brought up the topic of Fenli and the wolves, he'd stood, throwing back his chair, and told them all to stand down long enough for her to make a godsdamn recovery. He'd made himself scarce since then, and I wasn't sure why.

I packed the canoe and my things, and I made sure Esska was settled in with Fen.

"Would you shut up and go already?" she'd said when I tried to go over Fen's medicines a second time. "I will take good care of her, I promise."

I relented, looking back to where she lay sleeping.

"Tell her I said goodbye."

Ess nodded. "You'll be back in a day. Stop overreacting."

I knew she was right.

I left for the canoe, surprised to see Baer already there and with a canoe of his own.

"We can both go in mine," I said.

He only shook his head and climbed into his own. I should have known then.

I lead us through the water to the island of the wolves. There was no sign of them as we made our way to the hut on foot, normal for this time of day, and we made ourselves comfortable. That night, as we lay on our bedrolls, we heard their howls.

Gods, how I missed her. I ached with it. Every note they hit drove the pain deeper.

And I knew I was a fool, but I didn't care.

Early the next morning we headed out to the cedar where Fen and I would sit and watch. I parroted the same things she'd told me on that first morning. Leave your metal behind. No axe, no knives. Don't you dare make me regret this. Relax.

When the wolves finally came, I looked to Baer, trying to read him.

But he was unreadable.

We sat there for many hours.

When we returned to the hut, Baer told me to go home. He was going to stay. He wouldn't listen to any arguments about it.

"Take my weapons, if you must," he said, "but leave."

Finally, I relented. But I damn well took every last blade he had on him.

Before I got into my canoe to head back to Fenli, my gaze caught on a tree just up from the rocky shoreline. The memory of it came back to me, that night when we'd been found, and I'd seen the carvings in the bark for the briefest of moments before being pulled back to my world falling apart.

I had forgotten.

Now I left my canoe and made my way to the base of the tree. The marks were fresh, and I knew it must have been Fen who'd etched them.

I searched the woods for wolves

but in the end

the wolf was me

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth before I turned to go. I needed to get back to her.

I returned home, but it was many days before Baer made his way back.

“Are they—?”

He let out a gruff laugh. “They’re alive,” he said.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

That night, he told the clan that he was throwing his support in with the growing effort to end the wolf hunt.

“I’ve looked them in the eyes,” he said, as a chill ran up my back, “and I saw Toke looking back at me.”

### Chapter Forty-Five

Fenli

They nullified our marriage, and Roan moved out of the hut he’d built himself. I tried to protest, saying it should be me to move out, but they wouldn’t have it—not in the condition I was in and all the healing I had yet to do. Roan gathered his things to take with him to the bunkhouse and Esska moved in, pushing through the door with her bag just as Roan was stepping out.

Thank the gods for Esska.

I needed space from the marriage I’d been given into, but I didn’t want to be alone. I was struggling with my fears, some founded and reasonable, others laced with paranoia. The trouble was, I couldn’t always tell the two apart. In the moments when I struggled, usually late in the night, I needed Ess there by my side. I needed her to tell me what was real and what wasn’t. I needed her assurance that I was safe.

Bleak days stretched into a bleak season. But as the air grew crisp and the winds colder, some of the heaviness started to lift. It came slowly. One good day here, a night of sleep there. My outlook started changing, and some parts of me I’d forgotten

about crept back in. I grew curious about things again. The feeling shocked me as so familiar and yet not something I'd felt in a very long time. I took pleasure in a verbal spar with Ess one morning. A few days later, my legs itched to walk in the woods. Once there, Ess foraging for mushrooms beside me, my mind turned to mapping once more.

It was no perfect healing, not by any measure. But it was mine.

I saw Roan here and there, but he seemed careful to keep his distance. Esska said he asked about me every damn day, but I knew it was important to him that I have my space as well. I looked for him every time I left my hut. While walking in between buildings, grabbing food in the kitchens, at a naming ceremony for the newest (and loudest) clan member. We'd catch each other's eyes, then linger. And it was like we shared the same space somehow, the same moment, even as everyone else moved around us, no matter how stretched the distance between. A corner of my mouth would lift. He'd wink.

Come mid fall, Esska had the opportunity to join in on the Eastern hunt, a trip that took hunters from home to fell deer and elk for the long winter. She'd be six days gone, at least, and it would be a chance for her to get her first big kill.

"I shouldn't go," she said one night. "I'm not leaving you."

"You're going." I didn't even bother to look up from the lines I was drawing.

She sighed.

"Then Indi can come and stay with you."

I shook my head. Putting my charcoal down, I looked up and smiled at her.

“I’m ready for this, Ess. I want to do it.”

She chewed her lip, but, in the end, she agreed.

Indi came over every morning to have breakfast with me, and every evening I went to her and Iver’s hut for dinner. When I grew tired of walks to the busy coast and found myself craving the forest, I had the thought to seek out Runa. We went into the woods together on a few afternoons, and we talked back and forth. I knew it would make Ess proud to see me not being such a hermit, and the thought made me smile a little. We talked about Ess and how she may be fairing on the hunt. Runa confessed she was more than a little nervous to be as deep into the forest as we were, but she’d been wanting to face the fear for a long time.

“To be honest,” she said, “I’ve always been jealous of you.” I was so shocked by her words, I stopped dead on my feet. “You’re brave and independent and have been heading out into the wilderness since we were kids. I’d watch you go and wish I had half the nerve.”

“Really?”

She nodded.

“I’ve always been jealous of you,” I confessed. Now it was her turn to stop. “You’re so good with people, and everyone smiles when they’re around you, and you have great hair.”

She laughed. And I vowed never to be jealous of another woman again.

After a week’s time, the hunters returned with game and Esska returned with smiles and stories. She’d gotten her first deer, and she talked long into the night, alive in a way I’d seldom seen her before. This was what happened when we were ourselves in

the world. We came alive.

“You look good,” she told me, her smile wide across her face.

Gods, she was a sap.

“I feel good. I feel at home in my bones.”

“And in the clan,” she added.

“And in the clan,” I agreed.



The next day, my feet carried me to the hut where the single men bunked.

It was time.

So, I knocked.

### Chapter Forty-Six

Roan

The room, which had been a ruckus of noise and men jostling around, grew suddenly quiet around me. I looked up and found faces looking at me, then to the door, then back to me again.

And I just knew.

I dropped the figure I was carving and stood. And there she was, standing in the doorway, her attention already on me.

It was probably Toke alone who kept me standing, she was so beautiful in that moment. My breath hitched. My eyes swept over her, whole and healthy and here in my doorway. And I prayed I wasn't dreaming.

Her hand was clasping her elbow in front of her, and there was a blush at her cheeks.

Gorgeous.

And it wasn't until Jory cleared his throat that I realized I was meant to do something. I gave myself a shake.

Running a hand through my hair nervously, I closed the space between us. When I drew close, she stepped back, and I followed her into the dark night, closing the door just as the murmurs and chuckles and whoops took hold inside.

Goose was there, and he jumped happily around my feet. I bent to pet him before I stood, facing Fen.

"Hi," I said, shoving my hands into my pockets. I didn't trust myself with them. Not with her standing there so close. I wanted to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, straighten the clasp on her cloak, rub her arms to see if she was warm enough. Anything. All of it. More.

"Hey." She took a breath. "How are you?"

"Okay," I said. "You?"

"Fine."

I nodded.

I wanted to tell her she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in all my life, and I was so glad she was here, and I missed her so much it hurt, like a bruise inside me that Toke had his thumb on. But I didn't say any of that. She was free of me, and I needed her to know it. To know it deep in the marrow of her bones. She was her own person. And for the first time in her life, she could choose her own fate. I didn't want to take that from her. I didn't dare open my mouth for fear of swaying her before she'd had all the time she'd needed to come to her own conclusions.

But the silence stretched on, and it was growing harder to not pull her into my arms and kiss her.

“I was wondering,” she started, saving me from myself, “if you wanted to go for a walk. With me.”

I blinked at her. I could only just make out her face for all the dark gloom that surrounded us.

“Now?”

“We don’t have to. I just thought it might be—”

“I’d love to.”

She looked up at me. “You sure?”

“I’d love too.”

I’d been nearly breathless when I’d said it, and I cleared my throat.

She smiled. “Okay.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

We walked that night and every night after, sometimes to the moon and stars, sometimes to the light of a lantern. On the fourth night, she kissed me. One moment she was smiling at something stupid I'd said, the moon on her face, and the next she was closing the space between us, putting her lips to mine like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And I lost myself in her, just like that. She was a squall, and I was just a lone ship, nothing but her in my sails.

And I'd let her sink me again and again.

All my careful control was lost on me after that, but she didn't seem to mind. My hands kept seeking her out, brave words tripped off my tongue before I'd even considered them, and I fumbled over myself for her each and every night. My brash honesty didn't scare her away. Her hands sought me as well. She whispered words that made me bury my face in her hair and thank Toke for all my stupid luck.

And in the end, she chose me.

### Chapter Forty-Seven

Fenli

I was digging through the trunk in the far back corner when the door opened, and I knew I was in trouble.

"You're still packing?" came Roan's voice. "Tell me you are not packing right now."

I swung around and glared at him.

“Don’t you dare judge me.”

“You are making it impossible for me not to judge you.” He drew up behind me and hauled me to my feet, pulling me into his chest. “What the hell are you looking for?”

I had intended to fight back, but he smelled like soap, and I loved that smell on him. I changed my plans and turned around, burrowing my face into his shoulder and inhaling deeply.

“Most of it,” I murmured.

“Most of it?”

“Most of all of it. I just started packing a moment ago.” It was a lazy confession. I was too caught up in the smell of him, and now that I was in his arms, the warmth of him, to do more. What did I care that he’d packed days ago, and I had waited until the last possible moment, and now he was judging me for it? He smelled like soap and rain and felt like a cozy blanket in front of a fire. Let the ass judge me.

“You’re a mess,” he said. “Ess will kill you if she heads over and finds you like this. She was packed ages ago. Come on, this is a matter of life and death.” He worked to disentangle his limbs from mine, and I grumbled as he pulled his warmth away. “I mean it. She’ll have your hide. Pack, like your life depends on it. Gods, you’re unorganized.”

He helped me get my things together as quickly as we could. When we were nearly done, and I was in good enough shape that Esska likely wouldn’t kill me, he eased up a bit. We were carefully wrapping my bottles of ink when he spoke up once more.

“Maybe we can make plans for our ceremony on the way out.” I groaned, and he smiled wickedly. “It could be fun, and I bet Ess and Jory would love to help.”

“No plans, no ceremony. I’ve told you, Roan. We don’t need all that.”

“Oh, I think we do. We are getting married, after all. Kinda hard to do that without a ceremony.”

I resorted to whining. “But we’ve already had one. The old one should count.”

“You’re the one who moved the skies above and hell below to make sure it didn’t count!”

I growled, exasperated, and tucked a wrapped bottle into the box with the others. “Well, now I’m saying it should count. I don’t—don’t want to go through a whole day and night of people fussing over me.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I wouldn’t mind it.”

To that, I rolled my eyes. “You’re the worst. Look at that annoying smirk on your face, even as I suffer. Why do you like being the center of attention so much, huh?”

“It suits me.”

I rolled my eyes and double checked that I’d packed all the mapping supplies I’d need while Roan went over my clothes once more. When we were both satisfied, I remembered the parcel up in the loft and went to retrieve it. I climbed the new staircase Roan and I had spent three days building for Goose, so he could join us in the bed we shared. Crawling across Roan’s side of the mattress, then mine, I dug through the odds and ends I kept against the wall and pulled out a package wrapped in linen and tied with a leather chord.

It was a gift from Tovin and Helva's mother, given to me in secret and under the strictest confidence. I miss my children, she'd said. Make sure they know that. And please don't let their father hear of this. I carried it down the stairs and tucked it carefully into the top of my pack, then tied the whole thing up.

"Ready?" Roan asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:40 am*

I looked around our hut, and I was struck with a longing for too many things. I was excited about our trip out to see the North Clan and I could hardly wait to get started mapping for them. I'd brought extra supplies for Helva, and it was my job to get her started in the trade. Gaert and I worked about as well together as a wildcat and a tub of water, and I was looking forward to getting away for a bit.

But I'd miss home. I'd miss this hut and Indi and even Iver. We would not be gone for long, but it was enough to give me pause, to make me look around the hut a bit longer.

"Ready," I finally echoed.

And I was.

We headed out, meeting up with Ess and Jory in the kitchens and saying goodbye to everyone who came to wish us off with a cup of mead. The women in the kitchens doled out small packs of food, and Indi held us up with tears and hugs and kisses until I promised we wouldn't be long, and Roan pried me from her arms.

Soon we were trekking north, just the four of us with Goose on our heels, telling stories and laughing as we went.

"Would you look at that," I said, drawing to a halt with Roan behind me. There in my path was a boulder the size of a bear, split cleanly into two halves.

Roan looked over my shoulder. "It signifies an ending."



“Sounds ominous.”

He bent to kiss my temple and then my cheek.

“No,” he said. “It’s a good omen.”