



Seducing a Barbarian

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Description: Tomas was a jealous little shit. He should've known he wouldn't win going up against the best. Everyone knew I was the most popular in the brothel. There was no point pretending otherwise. In a shameless act of revenge, he had the guards called and had me arrested for offending the man who'd chosen me over him. They, in turn, sold me off to the barbarians. They don't know who they're dealing with. Especially the barbarian babysitting me; he says he's uninterested in males. We'll see about that. I'll show them all. They chose the wrong man to mess with.

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One

SIMON

“Simon! Simon, wake up! We need to get downstairs!”

I groaned and considered ignoring her, but Chanel wouldn't be coming around so early without good reason. She and everyone else knew how much I hated to wake up. And she knew what would happen if she woke me without good reason. Hell hath no fury like a tired Simon. I would make all their lives miserable for the insult alone.

Forcing my eyes open, I looked around my room. The sky was pink outside my window, the sun only just coming over the horizon.

“Someone better be dead. Or they will be,” I growled, forcing myself upright and out of bed. And because I was feeling pissy, I didn't rush. I took a second to wet my hair with the basin of water on my dresser, so I could tame it into playfully tousled instead of an exhausted bedhead. I pulled on a silky robe and added some tint to my lips to draw the attention away from my dark circles. When I finally headed downstairs, I felt a little more alert, but no less petulant. So it took me a while to figure out what was going on.

“So, at least one is prepared to greet us properly,” a voice with a thick accent commented. Casting around for the voice, I found a small company of handsome men standing in our doorway. All eyes were on me, which I appreciated. I liked the attention.

My boss, Quincy, cleared his throat and nodded quickly. “Yes, Simon is our most popular worker. He takes great pride in caring for his customers.”

Why the hell did he look so nervous? I looked over the men again. From their clothes, I assumed they came from the south. Al Nuzem, maybe? They looked fancy enough to come from the affluent country. But that wasn’t a first here. We saw all types in our brothel. After years in the profession, I doubted there was any group I was unfamiliar with. So why was Quincy acting like he had to grovel for the honor of their presence?

“We have many others for you to choose from. Chanel is also popular,” Quincy added, gesturing to my friend. She preened and gave the group a flirty smile, wiggling her fingers at them.

“No. No women,” the man said, giving Chanel a once-over before dismissing her completely. Her disappointment was... surprising. They were good-looking, but Chanel cared more about the size of their wallets than their looks. Maybe taking my time was a mistake. I felt like I was missing something.

“Then, perhaps Tomas? He is very accommodating.”

My brows snapped together. Tomas was a jealous shit and a size queen. He would complain outright about a man’s equipment if it wasn’t up to his standard. He’d lost many customers over the past two years that he’d worked here because he was rude to them—more than half of those I had to lure back by servicing them myself. People didn’t tip well if they were insulted, so I didn’t appreciate his behavior in the slightest. And why was Quincy skipping past me? He barely acknowledged my presence. He just admitted I was the best, so why would he skip me?

“Is there something wrong with Simon? Do we not deserve the best?” the man demanded.

He was speaking for the group, which was interesting. And he seemed to take offense that Quincy was skipping me. So did I.

I didn't really care why Quincy was acting like an ass. If these customers paid as well as their outfits said they could, I would start work early just to keep them happy.

"You absolutely deserve the best," I purred, giving the man a sultry look. "If I please you, I would happily give you whatever you want."

That got me a few leers, which was encouraging. I emphasized myself a little by letting my robe slip off one shoulder. My skin care routine was one of the reasons men loved me. After living a day in our rough city, they liked something soft to touch.

"Come here," the man in the middle spoke in the language of Al Nuzem, his voice smooth and low. It was a sexy voice, one I'd be happy to listen to as I pleased him. I sauntered forward, ignoring Quincy's and Tomas's glares, and stopped in front of the man. Dark features, caramel skin, and silky black hair I wanted to get my hands into. This would be fun.

The corner of his mouth twitched, like he was amused by me. I wasn't sure why, but whatever worked for him. He reached out, running his knuckles down my cheek, before plucking the robe and smoothing it back into place. "Do you know who I am, little one?"

I answered in his language, a skill not many of my fellow brothel workers had. I wanted to be able to speak to my clients, to better service them. It's why I got the best tips. "No. Do you want me to?"

His smile grew into a smirk. He didn't respond to me, instead turning to his friend who'd spoken for the group before. He nodded once, and the man bowed his head in

response. There was obviously a power dynamic here, and this guy was in charge. The details didn't matter, but now I knew whom to focus my attention on.

"My prince has chosen. Go ready your finest room."

I was still looking at the man (prince?), so I didn't see Quincy's response, but I heard him grunt before he started arguing. "I—Ah, perhaps you'd like them both? You could see who serves you better. Tomas is younger and?—"

Outraged, I spun around to glare at him, but before I could light into him, the man who chose me wrapped his hand around my elbow, gently pulling me against his side.

"Age is of no issue," he said blandly, and his friend translated for Quincy.

I scowled at him. "I'm not old. I'm only twenty-six."

He smiled patiently at me. "No, little one. You are not old. And even if you were, you are very beautiful. Your age would not matter to me."

Damn right, it wouldn't. I'd still be doing this job well into my fifties as long as I was getting paid well. I loved sex, and I was good at it, so age would not hinder me.

Quincy still argued despite the man's assurance that he was happy with me. "No, no, I wasn't saying age was—I just meant—" He cast a glance at Tomas for help, which was... strange.

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“Simon doesn’t like mornings,” Tomas offered. “He might not treat you as well as he should because he is tired. That’s why he took so long to come down. He?—”

Oh, that little bitch. I was interested in servicing the man because he was good-looking and it seemed like he’d pay well, but now Tomas had made it personal. He was obviously jealous and trying to make me look bad so he could take my place.

Spinning to face the customer completely, I bit my lip and looked up at him through my lashes. “I would give up sleep entirely for a night with you. Don’t listen to them.”

He chuckled, drawing me into the circle of his arms. “Perhaps I can wear you out enough that you sleep well tonight instead.”

I liked the sound of that. Unwilling to stand around waiting for Quincy to find some reason for this client not to take me, I took his hands, pulling him down the hall. The rooms were cleaned every night, so I didn’t have to make him wait. And when he disappeared into the room, I stopped long enough to send a smug grin Tomas’s way before following after him.

The man, who never actually gave me his name, left hours later, sated and happy. I’ll admit, I enjoyed myself too. He was attentive and heavy-handed with the compliments. Every time I did something to please him, he let me know, and I watched him go with a hugely inflated ego and a couple of love bites from his attention.

And oh my, did he pay well. Part of the purse went to the brothel itself, but he paid me a separate purse as a tip that had more gold coins than silver in it. I dug through it,

smiling to myself, and spun around to put it in my room, coming up short when Tomas appeared before me.

“You’re a real bitch,” he hissed, his arms crossed over his chest.

I gave him a bored look. “And you’re jealous. Green is a horrible look on you.”

He drew back his hand like he was going to slap me, but froze a second later when my blade pressed against his neck. I tutted at him, shaking my head.

“Now, now, Tomas. You should know better. If you touch me, I’ll carve my name into your skin for the insult. You lost this round. Deal with it.”

“It should have been me,” he seethed, stepping back to put more space between us. “Quincy promised.”

That still didn’t make any sense to me. Quincy didn’t play favorites, not when it came to making coin. Then it hit me. I huffed out a laugh, eyeing Tomas up and down.

“No. Don’t tell me. He convinced you you’d get your pick of the clients if you got on your knees for him for free? Oh, Tomas. You poor, pathetic little idiot.”

Tomas’s eyes widened in fury, but it was his own fault he believed a word Quincy said. The only time any of us slept with Quincy was if he paid for it. He was a cheap bastard, and if he could convince someone through lies and manipulation, he would. Tomas should’ve listened better.

With a cackle, I tossed my purse into the air and caught it again. “Well, you have fun with that. I think I’m going to soak in the hot spring for a while. I’ve earned it.”

I winked at him, heading upstairs long enough to put on real clothes before leaving

the brothel for the night. I'd earned enough that I didn't need to take more clients tonight if I didn't want to. And I'd been meaning to go to the hot springs. It was good for my skin.

After a few hours of soaking and being pampered by the staff, I went home for the night. The handsome man who'd bought me for the morning told me he'd wear me out enough that I'd sleep well tonight. It was cute that he'd thought that, but I was still tired after waking up so early, so I figured a good meal and an early night were well deserved.

Except, I didn't make it that far. Outside the brothel stood a group of men who I figured were just waiting for their turn. It wasn't until Tomas spoke that I realized they were guards and looking for me.

"There he is! He insulted the prince!"

I was so confused by that comment that I didn't move fast enough to get to my knives. They grabbed me and clapped me in irons before I could blink. I squawked out a protest, wriggling to escape them, but one punched me in the stomach, knocking the wind out of me, before I could get away. They put a bag over my head, and one got handsy as he searched me for weapons, removing both my knives from their sheaths.

"What are you going to do with him?" Tomas asked, his tone eager and vindictive. "Hang him, maybe? Or give him lashes and ruin that pretty skin?"

That asshole. I'd kill them all before I'd let them get away with that. I couldn't believe he had sunk so low as to bribe the guards to get back at me. I fought harder, trying to get the stupid bag off my head, but one picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, ignoring my protests.

“No. He’s to be a tribute. He will be given to the barbarians. They’ll deal with him how they see fit.”

Horror and outrage sank into my gut. No. I wasn’t being sold off to a barbarian clan because Tomas was a jealous little shit. I was too valuable for that. Even Quincy would say so.

“Don’t you dare! Let go, you asshole! Quincy! Stop them!”

I wasn’t sure he could hear me, but he’d have something to say if his top earner was sold off. He cared more about making coin than keeping Tomas happy.

“That’s enough. Shut him up.”

And that was the last thing I remembered before pain exploded along my temple, and blackness overtook me.

Two

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FEIGRIND

I rose early, as I did most days, but it did not fill me with joy as it once had. Several times now, I had accepted tributes, and I was always disappointed. Thanks to my disposition, I was often given the more troublesome women to care for. While I was able to convince most to stay and be treated well, they never chose me. I'd had higher hopes for the last one— she was sweeter than I usually dealt with, but there was no spark between us. She took to Tyarr instead, and they were now expecting a babe together.

At this point, I was ready to give up and accept bachelorhood. I could not take another rejection.

“My brother!” a familiar voice called from outside my tent. I sat up in my bed with a sigh. If Uttin was calling for me, a fight was coming. It always did. Only the opponent ever changed.

I invited him inside with a quickly murmured, “Enter.”

When he poked his head inside, his smile was tight. Something bothered him.

“What is it?”

“One of the tributes is causing trouble. Orthorr wants you to take him for now until he is better behaved.”

My eyebrows lifted slowly. “Him?”

While I'd heard there was a more significant influx of male tributes being offered, I never thought one would be sent to me. I only ever took female tributes. I had no interest in males.

Uttin nodded. "He knows you are not to keep him, but you are the only one who can handle those like him. He attempted to run into the wilderness twice and nearly got killed by a kravick. He needs a firm hand until he understands his new life."

I did not hide the aggravation on my face. I didn't know when exactly I became the brat tamer of the clan. But they were always sent to me. Even the males, apparently. Uttin only chuckled at my discontent.

"Come now, before he decides to run again."

No. That would be dangerous. We accepted tributes after we situated ourselves for the colder months, since moving around while trying to get them used to their new lives was too difficult. But that meant we were up against the woods, and if the male ran with no way to protect himself, he would not last the night. The only one I knew that had survived with no training was Verus's bondmate, but he was nearly killed by a shadowstalker and did not come out unscathed. He still walked with a limp, and he sometimes required a cane to support him. His was a situation of desperation to escape being murdered by his town kin. He did not take such actions because he was petulant about his new place in life.

With a heavy sigh, I shoved to my feet and grabbed my swords. I followed Uttin towards the village center, where Orthorr waited for us. He stood outside the receiving tent, talking to a few guards. All three were not focused on the tent itself and therefore missed when the petite man slipped out and ducked around the back. Shaking my head, I made a detour, coming around the back of another tent to catch the man off guard. He was so busy looking behind that he didn't notice me until he knocked into me and fell on his behind.

My brows furrowed. “Why are you gagged?”

He frowned at me, probably because he didn’t understand. Only those who regularly went to the towns to pick up tributes and discuss treaties knew the town tongue. I was a warrior, but I did not volunteer for that job. I preferred to stay close to home to better care for my mother. She was getting older and pushed too hard sometimes while working her craft. I asked her once to rest and let others do the job, but she would not. Many of the women of an older age did the same.

Normally, I would expect tears in this situation, as most tributes knew only rumors of our cruelty instead of the truth. Sometimes, the tears were fake to gain sympathy. But this male did not cry. He glared at me. It told me much about how our interactions would go in the future.

I helped him to his feet, leading him with a tight grip around his elbow back to the clan leader. He struggled and fought against me, dragging his feet, but this did not bother me. I had dealt with it before. He would learn to be happy here. They all did. And then he would move on to a male who would cherish him.

Orthorr did a double-take when he saw the male with me. “How...”

“I found him sneaking out behind your back. Why is he gagged?”

We did not treat our tributes in such a way. Nor did we use iron on their wrists, like the shackles on this one.

Uttin answered for me, glaring at the little male. “He screamed obscenities endlessly the entire journey. The other tributes could not rest. And he tried to bite me.”

So he was one of those, then. The last female who so wildly protested as such had become one of the neighboring clan’s strongest hunters. She and her eventual

bondmate had a passionate romance. Perhaps this one would have a similar fate.

“Clan leader. Uttin says you requested me to become his protector?” I didn’t think my clan brother was lying, but my brothers were known to play pranks if bored. And Uttin and I were close.

Unfortunately, Orthorr nodded. “I am. I apologize. I know it is not your preference, but you have the most patience.”

That was true. The only other person more patient than myself was Rath, and he was bonded already. His bondmate was a sweet little male who was creating a system to teach the tributes our language and ways of life more quickly. It worked well with Verus’s bondmate, and hopefully, would make it easier for the newer tributes to acclimate and accept their new positions.

With a heavy dose of resignation, I bowed my head to my clan leader, my fist over my chest. “I’ll see to him myself. Is there a key to his restraints?”

He might be difficult, but I wouldn’t allow him to come to harm being bound in such ways. The restraints could injure his wrists. Besides, it was better for him to realize I would keep coming for him than for me to tie him up and make him think he just needed to wait to escape once I trusted him.

Uttin handed me the key with a grimace, eyeing the male as I unlocked his wrists and tossed the restraints aside. Like I expected, he twisted his arm in such a way to cause me to lose my grip and took off running. I rolled my eyes and jogged after him. He was small, not anywhere near as fast as I was, and it was getting dark. He’d get lost eventually. I just had to keep a steady pace behind him until he gave up.

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It didn't take long. He ran out of breath, hindered by the gag. He was too busy trying to run to remove it. When he stumbled in the forest, I was quick enough to catch him before he could get hurt, settling him on his feet without holding him back. He spun around to glare at me again, his chest heaving with his breaths.

"Want me to remove that?" I asked, pointing at the gag so he knew what I was speaking about. His glare never wavered, and he reached to untie it himself, only to give up moments later. He turned around and crossed his arms, waiting for me to remove it for him. Uttin had tied it quite tightly. I bit back my irritation at my clan brother. Uttin was not patient. It was not in his nature. He was pushy because, most often, he had to be in order to keep the townsfolk in line.

Once the gag was removed, I waited. The male would either try to run again or be too tired to continue.

In an unsurprising move, he took off again. What surprised me was when he tripped a moment later, landing with a yelp on the ground. I grimaced. It was too dark to be running around in the forest. He would only hurt himself.

Stepping over the root he tripped on, I squatted down beside his ankle, touching it gently. He hissed and jerked his leg away, but it did not feel bent in any odd fashion. It could be a sprain. I'd need to take him to the healing tent to be sure.

"Do you wish to run again, or shall we go back?"

I knew he didn't understand me. Even if he did, I assumed he'd be too stubborn to answer. For tributes like these, it was better to ask forgiveness than permission.

“I will take you back now. We will see a healer for your injury.”

I scooped him up before he could protest, heading for the village again. Rath stood nearby, as he usually did when I was chasing down a tribute. He was the best hunter in the clan, and could see danger coming before I could. I understood the wildness of man. He understood the wildness of the creatures he hunted. It was his expertise I needed while chasing someone through the forest.

The little male in my arms grumbled under his breath, but did not fight my hold. He was more delicate than I was expecting. He fit in my arms like a female would, and underneath the sweat and dirt from the journey, he smelled of flowers, too. It was not something I'd experienced before, and I found myself curious. What else made him so different from the rest?

Three

SIMON

I was still pissed when the giant barbarian sat me down on a pallet of blankets in a large, well lit tent. The middle was open enough to allow the smoke from the fire out, but not too much heat. It was warm, and after days of trying to escape on the stupid journey here, the warmth made my body heavy with fatigue. I hated it. I needed to get out of here. I was going back to my city, and then I was going to skewer Tomas for doing this to me. There wouldn't be a recognizable piece of him once I was through.

A woman and a man came inside. The woman had an infant tied to her back in a way I'd seen some women do in the city when they had chores and other things that required both hands. The babe was asleep and seemed unbothered by her movement. The man was obviously not a barbarian, based on his size alone. He looked smaller than me, which was saying something, and he had no muscles to speak of. They both chatted idly until the woman noticed our presence and stopped.

“Feigrind? Is everything alright?”

“The tribute fell and hurt himself,” the barbarian said smoothly. “It does not look broken, but he might need it wrapped.”

I was pretty sure, from the way the barbarians had spoken to me and the other tributes thus far, that none of them expected me to understand them. And I wasn’t about to give that fact away before I had to. I knew enough of the language to get by from servicing a nearby clan to our town, and I wanted as much information as I could get before showing my hand. Maybe one of them would let slip the fastest way out of here.

While the woman knelt beside me to check my ankle, the man behind her turned his attention to me and smiled softly. “I know you must be scared, but I promise, you’re safe here.”

He spoke in the common tongue, probably to better soothe me. It didn’t work. I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

He startled at my sharp tone, looking almost frightened by it. Which was ridiculous, considering I currently couldn’t move without pain shooting up my ankle.

“I, uh... I’m Finn. I’m the clan scribe. I’ll be teaching you and the other new tributes the language and the way of life here. So that you can better?—”

“No, thanks,” I interrupted. “I’m not staying.”

He grimaced, obviously uncomfortable arguing with me. Good. Maybe he’d go away, then.

“I know it feels like the worst place in the world to be, but they’re actually really good people. Those rumors?—”

Were irrelevant. No one was forcing me to do anything. I’d cut off their balls if they tried. And I wasn’t going to let him or anyone else manipulate me into thinking I had to stay.

“I’m not interested. Go sell your little speech to someone else.”

The woman stiffened and looked up at me with a severe expression. “Do not treat him that way. He is only trying to be kind.”

I gave her a flat look. “I was stolen from my home and handed off to be a bed warmer to a bunch of savages. Do I look like I care about his kindness? Unless he’s offering to bring me back home, I don’t give a shit what he has to say.”

She shot a look at the barbarian, switching to his language. “You’ve got your hands full with this one. Rest and elevation. It doesn’t need a wrap. Be careful that he doesn’t attack you in your sleep.”

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Her words were harsh, and she pushed to her feet without a backward glance, pulling the smaller man to her side and leading him away. He was frowning and twisting his fingers, but didn't argue with her. Whatever. I didn't care.

"I feel like I don't want to know what you said to them," the barbarian said, picking me up again. "I will not be so lucky when you can speak our language."

It took a lot not to answer him. I didn't want to give up my secret. But he spoke to me like I understood, and if I wasn't paying attention, I'd snap back a response automatically.

He headed out of the warm tent and down a path to a smaller fire than the one in the middle of the village. I paid attention to try to get a better idea of my next escape, but there wasn't much to differentiate one path from another. It was just a bunch of tents, a few fires dotted around, and the forest on one side. That seemed like the quickest way to get out of sight, but as proved to me with my last attempt, it wasn't a good idea to tackle that at night when I couldn't see. I'd need to try again in daylight.

"I can tell you want to run again," he commented, forcing me to jerk back to look at him. "You are not the first in my care to do it. You will not be the last. I am your protector. I will keep you safe. Even from yourself."

From myself? What the hell was that supposed to mean?

He didn't explain any further. Probably because he was talking at me, not to me. He didn't think I could understand him. Which begged the question of why he even bothered.

Ducking into a tent near the smaller fire, he sat me down on a pallet much softer than the one in the healing tent. There were furs piled on one side, so soft I sank into them when he put me down. I shot him a confused look. The barbarians didn't strike me as the lounging in luxury types.

"The other tributes would complain otherwise," he explained, his focus on lighting a lantern on the table. He'd mentioned before that I wasn't his first tribute, but that didn't make any sense. Why would he need more than one? Was it a harem situation? Was he just keeping me apart from them until he felt I would behave? He'd learn eventually that I behaved for no man. I wasn't letting him keep me.

I woke up late, like I always did, and for a minute I forgot where I was. The furs were warm and comfortable, and the sun heated the tent enough to make me think I was inside my room at home. The weather was nicer there.

It wasn't until I heard voices talking and laughing outside the tent that I remembered. When I did, I groaned and buried my face into the furs. I'd told myself to wake up early, while the barbarian was still asleep. I could've snuck out and gotten away before he could chase after me. So much for that plan.

"You're awake."

I ignored him. At least until he spoke again.

"Are you hungry?"

Ugh. I had no choice but to turn around. I was starving. I'd been refusing to eat just to make my captors' lives more difficult. I couldn't refuse again. Turning over, I glared at him, but refused to get up. He didn't seem bothered by this. He didn't seem bothered by any of my behavior. Even after I'd run last night, he just looked bored. He held up a bowl of food, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Food?”

I put my hand out for it, but didn't get up. I was comfortable, and I wasn't moving unless I had to.

The barbarian shook his head, pointing to the spot near the table beside him. “Here.”

I scowled, crossing my arms. I wasn't going to let him tell me what to do.

He didn't get angry or try to coax me. He just waited, taking bites out of his own bowl like he didn't care either way if I ate or not. I wanted to pitch a fit, but my stomach growled petulantly, and I was forced to give in. I was so hungry, I was dizzy. I couldn't run away with no food in my belly.

Crawling out of the bed, I reached for the bowl. He saw straight through me and moved it before I could snatch it and bring it back to bed. I narrowed my eyes. Fine. He wanted to be that way; I'd make him regret it. Big men like him, who weren't into other men, always got uncomfortable with my attention. I got up, flinching only a little thankfully since my ankle was feeling better, plopped myself into his lap, and grabbed my food, ignoring him completely.

If being my chair bothered him, he didn't let on. He actually chuckled, amused, before eating around me. He didn't move me, didn't protest or shove me off like I'd expected. Was I wrong in assuming he wasn't interested? That's what it had sounded like when he was speaking to the older guy last night.

Lifting a fruit, he said its name, tipping his head to look at me expectantly. I glared at him. I wasn't playing that game. He still didn't get mad, though. He just kept going, pointing things out and saying their names. He eventually pointed at his chest, giving me a significant look. “Feigrind. Your protector.”

Then he pointed at me, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m not answering that,” I replied in the common tongue. “You don’t need to know. All you need to understand is that I’m going to make your life a living hell until you set me free. I didn’t ask to be here. And I won’t let you keep me as one of your harem. So you can stop trying to get me to warm up to you. It’s not going to happen.”

He hummed, snagging a piece of bread from his bowl. “Long name,” he commented dryly.

My mouth fell open. “That’s not my name!”

He still didn’t understand me. I growled, frustrated, and swatted at his arm when he rubbed a hand soothingly up and down my back. I didn’t need his comfort. I just needed a way out.

Four

SIMON

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He didn't leave me alone all day that first day. He spent most of it trying to teach me to speak and talking at me. Even when we relieved ourselves, he was within spitting distance. And I wasn't willing to run in the dark again without some kind of light and something to protect myself. I wanted to get free, but I wasn't stupid. So I was stuck with him for at least another night.

I wasn't really surprised when we went to sleep and he lay down next to me. What surprised me was that he didn't touch me. The first night, I figured he was being nice because I'd been traveling for days and was exhausted. I assumed the next night was when he'd push for sex. I was fully prepared to fight him, hurt him however I could, just to keep him away from me. He never did. He just lay down beside me and went to sleep. He didn't even tie me up to make sure I didn't run.

It annoyed me. Like he wasn't even worried if I ran. Because he didn't care what happened to me? Or he was cocky enough to think no matter what I did, he'd catch up with me. Either option angered me. I was more than he bargained for, and I would prove it eventually. At the soonest opportunity, I'd show him.

Which proved to be sooner than I thought. The next day, instead of staying in the tent all day, he brought me back to that first one they'd taken me to after we arrived. For a second, I thought he was sending me back, and I was really excited, but then I noticed a bunch of women in the tent, and that man Finn standing in the middle bouncing on his toes. He wouldn't be here if they were sending us back, right? He was already part of the clan as the scribe.

"Oh, you're here." He smiled gently at me. "Good. Welcome. We're learning the basics of the barbarian language today. There are some cushions to sit on—" he

gestured to the pillows on the floor. “And we’ll have some food brought in a little later.”

I made a face. I had never gone to school before. I had no interest in going now. And I didn’t want them thinking I cared enough about them to learn. When I turned to leave, I ran smack into Feigrind, who was standing behind me with that bored expression on his face again. He knew I’d try to bow out. Damn it.

“I don’t want to be here,” I said plainly in my own tongue. “I don’t care to learn.”

“It’s okay to still be upset. There’s a lot I can explain if you’re worried,” Finn offered behind me, his tone gentle. All of him was gentle. It bugged me. Did they make him quiet? Were they hoping I’d be the same?

Glancing at him over my shoulder, I narrowed my eyes. “How long have you been here?”

He seemed surprised by the genuine question, but didn’t care to hide anything. “About a year now? I arrived last year. I was the first male tribute, so I understand how you feel and?—”

My spine stiffened, and I turned fully to face him. “Hold on. Say that again.”

He frowned, tipping his head at me. “Which part? It didn’t take me a year to learn the language, so if that’s what you’re thinking?—”

I waved my hands wildly to stop his rambling. I didn’t care about that. “You said you were the first male tribute. Of this clan? Or ever?” Because I had a bone to pick with that guy. If it were Finn, he’d be on the business end of my attitude so fast, his head would spin.

“U-uh... Ever, I think. At least, that’s what I’d been told. I’m gathering the clan stories, so if there’s one from the past, I haven’t heard of it yet. Why?”

My eyes widened in indignation. “Why? What do you mean, why? I heard about you! You had a chance to get out! Your family came for you! You chose to stay, and now the rest of us have to suffer for it!” I slashed my hand toward two other male tributes off to one side who looked just as unhappy to be here as I was. They might not have been willing to speak up about it, but I was. “They never considered sending males before you! You doomed every man who has even the slightest inclination towards other men! You ruined everything! All for what? A little dick? How can you be so selfish?”

Finn was in tears by the time Feigrind stopped me. He grabbed me by the elbow, shoving me behind him as he asked Finn to translate what I said. I was too angry to listen to whatever bullshit Finn decided to spout back. I used his distraction to my advantage and slipped through the opening of the tent, making a beeline for the forest. Running on my ankle hurt a little, but I ignored it. It was daylight. I had plenty of time to put space between me and this stupid clan.

No one stopped me as I dashed into the trees. Honestly, I got farther than I thought I would. I ran until I was breathless and had to stop, and when I looked behind me, Feigrind was nowhere to be seen. I hid behind a tree, taking a few deepbreaths to get myself together. I’d always hated running. I could ride a man all night, but if anyone asked me to run, I’d run out of steam so fast, it was pathetic.

A low growl pierced the air while I was still catching my breath. At first, I thought it was my imagination, and I ignored it. But when the noise got louder, I realized I’d made a mistake. I had no weapon, nothing to defend myself. And no light once the sky went dark. I was supposed to have planned this out better. Not run the first chance I got, like an idiot.

Looking around wildly, I searched for the source of the sound. My heart skidded in my chest when I noticed what it was. Wolf. Oh, shit. There was no way I was outrunning a wolf. It was far enough away to give me a lead, but not so far that I felt like I'd have a chance, especially when my ankle was still bothering me. I was so freaking stupid.

It bared its teeth at me in warning, and I stood there like an idiot, staring back at it. Probably only pissing it off more. When it lunged at me, I closed my eyes and screamed, protecting my head with my arms. I didn't want to die. I was stupid and reckless, but I'd do better if I could just have another chance.

I felt the weight of it crash against me, but it was gone a second later, before it did more than knock me to the ground and scare the hell out of me. When I looked up, my mouth fell open as a warrior I didn't recognize pinned the animal to the ground and roared in its face. The wolf whimpered and fled the minute the barbarian let it loose. When he turned to face me, my heart lodged itself in my throat. He had a set of four scars across his face, like something had mauled him, and his shirtless frame was criss-crossed with older scars as well. The look of pure hatred on his face was clear, and when he stood, I considered maybe I had just traded one bad situation for another.

“Stand, tribute. Unless you'd like the ulvor to return with its brothers to eat you.”

He spoke the common tongue. It surprised me enough that I stared at him stupidly for a moment. Long enough to annoy him. He marched over to me, yanking me to my feet with a painful grip on my arm. The pain shook off the shock, and I fought against him, trying to tear myself free, but he shook me hard enough to rattle my brain a little, and I fell quiet just to avoid him doing it again. I had it easy with Feigrind. He was nice to me. This one had no such inclination.

He marched me back to the village without another word, practically dragging me

when I couldn't run anymore to keep up with his long leg span. He was enormous. We made it about halfway before Feigrind showed up. He looked pissed too, his normally blank expression dark and foreboding. He was still less scary than this guy, and I didn't protest when the man passed me back to him.

"He was nearly killed by an ulvor. Teach him to behave, or he will die. The creatures are wild this early in the season. They will kill him before you can reach him."

I jerked my head up to look at him. He glared down at me and repeated himself in my language to be sure I understood, jabbing his finger toward the forest. "You go out there, you die. I will not save you again. Stay with your protector."

Yeah, that was really freaking clear now. If I wanted to get out of here, I couldn't do it by running off. I needed them to escort me back. I wouldn't make it on my own.

Five

FEIGRIND

It wasn't often that a tribute got the better of me. I'd expected him to complain about the lessons and refuse to participate. I was ready for that. I did not expect him to lash out at Finn and make him cry. Finn was a gentle soul. He did not deserve such treatment. I tried to comfort him, but comforting wasn't my strong suit. It was when I turned to make the male apologize that I noticed he was missing. I ran after him, following the quickest path to the forest, where I came upon him and Einar. My clan brother had gone off on his own years ago. I hadn't thought he would return, apparently, just in time to save the male's life.

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In thanks for his assistance, I put my fist over my chest and bowed my head in a respectful gesture. “Brother. Praise be your return. Thank you for your help.”

His response was difficult to notice unless you were paying attention, a tiny chin dip before he strode off toward the village again. I turned to the male, but he was already following sedately, his expression defeated and angry. I doubted he would explain anything to a translator so that I could understand him. It wouldn't matter. He would not return to Finn's teachings until he could apologize and behave.

When we entered the village center and I saw the tributes being led away from the receiving tent, I sighed. I figured that would happen. Finn looked too upset to continue. We would need to avoid Rath for a few days, or until the male was ready to apologize; otherwise, he would be at risk. Finn's bondmate was not a gentle spirit and took significant issue with anyone upsetting his Finn.

Taking the male's arm to lead him to my tent, I was surprised when he flinched away and hissed. I frowned. For what reason did he react like that? Had he gotten hurt by the ulvor before Einar could reach him?

I waited until we were back in my tent to check. When I pushed up his sleeve, he protested, but his fight was diminished after his attempted escape. From fear of the ulvor or Einar, I could not know. Even I thought Einar was scary, and he was a clan brother to me. But any who could fight gronnok without losing a limb was someone to treat with great respect. And avoidance.

There was bruising on his arm. Not from a bite. It was in the shape of Einar's hand. He was too rough with the male. Thankfully, I had a salve given to me by Zoya after I

was injured during a fight. It would help with the pain. If I had to go to her now and ask for help, I got the feeling she'd refuse me. She and Finn were friends, and she would be angry when she heard that the male had made Finn cry.

"Sit on the bed," I said, urging him to sit. He went where I led him, but I knew better than to think he would be obedient. His face said it all. He was angry that his attempt failed. Maybe he even realized he would need a new plan now that he had needed to be rescued. He wasn't the first tribute to think that if they ran into the forest during the day, they would be safe.

After retrieving the salve from my things, I sat in front of him, gently applying it to the mottled skin. Afterward, I wrapped it so he would not need to worry about the salve getting on his furs. He scooted away from me the first chance he got, sitting on the bed with his glare in place, but he didn't speak. Too angry to do so yet.

For a few hours, we sat in silence. I sharpened my weapons and tended to my leather, and he glared. For hours.

When he finally spoke up, it was in his native tongue, sharp and angry. I looked up at him, my expression blank.

"You would know how to ask for what you need if you had been kinder to Finn. You will not regain your privilege to learn from him until you apologize for making him cry."

He crossed his arms, glaring at me. He didn't understand, and he didn't like that I refused to figure out what he was saying in his tongue. I did this on purpose. If I knew their language, they would refuse to learn mine. I forced them to learn, and they were happier for it in the end. He would be the same.

Frustrated, he mimicked eating and glared at me again. Ah. He was hungry.

“You will eat when they bring us our meals. You cannot be trusted to be left alone.”

His expression grew darker with the frustration of not understanding and the hunger. Thankfully, Patrick brought our meals before he could start yelling again. I would consider a gag if he tried.

With a polite nod to Verus’s bondmate, I took the food bowls and ducked back into the tent. The tribute had not yet moved, but I wasn’t allowing him to eat in bed. I’d had petulant tributes purposely make a mess, hoping to anger me into sending them back. That never worked, and they only complained for days when I took away the furs to have them cleaned.

“You can sit here or not eat,” I said as I got comfortable beside the table. That morning, he had used me as a chair in an attempt to be a brat. It only amused me, so I was fully prepared for him to do it again. I couldn’t say why I was disappointed when he didn’t. He sat beside me, far enough away to avoid touching, and glared at the table as he ate instead.

While we ate, I took a moment to study him. I’d never considered a male as beautiful, but this one was. He had sharp cheekbones, a slim face, and long lashes framing his multicolored eyes. They were brown in the middle, but faded to blue around the outside. It was something I had never seen before. Though always drawn into a frown or a scowl, his lips were pillowy and soft-looking. And his silky hair was a strange color. Like the petals of a summer flower.

“How?” I asked, despite knowing he wouldn’t be able to understand me. I followed up with a gentle tug on his locks to make myself clearer.

He batted my hand away and scowled, saying something in his language. When I only stared at him blankly, he rolled his eyes and grabbed a fruit out of his bowl, squeezing the juice into his palm. The juice came out more red than pink, but I

understood his meaning. He dyed it like the cloth makers did with clothing. It was strange. I had never seen someone do so with their hair before.

When I nodded to show I understood, he used the fruit juice to pinken his lips before wiping his hands off. That was... distracting and a little unnerving. It drew my focus constantly to his mouth, and I wondered if he tasted like the fruit or something sweeter.

I banished the thoughts with a frown. I had never thought of a male in such a way. I wasn't sure why I was thinking about it now.

It didn't matter. I was only with the male for long enough to get him to understand his place here and ensure his safety. He would move on to another male eventually. One who would better be able to keep him happy.

I would not admit, even to myself, how much that idea bothered me.

The male slept in like he had the day before. I felt no need to rush him. It gave me time to relieve myself and fetch our breakfast, so no one had to deliver it for us. He was still sleeping when I came back. I ate my food, used what space I had for a little exercise, and considered my options. I needed to check on my mother today. I had hoped the male would be in the receiving tent for Finn's teaching, so I could visit with her. Now I knew that would not happen. I could either send someone else to check on her, who would no doubt be cowed by her forceful nature and not care for her properly, or bring the male with me.

A soft snuffling sound came from the pile of furs, telling me the male would wake soon. It would be a risk to bring him. She spoke his tongue. If he said something cruel to her like he had to Finn, I would not be so patient and kind. I did not want to scare him.

He sat up, bleary-eyed and already frowning. His hair was in disarray, and there was a trail of drool on his cheek. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from laughing. It would only anger him.

“Food?” I prompted, showing him the bowl. He looked at it for a moment, then at me, almost like he was not quite awake enough to comprehend my meaning. Again, my mouth twitched with an urge to laugh. He did not wake well.

“Trench.”

Surprised, I raised my eyebrows at him. I had repeated the word every time we went to relieve ourselves, but I didn’t think he was listening. And he said it surprisingly well. Maybe he was good with languages like Finn was.

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He gave me another glare when I didn't immediately respond. That smile very nearly slipped out. His grumpiness was surprisingly endearing when he wasn't upsetting people. I could take his moods as long as he was polite to others. Maybe I could get my mother to translate that for me.

Six

SIMON

It didn't matter how late I slept in; I still hated waking up. It took me time to feel alert again. Even a trip to the trench and breakfast didn't help. It was like my brain was fogged with fatigue. When the barbarian led me to the river to wash, I was still not fully awake—not until my toes touched the water, and the cold shocked me. I yelped and jumped back, shooting Feigrind an incredulous look.

Of course, that was when I noticed he wasn't paying attention to me. He was pulling off his clothes so he could bathe, too. And oh, goddess, the man was gorgeous. All tanned skin and thick muscles that looked like they were carved from stone. Tattoos started on his neck and went down his chest and arms. My gaze kept going, taking in every inch of him shamelessly. The round globes of his ass were so tight, I was a little jealous. Thick thighs and calves. Large feet. He had a few scars here and there, nowhere near as many as the guy who'd rescued me the day before, but they didn't take away from his appeal. And when he returned just enough for me to get a look at his package, my mouth fell open.

“Oh, shit.”

“Tribute?” he questioned, frowning at me.

I forced my eyes off his cock. His gorgeous, perfect, should probably be a monument somewhere, cock. If he came into the brothel looking for fun with a man like me, I wouldn't have let him leave before I got that cock in every position I could think of. And that was saying something. I wasn't easily swayed by dick. His just happened to be that gorgeous.

I'd honestly not given his appearance much thought before. I was too focused on running. But he was a handsome man. For a barbarian, anyway. His hair was shaved on the sides, but long on top, and pulled into a ponytail most of the time. The only time I'd seen it free was when he slept, and now when he was about to wash. He had a thick beard, but it didn't drag down to his stomach like some men preferred. I hated beards like that. His was trimmed neatly to follow the line of his jaw. His nose was a little large, but it didn't take away from his features. It made him look more rugged instead, more natural. And his gray eyes were dark like storm clouds.

He didn't wait around forever for me to answer him. He probably thought I'd been complaining or causing trouble. Instead, he walked straight into the river until he was hip deep before dunking his head in to wet his hair, which was when I remembered how cold it was. Little droplets struck me when he surfaced and flicked the long hair over his head again, giving me goosebumps.

“You aren't serious, are you? It's too cold!”

Maybe a brothel wasn't the fanciest place to live, but at least we always had warm baths. Bathing in an icy river was barbaric.

“If you want to get clean, you will need to get in,” he said blandly, gesturing with his hands to tell me to get in the water. I adamantly refused. I was not going to freeze my ass off just because they didn't understand the concept of putting the water to heat

over the fire before bathing. Maybe I could teach him something before I left. Like the gloriousness of a warm bath.

“If you’re hoping for him to give in and warm you a bath, you’re going to be disappointed,” an unfamiliar voice said behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to study the man in question. He wasn’t a barbarian, his frame too round for that. Not fat, per se. Husky, like he ate well, but still moved around enough to burn off the excess. His short blonde hair was shaved on the sides like all the men in the clan seemed to do, and more spiky on top.

It was a good thing they weren’t getting me to join this clan. There was no way in hell I’d shave my hair. I took good care of it.

He didn’t come alone. A barbarian with shoulder-length dark hair followed him, stripping out of his clothes before he even got to the bank of the river. The man who’d spoken just looked amused at his lack of modesty, following suit. I stopped him before he stepped into the water to follow his man.

“Wait. Are you serious? No one bathes in hot water here?”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. “The babies do. Little kids who can’t handle the cold yet. You get used to it. I’m Patrick, by the way. That’s Verus, my bondmate.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the barbarian who had joined Feigrind. They spoke low to each other, soaping up in the freezing water like it was nothing to them.

A whimper actually escaped me, which was really not like me. But the idea of going into that water made me cringe all the way to my toes.

“It’s good for your skin,” a familiar, terse voice said behind me. Ugh. Did they have parties to bathe around here? I was a damn prostitute, and even I enjoyed privacy to bathe.

The healer came down the path that everyone else had. Behind her were another two barbarians I didn't know, and a familiar and very unwelcome face following behind them. That got me moving. I either got my ass in that water or scratched Finn's eyes out. I still blamed him for being here. They wouldn't have started sending men if he had just gone home.

The cold made it feel like it was hard to breathe, and my whole body started to shake within seconds. Every scoop of water over my skin made it worse until I was sure I'd expire on the spot.

Warm hands settled on my shoulders, and I looked up, surprised to find Feigrind frowning down at me. "Your lips are turning blue."

I opened my mouth to respond with something snarky, but Patrick interrupted to translate before I could give away my secret.

"He says your lips are turning blue. If you get deeper, the wind isn't so bracing," he suggested.

I made a face at him. "The wind might not be so bad, but the water is way worse! What is wrong with you people?"

Patrick didn't seem to mind the water, but he had more body fat to keep him warm. And the woman, who took turns with her barbarian holding the baby so the other could get clean, had the remnants of the baby weight on her, too. The only one close to my size was... ugh. Finn.

Casting a glance in his direction, I scowled. He was cuddled up against his barbarian to keep warm. The larger man seemed to enjoy the clinging and worked around him easily before turning to Finn and washing him, too. It was sweet and intimate, and I hated them both.

Feigrind offered me the soap, and I snatched it out of his hand, scrubbing quickly but thoroughly. I was not letting dirt linger on my skin just because the water was freezing. I even dunked my head to wash my hair, though I hated using plain soap on it. I missed the fancy soaps I had at the brothel. They were better for my hair and skin.

By the time I was finished, I was much more awake—and even more pissed off. I grumbled constantly under my breath about stupid barbarians and the lack of baths. I was so annoyed, I didn't notice Feigrind leading me somewhere new after we got dressed until I was pushed onto a felled log in front of a fire to warm up. I looked around with a frown. I thought we'd return to his tent.

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Feigrind didn't stop to explain either. He ducked his head into the tent directly behind me, speaking to whoever was inside.

“Hello, Maman.”

Maman? Mama. Was I about to meet Feigrind's mother?

An older woman puttered out of the tent, ignoring her son. The dismissal surprised me, but it didn't seem to bother Feigrind. He just looked amused.

“What did I do now?”

She scoffed at him. “I do not waste my energy on ungrateful sons. You only ever visit me to pester me. Go back to your duties.”

His smile grew with each barb. No wonder he was so unbothered by my attitude if a woman like this raised him.

“I am doing my duties, Maman. I watch over the tribute until he is ready to choose a bondmate.”

That made her pause and look up at her son. Her head swung around, and her eyes landed on me. “Him?”

Feigrind nodded. “Yes. He has not given me his name yet. Orthorr asked me to protect him because he is a brat who does not behave.”

My face twitched with the effort to lock down my expression. If I reacted how I wanted to, he'd know I could understand him. But the way he spoke about me made my hands twitch for my knives.

The woman didn't seem bothered by his words, though. She chuckled and reached up to pat his face. "Poor thing. I raised you to be too strong, and now you are paying for it."

He rolled his eyes, but his smile was affectionate. They both obviously cared for each other. It must be nice to have a parent like that.

"What's your name, lad?" she asked abruptly in the common tongue.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "I'm not answering that. He doesn't need to know."

She was unfazed by my declaration, turning to her son and raising her eyebrows at him. "Go away."

That surprised us both, and Feigrind frowned at her.

"I cannot. He is a flight risk. He has nearly been killed twice."

Once. The first time was not my fault. How was I supposed to know there were wild animals in the desert on the trip here?

"If he runs, you will catch him, as you always do. Go train. I will watch him."

He was reluctant, but he didn't argue with his mother. She shooed him away, and once he was out of sight, she gave me a pointed look. "There. He's gone. Name."

I liked her sass and felt a smile tugging at my lips when I answered. "Simon. You?"

“Urnda. Or Maman. Whatever suits your fancy. How many times have you run so far?”

Making a face, I crossed my arms. “Twice. I was hurt both times. It’s not worth it. I will get them to bring me back instead.”

She snorted. “Good luck with that. Do you know how to use clay?”

She didn’t beat around the bush or seem to care what my answer was. She grabbed my elbow and tugged me out of my seat to a wooden stool beside the tent. In front of it was what looked like a carriage wheel on its side, with a spoke in the middle, and a small table on top. I’d never touched pottery outside the finished product, so I had no idea what it was for, but I guessed I was about to find out. She plopped a mound of clay onto the table and pointed at the wheel beneath it.

“Move that with your feet. It will turn the clay.”

“What am I doing with it?”

She sat down at a similar table beside me. “For now, getting to know the clay. If it gets too dry, add some water. Don’t add too much unless you wish to wear it.”

It was a strange request, but she didn’t take no for an answer. She just started on her own work and ignored my confused expression. Whatever. It was better than sitting in that tent pretending I didn’t understand what Feigrind was saying to me.

Seven

SIMON

It was actually kind of relaxing after I got the hang of it. I wasn't anywhere remotely close to making anything usable, but I watched her occasionally to see what she was doing and eventually learned how to make something resembling a bowl. When Maman checked on me, her smile was amused, but tinged with pride.

“Good. That is more than most can do the first time. Most just make a mess.”

That made me feel pretty good about myself. I didn't have many skills. My mother was a whore, same as me, and my father was one of her clients. She never knew which one. I wasn't in any kind of situation where I'd go to school or learn a trade. The only trade I had was the lifestyle I was raised in. After she died, I managed to work my way into a nicer brothel, but that was about it. I couldn't even read, which frustrated me sometimes. Being told I could do something well that wasn't sex felt good.

Still, I didn't want to get comfortable here, so I couldn't help but sass back at her. “It's not that hard. Why are you making medo this? So the barbarian can get a break from me? Is he that weak?”

She chuckled, unbothered by my outburst. “Feigrind is capable of handling a great many things. It is being alone that hurts him. Not that I expect you to fix that. You were given to him because he is patient, not because he is interested in males.”

“Would it be a problem if he did?” I growled. Most towns made it illegal to have such relations, which was why so many came to me seeking comfort. Years of being alone took their toll.

Maman scoffed. “Gender is unimportant. There are some in the clan who have no gender at all. Only the important things, like happiness and trust, matter in a bonding. Something my son craves deeply.”

“So why isn’t he bonded, then?” I demanded. I was not jealous. I didn’t care who Feigrind ended up with. I wasn’t staying here.

“Because none who he takes under his protection choose him in the end.”

That surprised me. I knew he said he had multiple tributes. I figured either he was trying to gather a harem or he was sending them away when he got bored with them. Wasn’t that what the rumors said? That women were cast aside when they weren’t useful anymore?

“What do you mean by that? Why would they get a choice?”

When she looked up from her work, the amused grin was gone, and her face was surprisingly serious. She looked a lot like her son when she was like that.

“Because that is the way things work here. Tributes have a place of honor. They are treated as such. They get a choice of who they bond with.”

“But not a choice about staying,” I snapped back.

She sighed and shook her head slowly. “Not at first, no. Given the way the world portrays us, are you really surprised? They need time to learn that things are good here. Most choose to stay once they realize this. But if they learn our ways, meet our

people, and still wish to leave, no one will stop them. If the towns allowed us to visit and trade freely, tributes would not be needed. They could mingle as most men do. They cannot, thanks to the treaty. Without tributes, we risk dying out entirely. It was your people who forced their hand and made it this way.”

FEIGRIND

I was reluctant to leave the tribute with Maman. He had run twice already, and I didn’t trust him. But arguing with her would have only created trouble for me. I stayed close enough to keep my eye on them without interrupting their conversation.

It was amusing to see the male’s confusion when Maman forced him to the task of clay making. She did this to all tributes in my care. She said it was a test of their character. A person needed both a strong and delicate touch to work the clay properly. They were not good enough for her son if they could not manipulate it well. Only one of the tributes ever managed to make anything. But she chose Tyarr. It still smarted a little.

What did he offer that I couldn’t?

“You look down, brother,” Uttin said as he approached me. He frowned and looked around. “Where is your tribute?”

“With Maman. She sent me away so they could talk.”

He snorted. “Good. Not even the most stubborn tributes can argue with her. Perhaps she can get his head on straight.”

If she did, it would only speed up his leaving. I knew this to be a good thing because we were incompatible, but I found myself reluctant to let him go. To lose another tribute to someone else.

My melancholy mood did not escape Uttin's notice. He patted my shoulder supportively. "Do not worry, brother. You only need to protect him for so long. He will find a male who suits him eventually, and you will be free to find someone new."

I didn't answer outside of a grunt. I wasn't going to explain that it made me unhappy to think about. He wouldn't understand. He had no interest in settling down. It would take an arrangement by his mother or someone extraordinary to force his hand.

"Come. Let's train. It will help you work off some energy."

Pushing to my feet, I followed him a little farther away. Still close enough that I could keep an eye on the troublemaker, but far enough away not to disturb others. We set our weapons aside, since we had no wish to hurt each other, and got to work.

He was right. It did help a little, at least in clearing my mind. I focused only on Uttin's movements so that I could counter them most effectively. My muscles relaxed with each round we took against each other. Uttin was quick, but I was patient and waited until an opportunity presented itself. We were pretty evenly matched when it came to hand-to-hand combat, but I managed to get the upper hand during the last round, pinning him with his arm behind his back and my weight holding him down.

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He grunted and tried to twist free, but he was stuck and eventually forced to give up. I rolled off him and helped him to his feet, grinning at his sour look.

“I hate that move. You always win with that move.”

Laughing, I clapped him on the shoulder. “Then don’t let me use that move against you.”

He growled, trying to get me in a headlock in retribution for my tease, but Maman’s voice called out to us, and we separated to look at her. She was standing on the edge of where we were training, her hands on her hips and a frown on her face. The tribute stood next to her, his eyes locked on me. Or more specifically, my body. He’d given me the same look that morning when we washed. It had stunned me to find myself reacting to it, and I had to get into the water to cool myself down.

This tribute was dangerous.

Uttin noticed the look as well and chuckled, elbowing me. “Careful with that one. He looks like he wants to eat you.”

I shot him a frown. “I am not interested in males.”

He flashed me a bored look. “Tell that to your cock.”

Surprised, I looked down, and he barked out a laugh. There was nothing to see. He was just being an ass. It was my turn to get him into a headlock. I was a lot less kind about it when I ran my knuckles roughly over his hair.

“Boys!” Maman scolded. “When will you stop acting like children?”

Uttin shoved me away, and we separated again, both of us grinning. Uttin and I were not blood brothers like Rath and Godr, but we were born within weeks of each other. Our fathers were both warriors and friends. We were raised together.

“Apologies, Maman,” Uttin said with a charming grin. “You look radiant as usual.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Go do your duties, Uttin, or I will tell your mother I heard you wishing you could settle down.”

His face fell, and he put his hands up in surrender. “As Maman wishes. Please do not tell her that.”

He darted off like a shadowstalker was chasing him, disappearing through the nearest line of tents. I heard the tribute snicker, and I turned to look at him, but he sobered quickly and masked his smile before I could see it. I wanted to question his response, but Maman interrupted my thought before I could.

“Simon is hungry. Take him for lunch.”

His mouth fell open. He might not have understood what she said, but he heard her give me his name. Something he seemed determined not to give me. He shot an incredulous look at Maman, screeching in the town tongue.

Maman lifted a shoulder, a smug look on her face. “It slipped out.”

I wished I could follow along with their conversation. Whatever she said, it made him crack a smile before he forced it away again. What little I saw transformed his beauty into something almost magical. I wished I could have seen more of it.

Simon scurried away. Not out of sight, just far enough away to allow him to hide his expression and avoid me and Maman. I allowed it because I didn't think he'd run again. Not after what happened last time.

Maman turned back to me and raised an eyebrow. "You're staring, son of mine. Are you perhaps more interested in this tribute than you let on?"

I frowned. "I am not interested in?—"

She waved away my argument. "Yes, yes. You've said this. And maybe not all males. But your face says more than you are willing to admit. Perhaps this male is different."

Eight

SIMON

We were heading back to the tent when someone jogged up to Feigrind, his expression foreboding. Before he even explained why, Feigrind's entire demeanor changed. He swapped out the stoic man for something more fierce and warrior-like. It was the same expression he'd had when practicing with his friend earlier. Like he was ready for anything.

It was kind of hot, actually.

"The Fer'na clan is coming. They will be here by nightfall."

Feigrind cursed under his breath. "Why do they approach? We have done nothing to them."

The other warrior shook his head. "It is not known. But Orthorr wants us all to be there, just in case." His gaze flicked to me for a moment, his brow furrowed. "Is there

someone you trust with your tribute? Someone to keep him safe?"

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That surprised me. I was sure it was widely known by now that I'd run twice and made their precious Finn cry. Why would they care what happened to me?

Feigrind looked down at me for a moment, worry overtaking his features. He cared too, despite all the trouble I'd caused him. These barbarians were either dumber than I thought, that I could so easily manipulate them, or the rumors about them being cruel were baseless. If they were cruel, they wouldn't care so much.

"Where is Godr?"

The new barbarian's brows snapped together. "In the field. Why? He is not a fighter."

"No, but he is Rath's brother. They were trained together. And I can't leave Simon with Rath. Not after he hurt Finn. Godr is the next choice."

I couldn't ask what was happening, not without giving away that I understood them, so I only listened, a frown locked in place, like I was confused. Neither of them paid me much mind as they were discussing whether it was safer to bring me to the village center or stash me somewhere. I could've told them there wasn't a chance I'd let them stash me anywhere, but I kept that to myself. Whoever they were sticking me with probably wasn't as observant as Feigrind. I'd sneak away when I could to see what was happening.

Knowledge was power, after all. Maybe this other clan would bring me back home.

After the barbarian left to alert the other warriors, Feigrind gently took my elbow, leading me quickly but carefully through the tents to a fenced-off area on the opposite

side of the forest. A field absolutely filled with enormous horses.

“Great Goddess,” I breathed, staring at them. They were bigger than any horse I’d ever seen, with hooves as big as my face and muscles that matched the man next to me. I’d caught glimpses of them on the journey, but with my face being covered with the bag in the beginning and spending the rest of the trip in a covered carriage, I didn’t truly get to experience their size until just now.

Feigrind didn’t hear my exclamation. He called out to someone in the field, waving them over. The barbarian who joined us had long dark hair, the back pulled into two braids over his shoulders, shaved on the sides, with a bun on top. It was an interesting mixture, to be sure. He wasn’t as wide as the other barbarians, but he made up for it in speed as he jogged across the field. He was damn fast.

“Feigrind, my brother! You called for me?”

“Godr. I need a favor. The Fer’na clan is coming. I need you to watch over Simon.”

Godr glanced at me and back at Feigrind again. “Whatever you need. Is there to be trouble?”

Feigrind shook his head. “We do not know. But they are coming without much warning. They will be here by nightfall.”

The barbarian’s eyebrows flew up so fast, it was almost comical. “That’s... soon. And worrisome. Where is Rath? I will join him in case Finn needs to be moved as well.”

Ugh. I had to concentrate really hard on not making a face. Why was it always about that guy?

“He will probably be in the village center. But...” He shot me a quick look before turning back to Godr. “Keep a sharp eye. Simon has been... difficult.”

That didn't seem to surprise Godr that much. He just chuckled. “Your tributes are all the same. Do not worry. I will keep an eye on him. All tributes like the stallions. We will stay here until supper, and then I will ask Rath where we should go.”

Feigrind dipped his chin in acknowledgement before turning his focus onto me. He put his hands in a staying motion, then pointed to the ground at our feet. “Stay with Godr. I must go.”

Staring blankly at him, I didn't give him anything. He took that as a good sign and took a few slow steps back, like he was checking if I'd run. I wasn't going to do that, I didn't have a death wish, but I wasn't going to tell him that right now. I just enjoyed how stupid he looked as he walked backwards and stared at me until he was out of sight.

I saw several other barbarians with swords running in the same direction he did. I had no idea why they were so worried about this clan visiting, but it put me on guard. Maybe the rumors weren't unfounded after all.

Thankfully, I didn't have to sneak off to find out what was happening. Godr brought me to the village center for supper just like he said and conferred with someone he called Rath. I recognized him as Finn's bondmate. He was decked out in weapons, a fierce scowl on his face, and his bondmate plastered against his side. Finn wore a similar outfit to the rest of the barbarians, including a necklace they all seemed to share with a circular medallion on his chest. The outfit didn't really help him fit in, but it was better than what I was wearing. My lounge clothes were starting to look grimy, and I hated it. I wished I had something to change into that was more... substantial than this. At least it was better than the silks I wore while working, but not by much.

I wasn't entirely sure of the clan's size, but it felt like a good deal of the clan was there. The barbarians were all crowded around the fire, all armed. They murmured amongst themselves, the tension in the air so thick you could cut through it with a sword. The ones missing were the older clan members and women with children. And the other tributes. All except me.

Should I be happy about that? Or pissed?

I didn't have time to decide before I heard the thundering of hooves in the distance. It was barely loud enough to be heard over the noises of the clan, but one by one, the barbarians fell silent, listening.

"Rath..." Finn whispered uncertainly.

"Be at ease, kolrav. You are safe," the barbarian murmured back, cupping Finn's head against his chest. My irritation with him softened minutely. If I had that kind of affection regularly, would I give up my town and my family to keep it? Even at the expense of all the males in the country?

I didn't know. I'd never had anything like that before.

"Warriors. On guard," a familiar older man barked. The clan leader, Orthorr, I realized. He stood near the fire with a pensive expression. All the warriors, Feigrind included, straightened and faced the direction of the noise. My eyes locked on the barbarian. My supposed protector. What would happen to me if he got hurt? Would the next protector be so patient? Or would I end up with someone like the one in the forest? It was possible this situation could get much, much worse.

I would not admit even to myself that I was worried for my protector. I wouldn't.

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Not everyone in the new clan came into the center to join us. I could see a massive group of them just outside the circle of the village, a few holding torches to banish some of the shadows. Only about ten came into the village proper, including an older one who looked like the clan leader if I had to make a guess. He slid off his horse and swaggered up to Orthorr, like he had every right to be there. Ugh. I couldn't stand cocky men like that.

“Orthorr! Greetings, brother!”

Orthorr's expression was terse but polite. “Feiskedr. Blessings upon your travels. To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?”

“Trade, of course,” the cocky man stated. “And maybe a look at your tributes. Ours were decidedly lacking this round.”

I stiffened at the way he said that. And I didn't miss the past tense in that sentence. Theywere? What happened to them that he wasn't saying “are”?

“Trade, we can offer. But our tributes already have protectors.”

Feiskedr didn't look happy about the immediate rebuff he got from Orthorr. Annoyance flashed across his features before he wiped it away and plastered on his cocky grin again.

“I'm sure we can discuss it. After all, they have not met us yet. They could prefer us.”

I didn't need to know the rest of the tributes to know they wouldn't go willingly with

these guys. They embodied the rumors told about barbarian clans in every town within riding distance. I scanned over the group, studying their expressions. There wasn't a kind-looking one in the bunch. And when I reached the one on the end, my brows furrowed. Had I seen him before?

Either way, this was not a place I wanted to be. If they noticed I was out here and not with my protector or something, they might try to take me. That had happened to me once already. I wasn't letting it happen again.

While Godr and the others were focused on the newcomers, I slipped away and headed for Feigrind's tent. I couldn't get in trouble for returning to where I was supposed to be. And I'd rather relax in bed than tempt a shady group of barbarians. I ducked into the tent, taking a moment to light the lantern before sitting down to get comfortable. I heard noises, but no screams or shouts, so I assumed everything was fine.

I should've known better than to make assumptions after my life was turned upside down.

I was just getting comfortable and considering going to sleep early when the tent flap rustled. My eyes opened, expecting to see Feigrind there, and my heart faltered when I saw who stood there instead.

He leered at me with great interest. "I thought I recognized you. How profitable is this clan that they can hire a whore for an entire season?"

"I am not for hire," I growled, sitting up. "I have a protector."

He scoffed at me. "Lies. They would not take a whore as a tribute. Not even this pathetic little clan is that desperate. Do not play coy with me. I requested your service the last time I was in your town. You were claimed by another for the night. I will get

my turn now.”

Over my dead body.

Nine

SIMON

I tried to get to my feet to have a better advantage, but he backhanded me before I could fully stand, sending me to the ground again. My ears rang from the force of the blow, but I didn't let it stun me for long. As he climbed on top of me, I attempted to knee him in the balls, but he blocked me and forced my legs apart so he could lie between them. I slapped and punched where I could, but the angle was all wrong. He was bigger than I was. I didn't have my knives to help me.

For the dozenth time since the night Tomas sold me out to the guards, I felt helpless. I was tired of feeling helpless. Tears pricked my eyes, and I resorted to screaming until he covered my mouth with his big palm. Which, of course, gave me the perfect opportunity to bite him. He ripped his hand away, cursing loudly. It hurt my teeth, but it gave me an idea. He didn't wear a tunic, despite the cooler weather. He wanted my services? Fine. I never said I'd be nice about it.

I bit his nipple until he screamed from the pain. Only when he grabbed a fistful of my hair and jerked me away did I release him. He bared his teeth, glaring at me with eyes full of fury.

“You will regret that, you little?—”

He was gone before he could finish the sentence, ripped off me by Feigrind, who looked downright murderous. He threw the man out of his tent, and I heard the sound of a sword leaving a scabbard. I launched to my feet, poking my head out of the tent

to watch. If Feigrind was going to kill the man, I wanted to enjoy it. I remembered him now. He was kicked out of the brothel for hurting the one he was with that night. The poor boy was so badly injured, he couldn't bear to return.

This asshole deserved to die.

“You dare touch my tribute!” Feigrind roared, pointing his sword at the man. “You dare enter my tent and touch what's mine?”

The possessiveness was unexpected, but I didn't hate it. I could do a hell of a lot worse than Feigrind.

The one who attacked me shoved back to his feet, ripping his own weapon from its sheath. “You claim a whore? Are you truly that desperate?”

A crowd had drawn around us, and I felt my spine stiffen as a dozen sets of eyes all swung to me. I was not ashamed of my job. And I wouldn't let them shame me. I lifted my chin, glaring at them all. I hadn't asked to be here. They should have taken me back in the first place.

“Bite your tongue,” Feigrind snarled. “Or I will cut it from your throat. He is my tribute. Mine!”

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“What is the meaning of this?” Orthorr called, stalking into the fray. For an older man, he was still very powerful, and people of both clans got out of his way. The other clan leader followed more sedately, as if it didn’t bother him in the slightest that one of his own attacked a tribute. Asshole.

Neither man answered Orthorr. It was Godr who explained. “He attacked the tribute in Feigrind’s own tent. I heard him screaming.” There was guilt on his face that was misplaced. It wasn’t his fault I was attacked. I slipped away unnoticed. I thought I would be safe in Feigrind’s tent. I was the one in the wrong. I had been since the day I arrived.

“I challenge him to drokagorn,” Feigrind growled, his eyes still locked on my attacker.

That was a word I didn’t recognize, but from the looks on everyone’s faces, it was serious. Everyone paled a little, and even the clan leader looked conflicted.

“Granted.” The visiting clan leader said it with a grin, like he enjoyed the drama of it all. Orthorr did not agree. He swung around, glaring at the man.

“You agree to this? With your own on the line?”

Feiskedr shrugged. “If he wants to forfeit his life for a well-used whore, that is his business.” He turned his smug gaze to Feigrind. “Drunn does not lie. I saw your tribute working in a brothel in a town in the south west. I heard he was very popular.” He turned his wicked grin my way. “I’d like a chance at him myself. Should Drunn win, the tribute comes with us.”

There were a lot of protests about that, more than I expected. I'd only been here a few days, and I'd caused a lot of trouble in that time, too. It was a little shocking how adamant they were that I not be given up. I glanced at Feigrind, but he had his back to me. I couldn't tell what he was thinking right now.

"Your warrior made the challenge," Feiskedr said in a bored tone. "We are allowed to set terms. If he falls, the tribute comes with us. If you ignore the terms, we are at war. Is a whore worth going to war with us, Orthorr?"

A pained look slashed across Orthorr's face, but eventually, he backed down. Apparently, I wasn't worth that much.

I hated how much that hurt.

"So be it. However, win or lose, your clan will leave. Tonight. We do not welcome those who attack tributes into our borders. Those are my terms."

Feiskedr shrugged. "Agreed. We have no interest in associating with a pathetic clan like yours." He looked at me again, switching to the common tongue. "You will join us, whore. I don't want you running off before Drunn wins."

FEIGRIND

When one of the Fer'na warriors reached for Simon, I swung my sword, stopping just shy of his hand.

"Touch him and I will remove your hands."

He backed off, and I grabbed Simon, tucking him behind me. His palm rested in the middle of my back as he peeked around me. He was no doubt confused and frightened after his attack. I wanted nothing more than to hold him and reassure him

that he was safe under my protection. But I would not let the insult of the attack stand. I challenged the Fer'na who attacked him to a blood duel. It would end in his death. Or mine.

Uttin and Ethralk appeared behind me, covering my back and protecting Simon as we moved to the town center. I kept my eye on the Fer'na, especially the one who'd attacked Simon. He looked smug about what he'd done. But in the light of the fire, it was apparent he did not come out unscathed from his run-in with Simon. His chest was bleeding, and blood dripped from his hand as well. Simon was not going down without a fight. I was proud of him for that. And once he understood me, I would tell him as much.

The clans formed a circle, the Fer'na making up one half, and our clan making up the other. I'd wanted Simon to stay in the clan, but Orthorr took charge of him, pulling him out of the way and near the edge of our side of the circle. I didn't like that, how close he was to the Fer'na. Even if I came out the victor, I didn't trust them not to take him forcibly.

Just outside the circle, hovering beyond the light of the fire, I noticed Einar. He was watching it all, his eyes narrowed. When he looked at me, he dipped his chin once. I chose to believe that meant he would watch out for Simon, like he'd done in the woods. I had no other choice.

"A challenge has been made. The last man standing wins," Orthorr called with a heavy tone of resignation. He would have argued against this if he could. He did not believe in solving our problems with violence. But I wouldn't be deterred. Not after seeing the tears on Simon's face.

"A blood duel for a whore. He better be worth it," Feiskedr cackled.

He was worth it. Even if I breathed my last breath, he was worth it. Because he was

mine to protect, and I'd defend him with my life.

"Begin!"

The bastard lunged the moment he was allowed, slashing out with his sword. It was sloppy and easily parried. I did not strike back. I waited, watching, as he slashed and hacked in a pathetic attempt to take me down with sheer force. It was a wonder the Fer'na were so feared if this was how they fought. There was no skill to it. Yet, no one seemed to notice from his side of the circle. They called out for blood, shouted for the man to hurt me, but gave no instruction to help him.

It took very little time to find my opening. He threw his weight into each lunge and had to correct his stance every time. I used it to my advantage. Sidestepping at the right moment, I sliced across his chest with my sword. He stumbled back in surprise.

"Cheating bastard," he spat.

I merely raised my eyebrow. I would not give in to his taunts. I would only wait for my next opportunity. A good fighter was patient. He did not rush in blindly. And I would not risk Simon's life reacting with anger in my heart. I relied on my skill alone.

He came at me again, though his stance was more tucked in to favor his injury. It gave me another opening, this time on his back. He cried out in surprise, stumbling again. A few more times we did this dance, where he came at me, and I hurt him for it. Until the calls from the Fer'na slowly died and my clan's voices grew loud enough to drown them out. No calls for blood. Only steady, rhythmic grunts as the fight reached its inevitable end.

I heard Simon cry out in fury, his voice cutting through the quiet in my mind, drawing my focus. Feiskedr had used the distraction of the fight to sidle up to him,

and he had a hand wrapped around Simon's elbow. My distraction was enough to give my opponent time to strike, but I was thankfully quick enough to jump back to prevent the blow from being fatal. It hurt, and I bled because of it, but it would not kill me.

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Rage slowly filled my gut. I would end this battle and go for Feiskedr next if he did not release my tribute. With a quick lunge forward that surprised my opponent, I sliced across his neck, removing his head in one quick movement. I was striding for Simon before the body even hit the ground.

“Release him, Feiskedr!” Orthorr demanded. “Your man has lost!”

Feiskedr bared his teeth at Orthorr and tightened his grip. “And whose clan made the challenge? We should be given the whore as payment for our losses.”

Orthorr attempted diplomacy in getting Feiskedr to listen. Simon was less patient. The minute I was close enough, he snatched a small blade from my belt, slicing across Feiskedr’s arm to force him to release him. He said something in the common tongue that made Feiskedr glare at him, but he did not move to touch Simon again. He took a step back, out of range of Simon’s blade, and shot Orthorr a dirty look.

“When other clans find out you have sunk so low as to claim a whore, they will want nothing to do with you. You outcast yourself for the sake of a used hole.”

I growled, stepping forward to defend Simon’s honor, but Orthorr stopped me with a raised hand.

“You outcast yourself with your dishonorable actions, Feiskedr. Leave this place. You are not welcome here.”

For a moment, it looked like Feiskedr would start a war, regardless of the outcome. His expression didn’t waver until Simon said something else, his tone challenging.

Feiskedr sneered at him, but whatever Simon had said seemed to force him to back down. He shot one last scathing look at Orthorr before spinning on his heel and marching away, his clan following behind him. The rest of the warriors of our clan followed them to ensure they left, but I could not. I could not leave Simon.

From now on, he would never leave my side again.

Ten

“Will you seriously go to war over a used hole? If you do, you’re just as pathetic as they are for claiming me.”

My comment seemed to stop the asshole before he did something stupid. He sneered at me, but was smart enough to back off. I watched the asshole go to make sure he didn’t do anything stupid. Getting out of dangerous situations wasn’t my only skill while holding a blade. I also had an enviable aim with them. I could take the bastard down before he even thought to do anything stupid. But he didn’t turn back. I’d insulted him when I insinuated he was pathetic if he went to war over me.

The familiar warmth of Feigrind’s hand wrapped around my elbow, turning me slowly. He looked concerned, his free hand cupping my face as he checked me over. I wasn’t going to tell him I was fine– it’d be a lie. But I’d get over it. It wasn’t the first time some asshole tried to force himself on me. In my line of work, it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“He needs to see Zoya,” Finn’s quiet voice cut in. I shot him a dirty look.

“I’m fine.”

He shook his head, his eyes wide and fearful. Probably not because of me. He constantly looked over my shoulder, as if he were afraid that Feiskedr would come

back. His bondmate had left with the others to ensure the visiting clan had left. He was scared and all alone. Ugh. I wished that didn't make me feel bad for him. I understood what it was like to be smaller and relatively defenseless.

"N-not you, though I was going to ask. I meant Feigrind." He pointed at Feigrind's chest. My gaze dropped, and I sucked in a sharp breath, gaping at the barbarian incredulously.

"What the hell? Why are we just standing here? I didn't see him get hurt!"

Feigrind didn't seem to care either way that he was bleeding, but I cared. He'd risked his life to save mine. He'd challenged my attacker to a duel to the death. Literally cut the man's head off for hurting me. I didn't want him in any pain.

Grabbing the hand cupping my face, I dragged him away from the village center, looking over my shoulder at Finn when he didn't immediately follow.

"Well? Hurry up! I don't know where the hell I'm going!"

Finn jumped, surprised, and scurried after me, pointing out the way to the healing tent. He left us there and went to find the healer while I forced Feigrind to sit on the stupid pallet of uncomfortable blankets so I could look at him better. The cut didn't seem that deep, but I wasn't a damn healer, and it stretched across his chest. It might be worse than it looked.

Thankfully, the healer didn't dillydally. She came into the tent at a brisk pace and went straight for Feigrind, forcing him to lie down on the pallet. She nudged me to his other side, ignoring my frown.

"You're in my light. Sit over there."

I understood her request, but I still glared at her. She didn't have to be such a bitch about it.

Sitting beside Feigrind, I watched her work. She cleaned the cut and put a salve on it, wrapping it up while telling Feigrind he would be fine. He didn't look worried about it. He was more focused on me. I didn't get butterflies because of his intense attention. I wasn't that pathetic.

Once she was finished, she finally looked up at me, her expression guarded. "Finn said you were attacked. Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," I replied tersely. I didn't want her help. She obviously didn't like me, and the feeling was mutual.

She didn't argue or demand to look me over. She just pushed to her feet and walked away to wash her hands in a bowl of water on the table against the far wall.

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“He doesn’t need to stay the night. He’ll be fine. Just don’t let him get the dressing wet until I recheck it tomorrow.”

“Fine.”

I stood while the healer repeated herself to Feigrind. He got to his feet and nodded, thanking her politely. I didn’t care what she thought about me, but I was glad she was nice to Feigrind. I would’ve had to hurt her if she were cruel to him after what he’d just done for me.

We left together to head back to his tent. I felt an undertone of uneasiness stepping inside, but I shoved it down. I wasn’t going to cower just because I’d been attacked. I was fine.

A warm hand settled on my back. When I looked up at Feigrind, his expression was soft and understanding.

“You are safe now. I will protect you.”

My gaze dropped to the wrap on his chest. “Yes. But who will protect you?”

FEIGRIND

I was starting to think Simon understood more of our language than he was letting on. It hadn’t been obvious to me at first, but after the drokagorn, I noticed he hadn’t asked anyone for an explanation. I thought most would wish to understand why things happened, or at least the results. In the days since, I hadn’t seen him speak to

anyone to ask. The only one he spoke to was Maman, and she hadn't mentioned it.

After that night, I began paying closer attention when I spoke to him. It was subtle, but sometimes I noticed his face would twitch while listening to me, like he was holding back his reaction to what I'd said. The same happened when we were around others, and every now and then, he would react like everyone else would before smothering his response again.

I decided to test this a little. So I took Simon to see Maman again and had Uttin meet me so they could have their alone time. When I pulled him aside, he looked curious, raising an eyebrow at me.

"Do not question what I am about to say, yes?"

He nodded slowly. "Alright. Are we pranking someone?"

"Sort of. Just go with it."

He was always down for a prank with me, so he smiled and nodded, raising his voice to be heard better by those around us. "How are you, brother? You look well."

"Tired," I replied with a frown.

Uttin tipped his head with faux concern. "Truly? Why? Do you not rest well?"

I shook my head solemnly. "No. My tribute snores. It is keeping me up each night."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Simon's head whip up, but when I glanced in his direction, he dropped his gaze again, growling to himself under his breath.

Uttin patted my shoulder sympathetically. "That sounds worrisome. Perhaps you can

ask around for something to block your ears at night?”

The longer we discussed Simon’s snoring, the more irritated he got, but it didn’t outright prove anything. I wanted to be certain, because if he’d waited this long to reveal he understood me, he probably kept it from me on purpose.

“It is not only that. He is also starting to smell. I understand he is attached to his clothes, but it is unpleasant.”

I had to fight off a grin when Simon’s mouth fell open in outrage. He looked ready to say something, but Uttin’s next comment ensured his reaction.

“Do you think he just does not notice? Perhaps he has always been a smelly person?”

“How dare you!” Simon screeched. In our tongue. Not his. I was right.

He launched to his feet, storming over to us, his body practically vibrating with fury as he stuck a finger in my face. “First of all, I do not snore! And second, I bathe daily! It’s not my fault I don’t have more clothes! You stole me from my home!”

I raised my eyebrows slowly. “Had you only asked, I would have gotten more for you.”

He threw his hands up, exasperated. “How would I do that when—” He froze, finally realizing we spoke the same language. Irritation flashed across his face, followed by realization. He narrowed his eyes at me.

“You said that on purpose to get a rise out of me.”

That time, I did not bother to hide my grin. I expected it when he stormed off, and Uttin and I shared a laugh over his reaction. I didn’t expect him to come back so

quickly. Nor did I expect the clay he smeared across my face in retribution for my prank. I blinked my eyes open, staring at him in shock. Even Uttin was silent, his mouth gaping. But Simon didn't just bring enough for me. He turned to Uttin next. Uttin was fast, jumping out of the way, but that didn't deter Simon. He lobbed the handful of clay and got Uttin in the face anyway.

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Maman cackled from her seat and clapped. When I shot her an incredulous look, she grinned at me. “You deserved that. You could have just said you knew he understood you.”

“Did you know?” I demanded.

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I did. He is not clever. And he is terrible at hiding his reactions. You are just blind. I should have fed you more vegetables as a child.”

Simon snorted, stalking past me to join her again. He used a bucket of water to wash his hands and plopped back onto his seat, giving me a dirty look when I came to join them. I washed what I could from my face, but I knew I’d need to visit the river again to get it fully out of my beard. Clay was not easy to remove.

“How do you know our tongue?” Uttin asked as he joined us. He dodged around me when it looked like Simon would pick up more clay, but Simon just put it on his table and began to mold it, his eyes focused on his work.

“The bastard from last night didn’t lie. I worked in a brothel before being forced to come here. I learned to speak to my clients so I could better service them. There is a clan that settles on the outskirts of our town every winter. The town doesn’t care who comes to the poor districts, as long as they don’t cause trouble for the rich.”

Eleven

SIMON

I waited for them to comment on my career and try to shame me. I was nice before their stupid prank. A face full of clay was nothing compared to what I normally did to those who insulted me, but I wouldn't take shaming me lightly.

Feigrind only nodded. And the other one, who I recognized as one of the barbarians who brought me to the village, looked curious, not disgusted.

“How many languages, exactly? Later in the season, we send a small party to trade with other clans. They deal more with outsiders than we do. You might find someone to your liking there who would be happy to have a translator present.”

I wasn't interested in finding someone else in the clans, but I didn't point that out. I was getting tired of repeating myself.

Feigrind stiffened and his brow furrowed, like he didn't like Uttin's idea. I narrowed my eyes. I'd assume jealousy if I thought he was interested in males, but so far, he'd shown no signs of that.

“Simon, what in the world are you making?” Maman demanded.

I looked down at the clay I was working with. I wasn't actually paying attention to it. The movement of the table was an afterthought. I was just playing with it. But the lumpy bowl got squished a bit with my lack of focus, making it too oddly shaped to be used to eat.

“Something decorative, maybe?” Uttin suggested innocently.

I snorted. “No. I wasn't paying attention. I'll just start again.”

Instead of leaving like he did the day before, Feigrind sat in front of me, his legs crossed as he watched me work. It confused me, and I made a face at him.

“What? I’m not going to run. I don’t have a death wish.”

“That is good to know,” he replied easily. He still didn’t get up. Even after Uttin wandered away, he did not move. I shot a frown at Maman, but she just shrugged.

“He is overprotective. It is his way. It makes him a good warrior and a good protector.”

“I don’t need his protection,” I growled, giving him a pointed look. “I need a way home. Will you give me that?”

When he looked up at me, that blank look was back, showing he wouldn’t take the bait of arguing with me. A part of me liked that I could say what I wanted without pissing him off. But it also made me want to poke at him until he finally broke.

No one ever called me nice.

Maman got up, puttering away to check on the pots she had in the nearby fire. I took the opportunity to push a little. “What happens when I get bored here? I’m used to daily sex. You’re my protector. Are you going to take care of me?”

I was taunting him, but also trying to get an answer to a question. I needed to know if I had a shot because if I was going to be stuck here until they finally let me go home, I was not going that long without sex.

It would be worse than torture.

“Do you want me to?” he asked casually.

The nonanswer annoyed me, and I glared at him. “Don’t answer the question with a question. Are you attracted to men or not?”

“No.”

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It was a straightforward answer; had it been anyone else, I would've accepted it. I didn't take offense when men weren't interested. I had plenty wrapped around my finger who were. But it bothered me for some reason. I didn't want to look too deeply into why.

“Does this bother you?”

The confusing feelings made me lash out, hissing at him. “No. I don't care. I could have any man I wanted in my town. Why would I care if you don't want me?”

It was a lie. I cared. And I hated myself for it.

“You are very beautiful, Simon. But I have never been with a man before. I cannot say it is something I would enjoy.”

“You would with me,” I growled defensively. I was the best. Not even Quincy could deny that.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Considering your job, I don't doubt that. But I am interested in females.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why does it have to be one or the other? Plenty are interested in both.” Not me. I found women tedious. But not all the men I serviced were solely interested in men. There were times when Chanel and I would pair together with a client so they could fuck us both. As long as I wasn't required to do anything with her, I was okay with it.

His brows furrowed slightly. We were speaking the same language now, and still, he didn't understand me. I gave up. I wasn't going to pout and whine to convince someone to want me. If he wasn't interested, it was his loss.

Since I already spoke the language, which shocked a lot of people, when someone brought up returning to Finn's lessons, I wasn't required to go. I was glad for that, since I wasn't interested in going anywhere near the guy. Instead, I spent my time with Maman or sat out of the way and watched Feigrind train with the other warriors. It was a more relaxed kind of living than I was used to, sort of like a vacation, but after a few days, I grew frustrated with the routine.

"You can't just keep me here! I'm not your bed warmer!"

"No," Feigrind agreed. "You're a pain in my ass."

Usually, the insult wouldn't bother me. I didn't give a shit what people thought of me. But he was the only person I really talked to, and I was sick of him and his little comments. It was rainy and cold, so we were spending the day in his tent. He needed to learn a lesson that it was a bad idea to piss me off when he was stuck in a small space with me.

"If you don't take me home, I'll make you regret it!" I threatened.

He stared blankly at me. Still so patient and unbothered by my outbursts. It irritated the hell out of me, and what little control I had on my temper disappeared into nothingness.

"Don't make me hurt you."

He smirked. "I'd like to see you try, little brat."

Well, he asked for it.

I didn't throw myself at him. He'd expect that. Instead, I feigned storming out of the tent. He didn't know I wouldn't force myself into that cold, rainy weather on pain of death and stood to follow me with a resigned sigh. Before he could even fully get to his feet, I swung around and used my elbow in his gut. It hurt—he was basically just a rock wall of muscle—but it did take him by surprise enough to make him stumble. I used the reaction to my advantage, shoving him so that he toppled backwards. What surprised me was when his hand darted out to grab my new tunic, and he dragged me down with him.

With a screech, I lashed out when I landed on top of him, managing to punch him in the jaw. I yelped as my hand throbbed because of it.

“What are you made of? Stone?” I demanded, wriggling free of my tunic to get away from him. He was way too big. If he pinned me, I wouldn't stand a chance.

He clearly wasn't expecting me to shed my clothes to get away from him because he glanced at my tunic with a frown for a second, giving me back the upper hand. I pounced, landing on his chest, and drew back my hand for another punch. He caught my wrist before I could land it, though, and effortlessly twisted to put me beneath him.

Thankfully, he didn't immediately drop his weight, and with some quick maneuvering, I managed to wiggle free, but he didn't let me get away. He scooped one giant arm around me, crushing me against his chest, and no amount of wiggling was helping me get away. He caught my hand when I tried to punch him over my shoulder, too, switching to the other hand so it was trapped against my chest.

“Get off!” I demanded, still fighting even though I was definitely trapped. Maybe I could kick him in the balls. He'd definitely let go if I did that. Except he saw right

through me, and before I could even try, he dropped one leg on top of mine, pinning them too.

“Do you forfeit?” he asked, his voice laced with amusement. It pissed me off, and I felt my face flush with anger.

“Never,” I growled, digging my nails into his arm. He didn’t even flinch. Bastard.

“You have not yet been here a week. You cannot know you won’t be happy here already. Give it more time.”

“Oh, fuck you!” I snapped. “You stole me from my home! You don’t get to tell me where I’ll be happy! I was happy where I was!”

“Really?” he asked, somehow sounding completely unaffected. Meanwhile, I was breathing heavily, desperately trying to get free. How he managed to hold me with care while completely immobilizing me was beyond me.

“Given the choice between your life before and living here in a place of honor, would you truly choose there?”

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“Yes! At least there, I had a choice!”

“But did you really?”

I froze, confused. Of course, I’d had a choice. I didn’t have to take on clients who I wasn’t interested in. I could’ve walked away if I wanted to.

Except... not really. I was only ever good at one thing. Sex. Whether at Quincy’s place or somewhere else, it was the only job I knew. The only job I’d ever be hired to do. No one would hire a former whore in any other job. They’d risk people recognizing me and shaming the business. It was my choice to stay, but what other option did I have?

Feigrind’s grip on me loosened, but he didn’t fully release me. He held me against him, like he knew I was conflicted and understood. Like he was offering me comfort. I hated it. I hated that he saw me as weak. But after I shoved him away and put space between us, I hated the loss of his comfort even more.

Twelve

FEIGRIND

Simon went quiet after our discussion. It wasn’t like him. Ever since he’d come clean about understanding our language, he never failed to say something to let me know how he felt about being here. I thought I’d be happy when he finally went quiet, but it bothered me. He wasn’t a quiet or submissive man. It didn’t suit him.

I decided to give Simon space to think. I trusted that he wouldn't run by now. He'd made it clear he understood the risk and didn't deem it worth it. He wanted me to bring him home, and because I wouldn't do that, he wasn't going anywhere. Most of the time, this was when I started letting tributes meet others in the clan. He understood our words, and he was no longer at risk of running. This was when he would meet someone else and move on.

But I couldn't do it.

The thought of letting him go, of another tribute tossing me aside, was abhorrent. I couldn't keep him; I knew this. I wasn't what he needed. He'd said more than once that he was used to frequent sex. He wouldn't be happy with me if I made him celibate just so I wouldn't be alone. But I wasn't ready to let him go yet.

"I will be back. It is not safe to leave so?—"

"I know that!" he snapped, glaring at me. I expected more, wished for it even, but he went quiet again, pulling the furs over his head petulantly. My chest ached at the dismissal, and I ducked out to go check on Maman. The foul weather sometimes hurt her bones. I didn't want her in pain and alone.

The rain was harsh and sharp, like ice. I was soaked by the time I ducked into Maman's tent. She wasn't resting like I hoped, instead playing with her clay while she hummed to herself, but she didn't look to be in pain. She glanced up at me when I entered and shook her head with a sigh.

"You are asking for illness, son of mine. I do not need your constant hovering."

"No," I agreed, moving to sit by the fire. Not all tents had the space for fires so large like she had, but my father had built this tent for her so that she could always fire her pots no matter the weather. It was larger than other tents, and a pain in the ass to take

down when we eventually moved on, but I liked that she could keep doing what made her happy, no matter the weather.

“Where is Simon?” she asked, her eyes sharp on me.

“I gave him time to think. He is... quiet lately.”

Her brows furrowed, pulling at the wrinkles on her face. “Do you think he will run again?”

I shook my head. “No. He says he understands the risk, and I believe him. He is angry with me, I think, for making him question his freedom at home.”

She huffed out a laugh, turning back to her work. “All tributes feel this way. He will get over it.”

True, and I’d experienced the reaction in the past, but it felt different for Simon. I thought he’d never stop fighting. It bothered me that he did.

“His reaction is not new. Yours is. Why are you making that face?”

I wiped away the emotion on my face, pulling off my tunic so that I could wring it out. I ignored the annoyed suck of her teeth when I wrung it out on the dirt floor. At least I didn’t do it over one of the carpets.

“Have you eaten yet today? I can fetch something for you,” I offered without looking at her. It was easier to mask my emotions if I didn’t make eye contact. She knew me well enough to see through me.

I heard her rise, and I had no choice but to look up when she moved to stand over me. She stood with her hands in fists on her hips, her scowl as familiar to me as her smile.

One day, she would stop fighting, too. It broke my heart to even consider it.

“Stop that!” she snapped. “You are being dreary. Explain yourself.”

I shook my head. “There is nothing to explain. I—Ow!”

She stopped my excuse-making by pulling my hair, which was beyond childish. I leaned away from her, rubbing at the sore spot.

“What was that for?”

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“That’s what you get for lying to your mother. You have had tributes before. They all act this way eventually. Why is Simon’s reaction affecting you so?”

Pressing my lips together, I refused to answer. I didn’t want to admit it out loud. It was selfish to want to keep him merely so I wouldn’t be alone anymore. Simon deserved better.

“You want him,” she said suddenly, like she could read my thoughts. I didn’t like it when she did that. It irked me.

“I don’t. I have no interest in?—”

She raised her hand threateningly towards my hair. “Lie to me again. I dare you.”

With a growl, I forced myself to my feet. At least standing, I was taller than her. It made my hair harder to reach.

“What do you wish me to say?” I demanded, frustrated. I’d come here for comfort. I should have known better.

“The truth,” she suggested, like I was being purposely stupid.

I glared at her. She crossed her arms and glared right back. We stood there wordlessly for a while until I finally caved and threw my hands into the air.

“I am not what he needs! I know this. But I cannot stomach letting him go. I don’t wish to be alone anymore.”

Her glower softened a little, and she sighed, shaking her head. “I know. I see the pain in your eyes when your tributes choose another. However, you are lying to yourself. You are what Simon needs. He needs your strength to deal with his attitude, but also your softness to ease his pain. You still have a chance to keep him. You just need to pull your head out of your ass.”

I shot her a dirty look, but she was unfazed. I’d gained my patience from my father. My stubbornness was a gift from her.

“I’m not—” She raised an eyebrow, and I sighed, trying again. “I have never been with a male. I had no wish to. I don’t know how to keep him happy.”

“I’m sure there are others who will explain it to you.”

“Yes, and ridicule me at the same time,” I grumbled.

I trusted my brothers with my life, but there weren’t many who I would be willing to discuss such a delicate topic with. Had he still been alive, it was my father who I would have turned to for advice.

Again, it was like she read my thoughts. I appreciated it this time when Maman put her hand on my arm, rubbing it soothingly. “He would have been happy to explain things. I’m sorry he is not here to do so.”

My chest ached when I thought of my father. His loss cut me deeply. I still mourned him, even so many years later. Maman, too, though she’d never admit it. He was her other half. She was heartbroken when he passed.

“So what do I do?” I asked, defeated.

“Speak with the scribe,” she suggested. “He has a tender heart. He will answer your

questions without teasing. And speak with Simon. Given his life before he arrived here, I'm sure he's experienced enough for the both of you."

Based on the noises coming out of Rath's tent, it wasn't a good time to ask to speak with his bondmate. I left them alone and headed back to mine, only to find it empty. My heart stuttered, and I feared for a moment that Simon had run again, but he poked me in the side to get me out of his way as he came in behind me.

"Move. I'm getting drenched."

Stepping aside, I allowed him to pass. He was at least smart enough to bring a cloak to protect himself, so he was drier than I was. He didn't look pleased, though, and he was shivering when he crawled back into bed.

Worry coursed through me, and I quickly stripped out of my wet clothes, pulling on dry legwear before joining him in bed. He was surrounded by furs, with only his face poking out, and he looked so very unhappy. I hated that.

"Can I help you?" I asked, not wanting to touch without his permission. He was right, he'd had enough choices taken from him.

"How?" he demanded, glaring up at me. "Are you going to bring me home?"

I shook my head, not reacting to his baiting, instead opening my arms to him. "I can warm you up."

He frowned at me, glancing at my open arms and then back to my face almost suspiciously. I waited patiently, and he eventually wiggled forward, bringing the furs with him as he settled into my arms.

"Why are you so warm?" he complained. "You were outside longer than me, but it's

like you were unaffected by this awful weather!”

I hummed, resting my cheek on top of his head. The color was starting to come out, showing the pale blonde underneath. It was pretty, but I liked the petal color more.

“It’s our blood. We all run warm.”

He grumbled under his breath, snuggling closer, and I bit back a smile. This was something I always hoped for. It took work not to let myself get carried away. I still didn’t know if we were compatible in all aspects. I didn’t know how to ask to try. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to.

He shoved aside a few furs to get closer to me, and I got a better feel of his body pressed against mine. He wasn’t muscled, like my brothers. He was soft and slim. He had no beard, even after a week, and his blue-brown eyes were captivating. He was beautiful, and my body reacted without my say so. And Simon was not polite enough to pretend he didn’t notice.

“For someone not interested in males, you seem really happy to see me,” he teased, his voice a low purr that drew a shiver from me. I didn’t understand my reaction to him. I’d never reacted to any other male like that before, but I chose not to question it.

“You are not like other males,” I murmured, running my knuckles along his soft cheek. His eyes fluttered a little at the caress, and he leaned into me even more. I wanted to gather him closer, plaster him against me, but I wasn’t sure he’d want that.

“I am a male, though,” he said, punctuating his point by pushing his hips against mine. I felt his arousal, and while I was unused to it, I wasn’t turned off. I liked the very obvious way his body showed his interest. I didn’t have to question what his looks meant.

I hummed instead of answering, since I still didn't know what to say. I ran my fingers along his jaw and brushed my thumb over his bottom lip, my gaze locked on his mouth. His lips parted on a quick intake of breath, and his eyes became heavy-lidded. I wondered what he'd taste like. Would it be so different?

Simon's teeth sank into his bottom lip, and my cock twitched. Why was that so sexy?

He chuckled, low and throaty, and pushed lightly on my shoulder. I went willingly; if he wanted space, then I would not force him, but he came with me, straddling my hips and hovering over me with his hands planted on either side of my head.

"I should warn you. Every curious man who's crawled into my bed never wanted to leave it in the end. Are you sure you're willing to play this game with me?"

My lip twitched against a scowl. I did not wish to hear about those other men. I was under no illusion that he was untouched. I had my own experience with lovemaking. But I preferred not to think about it. Right now, I wanted his sole focus to be on me.

"Promise me you won't mention that again, and I'll let you do as you wish."

His eyebrows jumped a little, and a slow, smug grin overtook his face. "Alright, big guy. You want the shy, innocent virgin, I can give you that."

I frowned, capturing his hips before he could pull away. "That isn't what I meant."

He paused, studying me with a frown. "What? What did you mean, then?"

Sliding my hands up his back, I drew him closer and twisted, putting him beneath me. I stroked my fingers gently through the hair at his temples, taking in his beauty.

"I do not wish to pretend you are anyone other than yourself. I just don't want you

thinking of anyone but me,” I admitted softly.

Understanding flashed across his face, and he wrinkled his nose. “Have you seen yourself? Do you really think I’d be thinking of anyone else? I’d have to be blind to?—”

I cut him off by slamming my lips against his. I was glad I wasn’t the only one feeling desire. I was sure Simon had been with men much more handsome than me, but even if he was pretending, it felt better to be told he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

Thirteen

SIMON

I wasn’t sure why Feigrind was suddenly changing his mind about sex, but I wasn’t about to turn him down. I was bored out of my mind, and I’d always thought he was sexy. I’d have to be insane to turn him down.

I did feel his trepidation, though. He wasn’t the only first timer I’d dealt with, and I knew when to push and when to back off. I didn’t want to just take control and overwhelm him—I wanted to make it good for him. So I started slowly, trailing my tongue over the seam of his lips, asking for entry. He didn’t strike me as a complete virgin, so I didn’t need to hold back on this part. I stroked my tongue over his, giving as good as he gave me. He relaxed slowly but surely, sinking into it, and groaned when I pushed closer and let him grind his cock against my hip. I was itching to get my hands on that gorgeous specimen, but I held back. This needed to be at his pace.

Waiting for him to give me a sign that he was ready for something new was key, and when he started rocking his hips, I followed his lead, shifting to align our cocks. He grunted in surprise, then did it again, letting out another groan of approval. That’s it,

handsome. Don't think. Just feel.

It felt good for me too, and a part of me wanted to just lose myself in the sensation, but after days without any release, I wasn't interested in a quick frot. I wanted to get fucked, and I wasn't going to stop until I got him inside me or he had enough.

Breaking off the kiss, I tried to catch my breath. I couldn't get overwhelmed right now, but it was so hard to focus when he was rocking against me in just the right way. Determined to get the upper hand, I pushed on his shoulder like I had before, encouraging him onto his back. For a second, it seemed like he wanted to ignore me, which made me grin, but eventually he gave in to my demands and rolled over.

Swinging my leg over him, I straddled him, this time sitting on the ridge of his cock. His breathing stuttered and his hands moved to my hips, flexing slightly like he wanted to move me, but was unsure of himself. I gave him what he wanted, undulating my hips and smirking when he groaned again. While he was distracted, I pulled off my tunic and tossed it aside. It'd be the first test for him. I was missing a few parts for him to pretend I was a woman. I wasn't hairy like some men, but I definitely wasn't a woman.

Feigrind looked me over, his gaze like a hot touch along my skin. He didn't look disappointed with what he saw. I'd be pissed if he was. Grabbing his hand, I pressed it to my chest, encouraging him to touch.

"The sensitive spots are pretty much the same. Follow your instincts."

His brow furrowed a little, and he sat up, keeping one big arm around my waist, so I stayed where I was in his lap. He caught my lips in another kiss, then drew away to watch as he slid his hand over my skin.

“You’re so soft,” he murmured.

“I’d be softer if I had my products,” I grumbled, mostly to myself. But then he frowned and shot me a questioning look, so I explained. “I use products to take care of my skin and hair. I don’t like the bar soaps most commoners use.”

He hummed, dropping his gaze back to his hand. It wasn’t important right now. I’d bitch about it more later. After I got that gorgeous cock inside me.

His thumb brushed over my nipple, and I sucked in a breath, rocking my hips automatically. His eyes jerked to mine, curiosity overtaking his face. He did it again, this time a little more firmly, watching my face to see my reaction. I bit my bottom lip to encourage him. I liked the touch, and I was always pretty sensitive. Lots of men liked that about me;.they liked a responsive partner.

Feigrind dipped his head, flicking his tongue over my nipple, and a moan escaped me. I felt his arm tighten around my hips, drawing me just a little closer as he did it again.

Carding my fingers through his hair, I held him there, giving him little moans and murmurs of encouragement to keep him going. He switched sides, growing more confident, and I gasped out loud when he brought teeth into play. I shuddered in delight. I liked a little biting, as long as it was done right. I never liked pain play. It wasn’t my thing. But if he didn’t stop, I was going to lose my mind.

“Off,” I demanded breathlessly, tugging at his hair. Time for the next test. Nipples were all fine and well, but he’d truly notice the difference when I took off my pants.

He let me push him onto his back, his eyes dark and lust filled as he watched me slide down his body to the ties of his pants. His breath caught when I untied them with my teeth, and I gave him a sultry grin as I pulled them over his hips.

Great goddess, he had a beautiful cock. Long and thick, and drawn up to his belly. He was definitely enjoying what we'd done so far. I trailed my tongue along his length in a quick tease, enjoying the lusty groan that came out of him in response. If things went well, I'd teach him everything he needed to know about giving the perfect blowjob. That wasn't what right now was about, though, so I gave the tip a quick kiss and pushed away to stand over him.

He watched avidly as I untied my pants. I rolled my hips, pushing them down a little at a time to tease him some more. He wasn't wrong when he called me a brat. I owned that in my private life. Only when I was working did I put that aside.

When my pants slid down my legs and I kicked them aside, I tried not to let him see that I was holding my breath. I knew he could decide he didn't like it, but I wanted him to want me. I wasn't ready to stop.

Luckily, he didn't immediately pull away. He looked more curious than turned off, and when I sank back to my knees, he pulled me closer until I was hovering over him again.

"Like what you see?" I asked breathlessly. Never in my life had I cared so much about a man's answer to that question. It didn't matter when I was getting paid. It sure as hell mattered to me now.

"You're beautiful," he replied, running his hands up my arms and over my back. "Are you okay?"

I smiled at the question and leaned to kiss him. "I'm horny. Gonna help me with

that?”

It was his turn to grin. He tugged me closer, until I was lying on top of him, skin to skin. He drew my lips back to his, devouring my mouth, and I couldn't stop myself from rocking against him. Oh, yes. Without clothes was a lot better.

He broke the kiss, panting as he asked, “Now what?”

“That depends.” I nipped at his chin playfully. “Do you have any oil?”

I could go without—I'd used spit in the past—but I preferred not to. Especially when taking a cock as big as his.

Thankfully, he nodded and waved his hand toward the little chest by the table. “In there.”

When I raised an eyebrow at him, he flushed a little as he admitted, “I've been alone for a while. It makes it better when it's just me.”

Imagining him oiling up his cock to jerk off made my insides burn. Goddess, the image was sexy. Some other time, I was going to make him show me how he got himself off. A little show just for me, for once.

I crawled off the bedding to search the chest, wiggling my ass enticingly as I looked. He groaned, which was a positive sign that he wouldn't chicken out when things got moving. Excitement fluttered low in my belly, and I had to bite my lip to stop myself from giving away just how eager I was. I was a professional, damn it. I wasn't some newbie salivating over his first cock.

Snatching the oil, I crawled back to the bed, lying on my back beside him. He rolled onto his side, watching with furrowed brows as I oiled up my fingers and reached

between my legs.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his eyes glued to my hand.

“Prepping myself,” I replied with a smirk. “I need to stretch myself to take that gorgeous thing without any pain.”

He looked up, startled, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, shut up. Like a woman could take that without at least a little prep beforehand?”

He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “It’s not the same.”

“No,” I agreed. “I’m not a woman.”

I wanted to keep reminding him of that, because when it came down to it, he’d said he wasn’t interested in males. I still didn’t know why he was suddenly changing his mind, and I didn’t want him pretending I was something I wasn’t.

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He reached for me, running his fingers lightly along my length. “I know.”

Suddenly, I couldn’t wait anymore. I wanted him inside me more than I wanted to breathe. I removed my fingers, shoved him onto his back, and straddled his thighs as I dumped a healthy amount of oil into my palm. He gasped and shuddered as I slicked up his cock, thrusting into my hand. It only made me want it more. I lined him up at my entrance and sank down, watching his face as his eyes grew large, and he groaned from deep inside his chest.

“Simon...” he gritted out, gripping my hips tightly.

“Yes...” I hissed, my eyes rolling into my head as I took every single inch of him. He filled me up until I absolutely couldn’t take anymore, then kept going, until I was a trembling mess on top of him, and he was buried to the hilt. Shit. Could his dick be any more perfect?

Lifting off a little, I tested the waters, dropping back down. My mouth fell open, and I moaned in delight. He hit every sensitive spot all at once without even trying. Lifting higher, I sank onto him again, a little faster this time, and he shouted in response. I worked myself into a rhythm, up and down his length, until I couldn’t see straight, and Feigrind was groaning almost constantly beneath me.

Without warning, he snatched me against his chest and flipped us, putting me on my back. I didn’t hate the position, but I preferred to be on top so I could control?—

My eyes flew open, and I cried out in surprise as he snapped his hips and hit my pleasure spot dead on. He took the sound as encouragement and did it again and

again, hitting that perfect spot inside me each and every time. I writhed and moaned, completely at his mercy. It was shameful, I was supposed to be the experienced one guiding this little experiment, but I couldn't see straight, much less teach him. I didn't need to anyway. It was like his dick was made for me, hitting my pleasure spot no matter what angle he fucked me at. Lightning coursed through my system with every thrust, and I completely missed all the signs of my incoming release. It took me by surprise when it slammed into me so hard, my back arched off the blankets and furs.

"Feigrind!" I screamed, shooting cum all the way up my chest from the sheer force of my release. My body clamped down on his as it overtook me, and he shouted in surprise and bucked his hips, dragging out my orgasm until he finally flooded me with his release and collapsed on the bedding next to me.

It was only after I had a few minutes to breathe that I realized what had happened. I'd come completely untouched. That was unheard of for me. I always needed a hand to get me over the edge. But not with Feigrind. His perfect dick took me over the edge without even a squeeze to encourage me.

"Holy shit," I breathed, eyes wide as I stared at the ceiling of the tent. What the hell had just happened?

Fourteen

FEIGRIND

Being with Simon was different, but not as strange as I would have thought. It felt amazing being inside him, hearing the sounds he made. I was not naïve enough to believe those noises were real—he was probably making them for my benefit because of my inexperience—but I enjoyed them all the same. And I was curious to explore more with him. He was not cruel in his explanation, and he didn't tease me for my inexperience. He was a kind teacher, which was surprising given his disposition since

we met.

I fell asleep still considering how I wanted to approach the subject of more exploration. I didn't want him to think I was using him. I wanted to keep him if I could. But I wanted to make sure we were compatible before I brought that up. He seemed to have enjoyed what we did, but I didn't want him faking to placate me. If I wanted to make him happy, I needed him to teach me how to please him.

It was still early when I woke to Simon's mouth on me. He sucked on my cock with more force than I was used to, forcing me awake with a groan.

"Simon..." I breathed.

He pulled off my cock with a pop, looking up at me. His hair was disheveled from sleep, and his lips were swollen from sucking me. He truly was beautiful.

"Good, you're awake."

He gave me no time to question him before he climbed on top of me and sank onto my cock. I threw my head back, gritting my teeth against a groan that would wake my brothers if I wasn't careful. It felt so good, it was hard to control myself. He was hot and tight, slick with oil already, and he wasted no time before he started moving. I had no hope of keeping up with him. I wasn't fully awake, and being bombarded with pleasure upon waking was too much for my mind to handle.

Simon's moans forced my eyes open, and I watched as he writhed on me, his cheeks pink with arousal. His cock stood out in front of him, bobbing with his movements and leaking onto my belly. He might be able to fake some things thanks to his job, but he couldn't hide his body's responses.

I could only watch for so long before my control slipped, and I rolled to put him

underneath me. I wanted more, and he seemed to enjoy it when I did. He sounded surprised at first, probably because he wasn't expecting it, but then his moans grew into cries of pleasure as I fucked into him.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, ohfuckohfuckohfuck,” he babbled in the common tongue. I wasn't sure what he was saying, but I couldn't think much of it. His body tightened around me, and I lost my fight to stay quiet, groaning loudly as I spent inside him. He spilled across his stomach and chest, his body writhing in pleasure, and I did my best to keep moving for him until we were both too exhausted, and I had to roll off him for fear of crushing him. I took him with me, though, pulling him against my chest as I caught my breath.

When I finally felt like I could speak, I looked down at Simon to question him, only to find him fast asleep. It was a lot earlier than he normally woke, the sun just barely lighting up the tent, so I wasn't too surprised. He was curled up against me, his face relaxed, without his usual irritation or annoyance. I cupped his cheek impulsively, stroking my thumb over his smooth skin, and he sighed, leaning into the touch. It was a sweet reaction, one that tugged at my heart, and I had to force myself to move away to find a cloth to clean us up.

It was too early for Simon, but I rose early most days, so I was not interested in going back to sleep. I tucked him in with the furs so that he stayed warm and comfortable, and got up for the day, putting on fresh clothes and ducking out to fetch our breakfast, as well as Maman's. She didn't need to overexert herself fetching it.

I found Patrick and Yamileth hard at work on breakfast, talking quietly amongst themselves. They both looked up as I ducked into the tent they used for cooking, and Yamileth raised an eyebrow at me.

“Do you need something?”

Huffing a laugh, I shook my head. “You know why I am here.”

“I do,” she said snarkily. “I also know she said she would come herself. You hover too much.”

Yamileth and Maman were friends, so her reaction didn’t surprise me. If they could get support for Maman’s refusal to let me help her, they’d gather the entire clan. However, most knew my actions to be for the best and didn’t let those two suck them into their scheming.

Patrick frowned, looking between us. “Who are you talking about?”

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“My maman,” I replied, accepting the bowls of food he offered me. Two at first, since he was unaware that I was fetching Maman’s as well. I was grateful that he fed Simon without complaint, even with Simon’s surly attitude not making him any friends thus far.

“Is she sick? Do you want me to bring her meals to her instead?” Patrick asked. He was a good man, kind and thoughtful, and he’d taken over for Yamileth in making deliveries of meals to tributes and those too sick to join the clan after he began working alongside her.

“I am not sick,” Maman carped, stepping into the tent. I sighed heavily, and she poked me in the side in retribution. “I am not so old that I cannot fetch my own meals. Do not make it seem otherwise.”

“You should not have to,” I argued. “You need your rest.”

She and Yamileth both gave me dirty looks, and I had no choice but to back down. I would not win with both of them there.

“We will discuss this later,” I said, to end the argument. Perhaps I could convince Simon to eat with her. She enjoyed his company, and he seemed to like spending time with her as well. That wouldn’t work in the mornings, since Maman rose as early as I did and Simon liked to sleep in, but for other meals, I might be able to get her to rest more.

“Go. Feed your tribute,” Yamileth demanded, shooing me away. “When will you introduce him to the clan?”

My face gave away my distaste, and Maman laughed.

“He does not wish to. He is not wrong to keep Simon close. He is a little devil with a sweet face. His snark will upset any who take him seriously.”

Yamileth raised her eyebrows, curious. “Truly? Why have I not met him yet?”

They continued to discuss introducing Yamileth to Simon. I did not admit out loud that it was not Simon’s attitude that made me keep him apart from the clan. I was being selfish. I wanted more time with him without anyone else luring him away. Each time I introduced my tribute to the clan, they left. I didn’t want to lose Simon, too.

SIMON

Waking up after really good sex put me in a better mood than usual when I got up the second time. The first time, I had intended to just roll over and go back to sleep, but I was cuddled against the gorgeous giant, and I needed to test my theory. I thought maybe I’d reacted so strongly to him because I was worked up after a week without sex. That would explain why I came untouched. But even without foreplay and a quick prep on my part, it happened again the next morning. I was stunned at how quickly I came, too. I could last hours if clients wished it. I was only ever quick if that’s what they requested. But a few minutes being fucked with that gorgeous dick, and I was coming like a virgin riding their first cock.

It was embarrassing.

I had been having sex for more than half my life. I didn’t react like this. I enjoyed it, I had my fun, but I didn’t lose control like that. And I never came untouched. What was it about this barbarian that set me aflame?

A little disgruntled with my reaction, I almost didn't notice that Feigrind was not in the tent with me. There was a bowl of food on the table, he'd cleaned up our clothes that had been scattered everywhere, but he was nowhere to be seen. It stung a little. I knew my place. Men were only interested in me for sex. But I'll admit, I'd thought Feigrind would be different. At least kind enough to pretend that wasn't all I was good for.

The sated, happy energy I'd woken up with disappeared and, in a petulant protest to his actions, I snagged the bowl of food and brought it back with me to the furs to eat. He wasn't around to chastise me, so I could do what I wanted.

I was halfway through my meal when Feigrind came back. He carried a heavy pot that had steam coming out of the top. I was still mad at him, so I didn't ask, but I was curious.

He set the pot aside, raising an eyebrow at me. "If you make a mess, you'll regret it."

"Unlike some people, I don't eat like an animal," I snapped. "Where did you go?"

I didn't want to sound so hurt, but it came out that way, and Feigrind's face softened. He gestured to the pot.

"You do not like bathing in the river. I worry when your lips turn blue. So I heated water for you instead. I do not have your fancy products for bathing, but at least you will be warm."

Surprised, I sat a little straighter. "You warmed water for me?"

It was a thoughtful gesture, one I didn't expect, and I wasn't sure how to react. I'd been so determined to be angry with him, but he'd been gone only because he was doing something sweet for me. What did I even say to that?

“Your happiness is important to me,” he replied, and my heart stuttered in my chest. No one had ever cared much about my happiness before.

The rush of fluttery emotions that exploded in my stomach made me uncomfortable, and I had to look away from the earnest expression on his face. I mumbled a quiet thank you and moved to put my food down so that I could get clean before the water cooled too much. Feigrind gave me a cloth and a freshbar of soap, moving a rug out of the way so the water wouldn’t make a mess. I took my time cleaning every inch of me and sighed happily as the warmth sank into my skin. It was chilly this far north, and I only ever felt truly warm buried in the furs or wrapped in Feigrind’s arms. I didn’t want to get too used to that feeling either. I didn’t want him somehow convincing me to stay.

Fifteen

SIMON

Feigrind was pulled away a little after lunch by another warrior. He left me with Maman, like usual, and she immediately started chattering about the work that needed to be done. I was getting better at pot making, so she demanded I help her. I didn’t mind, since it was better than just sitting around questioning myself. I was spending too much time in my head, wondering if I truly wanted to go back or if I wanted to stay here with Feigrind. I wasn’t going to let him sway me. This wasn’t where I belonged. And a beautiful cock wasn’t going to make me abandon my home or my creature comforts. Any more bar soap in my hair and it’d dry out. Then I’d really have something to bitch about.

“Why are you scowling?” Maman demanded from her seat next to me. “If you are too rough on the clay, it will get air pockets.”

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I rolled my eyes. “I’m not being rough, and I’m not scowling. Stop projecting, you old hag.”

The first time I called her names, it had slipped out. I was annoyed with her son and took it out on her. She took it in stride and called me a petulant brat in return. Now we called each other names with an undertone of affection. She didn’t take offense, and neither did I.

She pinched the underside of my arm, making me yelp. “Call me old again and I’ll tell Feigrind to throw you in the river.”

I gasped, eyes wide. “You wouldn’t!”

I complained enough about the river. She knew how much I hated it.

She raised her eyebrows, a smug look on her face. “Want to test my patience?”

A smile cracked my face, and I chuckled, shaking my head. “I like you. And you’re not that old. Early twenties, at a guess.”

She flicked water at me for that, chortling. “Flattery will get you nowhere with me, brat. So tell me why you are moody. Is my son being overbearing again?”

My nose wrinkled. Feigrind wasn’t overbearing with me. After he realized I wouldn’t run, he gave me more room to be on my own, but when he stuck close, I didn’t feel like he was hovering. I felt more like he was watching over me to make sure I was happy. He left me with Maman because I seemed happy to be there, and when I was

tired and wanted to go, he took me away again. That wasn't overbearing.

"Why do you call him overbearing? Is he cruel to you?" I asked instead of answering her.

Her lip lifted in a scowl. "Not cruel, no. But he insists I cannot do things on my own. I am capable of getting my own meals or cleaning my tent. I don't need him to do it for me. Ever since his father died, he has hovered. I do not appreciate his constant reminders that I am old."

Well, when she put it that way, yeah, it sounded overbearing. But it also seemed like she was missing the point.

"He loves you," I pointed out, glancing at her. "I don't think he's trying to make you look weak. I think he wants to keep you happy so he won't lose you, too."

She made a noncommittal sound, but something about what I'd said made me pause. He'd said that morning that my happiness was important to him. Did he only have sex with me so I wouldn't leave?

Pushing to my feet suddenly, I looked around like he would suddenly appear in front of me. Maman looked up at me, a deep frown on her face.

"Where are you going?"

"Where's Feigrind?" I demanded. I couldn't let that question go until I got an answer. If he was just fucking me to change my mind about going home, I was going to kick his ass. He was not going to use sex to manipulate me.

Maman could obviously see that I was serious, so she didn't argue, instead rinsing her hands in the pot of water and wiping them on her apron before pushing to her feet.

“Come with me.”

I followed her away from her tent and back toward where Feigrind’s tent was situated. She didn’t bring me there, instead heading down the path past it to a small fire where a few warriors were sitting around talking. She narrowed her eyes on the nearest one, and he pointed without questioning what she needed from him.

“He’s with Uttin in the village center.”

She huffed in annoyance and turned again, heading towards the center of the village. I had only been there a few times, and only in passing, so I hadn’t taken in many details. There were a lot of people socializing and working crafts around the big fire. Mothers with their babies watched over other children, and an older man with a long beard told the older children stories in one corner of the square. It was a lively place, full of happy people. Whoever told rumors about barbarians had obviously never visited this clan. It was nothing like people thought.

Feigrind was with a group of warriors off to one side. He had a deep frown on his face, and he looked a lot like Maman when she was annoyed. I wasn’t sure why, but the expression bothered me for some reason. He wasn’t a bright, sunny person, but he wasn’t this grump either. Whoever was irritating him was going to get a piece of my mind.

I came to a halt a few feet away. I’d been annoyed with him when I demanded to see him. Why was I suddenly jumping to his defense now?

Irritated with myself, I finished crossing the square, stopping alongside Maman, who was glaring at the group.

“He cannot go. He has a tribute to care for,” she insisted.

“Go? Where is he going?” I demanded.

A familiar warrior, one of the ones who’d picked me up from my town and brought me here, shot me an irritated look. “He is needed elsewhere instead of babysitting petulant tributes. You can survive on your own for a time.”

When I first arrived, Feigrind was annoyed but quiet. But when the warrior spoke harshly with me, he bared his teeth in a growl and stepped forward, putting himself between me and the asshole.

“Speak to Simon with respect, Bhortis, or it is me you will be dealing with.”

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Yeah, screw that. “If he wants to talk shit, it’s me he’ll be dealing with, not you. I don’t need you to fight my battles for me.” My gaze whipped to the asshole still sneering at me. “And you should watch what you say. Your small dick energy is showing.”

His eyes widened in fury, and he took another step forward, glaring at me over Feigrind’s shoulder. “I will show you my cock, whore, as soon as you get on your knees to suck it.”

I had a comeback ready, but Feigrind moved before I could say anything. He tackled the guy to the ground. The asshole had no time to defend himself before Feigrind was slamming his fist into his face over and over. He had to be hauled off and away before he killed the piece of shit.

Maman took my elbow, dragging me away from the bloodied asshole on the ground to where Feigrind was being held back by a few of his friends. One I was familiar with, Uttin, was whispering harshly in his ear, trying to get him to calm down. Feigrind wasn’t listening. He kept trying to shake them off, and his eyes were locked on his prey.

Warmth filled my chest at his determination to defend my honor. No one had ever bothered before. I wanted to thank him, but with him acting like a wild animal, I doubted he’d be able to hear me. Rolling my eyes, I moved in front of him and twisted his nipple. He jerked away with a yelp, his fury draining away as he stared at me wide eyed, his hand cupping his injured pec.

“What was that for?”

“It got you to stop, didn’t it?” I asked dryly.

A few of his friends snickered at my tactics until I turned my glare on them. They all took a step back and one even covered his nipples protectively. I narrowed my eyes thoughtfully. I kind of liked being able to intimidate men three times my size.

“Go away. I want to speak to Feigrind.”

Those closest to him shot him wary glances, like they weren’t sure if he’d go after the asshole again, but Feigrind shook his head to reassure them.

“I’m fine.”

“Good. You did the right thing defending your tribute, but it would not be seen as such if you killed him,” Uttin said as he patted his shoulder, chuckling when Feigrind glared at him. “We will give you a moment to speak with your tribute. Try not to murder anyone while we’re gone.”

Maman raised an eyebrow at her son after they left. “You are normally more patient than this. Something you wish to tell me?”

Feigrind’s face fell into that mask of indifference I hated. I poked his side, scowling at him.

“Don’t give her that look. She’s right. You were patient with me, no matter what I did. It doesn’t make sense that you’re attacking people now. What’s wrong with you?”

He glanced at me, but didn’t reply. Instead, he changed the subject. “I left you with Maman. Why are you here?”

For a moment, I forgot entirely. It was shocking watching him lose his temper. The asshole who insulted me was still bleeding when his friends dragged him away. Feigrind watched with a narrow-eyed glare, not even looking at me. It was my annoyance that reminded me. And because I didn't always handle my emotions well, I kicked him in the shin to get his attention again.

He hissed and stumbled back, his expression incredulous. "What are you doing, Simon? Why do you keep hurting me?"

Maman chuckled, reminding us both that she was still there. I'd honestly forgotten.

"I'm going to let you two speak. I wish to visit with Yami. Try not to break him, Simon. He is needed to protect the clan."

She wandered away without a backward glance, still chuckling to herself. I turned back to Feigrind, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring at him. He was still rubbing his shin, like someone as small as me actually managed to do some damage. I doubted it. I was good with my knives, but I wasn't great at hand-to-hand. It's why I was never unarmed at home. In each room where we serviced customers, I kept weapons close by and out of sight. I wasn't going to rely on Quincy to rescue me if a customer was hurting me. He didn't care as long as he still got paid.

"Why are you here, Simon?" he demanded again.

I lifted my chin, watching his expression as I asked, "Did you only fuck me to convince me to stay with the clan?"

His eyebrows flew up, and he looked legitimately shocked, but I knew plenty of men who could lie as well as breathe. Feigrind was good at hiding his emotions when he was annoyed. He could excel in lying, too.

“What? Why would you ask me this?”

“Because until yesterday, you had no interest in males, and then suddenly you’re changing your mind, right after you argued that I wasn’t happy in my town. Are you using sex to make me think I’d be happier here? Because I will hurt you if that’s the case! I’m not going to let you manipulate me with sex!”

The surrounding conversations fell silent, and I realized too late that this was probably a conversation better had in private. I dismissed the thought immediately. If he wanted to lie and pretend he was suddenly into males, then he shouldn’t be ashamed of that. I wasn’t sneaking around and pretending, and I wouldn’t let him force me into that either. Not unless he was going to pay me.

The thought of Feigrind paying me for sex made me feel dirty. I’d never felt like that in my life, but just thinking about it made me sick.

Feigrind seemed confused, his gaze searching my face. All he’d see there is anger, so I didn’t know what he was searching for.

“Simon—”

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“Yes or no, Feigrind. I asked a simple question.”

He sighed and shook his head. “No. I didn’t. I made love with you because I wanted to. Because you are beautiful, and I am enraptured by you. I would not use sex to change your mind. Do you truly think I am that cruel?”

Sixteen

FEIGRIND

From the look on his face, he didn’t believe my words. It hurt that Simon thought so little of me. That I would bring him into my bed only to convince him to stay. It was not for that reason, but a part of me still knew if I told him the truth, it would only push him farther from me. He wasn’t ready for me to claim him. He still wanted to go back to his life. I would not bring up my hopes until I knew for certain that he wished to stay.

He still glared at me, his posture defiant and annoyed like usual. Despite his irritation, I still preferred it over his silence. I liked his fire, and I enjoyed our little back and forth. I was drawn to him, even before he came into my bed, but now that I knew what it was to hold him and touch him, I found it hard to stay away. I stepped closer until his crossed arms bumped against me, and he had to lift his chin to look up at me.

“Are you alright?”

His brows furrowed in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Bhortis was cruel to you. You should not have been spoken to in such a way. I will make sure he is punished for doing so.”

His head jerked back, surprised. “You mean more than you pummeling him into the ground?”

I made an irritated sound, scowling in the direction they’d dragged Bhortis off. “That was nothing compared to what I will do to him for insulting you. You are my tribute. It is my job to protect you. He will know my wrath when I’m through with him.”

Simon’s stance softened, and he smirked, closing the distance between us and putting his hands on my chest. I ached to wrap myself around him, but he was angry with me before. I didn’t want to touch without his permission first.

“Big bad warrior, so eager to defend my honor. You can relax, Feigrind. He’s not the first man to try and hurt me with his words, and I doubt he’ll be the last. I’m not insulted, because I’d need to value his opinion to care about what he says to me. I don’t waste my time on men like him.”

He was so much braver than I’d ever imagined. It still didn’t make Bhortis’s actions okay, but I was glad he wasn’t hurt because of it. If he was truly upset, I’d skin Bhortis alive.

“People are looking at us, you know,” he pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

I frowned and looked around. The village center was busy at this time of day and a great deal of those present were looking at us. I dropped my gaze back to Simon.

“Does this bother you? Would you like me to take you back to my tent?”

He rolled his eyes, like the brat he was. “It’s not me I’m asking about, you dolt,” he

carped. “You’re the one who has never had an interest in men. People are going to question why you’re suddenly cuddling one like I’m your teddy bear.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but he had a point. Despite my warnings to keep my hands to myself until he was more receptive to my touch, I had somehow wrapped him in my arms, my hands spanning his back to keep him close. It didn’t bother me that others saw; they’d find out eventually if I could somehow manage to get Simon to accept me, but I wasn’t looking forward to the teasing. I was grateful that Godr wasn’t around. He would pester me for details on what changed my mind until I either hurt him or answered his questions.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly. “I am not embarrassed, Simon. You are not some secret to be hidden away.”

Again, he looked surprised. He’d worn that expression a lot since last night. Like my actions weren’t what he was expecting. It made me think he wasn’t well treated before he arrived here. He should expect people to say nice things to him. He deserved to be spoiled.

“We’re speaking the same language, but I still don’t understand you,” Simon murmured, frowning at me. I wanted to ask what he meant by that, but we were interrupted by Orthorr, who did not look pleased.

“It is a concern when my warriors are fighting amongst themselves. What happened?”

Pressing my lips together, I fought back a growl. I did not wish to recount the story. It still pissed me off.

Thankfully, or maybe regrettably, Simon answered for me. “Some asshole tried to insult me, and Feigrind took exception. They both acted like the big barbarians they

are. Are you seriously sending him away? Because I don't give a shit who you assign to watch over me, I'm not going to act all demure while he's gone."

Orthorr shot me a questioning look.

"Uttin asked me to join them on the trade journey they will take soon," I explained. "Drakr's bondmate is due soon, and he does not wish to leave her side."

Orthorr sighed. "It would be unfair to ask that of him. But you are busy with your tribute. Is there no one else?"

"That was what we were discussing."

There were many warriors in our clan, but not all could leave on such journeys. Most needed to stay behind to protect the clan. We were on guard after the Fer'na showed up so suddenly. Usually, I went along on occasion because I was unattached and needed to burn off some energy, but not often. I preferred to stay with Maman. This first time I was resistant to going along, but there were few other options, especially now that Bhortis might have to stay with the healers.

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We spoke for a while on others who might be able to take my place, but it truly looked like I was the best option. And because I'd never spoken with Orthorr about my intentions with Simon, he assumed I would not be bothered by leaving him.

“We can introduce Simon to the clan, since he has proven he will not act recklessly and run. I'm sure he will be fine on his own while you're gone.”

Simon did not look pleased at the thought of my leaving. I wanted to take hope in that reaction, but it was still too early for me to leave his side. I worried what would happen if I left before he accepted my claim. What if, while I was gone, he found another who suited him better?

“I don't need a babysitter, and I'm not interested in being paraded in front of your clan like a piece of meat. Why can't I go with him?” he demanded with a surly expression.

The idea wasn't any better than leaving him behind. If he found someone to his liking in another clan, I wouldn't even have a chance to earn his favor. We were friendly with most other clans, but it would not be well received if I argued against another brother's claim.

Thankfully, Orthorr refused immediately. “No. Your behavior has not given me any indication that you would act politely. I don't want you insulting other clans.”

Simon scoffed but did not argue. We all knew better than to trust him to behave. The most he behaved was for Maman, and she wasn't able to go with us to watch him. An idea struck me, and I turned to Simon.

“I worry about leaving Maman. She likes you. It would make me feel better with you watching over her.”

I’d make the same request of her, essentially having them both watch over each other. That way, the two most important people in my life were safe while I dealt with this journey, and Simon would be kept away from most of the clan. He did not need to be introduced while I was gone.

With a frustrated growl, Simon relented. “Ugh. Fine. I’ll stay with Maman. But you better not be gone too long. We just started having sex, and I don’t like going without it.”

Orthorr looked shocked at Simon’s comment, but Simon didn’t stick around to explain. He stomped off, disappearing into the tent Maman had gone into in search of Yamileth. I trusted that he was safe with her and gave my focus to Orthorr instead.

“Is what he said true?” the clan leader asked.

He was not angry about it—he had no problem with same-sex relationships—but he was good friends with my father, and I’d known him all my life. My sudden deviation in preferences clearly took him by surprise.

“It is,” I said with a quick nod.

“I admit, I’m surprised,” he said, studying me carefully. “You have not shown any interest in males before now.”

Pursing my lips, I considered it. “I still have no interest in other males. Simon is special. I only want him. If he chose another, I don’t think I’d try again.”

SIMON

I was annoyed that Feigrind was leaving. He went on and on about wanting me to stay, and he was just leaving me behind? What was that about?

When I went looking for Maman, I hoped she'd back me up and make him stay. She'd already argued against him leaving before, and Feigrind loved his mother. He'd do as she asked.

I found her in what the barbarians probably considered a kitchen. It was a big tent with a fire in the middle and food and herbs being prepared. Patrick sat on a stool to one side, talking to his bondmate, who sat by his feet like a big puppy. I ignored them and instead turned to the two older women on the other side of the tent, whispering to themselves. Given Maman's temperament, I felt like that didn't bode well.

"What are you planning over there?" I demanded, planting my hands on my hips. Maman beckoned me closer, pointing at an empty stool beside hers.

"Sit. Make yourself useful."

She handed me a basket with beans in them, and I handed it right back. "Absolutely not. I'm not a cook, and I don't want to be responsible for someone choking on their food."

The other woman, who I hadn't been introduced to yet, snorted. "At least he doesn't pretend he is more useful than he is. I've lost track of the number of people offering to help me who only cause me trouble." Her beady eyes flicked to me, and she sized me up quickly. "You don't eat enough," she said, plucking a fruit out of a nearby basket and tossing it at me. I sighed and set it aside.

"I work hard to maintain my weight. I don't need to put on any more. I need Maman's help. They're going to send Feigrind away, and I'm not putting up with another stupid barbarian demanding I join the clan and become someone's bed

warmer.” I crossed my arms in a huff.

Maman frowned at me. “Did Feigrind say that was your purpose?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. But what else am I supposed to think? You don’t have people showing up just to join, do you? Could some random townsfolk join your clan and become barbarians willy nilly? No. You need to be married off to be here. And since I’ve got no skills outside of sex, I know what that will mean for me. I’d go out of my mind with boredom waiting around for some man to come home each night.”

“I would not know how someone would be received asking to join the clan,” Maman said with a frown. “It’s never happened before, aside from Patrick. He was a special case.” She cast a glance at her friend. “Did it happen in your clan before your husband moved here, Yami?”

The other woman shook her head. “No. Townsfolk are too fearful of us. They believe they will be torn apart for getting too close. None have been brave enough to ask. Even Patrick was terrified when he first arrived.” She turned back to look at me. “Why? Are you looking to become a warrior? You are small but probably quick because of it. You’ll need to eat more if you want to put on the muscle, though.”

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. I was not going to bulk up just to join their clan. “I like how I look, thank you very much. And no, I’m not interested in joining the clan at all. I’m just proving my point.”

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“And what of my son?” Maman asked. “Does he not make you wish to stay?”

I hesitated. If I thought we had a chance at making things work, Feigrind might be a reason for me to change my mind. He was sweet and determined to take care of me. And the sex was amazing. But?—

“If he wanted me so much, he wouldn’t be leaving me behind!” I snapped.

Maman made a tick sound behind her teeth, scowling at me. “He is not clan leader. It is Orthorr who decides who goes in the end. Have you asked him?”

“If you’re talking about the old barbarian in the robes, then yes. He said no because I ‘can’t be trusted to be polite’.” I made quotes with my fingers, rolling my eyes.

Yami looked amused, raising an eyebrow. “If you wish to prove him wrong, maybe don’t act like a brat while explaining yourself.”

“Shut up!” I scowled at her.

Maman pointed at me with a chuckle. “See? He’s sassy. And he doesn’t treat me like I’m broken. I like him for Feigrind. They are a good match.”

“You’re just saying that because you want Feigrind to stop hovering,” Yami countered, her hands moving to prepare the beans without her actually watching what she was doing. It was kind of fascinating how easily she did that.

“Well, he has been distracted since Simon showed up,” Maman agreed with a grin.

She turned to leer at me. “Did he ask you to teach him something new yesterday?”

Surprise lit up my face, and she cackled to herself before explaining to Yami, “He thinks he can hide things from his mother. When will he ever learn?”

“He’s a man, so never,” Yami replied.

“Hey,” I cut in with a glare. “Don’t lump us in all together. I’m not like him.”

“No, you’re not,” Maman agreed happily. “Which is why he likes you so much. So, what will it take to get you to claim him, Simon? Because my son wants a bondmate, and I know he wants it to be you.”

Seventeen

SIMON

In the end, Maman was no help. Feigrind came to find us and confirmed he would be joining the trading group, and no amount of arguing or glaring would change that or get him to take me with him. I stormed away from him so he knew how I felt about the whole thing, but I knew better than to think he’d let me wander far alone. Maybe Maman had a point about him hovering too much.

“Stop following me!” I snapped.

He didn’t reply, just followed me steadily through the tents and away from everyone else. I contemplated going to the forest just to piss him off, but that would just put me at risk, and I didn’t want that terrifying barbarian to grab me again. Instead, I went back to Feigrind’s tent, wishing it had a door I could slam in his face instead of a stupid flap. This whole place was irritating me. How the hell was I supposed to work off my irritation if I couldn’t do what I normally did?

“Simon,” Feigrind said pleadingly, catching my elbow. “Had I any other choice, I would stay with you. I cannot abandon my duties.”

Jerking my elbow free, I glared at the tent wall, my arms crossed over my chest. Deep down, I knew that. I saw how unhappy he was about having to go. But I was still angry. I wasn’t allowed to go home, I wasn’t allowed to go with him, so what the hell was I going to do while he was gone?

He moved closer, and I felt his warmth against my back. He didn’t touch, he never did without my permission, but he was close enough that I could tell he wanted to. Despite my better judgment, I took a step back, resting my back against his chest. His big arms wrapped around me, and he leaned over me, surrounding me with his scent.

Was it wrong to be annoyed that he smelled good even without all the fancy products the men in town normally used?

“Tell me how I can make this better. I do not wish you to be unhappy while I’m gone,” he murmured.

I bit back the urge to demand again that he take me with him. He wouldn’t, his clan leader had already said it wasn’t allowed, and I was tired of trying to argue my point. My eyes drifted to the bed, where I slept soundly as long as he was beside me. I didn’t think I’d be getting much sleep without him there.

“My daggers would be nice,” I finally said.

He tipped his head, turning me enough to look me in the eye. “You have weapons?”

I shrugged. “I did. They took them from me when they kidnapped me. I’m not sure where they are anymore.”

Probably sold off by that asshole guard who took them from me. Bastard. I'd saved for weeks for those daggers. I got them before I was popular and could barely afford to eat. I valued my safety more than a hot meal.

"You know how to use them?" He didn't sound judgmental, only curious, but it still irritated me.

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“Of course I know how to use them!” I growled. “Had those stupid guards not taken me by surprise, I wouldn’t be here right now. They’d be dead, and Tomas would be torn to pieces.”

His frown said he wanted to ask more questions about that, but he must have decided it was for the best not to push because he straightened and took my hand instead.

“Come with me.”

Like I had any other choice. I grumbled as I followed him back out of the tent and past the fire Maman had taken me to that morning. We weaved through the tents for a while before stopping in front of one set off a little from the rest with a big fire in front of it. Feigrind cleared his throat, calling out to whoever was inside.

“Brother? A moment of your time?”

He was being surprisingly formal, and I frowned up at him in question, but he didn’t need to explain once the man in the tent came out to join us. I took a step back automatically, trying to put as much distance as I could between myself and the terrifying, scarred barbarian who’d rescued me. I swung to face Feigrind, incredulous.

“What? You’re punishing me because I asked for a weapon? You’re such an asshole!”

Feigrind tightened his grip when I tried to pull away, refusing to let me leave. He didn’t acknowledge my outburst, instead speaking to the dangerous barbarian who

watched us both with narrowed eyes.

“Simon says he’s proficient with blades. I need to go on a journey with Uttin. We would both feel safer if he was armed while I’m away.”

Stunned, I froze. I’d thrown out the dagger thing because I didn’t have any other ideas on what to demand. He wouldn’t take me with him, so nothing else was good enough. But I wasn’t lying when I said the daggers would make me feel better. I’d already been attacked once while here. I didn’t want to be defenseless again without him there to protect me.

The dangerous barbarian turned his focus to me, and I felt my spine stiffen. I really didn’t like having his attention. He was creepy, and whenever he looked at me, it felt like he was a predator and I was prey.

“Prove it,” he said.

My brows snapped together. “What?”

“I will not give you anything without proof that you know how to use it. You already cause trouble here often. You want weapons, prove you are capable of handling them safely.”

Oh, this asshole. I glared back at him. “Fine.” I looked back at Feigrind, who looked concerned, but still curious. I really loved his curiosity. It had gotten him into bed with me.

“Care to spar?” I asked innocently. I wouldn’t hurt him, but I did hope to tease him a little. If he was going to be gone for who knew how long, I wanted more sex before he left to tide me over.

“No,” the other barbarian interrupted before Feigrind could answer. “You will go against me.”

FEIGRIND

My stomach dropped when Einar said that Simon must go up against him. He probably assumed I’d go easy on him, and he was unwilling to compromise on the matter. He wasn’t wrong; I had no interest in hurting Simon, but I didn’t like the idea of the smaller man going up against Einar. He was dangerous. Simon didn’t know what he was getting himself into.

“Brother—”

“You’re that desperate to get your ass kicked by someone smaller than you, then be my guest. But I get to choose the weapon. Show me what you have,” Simon demanded.

Damn it. I should have spoken to Einar privately first. Simon’s mouth was going to get him into trouble.

Einar didn’t take the bait of Simon’s snark, instead tipping his head toward his tent and leading the way inside. If Simon had a talent with daggers, I would obtain some for him as a gift, but Einar was the only one I knew who had an abundance of weapons and wouldn’t miss one for the short time I was gone. His tent was filled with them, and he always had at least half a dozen on his person. Simon eyed the weapons with interest, picking up a few and testing their weight before putting them back down.

Given his temperament, I expected him to take something large, given the option. I would have steered him away from that if I could. Not that I thought Simon would listen. I’d need to be clever to make him choose something else without him realizing

I was steering him in another direction. But I needn't have worried. When he finally chose, he settled on a pair of daggers no bigger than the size of my palm. He tested the weight, spinning them in his hand with the ease of practice, before giving a decisive nod.

“Okay. Let's do this.”

Unease tightened my gut as I followed them both out of Einar's tent to an open area nearby used for sparring. There were a few of my brothers there who looked up curiously when Simon stalked past, but none who might be willing to step in and argue with Einar's decision. He didn't care that Simon was a tribute. He only cared that Simon knew his weapon well before giving him something to protect himself. Perhaps I should have given up my dagger instead. I would probably not need it.

“No bloodshed,” Einar said, drawing my focus back to the pair now facing each other. When I saw the blade Einar intended to use, I protested immediately.

“You'll hurt him!” I snarled.

Einar gave me a blank look. “If he wishes to protect himself, it will be against someone who will carry something similar. It would be better for him to surrender if he can't handle facing off against a bigger blade.”

Simon scoffed, giving Einar a dirty look. “Over my dead body would I ever surrender to anyone. Feigrind, stop butting in. I don't need you to protect me.”

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He'd said this more than once, but it was my job, and I took his care and comfort very seriously. I wanted to call off the whole thing, but I knew by the stubborn look on Simon's face, he would only wait for me to leave before trying again. At least if I was here to watch him, I could step in before he truly got hurt.

"What's going on?" Uttin asked as he came to join us, frowning at the standoff. "Did Simon piss Einar off? Does he have a death wish?"

"Go fuck yourself, Uttin," Simon snapped, shooting him a glare.

Einar used Simon's distraction to his advantage, lunging forward. I let out a shout in warning, but I didn't need to. Simon moved before Einar could get close, ducking and twisting, so he ended up beside Einar with his blade against the larger man's throat.

"Woah," Uttin breathed.

I was just as stunned. Simon was quick and knew what he was doing. He backed off, jerking his chin at Einar, and they started again. I was no less anxious the second time, though curiosity peaked when Einar spun to stop Simon from going for his neck, and Simon ducked and put his blade to Einar's thigh instead. Too close to his cock for anyone's comfort. Several of my brothers sucked in a breath, and Einar was smart enough to surrender before Simon did anything drastic.

"Did you know he was this skilled?" Uttin asked in a low tone, as we both watched Simon and Einar spar. I shook my head.

Einar learned from his mistakes, and Simon had to work harder to stay out of range of

his blade. Not only was he good with the blades, he dodged and twisted like a dance, avoiding lunges that could have seriously injured him had he been anyone else. The more he countered Einar's moves, the more Einar tried to hurt him. He never succeeded.

It was fatigue that got to Simon, making him just sluggish enough for Einar to get the upper hand. He knocked my tribute to the ground, pointing his blade at Simon's neck, and I felt my breath stutter in my lungs. I wasn't the only one. The men who had been watching, jeering and egging Simon on the longer he stood his own against Einar, all fell silent. Einar's expression was dark, deadly, and I worried perhaps he wasn't in his right mind anymore. There were rumors that he lost himself to the battle and injured his own brothers in the past. I couldn't let him do that to Simon.

As I took a step forward, Simon released his blades, letting them clatter to the ground. It was what Einar wanted, and he stepped back, offering him a hand to help him to his feet.

"You are skilled," he said to Simon, the dark look clearing to something akin to respect. "Your stamina needs work, though."

Simon scoffed, snatching the blades off the ground. "Ask Feigrind about my stamina. I'm sure he'll say something different."

My cheeks burned a little as a few of my brothers jeered at me, but my focus was on Einar, who gave Simon a dry look. "I'll decline. You can keep the blades for now. I trust you can use them well. Use them on anyone in the clan, and I'll remove your hands."

Simon ignored the threat with a roll of his eyes before turning and heading to me. He leaned his back against my chest, accepting my embrace while keeping the blades away from me. I'd have to get him sheathes so he could carry them around. I wasn't

stupid enough to ask Einar for any more favors.

Tipping his head back to look up at me, Simon said, “I’m always horny after a fight. Wanna fuck?”

A smirk pulled at my lips. “I suppose you’ve earned a reward.”

Eighteen

SIMON

It didn’t matter how many times we had sex, it was always so shocking how perfectly his dick fit inside me. I tried so hard to keep my wits about me, so I could show him my skill and truly blow his mind, but each peg to my pleasure spot melted my brain until I could only writhe and moan. I rode his dick hard, using his shoulders for leverage. He was sitting up, holding me in his lap as I fucked myself on his perfect cock. He tried to flip me at one point, but I refused to allow it, wanting for once to have the upper hand. It didn’t matter in the end. I was still just as overwhelmed and?—

“Ah! Yes! More!”

He had bent his knees while I was too mindless to pay attention, giving him the positioning he needed to fuck up into me. His powerful thrusts sent me into a spiral of lust and pleasure, and I was sure people could hear the sounds I was making. I didn’t care to be quiet when it was this good.

Tension coiled in my belly, and I felt my balls draw up. I bit my lip, trying to hold back my release. I wanted him to come first. Wanted to prove that I’d earned my title as the best in the brothel. Just a little more. I could hear his grunts, feel his hands tighten, probably bruising my skin. I’d be mad about that later. I just needed?—

He dipped his head, catching my nipple gently between his teeth and thrust at the same time. The combined pleasure shoved me over the edge with a cry, wave after wave of ecstasy drowning out the world around me. I barely heard Feigrind's moans, his thrusts increasing as he sought his release, making mine drag on and on until I went blind from the pleasure.

When I eventually came back to myself, I was lying on Feigrind's chest, his hand rubbing soothingly up and down my back, his cock still inside me. It was... nice. My clients generally didn't want to cuddle after. They got off, paid me, and went on their way again. I got used to it, and it didn't bother me, but I hadn't realized how nice it would be to be held afterward.

"I don't want you to go," I admitted quietly. I'd grown used to him, and being alone again felt abhorrent.

He sighed, hugging me to his chest. "I don't want to go. I must. We need supplies as winter draws near. It should not be long."

"How long?"

He thought about it for a moment. "I have not gone on these journeys in a long while. I think a week is normal. Movement is slower because we will bring the cart with items to trade. If I can be back sooner, I will do my best."

I believed him. I didn't trust men often, but trusted Feigrind. He'd been honest and open since the day I met him. If there was anyone in the clan I could trust to be honest with me, it was him.

Pushing up to look at him, I studied his face. He was unbelievably handsome. It felt wrong. Barbarians were supposed to be gruff and ugly. The few I'd dealt with certainly weren't as good looking as Feigrind was.

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“When do you leave?” I demanded, trying to distract myself from the flutter in my belly that wouldn’t go away whenever I was with him.

“Tomorrow morning,” he told me, cupping my cheek and stroking it gently. I batted his hand away and sat up.

“Good. Then we can go again. If I have to go another week without sex, I want as much as I can get before you go.”

A slow grin passed over his face and his gaze turned heated as he said, “Whatever you want, raknar. You will find no complaints from me.”

The word repeated in my head all the next morning. He’d called me it again as he was leaving, giving me a sweet kiss goodbye before mounting his giant horse and leaving with a group of four other warriors. I thought I knew enough of the barbarian language to understand him, but I didn’t know that word, and I was curious. What did he think of me?

I planned on asking Maman once I met her for the day. I knew Feigrind was only asking me to look out for her so I’d stay out of trouble. I had no plans to stop her from doing what she wanted to do. But I did enjoy her company, so I’d agreed just to make him happy.

Ugh. What was wrong with me? Since when did I care so much about keeping men happy outside of the bedroom?

I was grumbling to myself as I got dressed for the day when a voice called out to me

from outside Feigrind's tent.

"Simon? Are you awake?" Patrick asked, quiet enough that if I was actually sleeping, he wouldn't have woken me. Well, he wouldn't have woken most people. He didn't actually have to try that hard not to wake me. Chanel said I slept like the dead. He'd need to be a lot louder to wake me.

"What?" I grouched, tugging one of Feigrind's tunics over my head. He'd gotten me new clothes when I finally started speaking to him in his language, and I had plenty. I just wanted to smell him. If anyone wanted to judge me for that, they could tell my blades.

"Can I come in?"

Rolling my eyes, I replied, "Whatever. Just get in here."

The barbarians were territorial about their tents. No one was allowed in without permission. Since Feigrind was gone, it was my permission they needed to enter. That felt pretty good, actually. If I didn't lock my door at the brothel, it was a guarantee someone would steal from me. I didn't have to worry about that here.

Patrick poked his head in and smiled at me. "Good morning. Or afternoon. It's pretty much lunchtime. Do you always sleep this late?"

My flat look didn't seem to faze him, nor did my grouchiness thanks to waking up alone.

"I like sleeping. What do you want?"

He waved his hand toward the direction of the village center. "I was going to invite you to eat with us. My bondmate goes on long hunts sometimes, so I know it sucks

when they're gone."

I made a face. "Feigrind isn't my bondmate."

He didn't look concerned about that. "I know. There's a whole ceremony for that. But you two seem pretty happy together." He lifted a shoulder. "I guess I just assumed you'd stick with him. Are you hungry?"

Starving, actually. Feigrind had catered to my demands for sex all night long, and I worked up an appetite. He'd probably only managed to get an hour or two of sleep before he had to leave. I wanted to feel guilty about that, but it was hard to feel bad after coming your brains out that many times. I was starting to think he had a magic dick. That was the only thing I could think of to explain how he so easily destroyed me every time we fucked.

"Who's we?" I asked suspiciously.

"A couple of the hunters. And I can introduce you properly to my bondmate. He's pretty chatty, though, so he'll probably dominate the conversation."

I didn't care about that. I was too tired to converse anyway. I agreed with a nod and followed him out after tucking my borrowed daggers into the sheaths on my thighs that Feigrind had got for me before he left, waking me to give me the gift and say goodbye. I thanked him with my mouth on his cock. That was one way I'd easily taken back the upper hand. He'd looked stunned when I was done, and I felt no remorse for making him late.

I probably should've asked Patrick to be more specific when we discussed who would be eating together. I didn't realize that one of the hunters was Finn's bondmate. Which meant Finn was there, too. I scowled to myself and made sure to sit as far away from him as I could. Which wasn't as far as I would've liked because I'd

agreed to meet Patrick's bondmate, and he'd sat next to Finn's before I even got there.

At least I didn't have to socialize with him. Patrick was right that Verus liked to talk. My assumption that he was like a big puppy wasn't wrong, and he bounced from topic to topic with a grin on his face. Other people cut in now and then, but he definitely dominated the conversation.

"So, Simon, right? How'd you do it?" Verus asked, turning his exuberant attention onto me.

I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for him to explain. "Do what?"

"Get Feigrind into your bed. He's never been interested in males before," he said innocently.

Patrick took exception to the question, smacking Verus's chest with the back of his hand. "Verus! You can't ask that!"

I shrugged lazily. "I'm just that good, I guess. Why? Does it matter?"

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He shook his head, but Finn's bondmate nodded seriously. I narrowed my eyes at him. It couldn't be that we were both males. He was mated to one. So I didn't understand his protest.

"Feigrind is a good man. He has wanted a bondmate for a long while. It hurts him whenever those in his care choose another. It matters that you are returning his affection. He deserves happiness."

There was no accusation, he didn't seem to think I was leading Feigrind on, but I felt a little like I might be. I still didn't plan on staying.

My stomach clenched uncomfortably. The thought of going home was what had kept me going since I arrived. So why did it make me nauseous now?

I tried pushing the discomfort away, but it wouldn't go. I just kept thinking about what would happen if I left. The life I'd return to. What I'd be leaving behind. Or more specifically, who. I still wasn't happy about how I'd been brought here, but the thought of leaving Feigrind and going back to life in the brothel wasn't as appealing as it used to be. Here, I could do as I pleased. I had sex for pleasure, not for work. I could say no if I wished, without risking an angry client or a missed meal. Feigrind would never force me to do something that would make me unhappy.

Did I really want to go back? No, not really. But I didn't like the idea of being Feigrind's bed warmer either. There had to be another option. Right?

SIMON

“Simon?”

I bit back a wave of annoyance. I'd been staring into the fire, contemplating my next move, and hadn't noticed Finn coming to join us. He looked nervous, twisting his fingers and biting his lower lip. My gaze shifted to look behind him, where his bondmate watched with a dark look in his eye. If I wasn't polite, he'd take issue. And I doubted I'd come out of that interaction unscathed.

“Yes?” I gritted out, my voice terse. If he wanted better than that, then he needed to stay the hell away from me. I could pretend he didn't exist all day long.

“I, um... I noticed you were uncomfortable in the river the other day. I hate it too, this late in the season. I was wondering... Rath—my bondmate—has been warming water for me to bathe. Did you... That is, if you want...”

He struggled to get the words out, and his eyes darted around. He was obviously terrified, and that made me feel like a dick. Forcing my expression into less of a resting bitch face, I leveled my voice to something less aggressive.

“What are you trying to say?” I asked, somewhat patiently.

He shot a pleading look to Patrick, who shook his head. “It was your idea, Finn. Just ask.”

Grimacing, Finn locked eyes with me again. “I was wondering if you wanted to share the water. Rath said he'd get enough for the both of us. I know Feigrind asked about it, so I assume he was doing the same for you. Since he's gone, I didn't want you to have to freeze.”

Damn. Of all the things he could've suggested, he had to offer the one thing I couldn't resist. No way in hell did I want to get in the river, especially with Feigrind not around to warm me up afterward. It meant I had to put aside my animosity towards Finn, though, which would be... a trial. I still blamed him for me ending up here.

Drawing in a breath, I let it out slowly. "Sure. I'd like that. Thank you."

The relief made his shoulders drop, and he smiled brightly at me. "Okay. We usually bathe after supper. I can come get you when it's ready." He glanced at Patrick again. "He could get enough for you too, Patrick."

Patrick shook his head with a smile. "I'm good. I like the river. But I'll come hang out if you want." He shot a questioning look at me, like he knew I'd be uncomfortable alone with Finn. I nodded, and he dipped his chin in acknowledgement. "Just tell me when, and I'll come hang out. Unless you plan on putting the water by the river. Then we can all go together."

They discussed it before eventually deciding to bring the heated water to the river. It made for easy clean up and wouldn't end up with the corner of someone's tent all wet. The floors of the tents were all rugs overlapped, and Feigrind had to make room every time I wanted to get clean and then wait for the ground to dry again before fixing it. They really needed something better for bathing. How hard would it be to make a bath?

I excused myself to go visit Maman, helping her make pots while she chattered about the change in the wind. She said her bones told her it would get cold soon. I said I thought that was a bunch of shit, and she ended up throwing wet clay at me in retribution. I enjoyed spending time with her. She was so sassy, it was hilarious.

I forgot about that word Feigrind had called me until I joined Finn and Patrick at the

river. After Rath brought the big pot of hot water for us to use, he kissed Finn on the cheek and murmured something that sounded like a term of endearment. I frowned at his back as he walked away.

“What did he call you?”

Finn had been watching his bondmate walk away too, though for an entirely different reason. His gaze was filled with heat and love, and he glanced back in that direction when Rath stripped to join a few others in the river to bathe.

“Huh? Oh. Kolrav? It means ‘my love’. It’s a term only used with bondmates.”

I pursed my lips, stripping out of my clothes and hanging them on a low-hanging branch of a nearby tree so they wouldn’t get dirty. Finn followed suit when Patrick did. Patrick stood in the shallows, washing himself with icy cold water that made me shiver just watching while Finn and I shared the pot of warm water between us. Patrick and Finn talked about the language lessons with the other tributes, and Finn excitedly told him about their progress. I was glad I didn’t need to go to those, because it sounded boring, but Finn seemed happy about it.

“If you’re the scribe, why are you also teaching language?” I finally asked. I hated being on the outs of a group, and I liked talking. I’d put up with Finn for a little while, at least.

Finn turned back to me and lifted a shoulder. “I’ve always loved learning. I picked up the barbarian language pretty quickly when I first arrived. When Rath told me that all the protectors were responsible for teaching the language, I asked around about other people’s experiences. Not every protector is a good teacher. I figured if I could help, I wanted to. I didn’t just want to be Rath’s bondmate, you know? So I came up with a way to better teach their language that was more universal. Patrick was my first student.”

“Thank the goddess for that,” Patrick said with a laugh. “Verus is a wonderful bondmate but a terrible teacher. All he knew how to do was point at things and say their name. Sometimes we weren’t looking at the same thing, and I just got so confused.”

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I chuckled, shaking my head. That was how Feigrind started teaching me too, but he was careful to touch the thing he was explaining first. If I hadn't already known the language and wasn't such a brat, I probably would've learned something.

"Did Feigrind teach you?" Finn asked me.

I shook my head. "No. I learned at home. I was better at servicing my clients if I understood them. I know a few different languages because of that. And I can say 'Wanna fuck?' in seven."

Both their jaws dropped, and I snickered, focusing on scrubbing my skin with the bar of soap Feigrind had given me. This one at least smelled of flowers instead of just plain soap.

"I can barely say that in one language," Finn admitted softly. "I've been with Rath for over a year, and I still blush when asking him to make love."

I wrinkled my nose. He really had to stop being so damn cute. It was hard to hate him when he acted all innocent like that.

"I don't really have the chance to ask much," Patrick said. "Verus always propositions me. He knows exactly how to make me feel wanted."

Feigrind was good at that too. Apparently, so was Rath, since Finn was nodding rapidly in agreement. Curious, I couldn't help but ask, "Are they both also mind blowingly good at sex?"

Finn flushed bright red as he nodded, and Patrick laughed. “Yeah. You too?”

“Yes. It’s annoying,” I growled. “I’ve been working at the brothel for over ten years, and yet he somehow manages to make me come like it’s nothing? What even is that? Do they have magic dicks or something?”

Finn made a sort of choked sound, and a deeper voice spoke behind me, laced with amusement. “I’ve never heard someone refer to our dicks as having magic before. At least we know Feigrind is doing well at keeping you happy. I thought for sure he’d embarrass the rest of us with his inexperience.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I raised an eyebrow at Godr. “Are you standing behind us for a show, or are you just eavesdropping like an old biddie?”

He grinned, gesturing to where the other men were getting out of the water. I hadn’t realized he’d been one of them, but on closer observation, his hair was still wet, and his skin was pink from the cold.

“We’re still close enough to hear you. If you want privacy, you should learn to be more quiet.” He winked when he said it, which made me think he was referring to another time when I wasn’t quiet. I gave him a blank look.

“You sound jealous. Your right hand not doing it for you?”

Unlike the last asshole I sassed, Godr didn’t get offended. He just laughed. At least some people could take a joke around here.

“You are going to keep Feigrind on his toes, aren’t you? I will give him my sympathies when he returns.”

I shook my head, smirking to myself as I finished rinsing the soap from my skin.

They were all a bunch of idiots. But maybe they weren't so bad. At least, some of them weren't.

FEIGRIND

It took a few days for us to travel to where the next clan was established. We were the closest to the forest, as we had the best hunters. The Halleik clan was against a river. They were best for fishing, and some in the clan even traveled by boat to trade with the towns that didn't ban our people. We would spend a day or two trading with them before heading home again.

I worried about Simon. Despite his sass, I could see how upset he was about me leaving. I hoped the clan would make him feel more at ease. I'd privately spoken with Maman and told her of his upset. She'd said she'd make sure he was okay. I trusted her to take care of him.

While Uttin talked to those in charge of trade, I wandered away to look at their wares. I hoped I could find something for Simon. He deserved nice things. I stopped at a stall set up with items from nearby towns, studying everything carefully.

"What are these for?" I asked the woman selling them, pointing at the bottles on one side.

"They are soaps and shampoos. Good for hair and skin. They are very popular among the women in the towns. Did you want to try it?" She opened one, offering it to me to smell. I recognized the scent immediately. It was how Simon had smelled when he first arrived. I'd asked one of the women in our clan who makes soap to scent some for me, but it wasn't the same. I wasn't sure what kind of flower created such a scent. Simon had said he'd be happier with his products.

"How long will this last?"

She tipped her head thoughtfully. “For the season, at least. If careful, perhaps two.”

In the end, I bought half her stock for Simon. I didn’t want him to have to be careful. He could use as much as he wished if it made him happy. If I could give him more of what he liked, maybe he would be more likely to stay.

I put the bottles into the cart that was already emptied of our goods and being filled with items we would need to survive the winter season, like vegetables that were foraged farther out from the forest and healing items. I helped where I could to hurry the process along. Uttin looked amused at my efforts, but no one complained about the work being done early.

“We will rest here tonight, with the clan leader’s permission,” Uttin said to the group once we were through. “If there are no objections, we will head back home tomorrow. Feigrind is anxious to return to his tribute.”

His tone was teasing, but he clapped me on the shoulder, and the rest of my brothers agreed to return early. I was grateful to them and looked forward to a hot meal and rest before heading home to Simon.

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We were sitting around the community fire, catching up with old friends, when a scout rushed into the village center. I watched as he hurried to his clan leader, whispering harshly to him. His gaze flicked to us a few times, and I felt my spine stiffen. A layer of dread settled over me when the clan leader approached us, the scout following behind him with anxiety written all over his face.

Pushing to my feet, I met them halfway. “What is it?”

“Olr is our scout. He tells me a large group of Fer’na were seen headed in the direction of your clan. Is this expected?”

Fer’na. My stomach dropped. Simon. They were coming for Simon.

Twenty

SIMON

It had been only four days since Feigrind left, and I was listless. It wasn’t just boredom. Maman kept me close during the day and kept my hands busy. It was more than that. I missed the stupid barbarian. Missed his touch, his body wrapped around mine as we slept. I missed the hovering. I never thought I’d ache for someone as much as I did for him, but the longer he took to get back, the more foul my mood was. How long did it take to do some trade? It shouldn’t be that hard.

Maman had finally had enough of my attitude and told me to go lie down because I was irritating her. I wasn’t in the mood for company anyway, so I did, despite it being so early. It didn’t help; I couldn’t get any rest with Feigrind gone, but at least I wasn’t

taking my mood out on others. I started snooping through Feigrind's things, moving things around in a way I knew would irritate him later. He liked things a particular way and got annoyed with me when I made a mess. I was in the middle of unfolding all his clothes when I heard footsteps approaching the tent.

Something about these footsteps felt wrong to me. I wasn't stupid enough to believe I recognized the stride of everyone in the clan, but I felt like none of them stomped around like great behemoths like those approaching me now. Barbarians were surprisingly light on their feet when they wanted to be. Not these. I grabbed my daggers automatically, keeping my stance low as I eyed the tent flap.

"Which one is the whore in?"

"That one."

"Good. I will have him first. Revenge for my brother."

"This was not the agreement," another growled. They were stupid enough to think I couldn't hear them? Or they didn't actually care.

Either way, it was their mistake. I moved silently towards a corner of the tent, cutting a rip right along the seam. I would apologize to Feigrind later for that. I was certain he'd understand. Slipping out of the hole I created, I stayed crouched and glanced around. It was after sunset, only fires lighting up the village now. I considered the possibility that they were only sneaking in to nab me, but a scream closer to the village center proved me wrong. They were here to cause trouble. And I wasn't going to let them get away with it.

"He's not here!" a voice shouted inside Feigrind's tent.

"Here. There's a hole. I?—"

The idiot poked his head out, and I grinned wickedly at the vulnerable position this put him in. I sliced my blade across his neck, and he dropped immediately, choking on his own blood. Leaping over him, I moved to the tent entrance, waiting for the other speaker. He came out in a hurry, ready to attack. Too bad he didn't expect me to be waiting for him. Stabbing him in the gut was effortless, and then he too got his throat cut.

I wasn't sure how many were here. I hoped not their entire clan. When they'd visited last, the mass of them standing outside the clan looked like their numbers were greater than ours, at least that I'd seen in the past few days. We were also down several warriors thanks to the trade journey. I could run, maybe get away, but I couldn't make myself do it. These people weren't bad. They didn't deserve this.

Chaos swept through the clan, and I saw familiar warriors battling with unfamiliar ones throughout the village. I crept toward the village center, staying out of sight. Maybe if I killed their leader, they'd back off. Cut the head off the snake, right?

I was getting closer when I heard a terrified cry from a tent nearby. I was going to ignore it—I couldn't stop every fight—but Finn's voice rang in my ears as he pleaded for them to stop.

"Please, no! Please!"

I knew that sound. That wasn't what people said when they were about to be murdered. It was something much worse, in my opinion. I spun on my heel, heading for the larger tent with the light shining from inside. One look inside confirmed my suspicions. Finn was pinned on his stomach, his hands held behind his back and his pants down enough to expose him, tears streaming down his face. He fought as much as he could, but he was a little thing, and the barbarian wrestling with his own legwear was much larger.

Stepping into the tent would potentially trap me, so I tossed one of my daggers instead. I was an excellent shot, and it lodged in the barbarian's skull, killing him instantly. Unfortunately, I didn't expect him to fall forward, crushing Finn under his massive weight. Finn cried out, unaware that the barbarian was dead, and I dropped my head forward in defeat and entered the tent.

"Finn. Finn! Stop crying. He's dead. I'm going to help you. Just—" I tried shoving the guy off, but he was enormous. "Give me your hand. I'm going to pull you out."

It took some work, but he eventually wiggled free, sobbing with terror and relief. He clung to me for a moment, his whole body trembling, and I let him because I knew what it was like to be in that position, and I didn't judge him one bit for being scared.

"Pull up your pants," I instructed, once he could breathe around his sobs. "Where's your bondmate?"

"F-fighting," he replied, hastily doing as I asked. It was hard for him, since his hands kept shaking, so I shoved them out of the way and tied up his pants for him, checking to make sure they weren't torn in the back before going to the dead guy and removing the dagger from his head. It took some doing, I had to throw it hard to get through the side of the head like I had, and the sound it made when I removed it made my stomach turn. I ignored it, beckoning Finn to follow me.

"Come on."

"Wh-where are we going?" he asked, tears still spilling down his cheeks.

"I'm going to the village center to see if I can kill the leader. You're coming with me because I don't trust you alone. After this is over, you need to pick some way to train to protect yourself. You can't rely on other men to protect you all the time."

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It was wrong to scold him right after a trauma, but he needed to do better. No one should rely on others to protect them. It was one of the few lessons my mother ever taught me. That, and how to use daggers to keep myself safe. The lessons had saved my life more times than I could count.

Finn basically plastered himself against my back, still sniffing and whimpering quietly. I shushed him but didn't force him to step away. I wasn't that cruel. I snuck toward the village center again, this time with Finn behind me, and when we got there, I grimaced. Most of the fighting was here. I might be able to sneak through, but I couldn't bring Finn into that mess.

"Where's Patrick?" I hissed.

"H-he was with Yami when I left," Finn whispered, pointing toward the tent I'd seen him in before. Nodding, I pushed Finn back and stuck to the shadows, leading him around the fighting and up the side of the cooking tent. I heard a clang, like a pan hitting something, and a thud, and my heart skittered in my chest. Dragging Finn with me, I rushed forward into the tent, skidding to a stop when I saw what was happening inside.

"Holy shit. That actually worked?"

Patrick stood over a fallen barbarian, a heavy pan in his hand that he'd obviously used to bludgeon the man. The older woman, Yami, was in a corner, with half a dozen little kids hiding behind her.

Patrick shrugged. "It was all I had. Are you two okay?"

Tugging Finn forward, I pushed him toward his friend. “He was attacked. He’s shaken up but ok. Keep him with you until his bondmate can get to him. I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?” Patrick demanded.

“To kill a barbarian,” I growled, marching out of the tent.

The asshole clanleader didn’t make it easy to find him. I thought he’d be in the fray, cutting down his enemies or whatever it was big men did when trying to show off. But he wasn’t in the village center like the rest of them. Not at first, anyway. I was going to go check on Maman and hopefully find some other enemy barbarian to question on the clan leader’s whereabouts when he came out of the tent I was brought to when I first arrived. Two big guys followed him, dragging Orthorr. He was unconscious, or dead. I couldn’t be sure. It was hard to see if he was breathing when they were dragging him around like that.

“Look around, Orthorr. See what you’ve made me do. If you’d done as you were told, I wouldn’t have to take over your clan.” He tsked. “I can’t feed this many mouths. Many will not survive the winter, all thanks to you.”

I ground my teeth, listening to his little speech. Typical macho man, putting the blame on the victim. I hated people like him. He looked like he was enjoying this way too much. And I knew just how to ruin his day.

“Hey, asshole!” I shouted, cutting through the noise of the clan. “I challenge you to a blood duel!”

We were standing far enough apart that most of the people fighting in the village center heard me. They shoved away from their opponents, looking to their leader to see what would happen next. I marched forward, ignoring the sneers and glares along the way. I stopped a good distance away, enough that he and anyone else couldn’t

lunge at me and try to catch me by surprise. They wouldn't get far. I was still armed and ready.

The asshole clan leader scoffed. "You are not a brother of the clan. You cannot challenge me."

"What's the matter?" I taunted. "Scared?"

Men like him hated any sort of insult to their manhood. And being afraid to fight someone like me, a whore half his size with what he thought was very little fighting experience, was definitely an insult.

"You think I'm scared of you, little whore? Do you know who you speak to?"

"Do you really think I care?" I countered. "All I see is a coward who sneaks into a village and attacks without warning because he knows he can't take a clan without cheating somehow."

His eyes widened, and he bared his teeth at me. "I am no cheat!"

I ignored him, continuing to pick at his pride. "Why is only part of your clan here? Did the rest not agree with your cheating ways and refuse to come? I could definitely see that happening. I know I wouldn't waste my time following a coward like you."

He took a step forward, almost shaking with anger now. Good. Angry men got sloppy. He'd make a stupid mistake eventually.

A shadow passed behind me and I ducked before the barbarian behind me could grab me. Using the move that seemed to stun most of the clan when I sparred with the angry scarred one, I sliced up the barbarian's leg, straight to his groin. He dropped with a shout and I straightened again, raising my eyebrow at the clan leader. In the

distance, I heard the clatter of hoof beats approaching at a fast pace. I seriously hoped that wasn't backup for them. I might be able to fight one on one, but I wasn't a warrior, and I didn't belong in an actual battle.

"See? Cheats. I challenged you to a blood duel. Doesn't seem fair that your little friends are trying to fight for you. Then again, maybe you really are too scared to face me. Do they fight all your battles for you?"

"You cannot challenge me!" he bellowed.

A stallion broke through the surrounding crowd and Feigrind launched himself off the animal, striding over to me.

"No. He can't. I can. I challenge you, Feiskedr. Face me or give up your honor as a warrior and leave."

"Try arguing with that, bitch," I added with a sneer.

Twenty-One

FEIGRIND

I rode hard from sun up to sun down to get here as quickly as possible. Uttin was not far behind me. I wasn't sure about the rest. I didn't wait to see who would follow. I could only think of Simon. Feiskedr was insulted after the last blood duel when we wouldn't give up Simon. I should have known he would come back. The Fer'na were not honorable. We should not have allowed them into the village in the first place.

I heard Simon's challenge as I approached, and Feiskedr's refusal, but I knew what I must do. Feiskedr had been a warrior almost longer than I had been alive, but it did not matter. I had to protect Simon.

Feiskedr looked defiant of my challenge. This did not surprise me. He lacked honor and often used his clan to do his bidding. I waited for him to offer someone else—I would have met whoever he threw at me head on—but he seemed resistant to that idea as well. What had Simon said to make him so hesitant?

"You cannot challenge me," Feiskedr finally said, lifting his chin. "I have defeated your leader. Your clan belongs to me now."

Simon moved before I even blinked, tossing his daggers. They hit their targets dead on, killing the two who held Orthorr hostage. The clan surged behind me, disarming the Fer'na in the village center who stood watch, leaving only Feiskedr to face me alone.

"Take mine," I murmured low enough that Feiskedr could not hear me. I didn't want Simon unarmed. He crouched and removed the dagger strapped to my calf, his eyes

never leaving the Fer'na clan leader.

“I’ve got excellent aim, asshole. Either accept his challenge, or try your luck dodging me.”

Feiskedr’s eyes were wide with panic and anger. He knew he’d lost, but he could not accept it. We all waited for his next move, the world quiet as the grave. No one knew the mind of a coward. I did not dare assume to know what he’d do next.

His gaze darted around before landing on Simon and narrowing. “Fine. Let the whore fight your battles. He challenged me first. Should he lose, he and the clan belong to me.”

“Coward!”

“Too frightened to face a warrior! He would challenge a tribute instead!”

“He has no honor!”

The clan’s shouts angered Feiskedr, but Simon ignored them, taking a step forward. I caught his elbow, shaking my head, my heart lodged in my throat.

“You are a beautiful fighter, but he does not fight with honor. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

The side of Simon’s mouth kicked up in a smirk. “I’m a whore, Feigrind. No one ever said anything about me fighting with honor. I can play his game just fine.”

He turned to accept the challenge, and I prayed to the heavens that someone would intervene. I had great faith in the goddess, but I didn’t know if she was listening.

Before Simon could speak, Einar stalked into the village center, marching straight up to Feiskedr. He cut off his head without blinking, then turned and headed for the rest, who were already disarmed. Uttin and several others swarmed in to stop him. It was dishonorable to kill unarmed warriors. They would face trial and sentencing. Should they be given the death sentence, only then would Einar be allowed to kill them.

“Woah. Guess that handles that,” Simon said, his tone impressed.

The clan worked together to handle the rest of the attackers. They were tied to stakes outside the village. In our culture, if someone was killed by wild animals while captured, it was the goddess who decided their fate. Rath took great enjoyment staking them close to the forest line, where the smell of blood would lure the beasts closer, after finding out one tried to rape his bondmate. Orthorr and many others who had been on guard and taken by surprise were brought to the healer’s tent, though we were lucky that none of our clan died this night.

I held Simon in my arms, watching the clan movements without moving away from him. I couldn’t. I knew Feiskedr’s goal was to take Simon. I knew what he would have done had he succeeded. My fiery, beautiful tribute would have become a broken shell of himself. I couldn’t stomach the thought.

While cleaning up the bodies, Bhortis brought Simon his daggers. I stiffened, daring him with my eyes to say something rude, but Bhortis’s expression held great respect when he handed the weapons back.

“I don’t think I’ve seen another who can aim that well without taking much time to line up their throws,” he said reverently. “You have great skill.”

Simon looked a little smug when he said, “I know.”

Bhortis took no offense, snorting before he returned to his task. Simon wiped the

blades on his pant leg before trying to walk away. When my arms tightened around him, he huffed out a laugh, tipping his head away from the fire.

“Come with me, then. I need to return these.”

Reluctantly, I let him leave the circle of my arms, following him to where Einar stood staring out at the darkness. He was still on high alert, waiting for something more to pass. I hoped his instinct was wrong.

“Thank you for lending me these,” Simon said, stepping up to him.

Einar pulled his gaze from the darkness to glance down at Simon, then away again. “Keep them. They are of better use to you than me.”

That surprised me. Einar was a hoarder of weapons. He did not like to give them up without good reason. Apparently, Simon had earned his respect as well.

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“You’re covered in blood,” Simon pointed out with a frown. “Are you hurt?”

I hadn’t noticed, but most of my focus was on Simon. When I finally looked at my brother, I realized his face was covered in blood, as were his clothes. Worry swept through me, but he quickly dismissed the notion.

“It is not mine. I would have come sooner to deal with the rat, but several cowards crept in from different directions and attacked the women. I made sure they did not succeed in their attempts.”

So it was not only Finn who was attacked in such a way. The Fer’na really were without honor. You were not considered a man if you resorted to those means of assault.

“Would you like someone to stay with you?” I asked. Others were posted on guard—we would not risk an attack twice—but he stood alone in this area. That seemed unsafe.

“No. I will watch over the east until the sun rises.” He turned his gaze to Simon, then to me. “Your tribute took down many enemies to protect our clan. Should he wish for it, you should bring him back to his home. He has earned his freedom.”

Simon sucked in a breath of surprise. Meanwhile, my heart sank. Einar was right. Simon had done a great favor to our clan. He’d protected its members and saved Orthorr. Should he request it, I was sure anyone would be willing to return him to his town. And I’d have no choice but to let him go.

SIMON

We checked on Maman first before heading back to Feigrind's tent. She was unharmed, the attackers never having gone near her, but she wanted to know what happened, and she wouldn't let us leave before we told her the story. By the time she was satisfied, I was exhausted, and my feet were dragging as we walked away.

The bodies of the men I'd killed were gone by the time we got to Feigrind's tent. They weren't my first. Life as a whore was dangerous, and I had to be willing to take a life to save my own. It was never something I enjoyed, and I was glad I didn't have to see the results of my actions. I could just move on from it and hopefully get some rest.

Feigrind was quiet as we stepped inside. He noticed the tear in the tent immediately, and I flashed him a pained smile.

"Sorry. I didn't want them trapping me in here. I cut my way out and?—"

He shook his head, interrupting me. "You need not apologize. You did what you had to in order to stay safe. I would never begrudge you that."

He fell silent again, and after a while, it started to weigh on me. I didn't know what he was thinking. He hadn't said much when I told Maman what happened, and his jaw was tight the entire time. It felt like he was angry at me for fighting, even though he'd just said he wasn't.

"What?" I snapped, turning to face him with my hands planted on my hips.

He shook his head, but I put a hand up to stall him before he could outright lie to me.

"Don't start. I know you're mad about something. So spit it out already. I'm tired,

and I just want to sleep.”

“I’m not angry,” he said, his voice tight with pent-up emotion.

I gave him a sour look. He was hiding something, and I wasn’t going to be able to sleep until I figured out what.

“You can tell me, or I’ll go stay with Maman. I’m not playing this game with you tonight.”

His hands fisted at his sides, and his jaw flexed as he gritted out, “If that is what you wish.”

I threw my hands into the air, exasperated. “It’s not what I wish! What I wish is for you to tell me what’s wrong! I wish to finally get a good night’s sleep because, daggers or not, I didn’t sleep well while you were gone! I wish?—”

He lunged, cutting me off by slamming his lips to mine. I never backed down from a challenge, so I met him head on, practically climbing his body to get on more equal ground. He lifted me off my feet, his big hands cradling my ass as he kissed me fiercely, like he wanted to devour me whole. Despite my exhaustion, my cock hardened against his abs, and I grew breathless and needy under his assault.

Breaking away, he nipped and kissed down my neck instead, intensifying my desire even more.

“I wish for you to stay,” he murmured against my neck between kisses. “I am not angry. Einar was right. If you wish to leave, I will have no choice but to bring you where you want to go. It would bring me dishonor to do otherwise. But I don’t want you to go.”

The need and heartache in his voice tugged on my soul. Never in my life had someone cared so much about me that they begged me to stay. Even my mother, despite how much she loved me, eventually sold me off to the brothel. She had no other choice, she couldn't afford to feed us both after she got sick, and I would have ended up there eventually when she died a year later. But her love wasn't enough to keep me with her and safe. Feigrind wanted to keep me. He didn't want me to go.

Gripping his hair, I forced his head back, kissing him again. "I don't want to go," I murmured against his lips. "I want to stay here with you."

He groaned, dropping to his knees before laying me gently on the bedding. I pulled him down with me, our mouths fused together as we reached heights of desperation I'd never felt before. I enjoyed sex. I'd never needed it before. I needed it now. Needed to feel him inside me, to be wrapped up in him in every way I could.

Feigrind must have felt the same, because he literally ripped the clothes from my body and his, only breaking the kiss when he absolutely had to. He didn't even pull away to find the oil, and I heard the clatter of things being knocked about as he reached for it blindly. Laughter bubbled up in my chest, but it quickly dissolved into moans as his slick fingers reached between us to rub against my hole.

He pulled back, breathless as he looked down to where he touched me. "I don't want to hurt you. How?—"

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Grabbing his wrist, I tugged his hand closer, groaning when he pushed one finger inside. “Keep going. I’ll tell you if it hurts.”

“Simon,” he breathed, capturing my lips again.

He was careful as he stretched me, a little hesitant thanks to his inexperience, but I didn't care. He was touching me. It was all I wanted.

For a little while, anyway. Eventually, I got frustrated and pushed his hand away. “I’m good. In me. Now.”

He groaned against my mouth, his expression pained. He was close to losing it. I seriously loved bringing him to the edge like that.

I wrapped my legs around his hips as he slicked up his cock with oil, dragging him closer until he was above me, his pupils blown and his breathing heavy. I had always made the first move, sinking onto his cock and riding him to get us started, so he stared in fascination as I pulled my knees to my chest and he pushed inside me for the first time. My eyes rolled back as that perfect dick stroked along all my sensitive spots, my legs tightening to hurry him along when he moved too slowly. We could do slow later. I wanted him now.

“Fuck me, Feigrind,” I demanded.

He seated himself fully inside me and shifted to rest on his elbows, bringing his face closer to mine. When he captured my mouth, it was in a sweet kiss, one that made my chest tight and my soul reach out for his. Tears pricked my eyes, though I wasn’t sure

why, and emotion overwhelmed me.

“No, kolrav. I will not fuck you. From now until eternity, I will only make love with you. Because you are precious to me, and deserve only the best of what I can offer.”

I stared up at him, stunned silent for the first time in my life. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. I didn't know what to do with it. Thankfully, he didn't make me answer him. He dipped his head, drawing me into another sweet kiss, and his hips began moving, knocking all sense from me.

His thrusts were perfect, hitting my pleasure spot each time. I mewled into his mouth, lifting my hips to meet his in a plea for more. He gave it to me, fucking me harder and faster, until I was keening from pleasure overload and desperate to come. I felt my breath catch in my chest, felt myself teetering on the edge of an explosive release, when Feigrind's hand wrapped around my cock. He stroked it only once before I embarrassed myself yet again and came without warning. The pleasure overwhelmed me, and I swore I stopped breathing for a moment. Feigrind followed soon after me, muffling his shout against my neck as he filled my channel with his cum. I shivered at the thought and clenched around him, making him gasp and groan against me.

We were both out of breath, sticky from my release, and sweating when Feigrind finally lifted his head. He brushed his fingers through my hair and kissed me with that same softness of before, murmuring against my lips.

“Thank you, Simon. For choosing me.”

Twenty-Two

SIMON

I woke up to an uncomfortable breeze, thanks to the rip in the tent lining. I frowned,

snuggling deeper into the furs, and I was going to drag Feigrind on top of me to keep me warm when I realized he wasn't there. I sat up with a frown, looking around. I knew he woke up a lot earlier than I did, but it was getting annoying how often I woke without him. I attempted to go back to sleep on my own, but the breeze was just chilly enough that I couldn't, so eventually I got up to pull on some clothes. The tent was still a mess after my tantrum the night prior, and I didn't feel the least bit guilty about it. Maybe I would have if he didn't sneak off every morning.

He came in right as I tugged my boots on. I scowled at him, but he was used to my morning moodiness by now. He set the bowls of food he'd obviously gone to get for us on the table and scooped me up, putting me in his lap in front of the table so I could use him as a chair. I startled a little, looking over my shoulder at him.

"What are you doing?"

"You seemed to enjoy sitting like this when you first got here. I want to make you happy," he murmured, nuzzling his face against my neck.

I melted. It was seriously hard to stay mad at him when he seemed determined to say such sweet things all the time. Still, I did my best to try. I poked him in the side and forced something resembling a scowl onto my lips.

"I don't like waking up alone."

That got a smirk out of him. "You don't like waking up at all. I'd bet you'd sleep the day away if you could."

I stuck my tongue out at him. Technically, he wasn't wrong. I enjoyed sleeping, especially when I was wrapped in his arms and warm. Sitting on his lap had basically the same effect on my mood, so I settled and took the bowl of food when he offered it, snuggling against him with a sigh.

“Orthorr wants to speak with you after you’ve eaten,” he said between bites of his own food.

I made a face. Sitting wrapped up in Feigrind’s arms made me happy. Meeting with annoying clan leaders did not. I didn’t do well with authority figures. If the guards in town weren’t visiting the brothel for sex, they were there to cause trouble. I wanted more than a few hours to relax before having to deal with anything like that.

“Do I have to?”

He tipped his head with a frown. “No... But it would be kind.”

“I’m not kind,” I shot back with a scowl. “I don’t care to hear what he has to say.” He probably wanted to berate me for making that challenge. Or maybe for killing several people. They deserved it, and three were trying to rape people, but for some people that wouldn’t matter.

Setting his food down, Feigrind took mine and put it aside as well before wrapping himself around me again. My indignation settled, and I turned in his arms, straddling his lap so I could bury my face against his neck. Now that I was with someone who liked to cuddle me, I found myself seeking it out whenever I could. I liked the way he held me without expecting sex from the touch. Not that I’d say no to sex with him, but it was nice that it wasn’t the first thought on his mind.

“I need to speak with him,” he murmured, running his nose along my neck. “I need to claim you properly. But I don’t like being away from you. Leaving to get breakfast took too long. I would ask that you come with me.”

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Ugh. He made a good argument. I wanted to claim him, too. I wanted to show all those stupid women who'd turned him down what they were missing out on. This gorgeous, sweet, fierce barbarian was all mine. I'd tell the whole world if I could.

"Fine..." I sighed. "But only for a minute. I was hoping to wake up with sex. You ruined my plans by sneaking off."

He grinned, straightening so he could lean his forehead against mine. "I will make it up to you. I promise."

Damn right he would. Just because I left the brothel behind didn't mean I was going to stop wanting daily sex. If he really wanted to keep me, he had to be ready to take care of that. In return, I'd take care of him and make sure he knew I chose him every single day for the rest of our lives.

FEIGRIND

I could tell Simon was unhappy about seeing Orthorr. He was probably still angry from when the clan leader wouldn't let him come with me on the journey. I'm not sure how things would have gone had he not been here. He'd saved Finn and Orthorr. His presence here was necessary, even if I hated that he was here without my protection.

There was no way of knowing the what-ifs, so I let it go, tugging Simon's hand as he dragged his feet toward the healing tent. Orthorr had been badly injured during Feiskedr's attack. Three against one would be a difficult fight for anyone, even for a seasoned fighter like him. He was resting under Zoya's care, and would stay there

until she saw fit to let him go back to his own tent. It was warm when we stepped inside, the fire in the middle always going to keep those sick and injured warm. The others who had been injured in the attack were resting nearby, and I nodded in greeting as I stepped past them to where Orthorr was propped up near the back.

Simon sucked in a breath when we got closer, his face twisted into a sympathetic wince. “Ouch.”

Orthorr huffed a small laugh at his reaction and grimaced for his efforts. “I believe I said the same thing upon waking. Thank you for coming to see me, Simon. Feigrind.”

Simon waved his free hand at me, the other still laced in mine. “He wanted to talk to you. I’m just tagging along.”

I wished he’d speak more respectfully toward the clan leader, but I could not expect that from Simon. Pushing him to do so would only make him lash out. Instead, I spoke to the clan leader about my intentions.

“I wish to claim Simon as my bondmate,” I told him.

Orthorr’s brows furrowed a little. “And does he agree to this?” He glanced at Simon expectantly.

Without hesitation, Simon insisted, “I want Feigrind. Returning to the brothel and leaving him behind is...” He shuddered and scowled. “I’m not going to do that. I want to stay with him.”

Pride and affection filled me, and I had to fight the urge to pull him in for a kiss. Now was not the time for it.

Orthorr nodded slowly. “If you both agree, then I see no reason to stop you. A

bonding ceremony will do a lot to ease the strain on the clan as well. I will let the others know to begin planning.”

Relieved, I let out a long breath. It was not often that Orthorr stood in the way of a bonding. Only if he truly felt the match would lead to problems in the clan, such as jealousies or fights, would he step in. However, Simon was not well received when he first arrived. I’d worried that Orthorr would not wish him to stay after the way he’d acted—and would probably continue to act on occasion. He was happy with his choice to stay as my bondmate, he’d told me plenty the night prior about how he felt, but that probably did not mean he would stop being a brat. I wouldn’t want him to, either. I loved his fiery spirit.

With permission granted, Simon was eager to escape and turned on his heel, tugging me along behind him. Orthorr’s voice stopped him before he could get far.

“Simon? A word, if you will.”

A flash of annoyance crossed Simon’s face, and I bit back a chuckle at his reaction. Drawing him back, I tucked him against me to ease his frustration, rubbing his back lightly. He still looked put out, but less like he wanted to start mouthing off to our clan leader. Hopefully, that meant he would behave.

“What?” Simon demanded with a scowl.

Or maybe not. I tightened my grip a little, giving him a look. “Be kind, raknar. He only wishes to talk.”

He narrowed his eyes on me. “What does that word mean?”

Orthorr answered before I could. “It means small spirited one. It is a term of endearment for those who are not demure or quiet.” He glanced at me, his smile a

little sad. “I used to call my bondmate the same thing.”

My heart ached for him. His bondmate had died a few years ago from illness. She was a good woman, kind and patient, but took sass from no one. She would have liked Simon. They were both spirited souls.

Simon must have understood the tension in the air, because he did not argue or demand more explanation. He crossed his arms, leaning his back against my chest in a possessive way that always made me smile.

“Okay. So what do you want?”

“I want to thank you,” Orthorr said sincerely. “You saved my life and the life of one of my clan. You distracted Feiskedr, and you gave the clan a chance to get the upper hand. And I was told you faced his challenge head-on before Einar intervened. You have brought great honor to my clan. I’d like to repay that somehow.” His gaze drifted to me for a moment, and I saw a flash of what looked like regret cross his face before he spoke again. “Had you not come to me with your plans to bond with Feigrind, I would have offered to have you brought back to your home, but...”

Simon shook his head before I could even begin to worry about it. “I already said I’m not going back. And I don’t need you to repay me. They would’ve done godsawful things to me had I not acted. I didn’t do it just for you. So you’re welcome or whatever, but I don’t need anything.” He glanced over at me. “Can we go now?”

I bit back a laugh and shook my head. “Orthorr is not that easily deterred, kolrav. Sit with me. We will speak with him together.”

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Begrudgingly, Simon let me pull him into my lap as we sat beside Orthorr's bed. It clearly took great restraint on Simon's part not to start arguing when Orthorr pushed for some way for the clan to repay him. He was still surly after waking up alone. If I could have stayed in bed all morning with him, I would have. But Simon liked to sleep, and I would have gotten restless lying in bed all day. I would need to find a better solution so that he did not wake up alone.

"What about a chance to travel?" Orthorr offered. I stiffened, frowning at him. I did not want him sending Simon away from me.

Simon narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What do you mean by that?"

"Uttin told me you knew many languages, including ours, before your arrival. It would make trade with towns easier if we had a translator present. When you are not working, you are free to explore the cities?—"

"Clan leader," I protested. He shook his head to stop me.

"You would go with him. Your maman has spoken with me at great length about your hovering. She will not be without care in your absence, but you need to live for more than just her now. You have a bondmate to care for, too."

I fell quiet, dropping my gaze. I knew my mother didn't like my hovering, but she was the only parent I had left. I didn't want to lose her.

Simon looked over his shoulder at me, then back to Orthorr. "Can I think about it?"

He nodded. “Do so. I will be here if you wish to discuss it more.”

With a nod, Simon stood, pulling me up with him. I let him lead me out of the healing tent and back to ours, grunting in surprise when he shoved me onto the bed. He dropped into my lap again, straddling me, and crossed his arms stubbornly over his chest.

“I’m not taking that job if it makes you unhappy. I’ll tell Orthorr to shove it up his ass. If you’re not ready to be apart from Maman, then he shouldn’t force you. That jerk.”

My breathing stuttered, and I reacted on impulse, yanking him to me for a frantic kiss. He groaned, kissing me back just as fiercely, and threw his arms around my neck. When we pulled apart, we were both breathing harshly, and I could feel his erection hard against mine.

“You are my other half. I don’t care to know what I would do without you. Thank you, Simon.”

He tsked, his smile full of affection. “You need to stop thanking me. Choosing you was entirely selfish on my part. I didn’t want to let you go.”

Twenty-Three

SIMON

In the end, Feigrind agreed that I should take the opportunity Orthorr offered me. Part of it was because he didn’t want Maman to start hating him because he hovered too much. But it was also because after a little pestering on his part, I admitted that I liked the idea of doing a job I wouldn’t be judged for. Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t ashamed of working in the brothel, but I liked the idea of earning my keep without

getting on my knees. I only did that now for Feigrind.

And because I'd agreed to bond with Feigrind, he said I had to let go of my grudge against Finn. I couldn't hate him for making it so I could be here because I got Feigrind and Maman out of it, and I wouldn't take that back for anything. The brat in me wanted to keep it up just because he'd told me to stop, but I didn't actually feel any animosity towards the man anymore. I understood now how he was swayed to stay. These barbarians with their magic dicks and their sweet talk were really hard to resist.

Of course, I didn't think the clan would come after me about my hair.

"Absolutely not."

"But—"

"No. I'm not shaving my hair. I don't care if it's the clan way or whatever. Come near my hair and I'll cut you."

And I definitely could. I still carried around the daggers Einar had given me. I was pretty sure Feigrind liked that I was always armed to protect myself. He was working to teach me hand-to-hand just in case, but it made us both feel better knowing no one could try anything stupid with me.

"No cutting people," Patrick scolded. "We aren't suggesting shaving as much as the barbarians. Just a tiny bit would mean a lot to Feigrind."

I scoffed. Feigrind loved my hair as it was. A few days after the attack, he'd surprised me with all the products I missed— and now he couldn't stop touching me. He liked my softness, including my hair. He also loved that I kept coloring it. Dyes didn't last long in hair, but it wasn't much effort to dye it every few days.

“He doesn’t have to,” Zoya said. She was still standoffish with me, but because I was being nicer to Finn, she put up with me. “None of the female tributes ever shave their hair. It’s not required that males do it. You two just did it to be cute.”

A frown pulled at my lips. I wasn’t a woman. I didn’t like being lumped in with them all because of a stupid haircut.

With a heavy, deeply unhappy sigh, I relented. “Fine. Only a tiny bit that can be easily hidden.”

“How about right here,” Finn suggested, circling a small section of hair by his temple and above his ear in demonstration.

I pursed my lips thoughtfully, then nodded. “I’ll accept that. But make it small enough that I can hide it if I want to.”

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Zoya looked smug as she came toward me with the razor. She'd definitely manipulated me to get me to cave. I was going to sic Maman on her for it later.

"I feel like I shouldn't trust you with that," I carped, leaning away from her. She sighed, exasperated.

"I'm a healer. I don't hurt people."

"Maybe not, but I could see you shaving off more than necessary and making an excuse like you slipped."

She made a face, but Patrick stepped in before she could pick a real fight with me.

"Let me. I help Verus with his hair, too."

I trusted him more than I trusted Zoya, who still had a grudge against me because I'd made Finn cry. She purposely ignored just how easy it was to make Finn cry. He cried when he was happy too. And I apologized... sort of. I told him I understood why he made the choice anyway.

Patrick pushed to his feet, leaning a little on a cane. I'd asked him about it, and he said he only needed to use it on occasion when the pain flared up. He'd been on his feet a lot, prepping for the ceremony, so he needed a little help now.

His hands were warm when he grabbed my chin, gently tilting my head so he could see better. I had to squeeze my eyes shut before he started. I didn't want to see him cut my beautiful hair.

The blade was slow and steady, cutting a small section near my temple under the longer layers on top. It took very little time, and when Finn handed me a mirror, I smiled to myself.

“How much do you want to bet he’s going to want to drag me off because of this?” I asked smugly. Feigrind wasn’t into men before he’d met me, but now he couldn’t get enough. I actually liked that he didn’t like any other males but me. I liked the special treatment.

Finn snickered, his cheeks pink any time I mentioned sex. He and Patrick were both sheltered and had never had sex before meeting their bondmates. I liked playing with Finn’s innocence by mentioning all the dirty things I was doing with Feigrind. I was pretty sure he integrated some of the stuff I mentioned into his own sex life. He also asked me questions he was too embarrassed to ask his friends or lover. I shared my knowledge because I’m a good person. Or because Feigrind liked me being nice to the clan and rewarded me with wild barbarian sex whenever he heard about my good behavior.

Probably more the second reason than the first.

“Alright, I think they’re ready,” Zoya said, peeking out of the receiving tent I’d been brought to when I first arrived here.

Taking a deep breath, I shook out my nerves. I never thought I’d be doing this. Sticking with the barbarians who’d kept me from my home. I didn’t think I’d ever be in a committed relationship, much less getting married—or the barbarian version of married, anyway.

I didn’t think anyone would claim a former prostitute, but Feigrind proved me wrong. He was always thanking me for choosing him, but he chose me too, and I was beyond happy about that.

Maybe I'd even thank Tomas one day. If he hadn't been such a jealous shit, I never would've met Feigrind. Now, I was in a relationship with a gorgeous man who spoiled me, had the respect of his clan, and had such mind blowing sex, I still believed magic was somehow involved. Meanwhile, he was probably still fucking Quincy for the tiny bit of power he thought he'd get from it.

Yeah, I was definitely going to rub it in his face one day.

FEIGRIND

My fingers ran over the smooth surface of the necklace I'd made for Simon. Maman helped me make it with clay and coated it in something to make it hard as stone once it was fired. It was different than most bonding necklaces, but Simon was different. I wanted him to have something special.

"Are you ready for this?" Uttin asked quietly. He was standing in for Orthorr, who was still in too much pain to hold the ceremony himself. Zoya had him moved to a comfortable spot in the crowd, while Uttin, as the clan second, took his place.

"I am," I murmured back. I had wanted a bondmate for a long time. I'd hated coming home after fighting to an empty tent. Now, knowing Simon would be there waiting for me, my heart felt full, and I was eager for the future. We would journey together, trading with other clans and towns, and see the world. When we were home, we would spend time with Maman and eventually, we would have children to care for too. That part surprised me when Simon first suggested it.

He'd mentioned once while we were cuddled together in the furs that there were many children like him in the town he lived in, who were sold off to brothels because their parents couldn't afford to raise them. He admitted he wanted to adopt in the future and perhaps prevent those children from suffering the same fate. I mentioned it to a few others, and there was a plan to go to Simon's old town eventually to see what

could be done to begin this process. I wasn't the only one who wished for children in the future.

"I still want to know what he did to change your mind about males," Godr said from close by.

He was immediately cuffed by Rath, who was one of the few who didn't tease me at first for choosing a male after a lifetime of only females. He'd also taught me things that I later used with Simon, and the sounds he made... I resisted the urge to shudder. I still wondered from time to time if he was faking to please me, but when I tried something new and he seemed so stunned with how much he enjoyed it, I began to accept that he truly enjoyed his time with me. Besides, it was Simon. He would tell me if he was unhappy. He never refrained from speaking his mind. I was always glad for it. I didn't have to guess how he felt about something.

The murmurs of the crowd picked up, and the clan parted to make room as Simon stepped into the village center. He was not in white, as was customary during bonding, but his legwear was a shimmery blue, and the silk wrap around his waist was white. His chest was bare, like most of the clan, showing off his lithe figure, but he wore a fur on his shoulders to keep him warm. He was beautiful, and I could not drag my gaze away as he approached.

Stepping up onto the platform beside me, he flashed me his usual smirk. "Like what you see?"

I'd liked what I saw since the first day I met him. I just wasn't willing to admit it then. Now, I couldn't resist reaching for him, running my fingers along his jaw and tracing my thumb along his lip. He'd colored them again, and the dark pink drew my focus over and over as Uttin spoke about our love and commitment to each other and our clan. When I offered Simon his necklace, his smile was soft and warm, and when he looked up at me, those beautiful multicolored eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

He still wasn't used to being treated as something precious. He would accept it eventually. I never planned to stop spoiling him.

After the bonding was done and we were moved to our seats to be greeted by the clan as a couple, Simon ignored his chair in favor of sitting in my lap. I chuckled, wrapping my arms around him, and ignored Uttin's exasperated sigh. It wasn't how things were done, but I didn't care. It was where Simon was happy, so it was where he would stay.

"Maman told me that only clan members made necklaces and shared them," Simon said to me between greetings.

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I nodded, nuzzling against his chin. “Yes. It is a way to bring the tribute into the clan and show they are bonded to one another.”

Simon tapped the necklace that rested against my chest. “Then why do you have this?”

I touched that necklace, a faint smile crossing my face. “It was my father’s. Typically, fathers give their sons a necklace when they become men and begin taking on duties for the clan. My father was gone before I came of age, so Maman saved it and gifted it to me instead. So that I can carry a piece of him with me wherever I go.”

He gave me a sympathetic smile and a kiss, then surprised me with a pout. “Now I feel bad for wanting you to wear the one I made you.”

My brows drew together as I frowned at him. “What do you speak of?”

He lifted one slender shoulder. “When Maman said men give necklaces to tributes, I thought it was cute. I wanted to make you one too. But I don’t want you taking that one off. That’d make me a jerk. So nevermind. I’ll?—”

“I want it,” I interrupted. “Who’s to say I can’t wear both?”

He faltered a little, then made a face. “I didn’t think of that. Fine. But you can’t judge me for the craftsmanship. It was my first try.”

He pulled a wrapped cloth from his pocket, offering it to me. Carefully, I opened it, and a smile stretched across my face when I saw what lay inside. It was similar to the

one I'd made him, formed from clay and tied with a bit of leather. But where mine was more plain, Simon had painted the one he made me to make it look like a flower.

"What is it?" I asked, running my fingers over the painted petals.

"It's the flower scent in my soap. So that you'd think of me no matter what. I'm selfish about your attention, you know. I always want you thinking about me."

He said it in a huff, but it drew a smile from my lips. I liked him selfish. Because he selfishly wanted me, and after so many choosing another, I wanted nothing more than to be wanted by him.

"To me, raknar, you will always be everything."

He gave me a soft smile, leaning his forehead against mine. "And I'll always choose you. No matter what."