



The Barbarian's Tribute (Not-So-Savage Barbarians #1)

Author: *Amy Padilla*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Every year, a woman from each town is chosen as a tribute to the barbarian clans to keep the peace, never to be seen or heard from again. The rumors about the barbarian clans were horrific. It was a sentence worse than death.

I never thought they'd choose me.

But when my brother betrays me by telling my father about my interest in men, he decides to throw me to the wolves to spare our family the shame. Making me the first male tribute.

Total Pages (Source): 23

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:18 am

One

The door to the library flew open, slamming against the wall so hard it bounced off and nearly hit my brother in the face as he followed behind my father. It was my brother's quick action that saved him from the embarrassment. He slapped a hand on the surface, stopping it before it could hit him square on. My father ignored it, storming into the room with his eyes ablaze. I'd seen that look a hundred times in my lifetime. It never ended well for the person on the other end of it. He'd never looked at me like that before, though. Not until now.

"Tell me it isn't true."

My brows furrowed, and I pushed to my feet, the book I'd been reading still clutched in my hand. "What isn't true?"

"Your brother says you've been shacking up with men! Tell me it isn't true, Phineas!"

My blood ran cold and my gaze jerked to my brother. He still stood by the door, a cruel grin stretching over his face when he took in my panicked expression. That look disappeared in a flash when my father glared at him over his shoulder, only to return the minute he turned his back. He was enjoying this.

"Phineas!" my father demanded.

I whipped my gaze back to his, swallowing hard. I wasn't sure how to answer. I could lie, but I doubted Fraser went to him without some kind of made up proof. Not

knowing that proof left me at a disadvantage. I wasn't sure if I was just digging myself deeper by arguing.

"I—" I started, only to be cut off by my father again.

"I should have known! Your continued refusal to wed wasn't because you were waiting for the best deal for the family! You were only biding your time, weren't you? Do you have any idea what would have happened if you had been caught! Do you care so little about humiliating your family?"

"I haven't done anything!" I argued, my voice tight, with unshed tears swelling in my eyes. While it was true that I was attracted to men, I never touched one. I never even flirted with one. I didn't want anyone to find out.

A loud crack filled the air as my father backhanded me. I cried out, falling to the ground from the force. I'd always been the smallest, and it was times like these that I wished it was different. It only added to the fuel, my father's furious eyes widening even further because of my reaction.

"You're disgusting! I don't know why I even thought you were a man! You're a disgrace to this family!"

My vision blurred, and I had to duck my head to hide my tears. It would only make things worse.

"Father, perhaps you should sit down. Your health—" Fraser started, his voice filled with faux concern.

"Silence!" Father shouted at him. "Get the carriage ready. Now!"

Fraser knew better than to argue and disappeared to do as bid, leaving me alone with

my father. I was afraid to move, terrified of the consequences if I did. I'd never earned my father's wrath like this before. Disappointment, sure, on occasion. I could never make him proud by being small and quiet and wholly uninterested in things that most men were into. I didn't hunt for sport, I didn't fight or have dozens of women in my bed. I preferred to spend my time in the library or taking walks along the river. It annoyed him, but he never hated me for it. Not until now.

"I won't allow this humiliation to stand, Phineas. You were already the runt of the family. You won't drag our name through the mud by associating yourself with us any longer."

Lifting my head slowly, I looked up at him. "Father—"

"I don't want to hear your excuses!" he bellowed. "Get up! We're leaving!"

I didn't want to go. Whatever he had planned, it wouldn't be good. Father never did half hearted punishments. He was angry enough to hurt me, so whatever he had planned once we walked out of this room would be worse than that. If I could just get him to listen, I could convince him Fraser was lying. I was fully prepared to spend the rest of my life alone. I wouldn't have shamed our family name. I never should've trusted my secret to my brother.

When I didn't move fast enough, Father took matters into his own hands. He fisted my short cropped curls, dragging me to my feet and out the door. I whimpered through the pain, dropping the book I'd been holding to grasp at his wrist. I wasn't strong enough to get him to release me, nor was I brave enough to try. I just held on in hopes of easing the pain somehow. He didn't let go until we were outside. The carriage was already waiting, Fraser sitting in the box seat with a mock frown.

"Where to, Father?"

“The council estate. Be quick about it.” He shoved me into the carriage and followed after me, slamming the door behind him. Ever obedient, Fraser snapped the reins, forcing the horses into a gallop to get us there quickly.

It wasn't a long trip, our home was close by, but it felt like it dragged on. I sat curled in on myself across from my father, trying to figure out why he was bringing me to the council estate. Did he want me to give up my ties to him publicly? Was he hoping they'd arrest me? I wasn't sure, and the longer I went without knowing, the more panicked I felt.

“F-Father, I swear, I haven't—”

“I'm not interested in your lies, Phineas,” he snapped. “Get out.”

We'd pulled up in front of the council estate while I tried to convince him to listen to me. I thought about refusing, forcing him to at least hear me out, but he didn't wait around for me to make a scene. He fisted my hair again and dragged me out, ignoring the stares of everyone there that evening as he hauled me inside. With the angle I was at, I couldn't keep track of where we were going until he forced me into the mayor's office, throwing me forward so that I collapsed to the ground.

“Here's your volunteer for the next tribute.”

My breath froze in my chest and I whipped my head up, looking at the men sitting at the round table. The men who decided who was handed off to the barbarian clan who passed through every year, in exchange for them leaving us alone.

The mayor, a portly man with a thin mustache, frowned at my father. “You're volunteering your own son?”

“He's no son of mine,” Father hissed. “And I'll not have him in my house a moment

longer.”

The town marshal tipped his head, looking at my father like he’d grown two heads. “They want women to service them. Why would we—”

Father shot me another hateful look before turning back to the group. “Given what proclivities Phineas has, I’m sure he’ll be able to fill that role. At least sending him, we won’t lose an actually beneficial member to our society.”

All eyes swung to me and looks of disgust twisted in their expressions. I choked back a sob, still on my hands and knees where my father had thrown me. I kept casting around for ideas of how to stop this, but I came up blank.

“Is there proof?” the mayor asked. “I won’t have him sent along only for him to cause trouble for us. Our alliance with those dirty barbarians is thin already.”

“Yes, your honor,” Fraser said, stepping forward from where he’d stood in the doorway. “He told me himself.”

Shame made my face burn. I did tell him, and I regretted it immensely. After coming home from another ball empty handed, without any women to court, Father lost his temper with me and called me useless. I’d barely choked back the tears until I got to my room. Fraser found me there sobbing. I wasn’t sure how to get Father to leave it alone. And I was scared I’d be forced into a relationship with a woman eventually, knowing I wouldn’t be able to touch them that way. It honestly repulsed me. Fraser had played the comforting brother, patting my shoulder and urging me to speak to him. He said he wanted to help, but he couldn’t until he knew what was going on. I suspected he already had his suspicions. All he needed was a confirmation, and I literally spelled it out for him. He said he’d help me, that he’d find a way to get Father to turn his attention away from me. I never thought he’d go so far as to sell me out to the barbarians.

“Well, then I guess we’ve got ourselves a volunteer,” the mayor said, pushing to his feet. He moved to stand over me, a sneer on his face. “You’re doing our town a great service by sacrificing yourself to the cause. Do us all a favor and do what’s needed to keep them happy. If they bring you back, you’ll face the noose instead. We don’t want any of your kind tainting our town.”

They gave me no chance to defend myself. No option but to accept their demands or die. And two days later, I found myself with my wrists bound, standing just inside the gate to town, staring down the stampede that was barreling toward us. I should have never trusted my brother. I shouldn’t have trusted anyone. Now, thanks to my family, I was going to die. There was no way they’d want anything to do with me. It’d be lucky if they didn’t take it as an insult that the town offered me instead of a woman.

As the barbarian representatives came closer, I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to watch what happened next. I just wanted it all to be over. Maybe, if I was behaved enough, they’d make it quick when they killed me.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:18 am

Two

“ R ath. You’re needed outside,” my clan brother Verus said as he poked his head into my tent. I’d been in the middle of sharpening my blades for the next hunt, and I didn’t immediately look up at him. I hated leaving things half finished.

“Who calls for me?”

“Orthorr,” he answered, his expression curious. He didn’t know for what reason I was being called by the clan leader, only that he was sent to fetch me. I finished my task, sticking the blade back in its sheath on my hip. Pushing to my feet, I stretched my muscles. I assumed if the clan leader wished to speak with me, it was for a fight. I was one of the biggest in the clan, the best hunter, and I was called upon to assist in guarding or fighting if the fighters of the clan were outnumbered. It didn’t happen often, but they had gone out to gather the newest batch of women for the clan. Perhaps a town had finally gotten brave enough to refuse them.

Ducking my head, I stepped out of my tent, following my brother to the center of our village. We were nomads, we moved often, but during the colder seasons, we settled near the forest for easier hunting. As the best hunter, I was used to long days in the cold, and it didn’t bother me, but it was always nice to sit by the massive fire that burned constantly in the middle of our village.

Orthorr was waiting for me, his frown pronounced by the wrinkles on his face. He was an elder and he didn’t hunt anymore, but he taught me the skill himself when I was just a boy, and I was always happy to see him.

“Village leader, you sent for me?” I asked, putting a fist to my chest with a slight bow in greeting. He returned the gesture with a fist to his chest and a dip of his chin before tipping his head towards the receiving tent. I fought off a grimace. I had no interest in what lay in there.

“One of the towns offered a male. I considered sending him back, but you’ve been alone too long. Go see if he interests you before I decide.”

I wasn’t the only male in our clan that had no interest in females. There were others. A few who weren’t interested in relationships at all. But most were open about their conquests and not interested in settling down. I had no interest in trysts. I wanted a bondmate, someone to take care of. But since the towns who were beholden to us only sent females, I thought that was impossible.

With a certain level of wariness, I stepped into the tent. The females were offered as a tribute to protect their towns. They were supposed to be volunteers, but more often than not, they were sent without true consent. It took those ones longer to accept that they were in good hands. My clan didn’t hurt females. We needed them to continue our line. Our clan, like so many others of our line, produced only males. We needed females from outside our clan to continue on. None would be forced, but after a while, they would learn to accept their status as a place of honor. We would truly cease to exist without them.

Loud snuffles and whimpers filled the room as I stepped inside. It was dark, given the late hour, and the females couldn’t yet be trusted with an open flame without supervision. There were two guards on either side of the tent, watching over them, but they wouldn’t harm them. They were only there to keep them from running off. It was dangerous to wander the forest alone, especially if you didn’t know it like I did.

For a moment, I couldn’t see the male Orthorr referred to. It couldn’t be a joke, Orthorr was not the teasing type, so I considered maybe he’d gotten out and was

going to check with the guards when I saw him. In the sliver of light from the fire, he sat curled in a ball, his arms wrapped around his knees and his head down. I would have walked past him had his hair been any longer. But males of the towns often kept their hair short, like this one did. He was a tiny thing, no bigger than a female, with pale skin and a slim figure. I stepped up to him, curious, and froze when he looked up at me. Even in the dark of the tent, I could see how pale his eyes were. Without the sun to offer its light, I couldn't be sure, but they looked like the early morning sky, pale blue and enormous. They filled with tears and he scooted farther away from me, bumping into a female behind him.

His fear of me made me sick to my stomach and the need to care for him was overwhelming. I scooped him up without forethought. He cried out, frightened, but I wasn't going to harm him. All the tributes would be assigned a male to watch over them eventually. To better teach them our ways and keep them safe. This male would get the same treatment from me. I would protect him and care for him until he was trusted enough to assist with tasks for the clan or... Well, women who became with child were allowed to stay with their chosen males and merely rest, but that wouldn't happen with him. Perhaps he could join me on the hunt if he was interested in such things. Given his petite frame, I kind of doubted it.

If we were compatible, I'd do whatever necessary to get him to choose me. Orthorr was right, I'd been alone a long time.

Stepping out of the receiving tent, I masked my discomfort at the male's tears. I wanted to comfort him, but our languages weren't the same. Only a few spoke the tongues of the town clans. They gathered the women and brought them here. If I wanted the male to know he was safe, I'd need to show him until he understood me better.

Orthorr turned as I stepped out, raising an eyebrow at me. "He suits you then?"

I didn't answer outside of a slight nod. Time would tell if we were truly compatible, but he was very beautiful, and he called to my instincts to care for him. It was enough for him to be assigned to my care. Orthorr nodded.

"We will accept his tribute, then. Tyarr will bring your meals to your tent. Uttin said he was well behaved, so he should not cause trouble, but watch him closely. We've never accepted a male tribute before. He could be a trap."

"Yes, clan leader. Thank you for calling for me."

The little male cried the entire way back to my tent. Not loud sobs like most females would. He muffled the sound by biting his bottom lip, his body shaking from the effort. His hands were bound at the wrist, which was normal, though the rope looked old and scratchy. Even in the light of the moon, I could see the irritation on his slender wrists. I would remove that soon and apply some healing ointment.

Ducking into my tent, I sat him down on the pallet I'd used as a bed since we settled here. It wasn't much. I was used to sleeping in trees or on the ground on long hunts. Hopefully, the male wouldn't be too upset about it. I'd never taken a tribute before. I hadn't prepared for this.

Once I released him, I waited to see if he would run or try to fight. He did neither, hugging his knees tightly again. Good. That would make this easier. I removed the rope first, biting back a snarl at the mangled skin underneath. How long had he been tied up like this to have such injuries? I'd never seen a female with skin so badly damaged. I wanted to apply ointment, but I worried about doing so without cleaning it first. I could bring him to the river to bathe, as most of the clan did, but given how frightened he was, that seemed like a bad idea. Instead, when Tyarr brought our meals, I requested a bowl of warm water from him. Tyarr was a kind brother, and graciously retrieved the water for me. I could see his curiosity, he wanted to meet the little male, but now was not the time. He would be kept separate for a few days to not

overwhelm him while learning about his new home.

The male hadn't moved when I ducked back into my tent. The tent was lit with a lantern in the corner, giving me a better look at him. He looked disheveled and dirty, his clothes torn in some places. That couldn't have been from us. My clan treated tributes well. I wished I could ask how he came to be this way, but the language barrier prevented it. With a sigh, I put the bowl aside and searched my things. It was all too big for him. I could request new outfits from those who made the clothing, or I could sew something myself. My mother had taught me that a male was useless if he couldn't be sufficient on his own. But that would take time. For tonight, we'd have to make do.

Pulling out my smallest tunic, I set it aside. I knew the town people wore clothes under their clothes, but I had no such things and my legwear was far too big. The tunic would be long enough to cover all of him, though, so hopefully it was enough.

Turning back to him, I hesitated when he flinched and hugged his legs tighter. I tried to show him through my face that I wasn't going to hurt him, but he didn't understand and tears spilled constantly down his cheeks. With a defeated sigh, I decided it was best to get the bathing over quickly. I pulled his soiled clothes off him, tuning out his whimpers and pleas. I did not blame him for doubting me. It only made me more determined to prove him wrong. I ran a wet cloth over his skin, wiping away the dirt and sweat. I was careful but thorough around his injured wrists, and wrapped them with another cloth after I applied the ointment I got from my hunting bag. It was easier to carry it with me than constantly return to the healers for treatment. I was glad for it now.

When I set to remove his legwear, he cried harder, trying to push my hands away as he shook his head. I wished I could leave them, but they were soiled and smelled terrible. He needed something clean. Carefully, so I didn't hurt him, I took his hands in one of mine, removing his legwear and his little clothes underneath with the other.

I purposely avoided looking at his intimate parts, to give him his privacy, and quickly cleaned his legs and feet. I offered it to him to get his private areas, and he hastily cleaned himself before trying to scoot away again. I couldn't allow that yet. I wasn't finished.

Tugging the tunic over his head seemed to settle him enough to whimper instead of full blown cries of fear. Normally, I would have waited on the tunic so it wouldn't get wet, but I thought it was better for him to be covered. Instead, I maneuvered him so he was lying over an uncovered portion of the ground, his head supported by my hand so I could pour water through his hair. He flinched and whimpered, but seemed to finally understand what I was doing because he didn't fight me anymore. I rubbed my fingers through his hair to get what dirt out I could and poured more to rinse it. Once he was more comfortable, I'd take him to the river to bathe more effectively.

The last thing I cleaned was his face. Tear stains streaked through the dirt there, and he squeezed his eyes shut when I started, like he was expecting rough treatment. I gentled my hand as much as I could, wiping away the dirt and tears carefully. When he finally opened his eyes, I felt my breath catch in my chest again. Pale blue and so fearful.

"You are safe," I murmured, though I knew he couldn't understand me. Hopefully my tone would be enough. "I won't hurt you."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:18 am

Three

When the barbarian brought me back to his tent and started stripping me, I expected the worst. I had no hope of fighting him off. He towered over me and the muscles of his arms were probably larger than my head. I could only cry and beg for him to have mercy. And he did. He only stripped me long enough to get me clean before dressing me again. Then he traded the bowl of water for a bowl of food and fed it to me by hand when I was too scared to move until I felt safe enough to take it myself.

The food wasn't bad, fire smoked meats and some kind of vegetable I didn't recognize. I wasn't really worldly, having only ever experienced what was to offer in our town, so I couldn't say what he was feeding me. Only that it was warm and filling and he let me eat as much as I wanted. After two and a half days without a meal, I was starving and finished everything he gave me. He seemed pleased, the corners of his mouth kicked up in a small smile. He offered me more from his own bowl, but I shook my head. I didn't want him to go hungry just because the mayor had refused to feed me while we were waiting for the barbarians to fetch me. Besides, any more food and I would be sick.

For the first time in days, I was clean, fed, and warm. Fatigue dragged at my senses, but I fought against it, too scared to close my eyes for long. He must have noticed, though, because he frowned and wiped off his hands before scooping me up again and moving me over to the makeshift bed. He didn't crawl in to join me, or make a move to take advantage of me. He just tucked me in and turned down the lantern, finishing his meal in the dark. I tried to keep my eyes open and on him, to make sure he didn't come after me, but fatigue won out and I fell asleep before too long.

I woke up while it was still dark to my whole body shaking. It was freezing and while there were blankets below me to protect me from the ground and one above me, it wasn't enough. I curled in on myself, trying to tuck my legs into the overly large tunic for warmth. It was when my teeth started to chatter that the barbarian woke up. He'd been asleep next to me, facing the flap of the tent's entrance, but he turned over and I could feel him staring at me in the dark. I clenched my teeth hard enough to make my jaw hurt to stop the chatter, but I was still shaking. I was never a very good actor.

A large arm came around my waist, drawing me against the barbarian's chest. I stiffened, afraid that now that we were awake and in bed together, he'd finally take advantage, but he only turned me over and tucked my head under his chin, wrapping himself around me. I didn't understand why until the warmth sank into my skin. Relief overwhelmed me as my body relaxed. He was warm and holding me to keep me warm, too. It didn't take long for the fatigue to drag me back to sleep again, and I stayed curled up against him until morning.

When I woke again, it was lighter. The sun hadn't quite risen yet, but I could see better in the tent. I was still cuddled up against the large barbarian, using his body heat to keep warm. A part of me wished I could go back to sleep and pretend for a little while longer that I wasn't sold off by my own father to a barbarian clan that might very well kill me as soon as I proved not useful. I wasn't a strong or clever man. They would be disappointed once they realized how useless I was.

I bit my lip, fighting back tears. More proof of what a useless man I was. Before her passing, my mother used to call me 'sensitive'. My brothers called me pathetic. I learned to hide my tears as much as possible to not garner their attention. I didn't want to catch the barbarian's attention either.

Only, it'd been hours since I was last able to relieve myself. It was the discomfort that woke me. I wasn't sure where to go or if I was even allowed to relieve myself without

supervision, but I didn't want to wake the barbarian and earn his ire to ask. I squirmed uncomfortably, willing myself to wait, but my movements were too erratic because the barbarian stirred and opened his eyes, his brows drawing together slowly.

He asked me something, but I couldn't understand him. I shook my head helplessly, fear and discomfort at war in my mind. Would he lash out like my father did?

Sitting up, he tried again, gesturing at me with a questioning look. I took it to mean him asking me what was wrong, but it was embarrassing to answer him. I felt my face flush, dropping my gaze to my lap.

"I need to relieve myself..."

He was quiet for a moment and when I looked up, he seemed confused. My body protested the wait and in a desperate move, I squirmed and pressed my hands into my lap, trying to hold out.

Body language worked better than talking because his eyebrows shot up and he pushed to his feet, leading me outside to a trench used in place of a toilet. He said something to me again and when I frowned, he scrubbed the back of his neck with his own frown. He pointed to the forest and shook his head no. Then mimicked running with his fingers on his palm. No running. I wished I could tell him I wasn't brave enough to do such a thing so he wouldn't hurt me, but I could only nod to show I understood. He gave me privacy, stepping past the line of trees so I could do my business. When I was through, I hurried to where he was waiting, not wanting to give him any reason to harm me. He'd been kind so far, but I didn't trust it to last.

He brought me back to his tent and urged me back to bed. The sun was just rising, so it was still early, but he didn't join me like he had before. Instead, he wrapped me tightly in the blanket to keep me warm and sat on the ground near the lantern that he relit. It looked like he was mending his clothes and the methodical movements of his

hands lulled me back to sleep.

When I woke for the third time, the sun was up and the tent was well lit. The barbarian was still working, his expression calm and focused. While he wasn't paying attention to me, I got a better look at him in the light. He had long brown hair that was shaved on the sides, as well as a thick beard. He slept shirtless, which was astounding given how cold it got. Then again, he was warm like a fire even in the middle of the night, so the cold must not have bothered him. His arms and chest were covered in tattoos, symbols carved in ink on his skin. I didn't know the meaning of any of it, but it was kind of pretty if you looked at it in the right light. When he'd come to fetch me, he'd had necklaces on, but they were set aside for now. All that decorated thick muscles and a wide chest. Even his thighs were massive. I was beyond terrified of what might be in his pants, especially if he planned to use it on me, but thankfully he slept in trousers the night before. If it was proportional to his frame, then I might have had nightmares.

Like he could feel me studying him, he turned and raised an eyebrow at me. I dropped my gaze immediately, fighting back the urge to hide under the blanket.

"Korvash," the barbarian said. I didn't know what the word meant, but when I gathered enough courage to look up at him, he beckoned me with a wave of his hand. I whimpered, terrified of what he wanted from me, but he waited patiently and didn't speak again until I got off the bed and moved closer, careful to keep the blanket around my shoulders. The tunic he gave me kept me covered, but it was too large and kept slipping off my shoulders when I moved around too much.

He rewarded me coming closer with a soft smile and a nod of his head. Then, without a word, he lifted me to my feet and stood me in front of him. I sucked in a sharp breath and tried to edge away, but he held fast to my hips, moving the blankets out of his way.

“P-please, no...” I whimpered. Not that he could understand. For all I knew, in his language, it sounded like I was saying yes.

He didn’t pull off my clothes or anything nefarious. Instead, he held up a pair of trousers that actually looked my size, holding them against me to measure better. He frowned, pursing his lips, but it was hard to truly look while I was wearing the tunic. It was basically a dress and hid my body from him.

To make things easier, I held out a shaky hand for the material. “I-I can try them on?”

When he shot me a questioning look, I mimicked pulling the trousers on. It was embarrassing to act out my intentions, but it helped and he nodded decisively, handing me the clothing. He even gave me his back for privacy, pawing through a wooden box while I slipped the trousers on. They were a little wide around the waist, but just right on the length. I cautiously tapped his shoulder, stiffening when he turned around. He pointed at the hem of the tunic and raised an eyebrow at me, silently asking to lift it. I nodded and squeezed my eyes shut, willing it all to be over quickly.

He muttered under his breath, pinching the sides until they fit better. Then he ushered me out of them with a gentle tug, making sure the tunic covered me in the process. He wasn’t at all what I was expecting. When the towns talked about the barbarians, they compared them to wild animals who raped and pillaged and would gut you as soon as look at you. This one was nothing like that. In the short time I’d known him, he bathed me, took care of my chafed wrists, fed me, and was now making me clothes. From scratch? Or maybe from his own, tailoring them to fit me instead. Which meant he was literally giving me the clothes off his own back. Would it always be this way? Or was he just buttering me up, so I was more compliant when he finally showed his true colors?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:18 am

Four

After making trousers that fit me, the barbarian disappeared long enough to fetch us breakfast. Leftover meat from the night before, from the looks of it, fresh bread and a bowl of fruit. It looked delicious, and it only took a little encouragement to get me to eat. I was still hungry after being starved for two days. While we were eating, he held up each fruit and said their name. The ones I was familiar with, I said in my own language to show I understood.

“Blueberry.”

He mulled it over, trying his hand at mimicking me instead of me copying him. “Blue...berry.”

I nodded, and he looked proud of himself. Then his eyes narrowed and instead of picking up another fruit, he pointed at me instead.

For a minute, I thought he wanted to know the word for shirt, and I pinched it while saying the word out loud, but he shook his head, knocking my hand away before putting his massive palm on my chest. My heart stuttered for a moment, and when I didn't understand, he touched his chest with his other hand.

“Rath.”

“Rath...” I repeated slowly. He nodded and tapped two fingers to his chest. It finally clicked and I looked up in surprise. “Your name is Rath.”

That was too much, he didn't understand me, but I understood what he wanted now. I debated telling him my full name, but I always hated it, and I had an opportunity to use something different now. It wasn't like my father was going to show up to berate me for disrespecting the family name. Putting my hand next to his, I introduced myself.

"Finn."

"Finn," he repeated, eyes soft. I had to duck my head to escape the intensity of his stare, and he eventually moved on, giving me a chance to get my heart rate under control. Were barbarians supposed to be so sweet?

He continued on that thread for a while, pointing at things and saying them in his language, then encouraging me to repeat him. He only stopped when I yawned for the third time. Despite his help the night before and the nap that morning, I was still tired. I didn't sleep much the past few days. While waiting for the barbarians to arrive, the mayor had the marshal take me to jail. Because, to them, having sexual urges for something other than women was bad enough to imprison someone. None of my family ever came to say goodbye. I was alone and scared and I worried about what they'd do to me if I actually fell asleep. Now that I was at least semi safe, I kept nodding off.

Rath tipped his head toward the bed, giving me a significant look. I shook my head quickly. I didn't want to come off as more useless than I already was. When he reached for me, I flinched and his hand drew back, his expression pained.

"I-I'm sorry!" I rushed out, panic lacing my tone. I hadn't meant to do that. I just couldn't figure out what he was going to do next. I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for him to lash out for the insult, but when his hands cupped my face, they were gentle and warm.

My eyes fluttered open, and I took in his expression. Pain, worry, understanding. No anger that I could see. His thumbs stroked over my cheeks and he pulled me closer to press his forehead against mine, murmuring low under his breath. I didn't understand the words, but his tone was soothing. This time, when my eyes drifted closed, it was to hide the tears filling them. In my entire life, I'd never been treated so gently. Like I was something precious. I wanted to enjoy it while it lasted, before he finally figured out how useless I was and stopped being so kind.

For the next few days, we settled into a sort of routine. Rath got up with me early in the morning to take me to the trench to relieve myself before sending me back to bed. Then he fed me, we practiced his language, and he showed me things that were unique to his people. The necklaces he wore were different for everyone, but since I hadn't been allowed to interact with anyone yet, I didn't understand how. My grasp on the language was too new to follow everything he was saying. He proudly showed me his knives a few times, and I figured out eventually that he was a hunter for his people. He had a bow that was almost as big as I was that he used to hunt, as well as small knives he could throw and bigger ones to take down larger animals after wounding them. Hunting wasn't really my thing, but he seemed happy to show me, and I wanted to do what I could to keep him in a good mood.

Not once in the past few days since I arrived did he give me a reason to think he'd hurt me. He held me every night to keep me warm, he fed me, and he made me clothes by hand. And not once did he get angry with me when I woke him at night because I'd had another nightmare of my father kicking me out and couldn't stop crying. He just petted my hair and hummed a little tune until I settled enough to sleep again. But I still found it hard to fully trust him. I wished I could understand more of his language. Maybe then I could understand what he wanted from me.

"Rath!" a voice called from outside the tent, followed by a string of their language too fast for me to translate. Rath looked up from where he was carving something out of wood, frowning at the flap entrance to the tent. He'd started it the day after I

arrived, but I didn't have the skill to ask what he was making. He answered, though slower than the person outside. I couldn't catch all of it, but a word I was familiar with popped up. Hunt.

"Hunt?" I repeated, tipping my head.

Rath nodded and sighed heavily. He pushed to his feet and like every time he stood next to me, especially when I was still sitting, I gaped at his massive form. Were barbarians part giant?

My expression always seemed to amuse him. He offered me a hand, pulling me to my feet, a smile tugging at his lips. I blushed and ducked my head. If I could, I'd try to explain myself. My town didn't have tall men. Yes, most were taller than me, but not by as much as he was.

"Come," Rath said, squeezing my hand gently.

Surprised, I looked up at him. We were leaving the tent? Aside from relieving ourselves, we hadn't done that yet.

He paused long enough to grab his blades and tie them to his belt before taking my hand and leading me outside. The man who'd called out to him was waiting, a little shorter than Rath, but still several hands taller than me, with a more trim build and braids in his hair. He smiled brightly at Rath, squeezing his shoulder, before turning a curious look towards me.

"Verus, my clan brother," Rath introduced, gesturing to the man. Then he turned to his friend. "My Finn."

My cheeks burned at the possessiveness in his tone. Not just Finn. His Finn.

A part of me worried how the clan would react to Rath claiming a man so readily, but Verus didn't even blink. He said something in a teasing tone, elbowing his friend, and ducked with a laugh when Rath tried to cuff him. He didn't seem to care either way. Could it be that this clan didn't care about same sex couples?

Not that Rath and I were a couple. I didn't know what we were. He took care of me, but he didn't ask for affection or try to touch me in unwelcome ways. Petting my hair when I was scared was nice, and he held me at night to keep me warm, but he never pushed for more. What did that make us?

Verus led the way through the rows of tents. I hadn't looked much, but from what I'd seen, the little village was laid out like a wheel and spokes, all tents circling a massive fire in the middle. There were smaller fires here and there, but the one in the middle was where they congregated together. That's where Rath brought me that morning. The air was cool outside the tent, so it was nice to be near the warm flame. Rath steered me toward some cushions nearby and pushed me onto one, putting up a finger to ask me to wait before he walked away. I was a little nervous, I felt safer with him, but he wasn't gone long. He brought a woman with him and my stomach sank thinking maybe this was his wife or girlfriend. It would be just my luck that the first guy who treated me kindly enough to even consider a relationship was taken.

She smiled and nodded as Rath spoke to her, stopping a few feet in front of me so he could do introductions. "My Finn, meet Zoya." He said another word I didn't recognize, and when I frowned, she spoke for herself.

"That word means healer. I'm one of the clan healers. It's nice to meet you, Finn."

My eyebrows shot up and my mouth fell open. "You speak my language? Does everyone?"

"No, not everyone," she replied with a shake of her head. "I'll be happy to explain it

to you, but first, Rath asked for me to stay with you while he goes on a hunt. He'll be gone a few hours, and he doesn't want to leave you all alone. Would you be comfortable with that, or would you prefer to go back to his tent to rest?"

I opened my mouth to reply with an immediate yes, since I really wanted to talk to someone who understood me. But then it clicked that she said he'd be gone for a few hours. I looked around hesitantly. Rath proved that it was safe to be around him, but I didn't know anyone else. I hadn't been around anyone but him. Were they all as nice as he was, or would others take issue with a smaller man not contributing in any way. Should I have volunteered to work?

Rath must've seen my panic because he kneeled in front of me and cupped my face, his brows drawn together tightly. He said something, but I didn't understand him. I was too panicked to run through all the words he'd taught me so far.

"He said you're safe," Zoya murmured. She sat beside me, worry and understanding written on her face. "He's not lying. You're safe here. Tributes are important to the clan. It's a place of honor for them."

I wanted to shake my head, but I couldn't with the way Rath was holding me. "I'm not a woman. It's not the same. I—" I choked back tears, trying to pull Rath's hands away so I could hide. He wouldn't budge and a few tears slipped out anyway. I whimpered, waiting for Rath to finally lose his patience, but he never did. He gently brushed the tears away with his thumbs and rested his forehead against mine, muttering something I didn't understand. Zoya understood him, though, and huffed out a laugh.

"He wants to take you with him. Pretty sure going on a hunt would only scare you. The animals out there can be terrifying." She said something to Rath, shaking her head at him. He answered, but he sounded put out about whatever they were talking about. Zoya turned back to me.

“I know things are overwhelming and scary, and it’s completely understandable to want to hide away, but he’s planning on rushing to get back to you and that can be dangerous. So for his sake, can you sit here with me so he knows you’ll be okay and he can do his thing safely? I promise, no one will hurt you,” she cajoled, putting her hand on my shoulder supportively.

I didn’t want Rath to get hurt just because I was being a big baby about everything. I nodded quickly, summoning what little bravery I had. “I-I’m fine here. He doesn’t need to rush on my account. I’m okay.”

Thankfully, Zoya translated for me. For a moment, it didn’t look like Rath believed her. He gave her a look that said as much anyway. She sighed and rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of affection in her smile. He couldn’t really argue with her, Verus and a few others called for him, so he couldn’t linger.

He shot another worried glance at me, and I did my best to hide my expression so he wouldn’t feel rushed. Touching his hands that were still cupping my cheeks, I murmured, “I’m okay.”

That time, he seemed to understand me. He nodded and in a move I didn’t expect, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my forehead, lingering for a moment before releasing me and pushing to his feet. He said something else to Zoya before he walked away, joining his friends and mounting a much more enormous version of a horse. He glanced over his shoulder, studying me with a frown, and I did my best to show him it was okay. I wasn’t going anywhere. I didn’t have anywhere else to go.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am

Five

After Rath left, I curled in on myself a little, circling my arms around my legs. The village center was busy, people moving about and talking with one another. None of them paid us much mind. A few smiled and nodded politely at Zoya, but they didn't come to talk to her. She sat beside me with a patient smile, her legs curled under her and her posture relaxed.

"So, how have language lessons been going?"

When I shot her a questioning look, she lifted a shoulder. "We all went through the same thing. Usually, you get a week before you're introduced to the clan so you're more comfortable, but Rath is the best hunter and they want to throw a feast soon. One of the women just had a baby. It's something to celebrate."

Curiosity loosened my tongue a little. "Everyone? Even male tributes?"

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Well, I'd assume so, but you're the first, so I can't really answer if there would be any differences."

My stomach sank. "Th-The first? W-Why?"

She lifted a shoulder. "I think the original agreement said women, but you'd have to ask one of the elders about that."

"A-Are they going to send me back?" The idea of that was more terrifying than staying here. I knew what waited for me if I went back. I had nowhere else to go.

Startled, Zoya waved her hands. “No, no! You’re not being sent back. I’m pretty sure Rath would gut someone if they tried. No, I was just saying that since the original agreement said women, towns never really deviated from that. You’re the first. But since there are a few men here who prefer other men, they aren’t opposed to it. Most of them aren’t ready to settle down, though.” She wrinkled her nose a little. “I think you got lucky with Rath. He’s the calm one. His brother, Godr, can’t sit still for anything. There’s a reason he trains the horses. He’s the one who can keep up with them.”

“I thought his brother was Verus?” Unless he had more than one. We hadn’t gotten around to discussing family yet.

“Yes and no,” she said, tipping her hand back and forth. “The men of the clan call each other clan brothers. They see their clan as their family. But Godr is his blood brother. They have the same parents.”

She took some time explaining clan hierarchy to me. It was easier to follow than the hierarchy of my home town. The clan leader made all the big decisions. Those who proved themselves as the best in their specific areas, like Rath as a hunter, led those under them and reported to the clan leader with questions or reports. A vast majority were soldiers of a sort, protecting the clan from rival clans or towns who tried to oppose them. The rest took jobs to support the clan. Hunters, farmers, clothes makers. None was seen as more important than the other, and they were all on pretty equal footing. It was fascinating to think about, and I found myself hanging on Zoya’s every word as she explained it all.

“Back when I lived in town, they always saw the soldiers above everyone else, but that made no sense to me. The soldiers wouldn’t be able to do their jobs without the clothiers or the blacksmiths or the cooks. Just like those people wouldn’t be able to do their jobs without the hunters and gatherers. I love the way things work here. They all rely on each other, so they are all equal. Except maybe the women.”

My brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

She sighed, pressing her lips together. “Well, it’s weird, but clans like these somehow only produce baby boys. There has never been a recorded girl born to a clan member. That’s why they need to go to town for tributes. They can’t sustain their lifestyle without new members and they can’t have kids without females. Since the continuation of the clan is so important, they see tributes as a place of honor. A man can’t sit around in the clan and do nothing, but a tribute can, especially if she’s pregnant. While we aren’t really in a place of power, we’re treated with great respect and if someone insulted us, it is treated almost like a crime. Not that it happens that often, like I said, they see tributes as honorable, but it happens sometimes.”

I sank in on myself a little. “Should... Should I be working? Rath never said anything. I’m not good at a lot. I can try...”

She shook her head, putting her hand on my arm to soothe me. “Relax. Just because you’re the first male tribute doesn’t change your title. You might not produce babies, but you do provide comfort and companionship to our strongest hunter. If you want to work, we can ask around and find you something to do, but right now your job is to learn the language, how the clan works, and decide if you want to stay with your protector.”

My brows snapped together. “I have a choice?”

“Of course you do,” she assured me. “They don’t force people into relationships. It can honestly take a while for tributes to find someone they’re comfortable with. The first people they’re assigned to are their protectors, who teach them the ways of the clan so they can understand better that they are safe here. Then they are introduced to the clan proper. If they choose not to stay with their protector, they can choose whoever they want. Some even leave to other clans to see if there are better prospects out there.”

It was nice to hear that they didn't force people. Honestly, most of the conversation was helpful. But it still felt like it didn't apply to me. I wasn't a woman. I couldn't provide babies. I'd done nothing but cause trouble and restless nights for Rath. What did they want with me?

After giving me a better idea of how things worked, Zoya gave me a crash course in the language. She taught me how to ask for things, important words like clan leader and healer, how to get help if someone was hurt. She was firmer than Rath, forcing me to use full sentences, and she invited a few other women over to join us and demanded they only speak in the barbarian language to better expose me to it. Whenever I looked confused, she translated, but mostly she encouraged me to listen and follow along as best I could.

Rath came back before supper, a large unfamiliar animal tied to his horse's back. Those who'd gone with him had smaller kills, but no one seemed to care one way or another. They provided for the clan. That was what was important. After handing off the animal to the cooks and his horse to the handlers, he made a beeline for me. My heartbeat stuttered a little at the intense look on his face. I worried for a moment that he was angry at me for some reason. Maybe he expected me to find something to do while he was gone. All of Zoya's reassurances fled from my mind, and I bit back a whimper when he stopped in front of me.

"Korvash," he called, kneeling in front of me.

He reached for me, but Zoya stopped him with a harsh, "No." It made him freeze, and he looked surprised, but she narrowed her eyes and pointed at his hands, saying something I didn't quite catch. Rath withdrew his hands with a frown and stood again. As terrifying as I found him, the idea of him leaving was even worse and I sat a little straighter when he took a step back.

"W-Wait, I didn't mean—"

Rath froze again and a pained look flashed across his face. He looked conflicted, though I didn't understand why. I didn't understand anything that was happening. I just didn't want him to go.

"Finn," Zoya called, her voice gentling a little. "I told him to go wash first. He's got blood on his hands from the hunt."

Oh. My gaze dropped to his hands, which were stained red. She stopped him from reaching for me because he would've probably gotten it on my face had he done what it looked like he'd intended.

"I-I—" I didn't know what to say. I stopped him from leaving, not realizing that he wasn't tossing me aside like my family had, and I didn't have enough grasp of the language to take it back. My cheeks burned and I dropped my gaze, wishing I could crawl under a rock somewhere. First I was terrified of him, now I was clingy. I really was pathetic.

Rath knelt again in front of me. He kept his hands to himself, instead dipping his head to rest our foreheads together. It was an affectionate gesture and it made my heart burst into a gallop in my chest. He murmured something in his language, but I didn't ask anyone for a translation. I focused on his tone instead. No judgment, no annoyance. He was soothing me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, in his language for his benefit. He shook his head, which was a little silly with the way we were pressed together.

"My Finn. No sorry," he whispered back.

Oh, how I wanted to lean into that possessiveness. He made me feel wanted, and I craved that feeling so much, I felt close to tears. I held back, since I figured he wouldn't go clean up if I cried. I didn't want him to be uncomfortable just to comfort

me. But when he got back, I didn't fight him when he pulled me against his side. It was safe and warm and I needed it. I needed him. Did he feel the same way about me?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am

Six

After the first hunt, I felt more comfortable taking Finn out of my tent. A part of me wished to keep him to myself, but that was selfish. He hadn't chosen me back yet. He would be introduced eventually. Orthorr wanted to introduce him to the clan at the new life ceremony the following evening. Earlier than most tributes, but he was well behaved when I was hunting and I didn't think he was interested in running or causing trouble. He'd need a translator, since we hadn't gotten very far in his language learning, but Zoya seemed fond enough of him and when I asked, she said she would be happy to sit with him and help him to understand.

Today, I had plans to introduce Finn to my stallion. When we were walking back to my tent the evening prior, I saw his gaze stray to the field the horses were kept in. He looked curious, and Vann was a good horse. A good judge of character. They should meet before any decisions are made.

Finn's small hand tightened in mine and he edged closer to me when a few of my clan brothers passed by. I pressed my lips together to hide my frown. Maybe he wasn't ready to meet the clan yet. He was still frightened. The only people he seemed to trust were me and Zoya. As much pleasure as it brought me that he seemed to trust me with his safety, I didn't want to push too hard, too fast.

I thought to mention it to Orthorr, but we arrived at the field before I could change course and Finn stood on his toes for a better look, curiosity overwhelming his fear. He weighed less than a full grown zorvash, so it was easy for me to lift him to give him a better vantage.

“Oh!” He clung uneasily to my shoulder, seated on my forearm. His wide, pale blue eyes locked on me, a flush overtaking his cheeks. I wanted to explore that expression, but I held myself back, jerking my chin toward the field. He took in an unsteady breath, turning his attention to where I directed.

“Many,” he breathed. His grasp of the language had grown since sitting with Zoya, and I appreciated his dedication to learning. Not all tributes cared to learn. Some didn’t know the language at all.

“Mm. One for everyone.” I doubted he could fully understand what I said, but it was important to immerse him. He’d understand eventually.

“Everyone?” he repeated with a tip of his head. “Tributes?”

Ah. He understood more than I thought. I considered his question with a frown. “No. Not all. Too big.”

While the women had the option to learn to ride, many complained the stallions were too big to ride. The towns had smaller horses, but no one had ever bothered to look into purchasing some. The women rode with their protectors while we were on the move. Or in a carriage if riding didn’t suit them.

“Oh...” Finn looked disappointed at my answer. If he wanted to learn, I’d teach him, but maybe not yet. He was still frightened and the handlers could be obnoxious. Like Godr. He came our way, leading Vann towards the fence where we were waiting. My blood brother had a big grin on his face, his eyes straying more than once to Finn. I set him down and tucked him against me, glaring at my brother in warning. My Finn.

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

I made a face. “I called for Vann. You are only to bring him to me. Go back to your

work.”

“Don’t be cruel,” he chided, leaning against the fence that kept the larger threats away from the stallions. They could fight with hooves and teeth, but they rested better with some protection and guards.

Proving that Vann was a better brother than Godr, the stallion nipped at his elbow and bullied him out of the way, leaning over the fence to press his forehead against mine. I stroked his neck, humming my approval, while Godr complained like he had his heart broken.

I ignored him, stepping back and pushing Finn closer to introduce the two. “My Finn. Meet Vann.”

He trembled where he stood, such a gentle spirit, so I stepped up behind him with a hand on his hip, using the other to lift his palm to Vann’s nose. Vann was a patient stallion, he didn’t rush the frightened man. He sniffed curiously and nudged Finn’s hand in greeting before lowering his head closer to Finn’s level.

“He wants to greet,” I said, showing Finn by pressing my forehead to Vann’s for a moment. Finn took an unsteady step forward, mimicking my movements. He wasn’t tall enough to reach Vann’s forehead, even with Vann’s help, so I lifted him again, giving him a boost so they could greet properly.

I watched, fascinated, as Finn melted against the stallion, a smile stretching across his face as Vann shifted to tuck the smaller man under his chin. It was a gesture to comfort, something I did to Finn when he woke at night in tears. Finn took it as such and when I set him on his feet, he moved closer, cuddling the massive stallion, tears swimming in his eyes.

“He likes stallions,” Godr said with an obnoxious smile. “Perhaps I should take over

his care.” He was watching Finn like a man interested in making a claim. It irritated me. I wanted to whisk Finn away back to my tent, but watching him with Vann made me hesitate. I couldn’t take away his joy.

“Don’t touch,” I growled at him.

He glanced at me, a teasing comment on his tongue, but he hesitated when he saw my face. His brows drew together slowly.

“You intend to claim him.”

If he chose me, yes. Having Finn around soothed something inside me. I wanted to keep him with me always. I couldn’t say that, though. I didn’t want to sway Finn into thinking he didn’t have a choice.

“We will go for a ride. You can go,” I said gruffly, purposely ignoring the question.

Godr didn’t fight me, which was a first. He straightened and his expression softened into something more kind. “You deserve a bondmate, brother. I hope he accepts you, so you will be happy.”

He gripped my shoulder and squeezed affectionately. I returned the gesture and jerked my chin toward the field, where two stallions were standing off. “Your troublemaker is going to start a fight.”

His head whipped over his shoulder and he sighed, exasperated, shouting as he marched away. “Don’t start!” he bellowed. Not that the stallion would listen. He was young and headstrong. He needed more time to be trained.

Finn was still cuddled against Vann, but he watched us curiously, craning his neck to see around Vann’s massive frame. “Everything okay?”

I hummed, hopping the fence and beckoning Finn closer. He looked reluctant to leave his spot, but Vann nudged him to follow me, like a good friend. I helped Finn over the fence and lifted him onto Vann's back. He let out a startled sound, clinging to Vann's neck. Worried he would be too frightened to enjoy it, I mounted Vann behind him, pulling the smaller man against my chest so he felt more secure. He held tightly to my arm around his waist, sucking in a breath when I urged Vann into motion. It was a smooth ride, just around the fenced area, but after a few frightened moments, Finn relaxed and enjoyed himself. And he was smiling when we finished.

I found myself willing to do a great many things to earn that smile again.

For lunch, I took Finn back to my tent. I could only be selfish for another day, and I used that as an excuse to get time alone with him. He didn't seem bothered by the separation, pointing out words he recognized while he ate. He was picking it up quickly. I was proud of him for that.

"Rath?" His questioning tone drew my focus away from my meal. He fumbled for the right words, his face flushing bright red as he asked, "Do you enjoy males?"

My brow furrowed. I wasn't sure what he meant by that at first. It was when his blush deepened and he ducked his head that I clued in on what he meant. "I am attracted to males. Are you?"

Admittedly, until this moment, I never thought to ask. He was a tribute, so the assumption was that his preference was for males. Now I waited on bated breath, worried I'd assumed when I shouldn't have. I was willing to try and convince him, maybe he just hadn't experienced it yet, but it would make things difficult. I wasn't going to force him to stay if he was uninterested in males. And he had no reason to be here if he was only attracted to females.

Thankfully, he nodded, his voice small when he agreed. "I'm attracted to males.

That's why..."

He said something in his own language, I couldn't understand what, but he looked ashamed. I wished I understood him better. None of the other hunters knew much about the town languages. Only one had his own bondmate, and he said the only town words she used with him were when she was irate with him. Those weren't helpful right now, though I did demand he teach them to me, so I would be aware if Finn was upset with me.

Reaching for him, I cupped his cheek, biting back a smile when he leaned into the touch. I didn't want him to think I took joy in his upset. But his continued acceptance of my touch made me hopeful of the future. If I kept showing him I wanted to care for him, perhaps he'd choose me back.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am

Seven

After so many nights of waking up to nightmares, it was disconcerting when the dreams shifted. Gone was my father's angry snarl, and in its place was Rath's gentle touch and his steady patience. The way he touched me started innocently enough, his roughened hands from so many years of hunting running gently along my skin. I practically purred with pleasure, plastering myself against him as his hands skimmed down my back.

I was so deliriously happy, I almost didn't register when his hands went lower. He cupped my behind, squeezing suggestively, and a moan escaped me. No one had ever touched me like that before. I liked it, wanted more, but I didn't know how to ask. And the more anxious I got, the more the dream seemed to slip through my fingers. I fought against it, trying to keep the dream going, but I woke up a few moments later, my erection hard and arching and pressed up against Rath's thigh.

Realization hit me like a bucket of cold water. My eyes flew open, and I spun around so quickly, if Rath hadn't been awake, he was now. Facing the wall of the tent, I willed my erection to go away, but it refused to go. I was still in Rath's arms, the scent of him still strong in my nose. It was fuel to the fire, and I felt my erection thicken even more at the reminder. I felt close to reaching completion just lying there next to him. The humiliation would be unbearable. He'd made me a few sets of clothes so I could change when they got dirty, but I didn't want to soil them with my seed. He'd notice. I could cry from embarrassment just thinking about it.

The embarrassment was what helped temper my need. When Rath finally released me and sat up, I was afraid to face him, worried he'd noticed my problem, but he said

nothing about it, waiting for me to follow him outside to relieve ourselves. We took turns, Rath still giving me privacy to do my business, and he offered me his hand on the way back. I took it because it brought me comfort, despite my embarrassing reaction that morning. And it always seemed to make him smile when I touched him. Like it meant as much to him as it did to me.

We stayed in the tent that morning, though I wasn't entirely sure why. He seemed happy to bring me out the day before. Meeting his horse had been lovely, and I kind of hoped he'd take me to see the animal again that morning, but Rath seemed content to stay in the tent with me. I heard noises outside, but Rath didn't react to them, so it wasn't anything unusual, I guess.

"What's wrong?" he asked. He was back to carving, though he still hadn't told me what he was making yet. It was circular, probably about the size of my palm, but that was all the detail I could get.

Forming the sentence in my head first so I could say it properly, I asked, "What's the noise?"

He tipped his head, listening, before responding. "Preparation. We celebrate new birth tonight. And introduce you to the clan."

My stomach sank. Zoya explained that to me. After a tribute has gotten more comfortable with the clan dynamics and their protectors, they're introduced to the clan as a whole. Not only to meet the people they'd be living with, but also to give them the opportunity to find someone else to connect with. I didn't want that. I wanted to stay with Rath.

"Korvash. Don't fear. You're safe."

"What does that word mean?" He'd called me it more than once, but never translated

it. And I was looking for any excuse to not think about meeting the entire clan.

Setting down his carving, he reached for me, pulling me into his lap. Like he could see right through me, he ignored my question, tucking my head under his chin as he repeated. "You're safe."

I wanted so badly to trust him. He sounded so determined, like he'd make sure I was safe, no matter what. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing myself to let go and just trust him. It was going to be okay. Rath would keep me safe.

My outfit for meeting the clan wasn't something Rath made for me. It was brought to me by a woman with a rounded pregnant belly and bright red curls. She stayed long enough to make sure it fit me before wishing me luck and disappearing again.

I tugged self consciously at the material, trying to cover more of myself. The flowy material of the trousers didn't bother me so much. They cinched at the ankles and were silky soft. It was the top that made me uncomfortable. It wrapped around my waist and draped over my shoulder, exposing half my chest. It could be worse. Rath wasn't even wearing a shirt. He had his necklaces and some kind of belt made of similar fabric as my top, but otherwise, it was just him and his tattoos.

"Won't you be cold?"

His brows furrowed as he turned to look at me. I lapsed into my own language when I was nervous, and he didn't understand me. I tried again, this time in his language.

"Rath not cold?"

The corner of his mouth ticked up, and he shook his head. "Fire warm. It's fine."

Right. I forgot about that. The celebration was to be held in the village center. Which

made me feel better about getting cold, but it didn't help make me more comfortable. I tugged the material again, biting back a whimper.

Rath frowned, stepping up to me with his head tipped in question. "What's wrong?"

It was the second time he'd asked me that today, and this time it was harder to be forthcoming. I didn't want to complain and make him angry with me. He'd been patient a long time, but if he wanted to hand me off, tonight would be the night to do it. If I wanted him to keep me, I had to keep him happy.

I shook my head, forcing a smile. "N-Nothing. Should we go?"

He didn't move, studying me for a moment before tugging the material off my shoulder. I covered myself immediately, never fully comfortable walking around shirtless. My brothers did it all the time, but I kept my tunic on unless bathing. Rath didn't pay me much mind, working around me as he wrapped the material around my torso before draping it over my shoulder again. It didn't drape quite as long as before, but it covered all but my shoulders and arms and the relief was overwhelming.

Tears pricked my eyes, and I ducked my head as I whispered a shaky, "Thank you."

He cupped my jaw, forcing my face back up, and stroked his thumb over my cheek to dash the stray tear away. Instead of saying something, he pressed another soft kiss to my forehead, leaning into it just long enough to make my eyes slip closed in response to the sweet gesture. When he pulled away, I almost rocked forward, chasing the affection only he could give me.

"Come. We meet the clan now."

Right. I kept my face carefully neutral, though I probably wasn't doing a very good job of it. Rath didn't comment when I clung to his arm as we got closer to the

crowded village center, nor did he push me away. He led me through the crowd, introducing me to different members of his clan. It hurt my heart when he didn't call me his Finn, but he still took care of me like he always did. He kept me closer to the fire, so I stayed warm, spoke slowly so I understood him better, and when I started to get overwhelmed, he pulled me toward the cushions to sit, tucking me against his side so I could stay warm farther from the fire.

Zoya came to join us not long later, introducing me to her barbarian, a large fighter named Khaul. His hair was shorter than Rath's, but similarly shaved on the sides. He had tattoos too, but they were marred in places with scars, probably thanks to his profession. What surprised me the most was that he spoke my language, just like Zoya. Stilted, it was obviously not his first language, but still good enough for me to understand.

"You are most welcome, Finn. Tributes bring joy to the clan."

"I, uh... Thank you..." I didn't really have a choice to come, but now that I was here, I didn't want to leave either.

"Has Rath shown you his favorite place?" he queried, tipping back a cup full of some kind of alcohol. Rath had offered me some, and it was sweet, but potent, and I ended up choking on it. Now I could only have small sips of it from his cup, so I didn't overdo it again.

"What place?" I looked up and over my shoulder at Rath, who smiled indulgently. He was quiet tonight, mostly watching the festivities, though he was a steady presence at my back as I interacted with the few people who approached me. Zoya helped translate too, which was nice.

Khaul jerked his chin toward the forest. "The hunter loves his forest. He would live there alone if we didn't force him to stay."

“Oh...” I looked warily over at the forest. Rath had warned me against going in there. He said it was dangerous. But he loved it anyway. I frowned, dropping my eyes to my lap. I never liked going into scary places. My brothers tricked me once into going into a hut on the outskirts of town. They told me our father was waiting for me, only to lock me inside and reveal that it was haunted. I cried for hours until someone from town heard me and let me out. Nothing even happened, but I was frightened all the same. I wasn't sure I could handle walking around in a forest full of dangers. Would that be a sticking point for Rath?

The clan leader called out to get everyone's attention, drawing the focus to a young woman with a bundle in her arms. The clan barked out a chant as one, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Zoya explained it was a chant to welcome the new babe to the clan, and after they were through, each member would go greet the little thing and press a small dot of ash to the babe's skin. She said something about what it meant, but Rath got up to join the line to meet the baby and pressed a kiss to the top of my head and I tuned everything else out. He'd been a little standoffish since we came out, but that was a good sign. Right?

The line was long and would obviously take a while, so when my bladder started making demands, I tapped Zoya's shoulder and asked what to do.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “You should be fine to go on your own. You've been introduced now, so you don't need constant supervision. I'll let Rath know if he comes back before you're through. Just go past those tents. It's not far.” She waved a hand in the direction of the trench. It felt a little weird to go on my own after almost a week of constant supervision, but my bladder wouldn't be ignored and I didn't want to pull Rath out of line to go with me. I figured if I made it quick, no one would even notice my absence.

“So you're the little whore they're bending all the rules for.”

I'd just finished and was tying my trousers again when someone spoke behind me. Not a voice I recognized, but the tone was familiar. Filled with disdain and superiority. My spine stiffened, and I turned slowly to face the small group of women who'd appeared at my back. Five in total, all unfamiliar to me. And all of them looked angry.

"I-I'm sorry?"

"You should be," the middle one hissed. "This place was bad enough without being tainted with people like you."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am

Eight

Like a habit, my gaze drifted to where I'd left Finn. Not because I believed he'd run, but because I knew he was still nervous and wanted to check on him. When I noticed the spot next to Zoya was empty, my shoulders tensed, and I immediately scanned the surrounding area. Where had he gone?

"Brother!" Verus said brightly, clapping my shoulder as he sidled up next to me. "You look well. How are things with Finn?"

"He's not where I left him," I murmured.

Verus tracked my gaze and frowned, but shrugged nonchalantly. "Maybe he had to relieve himself. He was drinking with you, yes? I saw so myself."

I grunted in agreement, shuffling forward with the line to greet the new babe. It was true, I had been giving Finn small drinks of my ale. If the need arose, it would take me a while to get back to him, so going by himself made sense. Still, a growing sense of unease thrummed through me. The longer he was gone, the more I worried.

I was at the front of the line, next to greet the babe, when I heard Finn's scream. I moved on instinct, racing through the crowds toward where I'd heard the sound. I nearly ran into a group of tributes who were wandering toward the food tables, ducking around them in my haste to get to Finn. The light was muted past the circle of tents and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. I couldn't see him and I hurried forward, worried he'd run off into the trees, but a whimper halted my footsteps.

“Brother? What’s wrong?” Verus asked as he joined me. A few others came as well, all frowning at me.

“Finn,” was all I said. I shushed him when he opened his mouth to ask more questions, listening. They all fell silent. I cast around for a clue of where Finn had gone. Another choked sob drifted on the wind, but it was confusing. He sounded close, but I couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Brother...” Verus said again, this time gripping my shoulder. When I glanced at him, his gaze was not on me, but lower, his finger pointed toward the trench.

Horror slammed into me when I saw him. The trench was used by the entire clan, and while it was drained regularly, it was not a place anyone wanted to slip and fall. Most would have probably thrown down a rope and asked for Finn to climb out himself, but the poor thing had fallen hard enough to get stuck. He choked on sobs, trying to free himself, and I knew he wouldn’t be able to manage it on his own. Without questioning it, I climbed into the trench, ignoring the smell as I reached for Finn.

“N-No!” he protested, big tears streaming down his face. I recognized the embarrassment, he made that expression before, and normally I would give him space to figure things out on his own, but I couldn’t do that now. My heart couldn’t take leaving him there.

Plucking him out of the mess, I cradled him to my chest. He shook with great sobs, refusing to touch me. Not like it would make a difference. We were both covered by now. A rope dropped, and I took it, holding Finn against me with one arm as I climbed out. Once I was on solid ground, I turned and headed away from the festivities. I’d been avoiding taking Finn to the river, he didn’t handle the cold well, but it was necessary. He needed to be clean.

I didn't bother to undress, heading straight into the water. Finn gasped at the cold, but

like the first night, I ignored his tears to care for him properly. When we were deep enough that the water went to his chest, I stripped him out of the soiled clothes before starting on my own. Finn was shaking, his arms wrapped around his middle, and he wouldn't look at me.

"Rath," Godr called from the hill overlooking the river. He tossed me a bar of soap without a word and stood guard with his back to us. This far from the main parts of the village, the creatures of the forest were more brave and could attack if not on guard. Usually, we bathed in large groups for safety. That wouldn't happen now. No one was getting near Finn without my say so.

I was cleaning off his face when he flinched. I frowned, tipping his head up with a knuckle under his chin to study his face. I hadn't noticed it before because he kept his head down, but there were scratches on his face. Not from a fall. They were too close together. They looked like they came from a person.

Outrage filled my chest and my voice was foreboding when I asked, "Who hurt you?"

He shook his head, doing his best to free himself from my grasp. I couldn't allow that. I was his protector. Someone hurt him on my watch. I needed to handle it.

"Finn. Tell me. Who hurt you? Is that why you fell?" If he was attacked and stumbled, it would explain how he ended up in the trench. Unless... "Did they push you?"

Whether he didn't understand or he just didn't want to answer, he kept shaking his head. I wanted to keep pushing, but his teeth were chattering. He was too cold to stay out here much longer. I needed to get him clean.

With quick efficiency, I cleaned off every inch of his skin. He wouldn't take the bar to clean his privates himself, so I apologized before doing that as well. I didn't linger,

just made sure he was thoroughly cleaned before moving on. By the time I was done, his pale skin was pink in the moonlight, and his lips were turning blue. I wasn't nearly as dirty as he was, so I quickly scrubbed and tucked him against me, using my body heat to keep him warm as we came out of the water.

I had no clothes with us, and I wasn't touching the soiled ones, but Godr proved he was a good brother by having a blanket waiting to cover Finn. I cared little for my own nudity, used to undressing around my brothers to bathe or change. Finn was shy, not even comfortable to have his chest exposed, and I didn't want to parade him in front of the clan and embarrass him further.

The blanket wasn't enough to warm him, but it kept him covered as I marched us back to my tent. When I set him on his feet so I could dress him, his legs went out from under him and I had to lower him to the bed so he wouldn't hurt himself. I tugged one of my tunics over his head, lacing the front tightly so it wouldn't fall off him.

I spared a moment to pull on some legwear before wrapping the blanket around Finn and scooping him up again. When I ducked out of my tent, my brothers were waiting for me, each with a worried expression on their faces.

“Have Zoya meet me at the fighter's fire.”

Verus was quick to respond, nodding his head and running off to fetch the healer. With the cuts and the unhygienic fall, I didn't want to chance Finn getting sick. I marched him away from the village center and to a fire nearer to the edge of the forest. There were smaller fires, since eating all together could get tedious. The fighters lived all together for easier training and their fire was second biggest after the village center. I wasn't bringing Finn near the clan again until I figured out who attacked him.

He trembled in my arms, his face hidden against my chest. His hands were icy cold, but I didn't flinch from the touch. He could take what he needed from me.

A few fighters sat around the fire, probably the first to greet the new arrival so they could escape to have a more relaxed gathering. They shot me curious looks when I joined them, but none asked questions. Janis, a fighter who I'd fought alongside a time or two, offered me some ale, but I shook my head, sitting as close to the fire as I would dare and curling myself tighter around Finn. He accepted the hold without a sound. It worried me. Normally, in his upset, he made plenty of noise. Little whimpers and sniffles to let me know how he felt. Now he was silent and unmoving, his breathing shallow like he was trying not to move an inch.

"Korvash," I whispered, ducking so he could better hear me. "Tell me who hurt you. It's my job to keep you safe."

No reply. I wanted to rage, to tear through the celebrations to find who'd attacked my Finn. I couldn't without releasing him, and nothing, not even vengeance, could pull me away from him now.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am

Nine

“T his place is bad enough without being tainted with people like you.”

I thought I'd finally escaped that mindset. No one I'd met thus far had even batted an eye at a male tribute, or my budding relationship with Rath. But that was probably because I was never outside of his sight. No one wanted to pick a fight with someone that big and skilled at hunting. They waited until he was away from me to tell me how they truly felt.

“You're only a hole to fuck. He'll toss you aside the minute he finds his bondmate. It won't be a boy. It'll be a woman who can give him what he needs.”

I'd stupidly tried to protest, arguing that Rath wasn't interested in women, just like me. It made the angry woman violent, and she lashed out, slapping me so hard her nails cut into my skin.

“You don't belong here.”

“You're a freak.”

“Whore.”

Each shout was like a physical hit, and I retreated on instinct. I hadn't realized they were herding me in a certain direction until the middle one smirked at me.

“Let me show you where you truly belong.”

Then she pushed me hard enough to send me into the waste filled trench. I cried out in surprise, which caused them to run, but she'd pushed me hard enough that I got stuck, and no matter how hard I fought, I couldn't get free. I was humiliated and scared when I heard Rath's voice. I tried to stifle myself so he wouldn't find me there, but he found me anyway. He had to climb into the mess with me to get me out and no matter how hard I tried to keep myself away from him, he still ended up covered in waste.

Now, sitting in front of a smaller fire, I couldn't look at him. I couldn't look at anyone. I made myself as small as possible and stayed silent. Who knew who else felt that way and was just waiting for me to be alone. If I hadn't been so obvious about how I felt about Rath, maybe they would have left me alone. Then I wouldn't have dragged Rath down with me.

"Over here," Verus's familiar voice said solemnly as he approached. I heard footsteps, but I didn't look up. Not even when Zoya spoke to me.

"Finn. Are you hurt? Can I see?"

No. I didn't want to show her or anyone else. Admitting I was attacked by a woman and she won would get me tossed out faster than my father had thrown me away. It only added to the humiliation. I was supposed to be a man, supposed to be able to protect myself. But I only ever disgraced the people connected to me. I was better off alone.

"Korvash," Rath urged, his tone tight with irritation. I wanted to do what he told me, just so he'd hate me a little less, but I couldn't.

They whispered to each other over my head, but when I wouldn't look up, Rath took things into his own hands like he normally did when I wouldn't listen. His grip on my jaw was tight enough that I couldn't break free, but loose enough not to hurt me. He

lifted my face and turned it enough to show Zoya the cuts on my cheek. I kept my eyes squeezed shut, tears slipping out unbidden.

“You’re right,” she murmured to Rath. I didn’t catch everything she said, but I caught the gist. “Not from a fall... Attacked? By who?... No, it won’t...”

Tuning them out, I tried harder to free myself from Rath’s grasp. This time he allowed it, his big hand cupping the back of my head as I hid my face against his chest again. His rumbling voice against my ear loosened the knot in my throat, little by little, and after a while, the exhaustion from the encounter overwhelmed me and I fell asleep.

I woke up alone in Rath’s tent. I figured he’d give me up eventually, especially after the humiliation from earlier, but it still hurt and I burst into silent tears, pulling the blankets over my head. I was never going to get a happy ending. All those books I read were a lie.

Crying until my eyes were swollen and my nose was stuffed up wasn’t pretty, but it was cathartic, in a way. It cleared my head enough to think clearly. I couldn’t go back to my home town. They’d kill me if I did. But maybe if I begged, Rath would send me somewhere new. A bigger town that I could more easily hide in. I’d take whatever job I could get and keep my head down. It wasn’t much of a life, but I wasn’t ready to give up on living yet.

I was so wrapped up in my plans, I didn’t notice the noise of the tent flap moving until a warm male body settled beside me.

“Korvash,” Rath murmured, running his hand over my head through the blanket.

I’d honestly expected him to avoid me until he could get rid of me, so I startled hard, jerking away from his touch. When I pulled the blanket down far enough to look at

him, he looked hurt, and the guilt twisted uncomfortably in my stomach. I sat up quickly, shaking my head.

“S-Sorry! You startled me!” I reached for him to reassure him, but then jerked my hand back when I remembered my earlier humiliation. He was comforting me. That didn’t mean he wanted me.

“I-I’m fine. You don’t need to coddle me. You should get some rest. Oh!” I realized belatedly that I was still in his bed. He probably wanted that back. “I’ll sleep on the floor. I’m sorry. I—”

He caught me before I could fully climb out of the bed, dragging me back into his lap. I tried to protest, mostly out of embarrassment, but he didn't let up, and when I struggled too much, he rolled over so I was trapped underneath him on the bed.

Unwelcome heat swept through me at the intimate position. I turned my face away, my cheeks burning, and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to think of something other than the weight of his body against mine.

“Finn. My Finn. Look at me.”

I shook my head. The embarrassment was too much. I couldn’t face him.

Apparently, his patience ran out, but instead of yelling or hurting me, he buried his face against my neck, his beard tickling the sensitive skin. The move made me squirm and twist to get away, and when he lifted his head, I couldn’t look away again without prompting another tickle attack.

His smile warmed me to my core as he stared down at me. When he pressed his forehead against mine, my eyes slipped shut again, this time soaking in the moment. I loved when he did that. It made my heart skip, and I wished not for the first time that

I could stay like that forever.

“I feared for you,” he murmured, his voice solemn.

Some of the warmth drifted away, but I couldn’t curl in on myself like I wanted to. Not with how we were positioned. I had no choice but to face him head on.

“I’m sorry...”

He shook his head, nuzzling against me. “No. No sorry. Who hurt you?”

I couldn’t answer that even if I wanted to. She didn’t stop to introduce herself. When I didn’t answer, Rath sighed heavily.

“Finn... My Finn. I...” He growled, like he wanted to say something but didn’t know how to communicate it. If he kept me, I’d throw myself into learning the language so he’d never be annoyed with me again.

Shifting only enough to take my hand, he pressed it to his chest right over his heart, looking at me with fierce determination. “My Finn. Safe.” He said it then in my language, pressing my hand harder to his chest. “Safe. With me.”

I got what he was trying to say. He wanted to keep me safe. By not telling him who hurt me, I wasn’t letting him protect me. No one had ever cared so much about my safety before. I thought I’d cried all the tears I had, but more sprouted in my eyes, spilling over my temples and into my hair.

Rath shook his head. “No. No sad. Safe.”

I didn’t know how else to tell him I trusted him. So, even though it was probably the worst kiss ever, I lifted my head and pressed my lips to his.

A lifetime of dreaming and pretending the characters in books were both men, so I could imagine a real romance, didn't prepare me for my first kiss. It was barely anything at first, a chaste brush of our lips, but when I pulled away, Rath followed me, taking my lips more firmly. My heart beat thundered in my ears, drowning out all my senses except for the touch of his lips on mine. Gentle sips at first, then deeper, his tongue pushing between my lips to tangle with mine. I hadn't been expecting it, and my body lit up in response, my back arching to press myself more firmly against him.

His weight settled more firmly on top of me, giving me the warm and safe feeling I craved. Thick fingers combed through my hair, making me shiver and mewl for more. I never thought I was touch starved, but the more Rath touched me, the more I wanted from him.

By the time Rath pulled away, I was panting and my lips felt swollen from the attention. He leaned his forehead against mine again, his smile strained.

"You need sleep," he murmured, brushing his lips against mine again like he couldn't resist. Then he drew away completely.

I whimpered out a protest, clinging to him and shaking my head. "Don't go. Please."

I'd said it in my own language, desperation making it hard to translate my thoughts, but he seemed to understand me. He shifted his weight so he was close, but wouldn't crush me, his big body blanketing me like I wanted. I cuddled as close as I could and he tucked my head under his chin before rumbling out, "Sleep well, my Finn."

I swear, in that moment, I fell hard for the barbarian who claimed me.

Ten

It was getting embarrassing how often I was waking up hard and needy. The first few days after the attack, it was fine. I woke up cuddled against Rath and happy. But eventually the dirty dreams came back, and they were getting more salacious as time went on. Every smirk and smile he sent my way was fuel for more dirty dreams. Twice now, I woke up grinding my arousal against his hip, so close to completion, a stiff breeze would have pushed me over the edge.

I wasn't naïve enough to think Rath didn't notice. He wasn't oblivious. But he was kind enough not to bring it up, waiting long enough for me to calm down before starting our daily routine. He forced me out of the tent when I tried to hide after my attack, but instead of bringing me to the village center, he left me with his brother instead while he went hunting. Godr was a goofball, and he still hadn't learned to slow down his speech so I could only get half of what he was saying to me, but I liked watching him train the younger horses and he let me visit with the calmer ones while he was busy.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I ran through what I planned to do with my day. Or, at least, that had been my intention. But instead of ignoring it like he normally did, Rath pulled me in tighter, pressing a small kiss right below my ear.

“You hide from me, my Finn.”

“N-No, I don't,” I protested, squirming when his thumb brushed over my nipple as he tugged me closer.

He nipped my neck just rough enough to make me gasp before soothing the sting with a kiss. He was more affectionate since our first kiss, but he'd never been this forward before. My stomach flipped when his hand moved lower and I almost wanted to let him touch me, but the embarrassment overwhelmed me before he could and I caught his wrist to stop him.

Usually, my apprehension was enough to stop him. When he tried to kiss me out in the field while visiting Vann and I shied away, he didn't push. He detoured and kissed the top of my head instead before taking me on a short ride with him. This time, he was determined to get me to admit I was hiding something from him. No amount of fighting or squirming helped, and I ended up flat on my back with my arms trapped over my head. My breath caught in my throat as the weight of him settled against my throbbing erection. I tried to look anywhere but at him, embarrassed at my reaction.

"Finn. Look at me," he cajoled, running his nose along my jaw.

I shook my head. I was too embarrassed. At least until he moved his hips, and I felt his erection rub against mine. My response was immediate and even more embarrassing than the erection. I let out a lusty moan, bucking my hips to get him to repeat the movement. He did, and I almost reached completion with that one move.

"Finn..." Rath's voice was strained and when I finally looked up at him, his expression was heat and pain, like he was fighting to keep his control.

I remembered what Zoya said about tributes having a choice. I never actually told Rath I wanted him. He was reacting like any man would to someone squirming and moaning against him, but he didn't know how I felt about it.

"Please... Please don't stop."

That time, it was his turn to groan. He rocked against me, sending lightning shocks of pleasure exploding through me with every rut of his hips. I gasped and moaned, lifting my hips as much as I could, but I didn't have much leverage. Not until I got my legs free and spread them, so he lay between them.

“Finn,” Rath groaned, his pace increasing as he ground against me. Hearing my name on his lips, said so rough and lusty, had me spilling my seed, shooting over the edge with a cry. My whole body shook with the force of it, the thrash of my heart beat in my ears nearly drowning out Rath's moan as he reached completion just after me.

When I finally came down from the intensity of the release, my stomach was sticky, the tunic I slept in was wet, and the man I was falling for was looking at me like something precious. I was happy with that.

“Why?”

I was whining. I knew I was. But he said we had to go to the river to clean up. The thought of entering that icy water again was... I shuddered at the thought. Jailed for two days wasn't as torturous as that.

“To get clean. Come, my Finn. It is safe.”

That wasn't what I was worried about, but it did make me frown. Was it something I needed to worry about?

“Why did you say that? Is it ever unsafe?”

He pressed his lips together and refused to answer. With days of constantly using his language, I felt like I had a decent grasp of it, enough for him to explain things to me, but his refusal spoke volumes. Great. Something else to be terrified of.

Rath pulled me against him, running his fingers through my hair with a smile. “You are safe, my Finn.”

His constant determination to call me his melted me every single time he said it. I was his Finn. And if I wanted to stay his, I needed to embrace every aspect of being in the clan. Including the freezing river baths.

Lifting my chin, I nodded once. “Okay. Let’s go.”

We weren’t the only ones at the river this time. There was a group of men there, cleaning themselves briskly. Rath steered us away and farther down the river until we had some semblance of privacy. He stripped his clothes with quick efficiency and dove in, looking completely unbothered when he came up for air. Meanwhile, I barely got a toe in the water before I was scuttling back away from the edge, my head shaking rapidly.

“No. It’s too cold. I can’t.”

Rath’s expression was patient amusement. He put his hand out and waited for me, pride stretching across his face when I relented and entered the water. I loved that look, and it almost made getting into the water worth it. It was horrible, so cold I couldn’t breathe, and it felt like my testicles were trying to climb back up into my body. I hurried forward, pressing myself against Rath to steal his warmth as much as I was able, my teeth chattering from the icy cold.

Rath hummed, rubbing his rough hand along my spine. “We won’t get clean this way.”

“Y-Yes we will. Y-You can work around me,” I chattered, considering climbing him to get closer. He felt warm between my thighs this morning. Couldn’t I have that again?

“No. It only makes me want to dirty you more.”

I didn't know what he meant by that until he pushed his erection against my belly. I gasped, looking up at him wide-eyed. “How can you be aroused right now? It's too cold!”

He barked out a laugh, his head thrown back, and my heart stuttered in my chest. He was so handsome. And right now, all mine. I felt my own arousal stir, brutal temperatures be damned, but besides a heated look and a kiss that was so dirty it warmed me to my toes, Rath didn't let us linger for a repeat of our morning activities. He lathered soap from a bar and scrubbed himself down, working around me just like I requested. When it was my turn, he didn't force me to move away, instead washing me himself. His hands left trails of heat in their wake, keeping me plenty warm until we were finished.

“M-Maybe the river i-isn't so bad,” I murmured as he ran soapy fingers through my hair.

“Mm. Hold your breath.”

Confused, I frowned up at him. He mimicked what he wanted, and I did as he asked, but I didn't understand why until he dunked my head under the water. I came out with a screech, this time not hesitating to climb him to get closer for warmth.

“Rath!”

He bellowed out another laugh, his eyes crinkled at the sides with his amusement.

“W-Why?” I whined, so cold I couldn't even feel my extremities anymore. At least my teeth stopped chattering.

“To get the soap out,” he replied with a grin. “There’s more left.”

I shook my head rapidly. “No. I’ll keep it there. I can’t do it again.”

His smile softened to affection, and he cradled me close with a hand on my lower back. “Hold on.”

Tightening my grip around his neck, I trusted him to maneuver me, tipping my head back when he dipped low enough to get my hair wet. He was quick about it, for which I was grateful, and he didn’t put me down as we got out of the water. Not until he dried me off with a cloth and I could put my clothes back on.

After Rath was dressed, he steered me to the fighter’s fire, as he called it. He still wouldn’t bring me to the village center until he figured out who hurt me. When I told him I didn’t know, he asked what they looked like, but it was too dark for me to tell. And I couldn’t admit out loud that it was a woman. I was too embarrassed. I liked the people at the fighter’s fire, though. They were loud and boisterous, but friendly and they didn’t blink twice at me cuddled in Rath’s lap as I attempted to get warm.

“No more river,” I complained, tucking my arms under his tunic to warm my hands. He flinched from the cold and nodded.

“Okay. No more river.”

We stayed that way until I could feel my extremities again. And when Zoya arrived for another language lesson, I was smiling.

Eleven

My Finn was happy, but I was still determined to find who hurt him. Leaving him in Zoya's care had not gone well last time, so I asked her bondmate to join them while Finn practiced speaking. He was much better after spending most of his days focused mostly on that, but he wanted to be fluent. And it was a convenient excuse to leave him without needing to hunt.

I marched to the village center to meet with Verus. He was helping me in the search. He broke off from the conversation he was having with some of the guards who had stood watch during the celebration, jogging over to join me.

"Brother. How is he?"

I appreciated his concern over Finn. He and Godr both had checked in often since his attack. They wanted me to find happiness and because I found it in Finn, they were determined to protect him for my sake. Neither was happy to hear about his attack.

"He hates the river. It's too cold for him."

Verus snorted, biting his lip to hide his amusement. "Considering his size, I'm not surprised. He has nothing to keep him warm."

Nothing but me. I wasn't unhappy about him pressing up against me while we washed. I'd keep bringing him there for that reason alone if he wasn't so icy cold when we were finished. I worried about him getting ill if he was constantly cold like that. I'd need to make preparations to better care for him come snowfall. He barely

slept comfortably, as it was. Perhaps a few furs would benefit him.

Shaking off the distraction, I tried to focus on Verus. “What did you hear?”

He pressed his lips together, the disappointment clear on his face. “Not much. A few saw Finn go to the trench to relieve himself. One even overheard him asking Zoya for permission first. But those patrolling weren’t in that area when he was attacked.”

Which meant we had nothing, aside from confirmation that my Finn was good natured and wouldn’t cause trouble, even now that he was fully introduced to the clan. While I appreciated that, it wasn’t helpful. Finn couldn’t tell me who attacked him, he said it was too dark to tell, but I got the feeling he wasn’t telling me everything. His eyes darted away any time I asked, like they did when he was embarrassed of something.

“Perhaps if we brought him around the clan more, we could see someone acting hostile?” Verus suggested.

It was a sound plan, and if it were anyone else, I would agree with it. But it was Finn. He was too sweet to use as bait to draw out his attacker.

While I was considering our options, someone bumped into me from behind. My reflexes were fast enough that when I spun around, I caught the female before she could fall to the ground. She clung to me, speaking in Finn’s language so fast I couldn’t even hope to understand her. I shot Verus a questioning look, but he was no better than I was at the town languages. The woman continued to talk, flapping her hand and giggling nervously. She didn’t seem to realize we couldn’t understand her and she still had not let go of my arms. Her nails dug into my skin, which was unpleasant. I had to practically pry her off me before I could step away from her.

“Where is your protector?” If she was clumsy, she should not have been wandering

around on her own, especially with the fire nearby.

She looked up at me blankly. I gave Verus a disgruntled look. The first word most tributes were taught was protector, so they knew who we were to them. If she didn't know that word, she was one of the tributes who refused to learn the language at all. It wasn't a practice I understood. It only made life more difficult for them.

Since Finn had taught me some of his words, repeating those I taught him in his own language so I could learn too, I attempted to communicate with her. "Where your protector?"

It was clear she understood me, but the face she made wasn't one I expected. She wrinkled her nose and crossed her arms petulantly, rattling something else off too fast for me to follow. I bit back a sigh. I purposely avoided tributes before now because I didn't want to deal with things like this. I was blessed at how accepting Finn was to the clan. He didn't complain and was determined to learn. His volunteering as tribute was a great gift to me.

Thankfully, Orthorr came to my rescue, coming to stand beside us. He understood the town languages and could communicate with the woman better than we could.

"Clan leader," I said respectfully, bowing slightly with my fist to my chest. "Can I request your assistance?"

He greeted me as he usually did before looking between my clan brother and me and the woman standing in front of us. "How can I help, my brother?"

"I... don't know. She does not speak our tongue. I asked where her protector was, but she didn't seem happy about my request."

Verus frowned at the woman for a moment before adding, "Has she been introduced

yet? Or is she wandering around when she shouldn't be?"

I wouldn't be able to answer that question. I paid little mind to the new tributes until their claiming days. I was not unkind to them, but some became unhappy when they approached me with interest, only for me to turn them down. I had no interest in females.

Orthorr turned to the woman, asking in her own tongue the questions we'd wanted to ask. Defiance overtook her face, and she glared at him, her voice tight and biting when she answered him. Orthorr was not amused by her behavior. He glanced at me, the annoyance clear across his face.

"She is protected by Feigrind. He is hunting this morning. She was supposed to stay in his tent."

I almost felt bad for my clan brother. Feigrind was a good man, a decent hunter, and dedicated to his clan. He wanted a bondmate badly. But given her reaction to his name and her disobedience, I doubted this woman would be it. She didn't react to him like Finn reacted to me. And when he was called to join us and he saw her wandering around, his reactions were nothing like I felt for Finn.

It made me that much more grateful for the little male who blessed me with his presence. I wanted to return to him, to ask him properly to be mine, but with Feigrind called back to deal with his tribute, someone had to hunt. And because I could trust Finn on his own, that someone had to be me.

I was reluctant to leave him that long, though, so instead of leaving him alone, I went looking for him. My Finn was braver than he let on, facing the icy river even though he was uncomfortable. He might be able to handle a hunt as well.

"The clan moves every moon cycle, following the herd, except ?during snowfall,

where the best game is in the forest,” I said slowly, making sure my words were correct.

Zoya beamed at me. “Correct. Some clans explore instead of following the herd, but those clans are smaller than ours. Fewer mouths to feed.”

I nodded along, repeating words I wasn’t familiar with. I was getting better. If they spoke slow enough, I could follow more conversations than just Rath talking to me. It was when they were speaking quickly that I couldn’t keep up. Zoya was helping with this by increasing her speed a little each day and quizzing me on the way the clan worked at the same time.

She frowned suddenly and shifted in her seat uncomfortably. When she put her hand against her stomach, I worried she was feeling ill. She was the healer, not me, and I wasn’t any good at figuring out what was wrong with people, but I felt compelled to ask what was wrong. She felt like my friend and I didn’t want her to struggle just because she said she’d help me learn. I could fetch another healer too, if she needed it.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Her smile was a little strained when she nodded, and she took a sip of water from a flask she’d brought along before explaining in our language.

“I believe I am with child. It has been a few months since my last cycle and my stomach is upset often. It will pass with time.”

My mouth fell open. “You’re pregnant?”

She lifted a shoulder. “I believe so. It’s my first, so I’ve never experienced it before, but I’ve assisted other healers in helping pregnant mothers, and the symptoms are

similar. If my belly grows, I'll know I was right."

Wow. I'd never met anyone who was pregnant before. It was just me, my father, and my brothers at home, and the only one married with children was my eldest brother, who lived in another town and didn't come home often. I wasn't around his wife when she was pregnant.

"Can I help? Did you need anything? Would you like to lie down?"

Her smile grew, and she patted my cheek affectionately. "I'm okay. You're lucky this isn't something you'll have to deal with. I wouldn't consider it pleasant."

My laugh was awkward, and I couldn't look her in the eye when I nodded. "Yeah. Lucky."

In a way, I was glad. I mean, I'd heard what women went through to have babies, and it wasn't something I ever wanted to experience. But I couldn't help but feel bad for depriving Rath of the joys of parenthood. He'd be a wonderful father. A lot more patient and kind than mine.

"Korvash," Rath's warm voice called for me, wiping away all my regrets and worries in an instant. I looked over my shoulder, smiling at him as he approached.

Zoya chuckled beside me. "I recognize that look. Are you smitten with a big barbarian of your own?"

A blush overtook my face. I ducked my head to hide it, but it was no use. She saw anyway. I was more than smitten with Rath. I was falling hard for him. He was everything I'd ever wanted. Kind, patient, sweet, and so handsome, it took my breath away sometimes.

I pushed to my feet when Rath approached, offering Zoya a hand to stand too. She waved me away, remaining comfortable where she was. “Khaul will be done soon. I’ll wait for him. Go. Spend time with your man. I’ll think of more ways to practice tomorrow.”

Khaul had joined us at first with the conversation, but as a fighter, he was expected to train often, so when another fighter asked him to spar, he readily agreed. He didn’t go far, I was pretty sure he was there to keep an eye on us, but we got to watch him do his thing while we practiced. I was curious if Rath ever sparred like that, and I was torn between wanting to see it or not. On the one hand, it would make him even more attractive than he already was. On the other, I already had trouble controlling myself around him. More material to fuel my dirty dreams might not be a good idea.

Saying a quick goodbye to Zoya, I spun around, nearly colliding with Rath. I hadn’t realized he was that close. He caught me with gentle hands on my arms, drawing me closer and tucking me up against his chest.

“You weren’t gone long,” I commented, a little breathlessly if I was being honest. He had that effect on me and the longer we spent time together, the more affected I was.

“Mm. I need to go on a hunt.”

The disappointment was like a punch to the gut. I knew he had to go, but I hated it every time. His absence made me sad, especially after the attack. I felt safest with him. Not that I wasn’t safe with Godr. He was very strong and capable. But he wasn’t Rath.

“I want you to come with me.”

Surprised, I jerked my gaze up to meet his. “O-Oh. I, um... I’ve never been good at hunting.” Or enjoyed it all that much. I wasn’t going to say that, though. I’d put up

with being uncomfortable if I could stay with Rath. Hopefully, I wouldn't cry when he killed something, though. That happened once before. For most of my brothers' kills, I could refrain, but Fraser shot a sweet little bunny, and it broke my heart to see the white fur all blood soaked. I hadn't seen Rath bring home something as small as a rabbit yet, so hopefully it would be okay.

Rath must have sensed my trepidation because he cupped my cheek, brushing his thumb over it in that sweet way that always made me melt. "You will be safe, Korvash. I only wish to have you beside me."

I melted a little more. "Okay. I'll go."

His smile was pleased, and he rewarded my bravery with one of those lingering kisses on my forehead. When he pulled back, he took a moment to study me before asking me to wait.

"I will bring you something to keep you warm. Wait here for me."

"Okay." I watched him go with a sappy smile on my face that only went away when I heard Zoya's snicker behind me. I spun around, taking in her amused expression, and felt my face burn brightly. "Oh, hush you. He asked me to go hunting with him. I'm allowed to be pleased."

"Of course you are," she said with a smile. "You two look very happy together."

I was happy with Rath. I never thought I'd get to keep him, but he seemed just as happy with me as I was with him. I still worried about it though. Was he truly happy with me, or was he just enjoying me while I was under his protection?

"Zoya? What does korvash mean?"

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “If you’re asking for a literal translation, it means petal heart. It’s a term of endearment. I think a better translation would be precious flower. Why?”

The warmth in my chest whenever I thought about Rath grew exponentially. He’d been calling me that since the day we met. That had to be a sign that he wanted to keep me. Right?

Twelve

The ride into the forest was nice, quiet, with my back up against Rath's chest as he guided Vann through the trees. His pace was sedate, probably to avoid making too much noise. I was tense and unsure when we first started out, but after a while, I relaxed in Rath's arms, looking around with more curiosity than fear.

"Where are we going?" I whispered, keeping my voice low to avoid frightening off any game. I'd gotten a beating for that when I was just a lad and was dragged out hunting with my brothers. They said I chattered too much, when I was only asking where to relieve myself. I took to hiding on hunting days after that so they wouldn't bring me with them anymore. I only went when my father made me.

"There is a tree farther in that is good for scouting," he murmured, his voice rumbling and low, giving me goosebumps. It wasn't from the cold, he'd brought me a fur covering to keep warm while we were out here. It was just my response to him.

We continued on for a little while longer, and while I wanted to chat with Rath like I always did, I enjoyed the quiet time with him as well. It was nice to just be near him without filling the silence.

Vann stopped next to a wide tree like he knew that was where he was supposed to go without prompting. Rath slid off his back, plucking me down once his feet were on the ground. He gathered his hunting things, his bow and knives and such, and attached them to himself in various ways before leading me around the tree to where there was a lower hanging branch above us. For Rath, it was easily within reach, but I needed a boost, and I muffled a yelp when he palmed my behind in the process. I shot

him an incredulous look over my shoulder, but he only winked at me, making my face flame hot. I scrambled up the tree and clung to the trunk, waiting for Rath to join me. I'd never been much of a tree climber and I felt a little dizzy being that far off the ground.

Rath swung himself up with ease, crowding close, and lifted me again to the branch above. I wanted to protest, it was too high, but the higher branch was a little wider and there was a knot in the tree big enough for me to press myself into, to feel a little more stable. I squished myself as far into it as possible to give Rath more room and watched, fascinated, as he climbed one more branch and sat with his back against the trunk, his eyes narrowed as he scanned the area.

For a while, we sat there in silence. I scanned the area like Rath did, but I wasn't entirely sure what I was looking for. I was familiar with a few of the animals closer to town, but this far out the animals were unrecognizable to me, and I wasn't sure which were for food and which were to avoid.

A snap of a twig made me whip my head around, but it was only Vann below us, chewing on a bush. I had to crane my neck to see him, and that was when I noticed something moving around farther away. It was sort of deer-like, with antlers and hooves, but it had long fur that hung all the way down to the ground and a wider face, like a horse. One of Rath's legs was dangling down from his branch, so I tugged lightly at his trousers to get his attention and pointed. Slipping off his branch, he crowded against me to look around the trunk, and when he glanced back at me, he looked proud.

Leaning until his lips were against my ear, he whispered. "Good job, my Finn. I will be back. Stay here. It is safe."

I nodded, pressing myself against the trunk to show him I understood. My heart rate picked up, fear for his wellbeing making my hands clammy. I remembered his

warning about it being dangerous out here. I didn't want him to get hurt. Before he could climb down and slip away, I caught his arm, leaning to kiss his cheek.

"Be safe," I whispered.

He leaned forward, pressing his forehead against mine, and kissed me chastely before climbing out of the tree and sneaking off into the forest. The creature had moved out of my view by the time he left, so I couldn't watch what he was doing, but I figured it'd take a minute. Stealth took time.

For a while, I studied the forest, trying to see if any other creatures would pop up that I could point out. It made me giddy whenever Rath looked at me with pride in his eyes, and I wanted to earn more looks like that. Nothing happened, though, and eventually I got bored. I wished I had a book with me. I would've been happy to wait here for him if I had something to occupy my time.

When he wasn't back as quickly as I thought, I started to worry. The creature didn't look overtly dangerous, but it could have been. I doubted Rath would have told me as much. He didn't want to frighten me. Nevertheless, I worried, and when enough time passed that my rear went numb and he still hadn't shown back up, I thought it was better to get down and look for him. He might be hurt and all alone. It hurt my heart to even consider it.

It took me a lot longer than it took Rath to get down from the tree. I clung to the trunk, easing myself off each branch, but I couldn't reach the ground on my own. I had to dangle myself from the branch and jump to avoid hurting myself, and still I stumbled. My muffled yelp was a lot louder than I'd hoped, but I managed to regain my footing without injury. and when I looked around, the forest was still and quiet.

Wandering in the direction I'd seen Rath and the creature go, I hid behind trees and peeked around them, my breath a little stilted from fear. Fear of what, I wasn't

entirely sure. I knew names for animals thanks to Zoya, but not what they looked like or which to avoid. I walked for a while, searching for any signs of Rath, but the farther I got from the tree, the more nervous I got. What if I passed him? What if he was at the tree waiting for me? I turned in a circle, frowning at my surroundings. How did I get back? Did I manage to get myself lost in a pathetic attempt at rescuing the best hunter in the clan? I really was useless.

A snapping twig had me whipping around. I didn't see anything at first, just trees and bushes as far as the eye could see. But a sense of foreboding settled on my shoulders and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I took a step back until my back was up against a tree, looking around desperately for the source of the noise.

“Rath?” I hissed out, tears pricking my eyes. Foolish, foolish, foolish.

“Finn!” Rath’s call was loud, but distant. I jerked upright, turning in the direction I’d heard his voice, and I was going to run to him, but a low growl filled the air, stalling me. Slowly, I turned my head to the side. There, in a thicket of bushes, something black and sleek crept closer, baring razor-sharp teeth as long as my forearm. Panic made my throat close up, stopping me from calling for help. I stood frozen, unable to move or run or cry out, while the creature slowly stalked toward me.

“Finn!” Rath’s voice got closer, but not nearly close enough. He wouldn’t get here in time. Tears slipped down my cheeks as I stared at the creature. What was I to do?

It crouched lower, readying itself to pounce, and the panic kicked up enough to free my feet. I ran, a scream caught in my throat as the creature snarled and leapt. It would have landed on me if not for Vann. The massive horse came out of nowhere, his whinny loud. He spun and kicked out with his enormous hooves, and hit the creature square on, sending it flying, and stood over me when the creature got on its feet again. Rearing on his hind legs, he kicked out again, warning the creature away.

The creature was panting after taking that kick and seemed to think better of challenging the horse. It slunk off into the brush right as Rath came barreling in from another direction, his eyes wide and terror filled as he searched for me.

“Finn!”

He snatched me off the ground and into his arms, hugging me close. I choked on sobs, clinging to him with my face buried against his neck.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to—”

He shook his head, pulling me away enough to pepper my face with kisses. “It is my fault, korvash. I should not have left you alone. Are you alright? Were you hurt?”

“N-No. Vann protected me. I’m okay.”

I said that, but I still wasn’t brave enough to let him go. And he didn’t make me. He helped me wrap my legs around his waist and kept me in his arms as he mounted Vann and steered us back the way we came. At the foot of the big tree we’d scouted from were two dead animals, but neither of us paid them any mind. Rath stayed on Vann’s back, hugging and petting me until I stopped trembling and could finally look him in the eye to apologize properly.

“I’m sorry. You said to stay put, but I got worried and I didn’t listen. I should have listened.”

Brushing my hair back, he studied me with a frown. “What worried you, my Finn? Did you see something?”

Embarrassed, I tried to duck my head, but Rath wouldn’t let me. He cupped my cheeks, lifting my chin to force me to look him in the eye.

“I-I was worried because you were taking longer than I thought. I was scared you were hurt, so I went looking for you.”

The intense look in his eyes softened, and he leaned to press his forehead against mine, gathering me close.

“I am sorry, Finn. After taking down the sorvik, I noticed another nearby. I should have returned to you instead. Forgive me. I did not mean to worry you.”

I felt stupid after hearing his explanation. He took longer because he found more game. Of course, that’s why he didn’t come back straight away. The animal might have been gone by the time he came here to explain and went back. I should have been more patient.

“How did you find me?” I murmured, nuzzling his chin. I couldn’t get close enough after that encounter. I thought I’d never see him again.

“I heard Vann. He knows not to make sound while hunting. He only does so if danger is near. You said he protected you. From what?”

“I, uh... I’m not sure. I wasn’t familiar with it.”

He nodded, accepting this answer, before prompting for more. “What did it look like?”

I took a second to form the words carefully in my head so I didn’t mess up my description. “Like a cat, but bigger. Black fur, long teeth, short tail.”

Surprisingly, Rath paled at my description. Spinning me around, he rushed out a quick ‘stay here’ before hopping off Vann’s back. He was quick to tie the animals so they could be brought back, and when he climbed on again, he tightened his grip on

me almost to the point of discomfort.

“Hold on.”

My attempt to ask him why was cut off with another yelp as he barked at Vann and we took off through the forest. I’d only ever ridden a few times in my life. My father didn’t care enough to get me lessons and my brothers weren’t interested in teaching me, so I’d never gone so fast before. It made me a little sick to my stomach, but I refused to complain about it. Not after causing trouble like I had. I just held on and squeezed my eyes shut until we came back to the village. Rath was off Vann’s back as soon as he stopped moving, and he plucked me down as well, calling out to a few of his clan brothers.

“Brother? What’s wrong?” Verus asked as he jogged over. He shot me a worried frown, but I couldn’t answer him. I didn’t know what was going on either.

“Shadowstalker. In the forest. It went after Finn. We need to go now.”

Like Rath in the forest, Verus’s face went pale. He spun around and ran, calling out to other hunters as he hurried toward the field with the other horses.

Spinning around, I asked Rath, “What’s going on?”

He put his hands on my shoulders, squeezing gently to show his seriousness. “I need to go. You will stay here. Go to our tent and wait for me. I will be back.”

Worry and fear overwhelmed me, but Rath didn’t have time to stand around and comfort me. He pulled me in for a tight hug, kissed my forehead, then moved me out of the way, mounting Vann again after the other clan members removed his kills from Vann’s back. Once the others joined him, they all raced off again, leaving me standing there alone, my heart in my throat. I should’ve stayed in the tree.

Thirteen

Rath was gone for hours. I did as he asked and went back to the tent to wait, but it felt like time dragged on. I paced the tiny space, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth and twisting my fingers. Every time I heard someone walk past, I peeked out, listening to see if anyone was talking about Rath. A few mentioned the hunting group, but none said anything about him returning.

Supper time came and went. I was certain Rath wouldn't be mad if I left to get something to eat, but I was too nervous to want to. My stomach churned uncomfortably, the worry eating at me, so I didn't even think about putting anything in it.

Eventually, I had to sit down or risk throwing up. I wrapped my arms around my knees, hugging them tightly, and willed myself not to cry. I berated myself for causing trouble, for putting Rath in danger by luring out a creature that was obviously dangerous. Hours passed with me doing that. I might have dozed here and there, but I was still berating myself when Rath came back. He looked exhausted, and his expression was grim. My stomach sank as I looked up at him, but he didn't say anything to me. He took off his weapons, leaving them resting by the bedding, and crawled over me, burying his face in my neck as he held me tight.

“What happened?”

He shook his head, tightening his arms around me. I wanted to keep pushing, but he was obviously exhausted. He'd gotten up with me that morning, done dirty things with me, then spent the morning taking care of me before we were sent on the hunt.

Even after his job was done, he had to save me and get me to safety before going back out. He was obviously tired. I couldn't tell what time it was, but it felt late. Instead of pestering him for information, I hugged his shoulders and stroked his hair, soothing him like he did to me so often.

He fell asleep like that, lying on me like a blanket. For a while, I dozed with him, but I couldn't seem to settle like normal. That foreboding feeling hadn't gone away since I saw that creature in the forest. Eventually, I wriggled free of Rath's hold, my bladder protesting going so long without relief. I thought about waking Rath to go with me, but I didn't want to cause him more trouble. Instead, I took one of his smaller knives from where he'd left it beside the bed. I carried it with me to the trench, which I still couldn't get near without flinching, and did my business before heading back.

Another wave of foreboding brushed against my back as I weaved between the tents to Rath's. I was almost too afraid to look over my shoulder. I was sure it was just my imagination. I picked up my pace a little, only to freeze a second later when a familiar growl filled the air.

This time, the creature didn't give me a chance to run. I barely had enough time to spin around before it leapt at me. My hands came up automatically to protect myself and I took a step back, tripping over a steak to the nearest tent. Tripping actually ended up saving me, because instead of landing on me as it probably planned, the creature leapt too far, knocking us both to the ground.

"Rath!" I screamed his name even as I felt the weight of the animal land on me. It let out a pained cry, leaping off me, which was when I noticed that in my attempt to protect myself, I'd lifted the knife I had borrowed from Rath. It didn't kill the creature, but it did injure it, blood dripping from its belly.

I scrambled back to my feet. Unlike when Vann hurt the creature, this time it didn't

run when injured. It bared its teeth at me, crouching for another attack. I held the knife in front of me, my hands shaking so intensely, I doubted it'd do much good. Running wouldn't help either. I was out of ideas.

Just as the creature leapt into the air at me, Rath shouted and tackled the thing. It didn't even have time to react before he slammed one of his knives into the animal's gut. The creature let out another yelp of pain, but Rath didn't let go or jump back. He lifted his head enough to bellow into the creature's face, jerking the knife hard and slicing through the animal in one quick motion. It went limp just as more clan members showed up to help. Rath shoved to his feet, covered in blood, fury coming off him in waves. He swung around to face me and I had to fight the instinct to flinch or jump back. Rath wouldn't hurt me. I hoped anyway.

He must have noticed my trepidation because he approached slowly, the hand not holding a knife lifted in a calming gesture. He shushed me, stooping enough to drop his weapon before the other hand came up to do the same. I didn't understand what he was doing or why he was acting like that until he spoke to me.

“You are safe. You are okay.”

My gaze darted around as I tried to figure out why he was saying that. Was there another one? Did they come in groups? Did the whole camp need to move somewhere safer?

Rath's hand was warm when it wrapped around my wrist. He pried the knife out of my hand, handing it off to someone else, but his eyes never left mine.

“Breathe, Korvash. You are safe.”

It was when he cupped my cheeks that I realized I was hyperventilating. My whole body trembled against his palm and my knees went out from under me. Rath caught

me, pulling me against his chest. Zoya came out of nowhere in her night clothes and a cloak, appearing at our side with fear and determination on her face. Her gaze swept over us both in a clinical manner before she turned to me.

“I-I-I-” I couldn’t get any words out. It felt like they were caught in my throat and I couldn’t force them out, no matter how hard I tried.

“It’s okay,” she soothed, taking a deep breath and urging me to do the same. “You’re okay. Try to breathe, Finn, or you’ll pass out.”

I was feeling really lightheaded. I tried to do what she asked, but I couldn’t seem to make my body listen. My fingers dug into Rath’s arms, desperately reaching for that safe feeling that blanketed me whenever he was close. He wrapped himself around me so much that I couldn’t see or hear anything but him. His rapid heartbeat, his deep breaths, the strength in his arms as he held me. It helped, and I tried my best to match my breaths to his, listening to his heartbeat as it slowly came down to a more steady thump, thump, thump against my ear.

“Were you hurt?” Zoya asked Rath. My fingers tightened, worry rising again, but it quickly came back down when Rath answered in the negative.

“No. It had no chance. I caught it as it was leaping at him. I should have known better than to return until I found it.”

“Honestly, it’s a good thing you did, otherwise he would’ve been alone when it came for him,” Zoya argued.

“You were where you were supposed to be,” an older male voice said soothingly. I didn’t recognize it, but at the moment, I didn’t care. I just wanted to get as close to Rath as I possibly could.

There was a flurry of activity around us, but no one seemed to expect anything from me. Rath kept me wrapped up in his arms and spoke around me, reporting to the older man what had happened in the forest earlier.

“How did you manage to get the thing twice without getting injured?” someone asked.

Rath turned, looking over his shoulder, and I could hear the frown in his voice. “What are you talking about? The kill was quick.”

“There are two stab wounds,” the person explained, and I could hear shuffling like they were turning the creature over to prove it.

Large hands rested on my shoulders as Rath gently pulled me away so he could look me in the eye. “Did you...?”

I dropped my chin, my bottom lip quivering. “I-I didn’t mean to. I tripped the first time it jumped at me and—”

Rath sucked in a sharp breath, yanking me back against him again. To my surprise, a tremor ran through him, much like it had me before he’d settled me. I wrapped my arms around him, squeezing him as tight as I could muster, my face buried against his chest.

“I’m sorry.”

“Alright. I believe it is safe to say the danger has passed,” the older voice said. “Verus, alert the other hunters and everyone else, get some rest. I get the feeling we have a ceremony to plan.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that, and I didn’t care. It took a few moments for

Rath to be willing to release me enough to walk away. We headed back to his tent, but then I remembered he was still covered in blood. We didn't have anything to clean him up inside the tent.

“You should go to the river and clean up. I promise, I won't leave again.” I'd caused enough trouble being where I shouldn't today.

Rath shook his head. When I opened my mouth to argue, he pulled me against him again, resting his forehead against mine. “I can't be away from you right now. I'll survive.”

I didn't like the idea of him being uncomfortable just because he was worried about me. So, despite how much I hated it, I drew him to the river myself and stripped down, leading him into the icy water with the most blank face I could muster.

Rath huffed, pulling me against his body. “You are not good at hiding, kolrav. You do not have to pretend.”

That word was new, and I wasn't sure what it meant, but now wasn't the time for a language lesson. I focused on running my hands over his skin, washing off all the blood. I wasn't as cold as before, maybe because I was still numb from the panic, but I still didn't want to linger in the water if I didn't have to.

Rath took his turn, running his rough palms over my skin. Because I was cuddled against him, a fair amount of blood transferred to me, too. He wouldn't let us leave until he was sure every drop was gone. Then, when we were both clean, he dried us both off and covered me with the cloth before sweeping me off my feet and marching us straight back to his tent. And instead of bringing me to the fire to warm me up, he warmed me with his body on top of mine and his tongue in my mouth until I was so worked up I came with a cry and ruined the efforts of our river bath. But when he followed after with a shudder, I couldn't find it in me to complain.

Fourteen

“Rath...”

He groaned, rutting against me, his hips grinding in just the right way to make me moan. It'd been three days since the shadowstalker came after me, and he still refused to go on another hunt. He'd have to eventually, but whenever anyone brought it up, he dragged me back to the tent and we ended up like this, wrapped around each other in a sweaty, sticky heap.

A familiar tingle at the base of my spine told me I wasn't going to last much longer. I tried to hold back, but it was just too good, and when I came with a cry, Rath was always quick to follow me, painting my skin with his release.

We both fought for breath, clinging to each other. I didn't think I'd ever get sick of this, it was too perfect, but I was starting to wonder why we never did more. I'd heard rumors, mostly from my brothers, about things men did together. They always spoke of it with disgust and horror, but I found it intriguing. I wanted to ask Rath about it, he was obviously more experienced than me, but I was too embarrassed. Besides, I didn't want to remind him constantly of my inexperience. I wanted to be good enough for him.

“Brother!” a familiar voice called from outside the tent. “We must go!”

Verus was smart enough not to poke his head in, but it didn't stop Rath from growling loud enough for him to hear. “How long were you listening to us?”

“If you wished to be discreet, you did a poor job of it,” was Verus’s teasing reply as his footsteps moved away from the tent. I felt my cheeks flush, and I wanted to pull the blankets over my head, but I also didn’t want Rath to move. I clung to him instead, burying my face against his neck.

“Where are you going?”

His sigh was resigned, and he hugged me tighter when he muttered, “To hunt. I must. It’s my duty to the clan.”

When I first met him, he was excited to share all the details of his job in the clan. He showed off his knives with pride and the first words he taught me outside of the clan hierarchy were words about hunting. The reluctance in his voice made me frown now.

“What’s wrong? I thought you loved to hunt.”

His grip on me tightened and for a moment, I thought he wouldn’t reply, but he eventually admitted, “I can’t bring you with me. I can’t have you in danger again.”

Ah. While I hated being separated from him, I had to agree with him. I didn’t belong out there. I wanted to do something to support the clan, earn my keep as it were, but I didn’t think hunting would be the way I would do that. And I could hear it in his voice that Rath would be too stressed having me out there anyway.

“That’s okay. I’ll wait here for you.”

I thought he’d be relieved, but he still didn’t release me. If anything, he clung to me harder, his beard tickling my neck in his attempt to hide away. I hated how upset he was, but I absolutely adored how willing he was to be vulnerable with me. He was upset and while he didn’t look me in the eye, he did show me with his actions how he

felt about it.

Another rub gave me goosebumps, and I couldn't stop the snicker that escaped me. "Rath," I complained, poking his side. "You're tickling me."

He grunted, pulling away enough to look at me. "You say this as though it would make me stop."

"Huh?"

Instead of answering, he buried his face again, this time purposely scraping his beard on my neck. I squirmed and laughed, helpless to get away with him pinning me with his big body. He only stopped when I was breathless and close to tears from laughing so hard. This time, when he lifted his head, he looked a little lighter, though there was still apprehension in his eyes. I trailed my fingers over his face, urging him to speak to me.

"What's wrong?"

"I do not wish to bring you with me, but I like leaving you even less. I do not know what to do."

I melted at his sweet confession, cupping his face and lifting up enough to kiss him. He leaned into it, seeking my comfort, and when I pulled away, he leaned his forehead against mine, his brow furrowed with worry.

"How about this? I'll go to the field with Godr while you are gone. If I need to go anywhere, I'll ask him to go with me. That way, you know I'm safe and looked after and can focus on staying safe yourself."

It wasn't the same as staying by his side, but I figured it was a suitable compromise.

And Rath seemed to agree. He was reluctant, but it was enough to get him out of bed and moving. And I would keep my promise. I wouldn't go anywhere without Godr beside me. I didn't want to be the reason Rath was distracted.

We cleaned up and got dressed, and Rath led me to Godr, giving his brother a stern warning about watching me before he forced himself to go. Godr watched with amusement, raising an eyebrow at me once he was out of sight.

Pointing a finger at him, I frowned. "Be nice."

He chuckled, putting his hands up in surrender. "I am a very nice brother. It is just fun to see him so flustered. He is the calm one. He needed to be shaken up a bit."

I wrinkled my nose, following him into the field where the horses were grazing. "I don't like shaking him up. I don't want him distracted out there. He could get hurt."

The worry ate at me and I chewed on my lip, staring at the forest we'd been hunting in together a few days before. If he wasn't focused, what were the chances that another shadowstalker could come after him. Zoya explained why they were so dangerous. They weren't the biggest or anything, but once they decided to hunt something, they wouldn't let it go until they got their prey. The shadowstalker would've kept coming for me until it found me. That's why Rath panicked when I described it to him. He knew I wouldn't be safe until he killed it.

Godr's hand rested on my shoulder and when I glanced up at him, his expression was full of understanding. "Rath is a good hunter. The best. He will return to you. Try not to worry so much."

Easier said than done. But I nodded along and followed him to a spot where I could watch him train the younger horses while staying out of the way. And I kept my promise to Rath, staying by Godr's side until he returned to me, safe and sound.

“You look deep in thought.”

I blinked up at Godr, coming back to the moment. I hadn't actually been thinking about anything important. I got bored watching him for the fourth day in a row, and ended up daydreaming about how Rath woke me up that morning. He'd wrapped his large fist around both our erections, stroking them together. I'd come so embarrassingly fast, I think it shocked even him. But instead of letting me wallow about it, he had me help him stroke himself until he came on my stomach. Both experiences were new and unbelievably sexy. I wanted to figure out a way to surprise him too, but I worried I'd be too awkward because of my inexperience or do something wrong that he wouldn't like.

“Is Rath back yet?”

He smirked, shaking his head, and offered me a flask of water. “You were looking a little flushed. Is it too warm in the sun?”

“Not at all,” I replied before realizing what I'd said. Godr didn't miss the meaning, though.

“Oh? So then, what's got you so flushed?” His tone was teasing, but I stiffened anyway, and his face fell when he noticed my fear. He squatted in front of me, tipping his head. “What's wrong?”

“I...” I bit my tongue. The last time I talked to someone about my desires, my entire life fell apart. I didn't want the same to happen with these people. Each day, it felt more and more like home. I didn't want to lose them.

“You know you can talk to me, Finn. I am not loose lipped.”

I knew that. He'd been kind to me since I started staying with him during the day. He

even let me help sometimes. He had another clan member build me a step so I could better reach and taught me to brush the horses' manes. I liked it, it was relaxing, and it made me feel useful after I'd told him I didn't like not doing my part.

But this wasn't about the clan or my place here. I wasn't comfortable discussing intimacy with anyone. Not even Rath. I was too scared.

"Is it my brother? Let me guess, he snores and you don't know how to tell him."

A smile tugged at my lips, and I shook my head quickly. "He does not."

"No?" Godr pretended to be thoughtful. "He did when we were young. I thought he was a beast from the forest come to steal me from my bed with all that noise."

Laughing, I tossed a handful of grass at him. "You hush! You did not!"

He nodded solemnly, his face full of mock sorrow. "I did. It was horrible. I was grateful when he got his own tent. But then it was too quiet without him. I could not win."

My shoulders shook with my silent laughter, and some of the tension eased. Godr was nothing like my brothers. He teased and joked, but he was never cruel about it. And he seemed to care genuinely about Rath's happiness.

Sitting beside me, Godr bumped my shoulder, raising his eyebrows at me. "Tell me what's wrong."

Biting my lip, I stared at my lap, twisting my fingers anxiously. "It's not... I shouldn't discuss it."

"Is it about the person who attacked you? Are they bothering you again?" he asked

more seriously.

I got the feeling he wouldn't let this go like Rath would. And I didn't want him mentioning it to Rath. So despite my trepidation, I blurted it out.

"I want to please Rath!" My face flushed bright red, and I ducked my head, refusing to look at him.

"Did he say he was displeased with you?" Godr asked, confused.

I shook my head, but still couldn't look at him. "N-No. Not like that. I mean, um... I want to please him... in bed..." I barely muttered out the words, so embarrassed, I thought I might burst into flames.

"Oh. Oh!" He chuckled as he finally realized what I meant. "I'm sure you don't have a problem with that. I've heard the talk of the sounds coming from your tent."

Horried, I whipped my head up to look at him. "W-What?"

He shrugged. "It is not as though the walls of the tents are thick. Most don't bother to be quiet. Why hide that we are enjoying ourselves?"

To him, maybe, it was normal to overhear such things, but for me, it was beyond embarrassing. I honestly hadn't thought about it before now. I wasn't sure what was worse, knowing people heard us, or knowing it'd happen again. Soon. Rath had a... healthy appetite, and took me as often as he had spare time. Especially since the shadowstalker attack. Like he needed frequent reminders that I was there and safe.

"Why do you think you don't please him?" Godr asked, distracting me from his horrifying revelation.

I winced. “It’s not... I don’t think he’s unhappy with what we’ve done... I just... I’m... inexperienced. I don’t know how...” I trailed off.

“Ah. I understand now. Have you asked him? I’m sure he would be happy to teach you.”

“I, um... I wanted to surprise him. He’s usually in charge and—” I shrugged. “Nevermind. I shouldn’t be discussing this. I’m sorry. You can go back to your work. I’m fine.”

“No. I can help. After all, I am quite experienced in this area,” he said, waggling his eyebrows and bumping my shoulder. “Do you have questions, or should I just tell you things to try?”

Looking up at him, I felt my chest swell with relief and elation. This wasn’t like last time. He didn’t shame me or make me feel bad for asking such things. Godr actually wished to help me. I had to work hard not to burst into tears and hug him silly, I was so grateful. I couldn’t have that kind of relationship with my brothers, but Godr was Rath’s brother. If Rath chose to keep me, maybe I could have that relationship with my brother-in-law instead.

Fifteen

Finn was acting strangely. At first, I worried he may have found out my intention to ask him to be my bondmate. It was supposed to be a surprise, and he was terrible at keeping things from me. But he didn't mention anything about it. If I knew him as well as I believed I did, he would not be able to keep it to himself. He seemed as eager as I was to keep each other, and I doubted he'd be able to handle not asking about it. Which left me at a loss as to why he was acting so strangely. I returned from my hunt and found him in the field where I had found him every day since I returned to hunting. He was brushing the mane of one of the stallions, humming to himself, but after I surprised him with a kiss, he wouldn't stop blushing and he couldn't look me in the eye.

The strangeness of his behavior only grew when we went to get our supper. He seemed almost anxious, glancing at me when he thought I wasn't looking and bouncing his leg when he sat beside the fighter's fire. I wanted to ask Godr, but my brother was conveniently busy in conversation whenever I sought him out. And when he caught me looking at him and I shot him a questioning look, he pressed his lips together like he was fighting laughter. What happened while I was gone?

After our meal was finished, I brought Finn back to our tent, hoping if we spoke privately, he'd feel more comfortable. If my brother upset him for some reason, I wanted to know so I could deal with him myself.

Before I had a chance to even ask, Finn threw himself at me, using what little strength he had to pull me low enough for a kiss. And not the sweet kisses he liked to give me to show me he cared. No, this was a kiss with intention. He nipped at my lip,

demanding entry, and moaned into my mouth when I tangled my tongue with his. I could never say no to his affections, and I had no interest in doing so now, but I was curious if this was the reason he was acting so strangely. If so, I was flattered.

Lifting him off his feet, I marched to the bed and laid him upon it, following him with a chuckle when he wouldn't loosen his arms enough for me to pull away. I truly enjoyed an amorous Finn. His needy eagerness thrilled me every time.

Pulling back, I trailed kisses along his jaw, enjoying the little mewls that escaped him. "Is this why you were acting so strangely? Did you need me? Because you need only ask, kolrav. Anything you want from me is yours."

"A-Anything?" he asked breathlessly, tipping his head to give me more room.

"Anything," I agreed. I wanted to tell him about my intentions to reassure him, but he cut me off before I could give away the secret.

"Can I... be on top?"

He stiffened, waiting for the rejection, and let out a startled laugh when I rolled us over so he was lying on top of me. I never thought to offer because he seemed to like me on top of him. I wasn't going to complain either way.

"Is this what you need, my Finn?"

Sitting up slowly, he bit his lip and nodded. I ran my hands up his sides, enjoying the view immensely. It would be better if he was naked. But when I tried to sit up to better strip him, he pushed me back down, a deep flush on his face.

"I want to try something," he murmured.

My Finn was a shy little thing, and I didn't want to discourage him from telling me what he wanted, so instead of stripping him like I wanted, I laid back and tucked my hands behind my head, giving him full access to my body.

"I'm all yours, kolrav."

"What does that word mean?"

I shook my head, denying him this time. He would figure out my intentions if he knew the meaning of the word. He could wait a few more days.

To my great surprise, and vast amusement, he stuck his lip out in a pout. He was trying to show he was displeased with me, but sitting on my stomach looking adorable wasn't going to work in his favor. It only made me more sure of my plan.

When I didn't respond how he wished, he looked contemplative for a moment before a flash of determination crossed his face. I almost lamented my fate with that look. He would not go easy on me, would he?

When he pulled off his tunic, I got the answer to my question. I tried to reach for him, and he pushed my hands away with a shake of his head. He intended to torment me until I gave in. I was not entirely sure I would come out the victor in that game. Especially when he scooted backwards to pull off my tunic and his pert little ass sat on my cock.

Groaning, I gripped his hips, considering going back on my word to let him explore. I was a patient hunter, but when it came to Finn, my normal control was lacking.

"Nuh-uh," he chided, wagging a finger at me. "No touching until you tell me. I've got lots of ideas too, so you should hurry up."

“Mm. And where did you get these ideas? In one of those books you told me about?”

Finn told me how much he loved to read before coming here. I’d asked around about getting him some books to read. I would give them to him as a bonding gift.

He shook his head, and the blush came back, his shoulders going up in embarrassment. That emotion did not belong in our bed and I hastened to reassure him, cupping his cheek.

“Kolrav. What is it? Did Godr say something to you? Is that why you are so upset?” He spent the past few days with my brother. It was a reasonable assumption.

Finn shook his head rapidly. “No! No, he has been very kind. I, um... I asked him some questions. I’m not... experienced, and I wanted to know how to please you. He was kind enough to offer help.”

Had it been anyone else, I would have accepted this. Sex was nothing to be ashamed of, and if someone as inexperienced as Finn had questions, I knew plenty of people who would be happy to explain things to him. However, Godr was a shit sometimes, and I didn’t trust his counsel.

“What did he tell you, exactly?”

“Um...” The blush on his cheeks worked its way down his neck and onto his shoulders and chest. If it was difficult to discuss this with me, I imagined it was even more so with Godr. “Well, he said that many men like when the smaller man is on top, like this when we’re... you know... intimate.”

True. Though, I liked it just as much having him underneath me. I nodded along encouragingly.

“What else?”

“He said there’s prep involved, and an oil I needed to ask the healers for. I was hoping you could do that...”

Also true. Perhaps Godr was truly being helpful. “I can do that, korvash. Anything else?”

His brows furrowed a little. “Um... well, he said something else, but I wasn’t really sure about it. It sounds painful.”

I frowned. While his first few times might be uncomfortable, it would never be painful. I’d do everything I could to make sure of that. Godr knew the same, so I wasn’t sure if that was what he was referring to. “What do you mean?”

“Well... he told me about using my mouth... down there... but do you truly like to be bitten? I would think that would ruin the mood, would it not?”

There it is. I knew better than to trust my brother to be completely truthful. Biting back an exasperated sigh, since I didn’t want Finn to think it had anything to do with him, I cupped the back of his head and pulled him down for a quick kiss.

“While most of what my brother told you is true, biting is definitely not part of it.”

Sitting up, Finn’s brows drew together tightly. “What? Then why would he suggest it? He said you like it and t-to bite all over.” He waved a hand at me, his flush deepening. “Especially down there.”

I could not hold in the sigh that time. “That would definitely hurt and not in a pleasurable way. Godr was lying. It is a reference to an old relationship I once had. He probably hoped to prank me by getting you to do that.”

Embarrassment made Finn scramble away from me, but it was the hurt in his eyes that worried me the most. Hurt... and anger.

“Finn?”

He stood there for a moment, stock still. Tears welled in his eyes and his teeth clenched, like his emotions were in turmoil. When I reached for him, he shook his head sharply, snatching up his tunic and darting out of the tent without a backward glance. Stunned, I lay frozen for a moment before launching out of bed to go after him. I didn't know which direction he went, but since he knew not to wander off alone, I made a guess that turned out to be correct. I was several paces behind him when he walked up to the fighter's fire and my brother, who was drinking with his friends. And in a move that was so very unlike my Finn, he pushed Godr hard, taking him off guard enough to make him stumble.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am

Sixteen

I was so blindly angry when I went looking for Godr. I trusted him. I thought he wouldn't betray me like my brother had. That alone was bad enough, and hurt me down to my core, but he also risked my relationship with Rath in the process. I could have hurt him. My stomach churned just at the thought of hurting Rath.

"You asshole!"

Godr looked stunned, actually stumbling back from the push. I wanted to do it again, or maybe to hit him, but I could barely see through the angry tears welling in my eyes.

"Wha—"

"You lied to me! You said you'd help me, but you lied!"

I choked on a sob, barely noticing the silence as everyone near the fighter's fire turned to watch. All I could focus on was Godr and his betrayal.

"Finn, wait," he started, a hesitant smile on his face. "It was just a joke—"

"It wasn't funny! I could have hurt him! I could have hurt him and he could have left me and I'd be all alone again! I hate you! I hate you for trying to take him from me! I'll never trust you again!"

Deep, gut wrenching sobs ripped through me, so strong I couldn't breathe right. I

sank to my knees, hugging my middle tightly. I could've lost him. The only person who truly cared for me. Who took me in and showed me what it meant to be cared for. To be loved. Rath was the first person ever who truly made me feel safe enough to be myself. He never judged or got angry with me if I made a mistake or if I cried on him. He just held me and kissed me until I felt better. The thought of hurting him, even by accident, tore me up inside. And after I trusted Godr, too.

Footsteps approached from behind me, and when Rath scooped me into his arms, I didn't fight him. I sobbed into his neck, clinging to him desperately. I couldn't lose him. I just couldn't. I wouldn't survive.

"Rath..." Godr croaked.

Rath didn't say anything. He walked away without a word, bypassing his tent to bring me to the river instead. He didn't bring us in it, he kept his promise not to bring me there unless we absolutely had to. Instead, he sat on the banks with me cradled in his lap, hugging me so tightly, I had no hopes of escaping him. Not that I wanted to. If I could, I'd crawl under his shirt and hide forever.

He waited for the sobs to stop. Waited for my tears to dry. And waited more until I could speak around the hiccuping gasps to explain myself.

"Did... Did I ever tell you how I ended up here?"

I didn't expect him to answer. I knew I didn't. I was ashamed of how it happened. I'd hoped I would never have to tell him.

"My father had been expecting me to find a bride. He didn't know of my interests. I never planned on telling him. It isn't legal in my town. And it's seen as disgraceful. I knew I wouldn't be able to force myself to be with a woman. I thought, if I kept waiting, he'd forget about it and I could live my life alone. But the longer it took for

me to find someone, the more irritated he got. I was scared he'd force the issue, and I cried about it in my room one night after he screamed at me. That's when Fraser showed up."

It still hurt, and it felt as though there was a ball of spikes in my throat, making each sentence painful to bear.

"He played the doting brother. We'd never been close, but not estranged either. He mostly ignored me. So I didn't think to distrust him. He told me he wanted to help me, that he worried about me whenever father yelled, and he said if he knew what was going on, he could come up with a plan to fix things. I trusted him..." Another sob bubbled up, threatening to choke me, but I had to finish. Rath deserved to know. I was cast out by my own family. I had no home to go to besides here. I was scared it would sway his judgment of me, but after my outburst, I had no choice but to tell him.

"I told him I wasn't interested in females. That I preferred men. I assured him I didn't intend to act on it, I was happy to be alone with my books. He said he'd help..." Sucking in a deep breath, I continued. "H-He ended up going to my father, but not to help me. Instead, he told him everything. My father was so angry, he disowned me without giving me a chance to explain. Then he dragged me by my hair to the council estate and offered me as tribute. The whole town feels as he does. They said if I ever came back, they'd hang me. I don't... I don't have any family anymore."

Hearing how Finn's family treated him, merely because of his interest in men, sickened me. He was sweet and loyal, and he worked hard to gain people's approval. He worked so hard to know the language and how things worked here that he could tell me his whole story without needing a translator, and it had been little over a week. To cast him out, despite all that, confused me. Who would give up someone like that?

As he explained his brother's part in all of it, though, I slowly began to understand his reaction to Godr's prank. He'd meant no harm in it, he wasn't trying to be cruel. But by targeting me through Finn, he unknowingly betrayed the man who took great leaps of faith to trust him enough to speak with him like that. The logical part of me knew if Godr had been aware, he would've never done such a thing, but the part of me determined to protect Finn was angry. Violently so. He shouldn't have done it in the first place. Finn was too gentle to be part of his pranks. Anyone could see that.

"Why didn't you ask me when you had questions? Have I done something to make you not trust me?"

That would hurt me greatly. I wanted nothing more than to earn Finn's trust and keep it. Just like his heart.

"N-No!" he practically shouted, sitting up abruptly to look at me. "No, it wasn't like that! I just..." He looked away again, embarrassment making his shoulders creep up. "I wanted to please you. You take such good care of me, and I know there's more we haven't tried. I thought if I surprised you, we could—" He grimaced, hugging his arms around himself.

I fought between elation that he was so eager to please me and upset that I hadn't shown him well enough that he pleased me just by staying by my side. I didn't need adventurous intimacy to be pleased with him, though we would've gotten to that eventually. I planned on easing him into it, since I knew he was inexperienced. With the shy way he reacted to me, as well as the surprise when I tried something new, I didn't need him to tell me straight out he was a virgin. I didn't want to frighten him with too much, too fast.

Cupping his cheek, I stroked at the dried tear tracks on his face. I hated so much to see him cry. It wasn't something I could avoid, he was an emotional man, but I aimed to limit it as much as I could. He deserved to be always smiling.

After everything he'd told me, I wasn't entirely sure where to start in reassuring him. There was so much he was holding in. I chose instead to show him how I felt, just as I had in the start of our time together. I drew him closer, kissing him softly, with every ounce of love I felt for him, until I felt tears dampen his cheeks again.

“Kolrav is the term we use with the ones we want to spend our lives with. It is given only once, to our bondmate, and signifies in words that we have chosen to spend our future with the one gifted it. In your tongue, it means my love. I asked Zoya to translate it for me because I wanted to tell it to you when I asked you to bond with me in front of the clan.”

Finn's eyes went so wide, I feared they'd fall from his face. For a moment, he was silent, but just like I expected he would, tears filled his eyes and his beautiful smile overtook his face as he leaned his forehead against mine.

“Truly?”

“Mm. I am supposed to let you get to know the other men who would claim you, but I cannot. I want you for myself. I never want to let you go.”

The tears on his cheeks now were full of joy and happiness. He nodded over and over, telling me without words how he felt about my proposal. I would need to do it properly in front of the whole clan, but perhaps this was better. After everything that happened to him, he deserved to have my full focus. And he'd have it. For the rest of our lives.

Seventeen

We stayed out on the bank of the water, trading kisses filled with love and devotion, until Finn got cold and kept trying to bury himself in my tunic. His icy hands on my skin were my punishment for keeping him out there in the chilled weather. When he began to shiver, I scooped him up and carried him back, tucking his head under my chin as we walked.

“Rath? Why did you take me to the water?”

“Privacy,” I answered, coming around to where my tent sat. And my brother waited. “I knew he’d come looking for us.”

Finn’s arms tightened around my neck and he burrowed closer, his voice terse. “I don’t want to talk to him.”

“No. I’ll deal with him. You get into bed. Warm it up for me.”

He scoffed, but didn’t reply. Instead, he hid his face as we came up to my brother, hiding away until I could get him in the tent and safely away. No one entered a man’s tent without express permission. It was understood by all to be this way.

Setting Finn on the bed, I wrapped the blanket around him and narrowed my eyes. “I’ll get you something warmer soon. You shiver in your sleep if I move away from you.”

“So then, don’t move away from me,” he suggested cheekily. He was trying to

lighten the mood, but when I moved to step away, he grabbed my tunic, his lip trembling. “Do you have to go?”

“I won’t go far,” I promised. “He won’t go unless I speak with him. Stay here.”

He leaned into my palm when I cupped his cheek, shutting his eyes. I hated walking away from him when he was still so fragile, but my anger towards my brother was simmering under my skin. I needed to deal with him before I could properly comfort Finn.

Godr looked up at me when I stepped out of my tent again. He looked abashed, but he didn’t know half of what he’d truly done to Finn. And I wouldn’t discuss it here with Finn listening.

Fisting the back of his tunic, I shoved him away from the tent and didn’t stop pushing until we were well away from Finn. When I released him, he stumbled forward, shooting me a confused look.

“Rath, it was just a prank. I—”

“Enough! His own brother stabbed him in the back after promising to help him. You saw it as a prank, but he trusted you and you threw it in his face. It is a miracle he trusted you in the first place!”

Godr’s mouth fell open. It could have been because of what I revealed, but it also might have been the fact that I was yelling. I wasn’t one to raise my voice. Not at him especially.

“You should have never involved him in one of your pranks,” I growled, glaring at him. “Targeting me is old hand for you. I know to expect it. But you used him to get to me. My bondmate. Had I not questioned him and explained things to him, it would

have broken his heart to hurt me in that way! I should gut you for hurting him! All the work put in to get him to trust in our clan thrown away because you refuse to grow up and act like a man!”

Godr flinched, dropping his gaze in his shame. Fury filled my veins. I wanted to hurt him. Flashes of the look of betrayal on Finn’s face, the way he screamed at Godr and trembled in my arms as he explained what happened the last time he trusted a brother. It all fueled my rage until I shook with it.

Orthorr’s hand on my shoulder kept me from hurting my brother. He squeezed tight enough to ground me, urging me to back away from Godr. In my anger, I’d stalked him until his back was against a tent and he couldn’t move. We were toe to toe, and I only barely resisted the call for blood.

“Rath. Your bondmate is waiting for you.”

Jerking around, I followed Orthorr’s gaze to where Finn stood, barely hidden by a nearby tent, tears in his pale blue eyes. I took a step back, away from Godr, and turned for Finn instead. He didn’t hesitate to reach for me when I approached, cupping the back of my head as I lifted him off his feet and buried my face in his neck.

“Let’s go,” he murmured, holding me as tight as I held him. “Please.”

For him, I let go of my anger and walked away, not stopping until we were in bed and wrapped around each other. And for the first time, it was my head tucked under his chin as he comforted me, stroking his fingers through my hair and shushing me until I fell asleep in his arms.

“Do you ever braid it?”

Finn sat on the bank of the river, watching as I lathered the soap in my hair. I couldn't coax him in to join me, he preferred the heated water, but he didn't seem to mind sitting with me, especially with the fur I brought him to keep him warm. The fur I had made from the shadowstalker he helped me kill. It wasn't very large, but neither was he. It seemed fitting after the beast tried to kill him.

"I don't know how," I replied before dunking my head to rinse out the soap. When I came back up, I caught his heated look and smirked to myself. He'd been clingy this morning, but not in an amorous way. He was still hurt from Godr's actions and needed my love, not my body, to help him recover.

When I came out of the water, he had a cloth ready for me to dry myself. He hovered, but I didn't comment on it. I preferred him close to me.

"I could... I could braid it, if you want."

Tipping my head, I studied him. "You know how?"

There it was again. The apprehension that he didn't have the day before. We'd gone several steps back, and I still regretted not hurting my brother for it.

I gave Finn a moment to gather his courage, rubbing my head vigorously to dry my hair. In the summer, I would leave it alone, but it was getting colder now. It was better to get the water out.

"I, um... My father used to throw parties. The guests brought their children along. I preferred playing with the girls over the boys. It was less... rowdy. A couple of them taught me to braid using ribbons pinned to a cushion. I've never braided hair before, but..."

Pulling the cloth away from my face, I used it to snatch him against me. As I was still

wet, he squawked in protest, but he didn't try too hard to escape me. I took pleasure in that, how eagerly he pressed himself against me, despite his complaints. Pressing a kiss to his lips to stall him before he started to ramble again, I assured him, "Everything I have is yours. Including my hair. If my bondmate wants to touch me, you'll not hear me complain."

He flushed, a pleased smile on his lips. I kissed that too, merely because I wished to. He hummed a happy sound, bouncing on his toes a little when I pulled away to finish drying and dress myself. We were headed back to my tent, hand in hand, when Godr appeared, looking a little like he hadn't slept. He opened his mouth, probably to apologize, but stalled out when he took in the look on Finn's face. I saw it too. He closed himself off, avoiding eye contact, and wrapped his arms around his middle. Protecting himself.

Godr might be ready to apologize, but Finn wasn't ready to hear it. Tucking him against my side, I gritted my teeth when I saw the guilt stricken look on Godr's face. My fights with my brothers never lasted longer than a few hours, but I wouldn't push Finn to forgive him before he was ready. Even if it hurt to see my blood brother suffer.

"A black eye would've been kinder," I grumbled under my breath.

"What?" Finn looked up at me, the icy wall he'd thrown up in Godr's presence slowly fading the farther we got from him.

I shook my head. "It's nothing. Come, kolrav. I have a comb you can use to play with my hair."

For a while, after we returned to our tent, as he brushed out my hair, Finn was quiet. He was normally eager to converse and practice his language skills, but I felt his turmoil. He was deep in thought, working through his emotions, and I was happy to

give him the time he needed until he was ready to speak with me.

“You want me to forgive him,” he murmured, the gentle combing movements slowing to a stop.

Looking over my shoulder at him, I offered him a patient smile. “What do you want to do?”

He sat back on his heels, playing idly with the comb, his eyes in his lap. “I want...” His lip trembled, and he dashed a tear as it slipped over his cheek. “He– He didn’t know what it would do to me. It feels like I’m being unfair taking it all out on him. But... it still hurt.”

Turning around completely, I bit back a smile when he immediately crawled into my lap. He no longer felt the need to hold back until I offered him affection. He trusted that I wanted him close, no matter what. Wrapping my arms around him, I tucked his head under my chin, thinking through my words.

“You’re right that he didn’t know. You weren’t ready to tell him. But he should have known better. He has spent days with you. He should know you well enough by now to understand you are not interested in pranks. It was cruel to include you without your consent.”

He nodded, his fingers toying with my necklace. I hadn’t yet put on a tunic, as my hair hadn’t fully dried. He traced his fingers over it, his soft breath warm against my chest.

“That’s true. I never liked pranks. My brothers played them on me often. I hated it. I’d never want to do that to someone else. Especially not you.”

Finn didn’t talk about his family much, but what little he expressed to me gave me a

clear impression of them. If I ever met them myself, I'd gut them for the pain they caused him. He should have been treated more gently. He should be treated that way now.

"Do you think I should forgive him?" he asked, a tremor in his voice.

"Not before you're ready. But eventually, yes. Godr is not a cruel man. Stupid, at times, but not cruel. He didn't intend to hurt you. And tearing him apart in front of the clan was an effective punishment."

He hummed, capturing my hand that had been combing his curls and pressing a kiss to my palm. "I forgot to thank you for that. It felt nice to have someone stick up for me."

I kissed the top of his head in response to his affection, but that wasn't what I was referring to. "It wasn't me I was speaking of. You confronted him for his wrong and put him in his place in front of the clan. You should be proud of yourself for standing up for yourself like that."

"Even though I cried and acted quite dramatically?" he asked in a small voice.

"Mm. Even then. You were emotional because he was cruel. It is he who will face the clan's wrath for making you cry. Tributes are held in great respect. Hurting you as he did won't end well for him."

Finn sat up suddenly, eyes wide with worry. "They won't hurt him, will they?"

A smile tugged at my lips. He was angry, yes, and hurt, but he still cared for Godr. He saw him as a friend. They would get past this eventually. Hopefully soon, because I wanted my brother at my bonding ceremony.

“No. They won’t hurt him. But he will spend the next few days getting scolded by every single person in the clan. And when my parents hear of what he did, he’ll be lucky to escape unscathed.”

“Oh. Okay— Wait. Your parents?”

Eighteen

I could tell Rath wanted me to forgive Godr. They were brothers. He tried not to sway my judgment, but his face got tight whenever we walked past him. So, despite the hurt that still tugged in my chest, I made eye contact with Godr while we were eating by the fighter's fire, allowing him to come close to speak with me.

Rath stiffened beside me at Godr's approach, but I put my hand on his to stall him, nodding once to show him it was okay. He flipped his hand, holding mine gently, and stayed silent, though his body language said a lot. He was ready to defend me and hurt Godr if he made me cry again. I vowed to do my best to avoid that, if only to keep Rath's hands clean.

"I, uh... Can I sit?" Godr asked, pointing to a spot on the ground in front of me. There were logs used for seating around the fire, but I sat on the end. He'd have to lean around Rath to speak with me, or sit on the ground. He chose the latter when I nodded. Crossing his legs, he settled in front of me, then seemed like he was at a loss for words. He scrubbed at the back of his neck, opening and closing his mouth like he wanted to speak, but kept changing his mind.

"Get on with it already!" someone snapped from the other side of the fire.

Godr scowled over his shoulder at them before turning back to me. "Right. I, uh... I wanted to apologize to you, Finn. I had no idea playing a prank would upset you. It wasn't even a prank on you directly, so I didn't even think about it."

"That's a horrible apology," Zoya said loud enough for Godr to hear. I hadn't realized

she was here, but when I looked over my shoulder, she stood at my back, glaring down at Godr. It warmed my middle, having someone so clearly on my side. Not to the same effect Rath's defense had, but something different. It felt as though I had a real friend.

Godr grimaced, his shoulders by his ears. "I'm trying," he grumbled.

He was trying. He was terrible at apologies, but I could see the sincerity on his face. It was a look my brothers had never had. They never even bothered to try to apologize when they upset me. Not even the time they shoved me into a tree and I fell and broke my arm, trying to get down. At least Godr looked remorseful.

"Try harder!" someone else demanded. That got a few murmurs of agreement. I looked around, surprised. I thought Rath was exaggerating when he said the entire clan would scold Godr for upsetting me. But everyone there was glaring at Godr, expecting him to make things right. When I looked at Rath, he smiled softly at me, kissing the back of my hand, silently saying he was there for me, even against his own brother.

I was overwhelmed by the support, and it took me a second to get myself under control. Sucking in a shaky breath, I stalled Godr's rambling apology, which didn't make much sense anyway.

"I... I think, if it had been someone else, the prank wouldn't have hurt so much. But I trusted you, and you lied to me. I don't think... It won't be easy for me to give that trust back." Pain and remorse overtook Godr's face and guilt ate at me. I didn't like seeing him so upset. "But... I'm willing to try. As long as you promise not to do it again. Rath has been showing me how I deserve to be treated. I won't be so forgiving next time."

The relief on Godr's face was all-encompassing. His shoulders slumped, and he

nodded, accepting my conditions. “I’ll earn back your trust, Finn. I promise. You’re my brother’s bondmate. That makes you my brother, too. I will be a good brother to you.”

I wasn’t ready to think along those lines yet, but maybe, in the future, I would be okay with it. For now, we’d take it one step at a time.

Verus strode up, a few other men I recognized but didn’t know their names coming up beside him. They all crossed their arms, looking down menacingly at Godr. “Well, you’ve earned Finn’s forgiveness. He’s nicer than I am. I would’ve let you squirm a little while longer. But you haven’t yet earned the forgiveness of the clan. That will be a lot messier.”

Godr blanched, looking up at them uneasily. “What would you have me do?”

Verus tipped his head towards the forest. “Trench duty. For one moon cycle. Perhaps next time you’ll think twice about making a tribute cry.”

I wrinkled my nose, turning to whisper in Rath’s ear. “You were right. A black eye would’ve been kinder.”

He barked out a laugh, startling his brother. “Don’t worry, Kolrav. He’s earned your forgiveness. He will work to earn the clan’s. And he will wear his shame to earn mine.”

I frowned, but Godr seemed to understand what he meant. His head hung when he pushed to his feet, his expression repentant. “As my brother wishes.”

Confused, I watched as Rath pushed to his feet, squaring up to his brother. Godr barely had his head up before Rath punched him hard enough to send him to the ground again. The crowd cheered around us. I choked on a gasp, startled, but it was

Rath who gave Godr a hand and pulled him to his feet again. They hugged it out, speaking low to each other, and then it was all smiles again. I shot an incredulous look at Zoya, who rolled her eyes.

“Boys.”

I felt lighter when we walked back to the tent that night. I hadn't fully forgiven Godr, but he apologized and was willing to make amends and that meant a lot to me. I leaned my head against Rath's shoulder, our fingers tangled together as we walked.

“Two days,” I hummed. When Rath told me of his intention to keep me, I was almost giddy, but there was a level of trepidation as well. There was a lot that could go wrong in two days. I almost wanted to hide away in the tent until it was time so I could make sure nothing else awful happened. I'd only been with the clan for two weeks, but the amount of ups and downs had been a little dizzying.

Rath's hand tightened on mine and when I looked up at him, his smile was affectionate. How did I get so lucky to end up with him? Was this somehow the universe's way of making up for my childhood? Because if it guaranteed I'd end up with him, I'd go through it all again, just to get back to him.

Rath stepped into the tent first and came up short. I didn't have time to react and bumped into him, nearly stumbling back from the shock.

“Rath? What is it?”

I peeked around him and my mouth fell open. The tent was in disarray, blankets strewn and torn, Rath's box of belongings dumped. The little table that held the lantern was upended and the oil from the lamp was spilled in a large puddle. My heart sank looking at it. My brothers had done something similar a few times, usually in retribution when I'd done some imagined slight. The once safe feeling I'd gotten was

tainted now, just like it had been when they'd done the same thing.

“Who...”

Rath shook his head. “I do not know. But I intend to find out.”

Spinning on his heel, he exited the tent again, dragging me with him with a tight grip on my hand. He marched away, probably to inform his clan brothers, while I took one last look over my shoulder with a frown. I didn't think things like this would happen here. His clan was so accepting. And they handled their problems face to face, instead of in backhanded ways. So then why...

A flicker of something caught my eye just before we came around the corner. It almost looked like a lantern...

Horror slammed into me and I wrenched my hand away from Rath's, racing back to the tent. Sure enough, there was a figure standing outside the tent, a lantern in their hand. Their back was turned, so I couldn't see who it was, but it didn't take a genius to figure out their intention. A fire would destroy everything of Rath's, everything he'd made for me. I couldn't let that happen. I wouldn't.

The figure heard my footsteps and turned right as I tackled them. They screeched as they hit the ground, their weight pretty evenly matched with mine. A woman? The lantern she'd been holding shattered on the ground near our heads, lighting the grass aflame, but I couldn't deal with that now. The woman was screaming, trying to get away, and I wasn't going to let her. I was tired of people trying to ruin my happiness. I just wanted to live my life. What was so wrong with that?

“Finn!” Rath raced to help me, but the fire was spreading. He had to deal with that first.

“Put out the fire before it spreads!” I shouted, scrambling to catch the woman’s hands as she tried to shove me off her. She managed to grab my hair hard enough to make my eyes tear up, but it left her vulnerable. Pushing aside the fear and abhorrence for violence, I drew my fist back and punched her in the face. She cried out in surprise, releasing me to touch her injured cheek.

“How dare you!” she screamed, clawing at me again. I caught her hands that time, pinning them both to the ground. “Get off me, you disgusting little shit! Get off me!”

Startled, I nearly released her. I recognized that voice. It was the same woman who attacked me and shoved me into the trench. She was alone this time, without her group of friends, and once again trying to hurt me. This time, she would’ve hurt Rath as well. I couldn’t abide by that.

Anger fueled me, I wanted to hit her again, but I couldn’t move without releasing her. Instead, I screamed in her face.

“What did I ever do to you? Why do you keep attacking me? If anyone is disgusting, it’s you for what you planned to do!”

Nineteen

“G o to hell!” she screamed back, lifting her head in an attempt to headbutt me. I stayed out of range, though, so she missed. “Your kind should be hanged! You’re disgusting!”

More clan members joined us, some helping Rath cover the flames with dirt, while others pulled me off the woman and separated us. I didn’t fight against them, they weren’t trying to hurt me like she was, but she didn’t see it the same way. She screamed and lashed out, kicking and scratching anyone who came in range before her arms were pinned to her sides.

“What is the meaning of this?”

The crowd parted for the clan leader, who I recognized from the new birth celebration. He was an older barbarian, but still massive and burly. The only difference being that his hair was white, and he wore robes instead of the legwear and tunics the other barbarians wore. He looked at Rath, the woman, then at me, raising an eyebrow in a silent demand for an explanation.

Still breathing heavily from the fight, I looked around warily. I’d just seen what happens when someone hurts a tribute. Since I was already part of the clan, did those rules pertain to me as well?

A heavy hand on my shoulder drew my attention and Godr gave me an encouraging nod. “Tell us what happened, brother.”

Bolstered by his support, I turned back to the clan leader. “We came back to Rath’s tent tonight to find it in disarray. I didn’t know why at first, nor did Rath. He pulled me back out so we could speak with someone, I’m assuming to get help.” I shot a questioning look at Rath, who nodded in the affirmative. He looked pissed, but not at me. He was glaring at the woman. “Right. So, we were going to leave to handle it, but right before we were out of sight, I glanced back and saw someone sneaking up to our tent with a lantern. “I gestured to the lantern on the ground. “There was spilled oil inside. I feared whoever it was intended to light the oil and burn our things. So I tackled her.” Frowning at my feet, I twisted my fingers nervously. “I know we aren’t supposed to hurt tributes, but she was going to ruin Rath’s things. I’m not sorry for what I did.”

My shoulders came up, waiting for the worst. If I didn’t apologize, would they make me leave? Would I have to walk away from Rath? I could lie if I needed to, but I wouldn’t mean it. I didn’t regret it. She deserved it.

“What is he saying?” the woman screeched, fighting against the hold on her. “He’s lying! He attacked me! He said he would rape me! He should be hanged!”

Horried, I whipped my head up to look at her, but before I could defend myself, someone in the crowd scoffed.

“He did not. He has no interest in females. You lie to save yourself.”

I knew that voice. Khaul stepped forward to translate, his lip lifted in a sneer as he told the clan what she’d said. I hadn’t realized she didn’t understand the barbarian language. She’d been here a few weeks at least. She should have known enough to follow along by now.

Looks of disgust crossed the faces of the clan, all aimed at her. The last time someone accused me of something, it ended poorly for me. This time, no one believed her. The

relief was so intense, I felt tears prick my eyes.

“Why attack him?” Khaul demanded to her. “What reason do you have?”

She refused to answer him, instead focusing on struggling against the man who held her. I hadn’t met him yet, but he looked resigned and angry, like he’d dealt with her before.

“I, um...”

The clan leader looked to me again, his expression softening to something more kind. “Finn? Do you have more to say?”

I didn't want to admit that she'd attacked me before. I hadn't been lying when I said I didn't see her face, but I knew she was a woman. It might've been easier to figure things out if I'd been honest about it. But it was embarrassing and I hated how easily she got the upper hand.

Godr's hand squeezed gently, reminding me of his support. When I glanced at Rath, he was seething nearby, held back by Verus and a few others to keep him away from the woman. This would only make things worse.

Grimacing, I admitted, “This wasn't the first time. She cornered me near the trench and attacked me there too. She doesn't like men who are not attracted to women. She thinks it's wrong. Lots of town people do.”

Rath's eyes widened as he realized what I was saying. His head whipped around and he fought harder against his clan brothers, roaring his fury. I'd never seen him that way before. Even when Godr upset me, he was angry but so much that he needed to be held back like that. I think if it had been a man who'd attacked me, the clan wouldn't have stopped him, but she was half his size. If he hurt her for hurting me,

she might not survive it.

“Finn.” The clan leader’s voice was calm, despite the tension in the air. When I looked over my shoulder at him, he jerked his chin in Rath’s direction. “Go to him. Only you can settle him now.”

Nodding, I edged around the broken lamp pieces and spilled oil. Rath’s brother released him just as I threw myself at him. He had no choice but to catch me or let me fall. His arms around me kept him from going after the woman, clutching me tight. I wrapped my arms around his neck, petting his hair and shushing him to get him to relax.

“I’m okay. I promise.”

He turned away from the crowd, putting a few steps between us and them, and buried his face against my neck. While he took the time to calm down, I listened as the clan leader confronted the woman.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I didn’t do anything! He attacked me! Why aren’t you punishing him?!”

“He was protecting his home,” the clan leader replied calmly. “Unless you have some other explanation as to what you were doing here?”

She screamed and raged about the injustice of them punishing her, but she didn’t offer any explanation. She couldn’t. The evidence was all there. In the end, they tied her hands and took her away, and Godr offered us his tent for the night, volunteering to stay with a friend instead. I was too exhausted to clean up the mess she’d made, and Rath didn’t argue. He kept me in his arms until we were safely ensconced in Godr’s tent, then held me close as I cried until I fell asleep.

When I woke, I was in my favorite place, smushed so tightly against Rath, that it was difficult to tell where he ended and I began. Normally, I woke first, but this time, he was running his fingers through my hair, pressing small kisses to the top of my head. Not to wake me. More like he needed to touch to ensure I was okay, and he wasn't really paying attention to it. His movements stalled when I looked up at him, and when he glanced down, he looked apologetic.

"Did I wake you?"

I shook my head. "No. I liked it. Did you sleep?"

"Mm. Some. I prefer my own tent."

There was a significance to their tents that Zoya explained a little. Not in a ton of detail, but she said it was equivalent to their homes and the space was respected as theirs and they took pride in taking care of it. Which made the woman's actions even more deplorable. All because she didn't like my preferences for men.

Sitting up, I pulled my knees to my chest and hugged them. "I'm sorry. I should've told you sooner. I was embarrassed that it was a woman who attacked me. My brothers always said I wasn't a real man. It just proved it and I didn't want you to see me that way."

Rath sat up too, trailing his fingers along my jaw to draw my focus to him. His smile was kind, like it always was when he looked at me, and it only grew when I leaned into his touch.

"I do not see you as less than a man. Their gender was not important. You are my gentle Finn. It is not in your blood to fight. There is nothing wrong with this."

It was the first time someone had ever said that to me. That there was nothing wrong

with who I was. He was right, I didn't like fighting. I never wrestled with my brothers or learned to wield a sword like proper gentlemen were supposed to. I stayed in the library and read my books and wrote poetry from time to time, though I'd never admit that to my family. The only reason I fought with that woman was because it would have hurt Rath if she did what she intended. He was worth fighting for.

Releasing my grip on my knees, I turned and crawled into his lap, hugging him tightly. He accepted my need for affection with a smile, kissing my temple and holding me close until I was ready to face the world again.

“We should go clean up your tent. With how cold it is, it will take all day for the blankets to dry.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment before twisting until I was lying beneath him with his big body between my thighs. My stomach tightened at the implication, but we were in Godr's tent, not ours and if he started teasing me now, it would be hours before I got any relief.

“Rath...”

“Do you remember that thing my brother said he'd teach you about?”

My brow furrowed. Why was he bringing that up now?

“Yes... But you said he lied about that.”

He nodded seriously. “True. He did lie. But the act itself is real. It is just done without teeth involved.” A wicked grin overtook his face. “Want me to show you?”

My mouth opened and closed, a flush working its way down my neck until my whole body felt hot. “You want to... put your mouth...” My arousal swelled against his

stomach, answering for me how I felt about it. Everything Rath showed me was amazing, and this would probably be no different, but still... “Here? Shouldn’t we wait?”

He lifted a shoulder, his expression smug. “It seems fitting to learn here what he should have explained correctly the first time.”

And that was all the explanation he was willing to give. He disappeared beneath the blankets, wrestling with my trousers and pushing the tunic out of the way. And then his mouth was on me and I couldn’t breathe.

My back arched off the bedding, a strangled scream catching in my throat. There was no teasing, no explanation or introduction. He sucked me into his mouth without hesitation all the way to the root and bobbed his head with enthusiasm. It felt as though he was attempting to suck out my soul through my erection, the pleasure so intense I couldn’t make a sound. I struggled to draw in a deep breath, scrambling for purchase and finding it in Rath’s hair. When I finally managed to breathe, my release slammed into me so hard, I quickly lost it again, my lungs tight as wave after wave of pleasure slammed into me.

The entire experience was over embarrassingly fast, but I was too delirious from the pleasure to panic over it. It felt as though I could feel my heartbeat through my entire body, throbbing so loud, I could hear nothing outside my heavy breathing. When Rath’s face came into my line of sight, I tried to speak to him, but no words came out. I could only gape at him, my mouth opening and closing like a fish.

That smug look came back, his eyes dancing with amusement. I could not even be cross with him for looking at me like that. I was too dumbfounded to speak.

Rath chuckled, pressing his lips against mine in a quick kiss. “You are fun to surprise, kolrav. I will give you a moment to recover before we return to our tent. You are

right, the washing will take time.”

My eyes widened incredulously, but he only laughed at my expression, tossing the blanket away and pushing to his feet. His erection strained in his trousers and I felt guilty not reciprocating, but I needed time to recover, and by the time I could think clearly, he was pulling me outside and toward his tent. Then we were too busy cleaning and preparing the tent for me to find a moment to pull him aside.

I didn't actually end up learning anything from that lesson. It was too fast and I was so stunned by the pleasure, I had no time to comprehend what he was doing to me. It seemed, if I truly wanted to learn, I would have to try it myself.

Twenty

I was always aware when Finn woke. He stirred in my arms, snuggling closer as he slowly woke. Most days, I pretended not to notice so that he would not feel rushed to move. Since today was so important, I wanted him to sleep as long as he needed. So when he began to wiggle lower, I wasn't sure what he was doing. Not until his beautiful lips wrapped around the head of my cock.

A groan ripped from me and my already hard cock throbbed from his attentions. I always woke this way, eager to pull him under me and grind us both to completion. It had been my intention once he awoke, covering him with my body so he felt safe and loved while I brought us both off. I hadn't been expecting this. He was timid, cautious not to hurt me, but seemed eager to explore me with his tongue.

“ Finn ,” I growled, squeezing my eyes shut to better focus on not reaching completion too quickly. It was hard to concentrate when he ran his tongue along my length like that.

He pushed at my hip, encouraging me onto my back, and I went willingly, spreading my legs to give him more room. When I lifted the blankets to look at him, his cheeks were flushed and his eyes were shut, almost as though he were enjoying this as much as I was.

He attempted to bob his head and take more of me, but I was much larger than he was, and he ended up gagging himself. The feel of his throat constricting around me was divine, but I didn't want him hurting himself. I cupped his chin, trying to draw his focus, but he batted me away, his face full of determination as he sucked me down

again.

“Ah! Finn... Go easy. You do not—” Another loud groan escaped me as he suckled on the tip. I could barely think straight, much less give him direction, but he’d said he wanted to learn more. I promised I would teach him. “Do not take so much that it hurts you,” I panted out. “Use your hand on the rest. Ungh. Yes... Yes! Like that!”

He used not one, but both hands on my length, to cover what his mouth could not. His grip was tight enough to border on painful, but with the suction of his mouth and his eager tongue swirling around the head of my cock, it was perfect. I wouldn’t last much longer. His eager enthusiasm balanced out his inexperience, until my thighs shook with the effort of holding back my thrusts. I knew he wanted to bring me to completion with his mouth, but desperation overtook me. I hauled him off my cock by his arms, rolling him underneath me on his stomach.

His startled sound didn’t deter me. Lifting his tunic out of the way to expose his ass, I pulled the cheeks apart and guided my erection between them, rolling my hips once. The noise Finn made was both surprise and arousal, his moan breathy and loud. Using his saliva on my cock as lubrication, I rode the swell of his ass, the head of my cock bumping intermittently against his hole. It was a terrible tease, I wouldn’t take him like that until after the ceremony, but he seemed to like it. His delighted moans were high pitched and needy, his fingers digging into the bedding as he pleaded for more. His grasp of the clan language disappeared, his mind too clouded with lust to translate his pleas, but I understood him well enough.

A grunt punched through me with every thrust, a telltale tingle signaling my imminent release. I needed Finn to get there first, so I hauled him to his hands and knees, reaching beneath him to stroke his cock. It took only two pumps of my fist to set him off with a wail. His sounds, combined with the way his body contorted with pleasure and the fluttering of his hole teasing me was enough to bring me off as well, a low growl in my throat. My release spent across his ass, the image dragging out the

pleasure as I imagined it dripping from inside him instead of off him. Tonight. After the ceremony. I would show him everything.

When I collapsed, I was careful to rest my weight on my forearms, my body covering his enough to make him feel safe and loved without crushing him. He lay quiet, panting beneath me, and I couldn't resist pressing kisses to every inch of him I could reach.

Humming a happy sound, his eyes fluttered open and he looked over his shoulder at me.

“I love you.”

He murmured the sentence in his language, so I didn't understand its meaning, but when I tipped my head in question, he blushed and hid his face in the bedding. I was prepared to tickle and tease until he told me what he'd said, but footsteps approached my tent, and Verus called out a moment later.

“My brother. Orthorr calls for you. He says to bring your bondmate with you.”

His voice was unusually solemn. Finn heard it too and stiffened, unease wiping away the bliss on his face. I did not know what Orthorr wanted from us, but I didn't think it would be good.

Instead of calling back to answer him, I pushed off the bed, covering Finn before poking my head out of my tent. Tension pulled at Verus's face, and when he saw me, he looked apologetic.

“What is it?”

He shook his head. “I don't speak the tongues of the town. You know this. Just... you

need to come. Now.”

Nodding once to acknowledge him, I ducked back inside to find Finn trembling as he tried to wipe himself clean and dress. Verus’s tone was frightening him. Kneeling in front of him, I cupped his cheeks, leveling him with a look.

“Whatever it is, we will face it together. You are safe, my Finn. I promise.”

Latching onto my arm, he choked on a sob, nodding. I helped him clean up and get dressed, since his fingers shook too much to do it himself. Pulling on my own clothing, I found myself wondering what else could go wrong. In the limited time he’s been here, Finn had been attacked both by a tribute as well as a shadowstalker. He’d been hurt by my own brother, and had to fight to protect our home. It was as though forces were working against us. Perhaps I would need to bring him to a shaman for a cleansing ritual. I didn’t really believe in the effectiveness of it, but my mother did. Her clan had one, too, so I knew where to go.

We joined Verus outside and he fell into step beside me, his expression determined. Whatever we faced, Finn and I would not face it alone. One by one, more clan members joined in a show of force as we marched to the village center, where more stood in a half circle around Orthorr and three men I didn’t recognize.

Finn’s spine snapped straight and his footsteps slowed. “George?”

The crowds had parted enough to allow us through, but the man didn’t hear him at first. He was in discussion with one of his companions, his expression dark. For a moment, I worried he was a past lover coming to claim my bondmate. He admitted in being untouched, but he also said such things weren’t allowed in his town. It could have been that they’d just not found the opportunity to be alone.

When Finn stepped forward, my hand tightened on his, drawing him back. I couldn’t

stomach losing him. I'd fight the man if I had to.

"Who is that?"

"My brother."

I never thought I'd see anyone from my family again after my father had me thrown out. George wasn't even there when it happened. He was the eldest, he lived in another town, and he only ever came home for important matters. It had been an age since I'd seen him last.

"George?" I called again, louder this time. "What... What are you doing here?"

Spinning to face me, his eyes trailed over me, narrowed and suspicious. "Good. You're unharmed. I told them if you weren't, the contract we held would be void."

That was surprisingly thoughtful. I didn't think any of my brothers cared about my wellbeing. But it didn't answer my question.

"What are you doing here, George? How did you even know where I was?" This wasn't the only clan that was part of the treaty accepting tributes. It was a matter of luck that I ended up here with Rath.

"What do you mean, why am I here? I'm here to take you home. I can't believe Father allowed one of Fraser's pranks to go this far."

I shook my head, confused. "What are you talking about?"

He rolled his eyes, irritation flashing across his face. George was never a man of abundant patience. If I didn't understand him the first time, he got annoyed with me.

“I was visiting home when Father told me what he’d done. When I asked for proof, he said he had none, but sent you off anyway. It is shameful to our family to have one of my siblings here as tribute. Especially my brother. They’re treating you like a woman and I won’t allow it. Now, let’s go. We’ve found someone else to take your place so the treaty stands.”

He gestured to a disheveled and tearful woman on his horse who looked absolutely terrified. Whoever she was, she didn’t agree to be here. She shouldn’t have been dragged here in the first place.

“Fraser wasn’t lying, George. He stabbed me in the back by telling Father, but he didn’t lie.”

“Of course he was lying,” George snapped, studying me again. “You are only punishing Father by pretending so you can stay. It is a disgrace to think that way. None of our family has ever been tainted as such.”

Drawing in a deep breath, I let it out slowly. I heard that mindset all my life. It made me scared to live. I hid away so people wouldn’t catch on that I wasn’t like them. That I was an abomination in their eyes. But having the truth revealed turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. Here, with the clan, I was truly myself and they accepted me that way. Nothing could convince me to go back. Ever.

“Then I guess it’s lucky that Father disowned me. I’m not part of your family anymore. And I’m not leaving.” I reached out, taking Rath’s hand and lacing our fingers together. “Fraser wasn’t lying. I am attracted to men. I’ve fallen in love with one. And this clan accepts me the way I am. This is my family now.”

Disgust swept over his face, along with a healthy dose of disbelief. He still wanted to believe that I was lying to punish my father. But that wasn’t what was happening. And I wasn’t interested in arguing about it. If he wanted to force me to go, I had an

entire army of barbarians at my back. He'd have to go through them to get to me.

"So you'd rather live in sin and taint yourself like this instead of coming home? You had such a terrible life that living with these... animals... is better for you?"

Lifting my chin, I glared at him. "Yes. This is my clan. My family. And no amount of belittling from you can bring you even close to their level. Go home, George. Today is my bonding day and you're not welcome to join."

Never in my life had I felt confident enough to stand up to my brothers. If I tried, I'd get a beating for the insult. Being with the clan made me brave. And when George took a step toward me, his fury evident, the clan pressed forward, surrounding me, putting a literal wall of muscle between me and my past. Even he wasn't stupid enough to challenge that.

"Fine. If that's what you want, then you'll need to live with the consequences. Once I leave here, I won't ever come back to save you. You'll spend your life on your knees just to be a brat."

I didn't respond to that. Partially because I knew nothing I could say would make him accept me as I was. But also because I knew what he was referring to, and I absolutely wanted to get on my knees sometime soon. Rath seemed wild for it lying in bed. I wanted to know if I could make his knees weak if he was standing.

As he approached his horse, the woman he'd brought with slid off the other side, darting away to escape him. A familiar man, the one who'd held back the woman who attacked me the other night, caught her in his arms and tucked her behind him, shielding her from George. He scowled, but paid no mind to it. She wasn't worth enough to him to fight for. He mounted his horse, raising his eyebrow and giving me a significant look, like it would somehow sway me. Maybe before I would've jumped to follow his order to keep him and my family happy, but not anymore. I kept my

chin up and didn't waiver an inch. He sneered at me and turned his back, steering his horse away.

"Wait!"

Surprised, we all turned to see the woman from last night. She had her hands tied and she was disheveled. She'd obviously snuck out of where she was being held again. A few fighters moved to stop her, but she screeched at them and ran toward my brother, putting her hands up pleadingly.

"Take me with you! Please! I do not wish to stay here!"

From the look on George's face, he wanted to refuse. He'd always been selfish, and he never did anything for others unless he got something out of it. Bringing me home wasn't about rescuing me. It was about removing the stain from our family name. I should've seen that coming the minute he showed up here.

"She'd be a good match for Fraser," I called out, catching his attention again. "She comes from an influential family."

That was a lie. Maybe. I didn't actually know. Or care, really. I wanted her gone, and I wanted Fraser to suffer. Being married to a bitch like her would probably do it. Or they'd be perfect for each other because they were both horrible down to their cores.

The woman nodded furiously when George shot her a questioning look. "Y-Yes, yes! My father is very influential. The only reason I am here is because we held a raffle in my town and I was chosen. He was honorable enough to be forced into sending me."

I didn't believe it for a second, but George apparently did. He jerked his chin at one of his men, who scooped her up onto his horse. Without another glance in my direction, they left, and my shoulders slumped with relief.

“Uh... Care to tell the rest of us what that was about?” Verus asked, raising an eyebrow at me. That’s when I realized none of that was in their language. They didn’t know what George said about me or what he wanted. They stood by me anyway. It warmed me to my core and a smile broke out over my face as I nodded.

“Sure. Where do you want me to start?”

Twenty-One

After Finn explained what his brother wanted, I was furious, but he proudly told everyone he sent the man away and he wouldn't be coming back, so I was forced to let that go. Still, I kept him glued to my side until near when the ceremony was set to begin. Then, he was stolen away by Zoya to get ready, while I went with my brothers to set up our tent for the night. Not my tent, which they would be expanding to better suit a couple while we were gone, but a tent further from the village where we would have privacy as a newly bonded couple. They teased and joked about what we would do there, but all of my brothers took a moment privately to congratulate me for finally finding someone. They knew how badly I wanted this.

After the tent was set, I returned to my own tent to get ready, picking out my finest garments to wear. I was just finishing when a familiar voice called for me.

"Do you plan on being in there all night?" he teased.

A grin stretched across my face and I ducked out of my tent to greet my father. He pulled me in for a hearty hug, clapping me on the back. This was his village once, but when another village was attacked and left in pieces, he and a fair few of the older generation went to help. Eventually, he chose to stay. My mother liked it there, too. I visited them and they came to see me and Godr as well, but it had been a while since our last visit.

"Hello, Father. I'm glad you could make it."

He scoffed, throwing his arm around my shoulders as we headed toward the village

center. “Like I would miss my own son’s bonding ceremony. So where is he? I thought he would be with you. I wouldn’t have been so polite otherwise when coming to fetch you.”

Barking out a laugh, I shook my head. “He was kidnapped by the females to help him get ready. They like his company. He is gentle and less rowdy than we are.”

“Mm. Sounds like he suits you, then. You’ve always been fond of the sweet things in life.”

I fought off a grin, because he wasn’t wrong, but I was unwilling to admit it. He’d only tease me more. His personality was reflected in Godr. I got my mother’s more calm persona.

My mother was speaking with Orthorr, her expression fierce. I worried for a moment, until we approached them and I heard what they were discussing.

“How dare he? Insulting his own kin on his bonding day and trying to force him to leave. That poor boy. Is he even well enough to do this today? We can delay until he’s had time to process.”

Orthorr chuckled, shaking his head. “Finn is a gentle soul, but he stood his ground against his brother today. It was he who claimed the clan, not the other way around. He will make an excellent addition to our people.”

Pride lit me up inside and I couldn’t help but smile. Finn would always be gentle, it was just his way, and I liked that about him. But when it came to the things he cared most about, he was as fiercely protective as I was. He’d go against his instincts to protect his family. His clan.

I greeted my mother with a hug, listening to her coo over my hair. Finn had stolen me

away at one point to try his hand at braiding it. He was better than he let on, and I told him to leave it for the ceremony. He was so pleased, he nearly cried again. My sweet, gentle Finn.

The sun was beginning to set when the ceremony began. My breath caught in my chest when Finn finally joined me. His hair had been partially shaved on one side, leaving most of his curls intact while embracing the ways of the clan. He wore a white tunic and legwear, as well as thick fur on his shoulders. But it was his smile that stole my breath away. Gone was the terrified and trembling man I'd pulled out of the receiving tent. In his place was a man full of happiness and pride, his cheeks pink from all the attention on him. Zoya and the others talked him through the ceremony so he'd know what to expect, but he still cuddled up against my chest the moment he was close enough, making the crowd chuckle. He blushed and ducked his head, but he was smiling, knowing here he was truly accepted as he was.

Orthorr's smile was patient and he waited for Finn to get his cuddles in before starting the ceremony, speaking loud so the entire clan could hear him.

"We gather today to celebrate this couple. To bask in their love and commitment, both to each other and to our clan. Bondmates are more than just lovers. They are partners in all things. Each challenge they endure, they will face together. A fate only the bravest and strongest can wield."

He turned to Finn, his expression kind. "We know not what the future brings. Fate brought you here to us because you were needed here. Not only as a tribute, but as a staunch defender of our way of life. We are honored to call you brother."

Tears spilled over Finn's cheeks, which I'd expected. With his hands in mine, he had no choice but to let them fall. Instead of embarrassment over his display, he only smiled and murmured a quiet thank you to Orthorr, his voice trembling with emotion.

With a nod, Orthorr turned to me, pride on his face. “Your clan saw your heartache, brother. I was prepared to send you to another clan to find your other half. Fate saw fit to bless us with this man so we could keep you here. Honor the blessing she gifted you, so that we all can bask in her grace.”

Dipping my chin, I turned to where Godr waited, the necklace I carved for Finn in his hand. Finn looked curious when I showed it to him, his brow furrowed.

“Isn’t that... Didn’t you start working on that right after I came here?”

He didn’t realize the implication of that, but the rest of the clan did. Some laughed, others smiled, and a few called out a cheer. Finn looked around in startled confusion before tipping his head at me.

Fighting back a grin, I nodded. “I did. I knew when I first saw you that I had found my match. But since we didn’t speak the same language, it took me a while to express that to you.” The crowd chuckled and Finn smiled, shaking his head a little. Tipping my head towards the necklace, I explained, “In our clan, when a man finds his bondmate, he offers them a gift. Something to show his claim to the world. It would honor me if you wore this, so everyone can see that you are mine and I am yours. And no force can tear us apart.”

His brow furrowed, barely banked hope in his eyes. “Do you promise?”

My smile broke free and I nodded. “I promise, kolrav. You are my Finn. I will protect our bond for the rest of my days.”

With a tear filled smile, he accepted my gift, his eyes full of love as I slipped it over his head. It took some guesswork, I couldn’t make it the same size as mine, but thankfully, it rested perfectly over his heart. He ran his fingers over it, more tears spilling over his cheek, but his smile faltered and a hint of panic overtook him when

he looked up at me with wide eyes.

“Was I supposed to make something for you? I didn't know that. I didn't ruin everything, did I? I don't actually know how to carve, but—”

Chuckling, I silenced his rambles with a quick kiss. “Relax, kolrav. You are my gift. Not any trinket. It is the clan member who supplies the necklace.”

He slumped with relief, resting his forehead against me for a moment. Laughter rippled through the crowd, but I was not bothered. My Finn was emotional by nature. He cared deeply. Had it been required, I knew he would've done everything he could to make me something from his own hands. If he figured it out, he might still.

Orthorr cleared his throat, drawing the attention to him once more. “Finn has accepted his bondmate and takes his place in our clan. As such, we welcome them both home.”

Turning, I urged Finn to face the crowd. He looked curious, but no longer frightened like he had been the day he arrived. He squeezed my hand, resting his head against my arm, and smiled brightly as the clan chanted together to welcome us. When they were through, I surprised him by scooping him up like I had that first day, and kissing him senseless, until the cheers of the crowd fell away and it felt like we were the only two who existed in the world.

A barbarian wedding was much more fun than any that I'd ever been to. Once the ceremony itself was over, Rath and I were sat in big fancy chairs on top of a platform, where we were greeted by each and every member of the clan. It took a while, since this clan was bigger, and by the time we got close to the end, people had been drinking for a while and the greetings were starting to slur. I couldn't stop laughing when Godr came up for his turn and fell right back off, too drunk to stay on his feet. Rath watched with wry amusement, shaking his head, and threw out a comment about

his brother being a lightweight.

Rath had been drinking too, though not nearly as much as the rest of the clan. He offered me sips of his, since I still wasn't great with the strength of the beverage. I also think he was looking for any excuse to get me closer, because whenever I leaned in to take a drink, he found some place to kiss me. My temple, my cheek, my neck. The attention was enough to keep me buzzing with excitement for what would come later. I didn't care how embarrassing it was to ask outright. I wanted Rath to take me. And after we were alone, I was going to ask him to. He was my bondmate. He wouldn't shame me for the request.

"You're blushing," he murmured against my ear, pressing another kiss just underneath it. "Have you had too much to drink, or are you thinking about what I will do to you tonight?"

I sucked in a breath, biting back a whimper when he kissed his way down my neck. Maybe I didn't have to ask, then. He seemed to be thinking of something similar.

"W-What were you planning?" I asked breathlessly, shivering when he nipped at my skin.

Before he could answer, an older couple came up to join us, forcing us apart. The man looked like he was fighting back a laugh, but the woman had a patient smile and she nudged her companion with her elbow before introducing herself to me.

"Hello, Finn. I am Theslei, and this is my bondmate, Odvef. We are Rath's parents."

Twenty-Two

My stomach dropped and I straightened abruptly, shooting Rath a panicked look. He told me his parents would be here to celebrate with us, but I didn't feel prepared to meet them yet. The only parent I'd ever had disowned me and sold me to a barbarian clan less than a month ago. What if they thought I wasn't good enough for their son? Could they make him take the bonding necklace back?

Theslei's smile was warm as she took my hands and pulled me out of my seat and into a hug. "Relax, child. I know of your family. It does not make you any less deserving of my son." She released me and squeezed my hands instead. "You make him very happy. I'm honored with the gift you have given him."

"O-Oh... Um... He's more the gift than I am. He was my protector when I first arrived, and he takes care of me."

"You are gifts to each other. As it should be," she replied. Leaning closer, she whispered, "I always believed he needed a bondmate with a gentle spirit. He enjoys taking care of people."

I ducked my head to hide my smile. No one seemed to have a problem that I wasn't strong or a fighter. They were just happy that I matched Rath so well. I still wanted to find a way to serve the clan, but Zoya said there was no rush. I'd only been here a few weeks and there were lots of jobs I could help with until I found one that suited me best.

"My turn," Rath's father, Odvef, said, nudging his bondmate out of the way. She

scowled at him, going to give her son a hug while Odvef wrapped me up in one of his own. While we were so close together, he murmured in my ear, “So I heard one of my sons made you cry. Tell me what he did so I can deal with him properly.”

I rolled my lips between my teeth, fighting back a laugh. Godr really was getting hell for what he did. And he still greeted me with a smile every morning. He was a good brother. Though I was curious to see what his parents would do to him once they heard the story.

Zoya told me the party would go all night, so when Rath offered me a hand and led me away, I wasn’t sure what was happening. We weren’t going back to our tent, instead heading in the opposite direction, closer to the river. When I noticed the solitary tent all on its own, I frowned at him.

“We aren’t moving, are we? I like our tent.”

He chuckled, shaking his head as he led me inside. “No, kolrav. This is just for now. Unless you’d like the whole clan to hear you tonight.”

My face flushed, excitement and nerves making my belly tighten as he lit the lantern in the corner. The only thing in the tent was a bed, with mounds of blankets and furs to keep us warm, and a small table with a lantern and what looked like a bottle of oil. Did he plan on leaving it on all night?

“My Finn,” Rath murmured, stepping up to me. Looking up at him, I felt my heart leap, the look of love and lust in his eyes making me tremble with want. I suddenly needed to touch him. Needed to be pressed against him. But we were both still dressed and that was too many layers between us.

Lifting onto my toes for a kiss, I wasn’t disappointed. Rath met me halfway, sealing our lips together in a passionate kiss. He drew me against him with one massive arm,

the other cupping my chin as he took my mouth how he pleased. I was so lost in the feel of his tongue gliding against mine, I didn't notice my feet leave the ground until he was laying me back on the bedding so thick, we sank into it.

Rath sat back, pulling his tunic in a way that I was sure he didn't mean to be seductive, but made me shiver watching him. He tossed it aside, leaving just his necklace and all those tattoos. Shirtless, with the lighting behind him, and his long hair braided, he truly looked like a barbarian, ready to have his wicked way with me. I felt my arousal twitch in my trousers at the image alone.

“Rath...”

A grin spread across his face, like he knew the effect he had on me. Dropping to all fours, he loomed over me, only leaning down far enough to run his lips over my neck.

“What do you want, my Finn? Anything you ask of me, it is yours.”

Arousal and embarrassment warred in me, but I trusted Rath. I didn't need to be embarrassed with him.

“I want... I want you to take me...”

He growled in approval, claiming my lips fiercely. I gasped at the sudden move and he took advantage, tangling his tongue with mine. Rough hands pulled my tunic free so he could touch my skin underneath. They skimmed up my chest, thumbs teasing over my nipples until I whimpered and squirmed. Then his lips replaced his hands, pulling the tunic out of the way with each hot kiss he trailed over my skin. A small cry escaped me when he flicked his tongue over my nipple, dragging into a moan when he sucked it next. He pulled my tunic off before switching to the next to give it equal attention.

“Rath, Rath, please...” I murmured, squirming and writhing beneath him. We hadn’t even taken our trousers off yet, but I was already on edge. What was he doing to me?

Trailing his tongue down my chest and abs distracted me from him untying my trousers until he was pulling them down my legs. He tugged off each boot and my trousers, leaving me naked and exposed. For a moment, I thought to cover myself, but Rath was my bondmate. My body was his to command. I let my hands rest near my head, trembling as his heated gaze skimmed over my body. My erection rested stiff against my belly, so needy it was weeping against my belly. My chest rose and fell rapidly, a whimper catching in my throat when he chose only to stare.

“The gods blessed me when they sent you to me,” he murmured. I wasn’t entirely sure he’d meant for me to hear it. He was too busy devouring me with his eyes for me to be sure.

Just when I thought to sit up and take matters into my own hands, Rath moved, standing long enough to shuck his trousers and boots. It was my turn to stare, my mouth going dry at the sight of him. I’d obviously seen him before, especially this morning when I took him into my mouth, but it looked bigger standing up away from his body. Godr explained to me what needed to happen to help me take it, and he warned me that it could be uncomfortable, but still I was eager for it. I’d dreamed of being taken in that way, and I was finally getting my wish with the most perfect bondmate in the world.

Rath turned momentarily, returning to the table to pick up the oil. I frowned when he turned back with it in his hand.

“What is that for?”

One corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk, but he didn’t answer me. He showed me instead.

Dribbling the oil on his fingers, he settled over me again, his weight on his hand by my head as he sipped and teased at my lips. When he reached between us, I thought he would touch my arousal again. Instead, he went further, tracing his fingers along my crease. A sound I'd never made before escaped me, like a strangled groan only louder. Desperation dumped into my veins and I grew frantic, pushing back against his hand, until Rath stopped me, settling on his elbow so he could blanket me with his body and stop my movements.

“Shh... slowly, kolrav. We have all night.”

“P-Please. I've never– I've always wanted– Please!”

He groaned, resting his forehead against mine. “I cannot say no to you. Alright, kolrav. I'll give you what you need. But let me take care of you. I do not wish to hurt you.”

I nodded rapidly, accepting his kisses as a distraction. This time, he did not tease when he touched me again. He ran his oiled fingers over my hole, softening it to his touch. He swallowed my needy moans, pushing one finger in once he decided I was ready. The stretch was new and it burned a little, but not enough to deter me. I gasped with each drag of his finger, clinging to his shoulders, until my body relaxed and he pushed in another.

“R-Rath!”

“That's good, my Finn. Just relax. I'll take care of you.”

If he took care of me any better, I was going to reach completion before we could get much farther. I took to rocking my hips, driving his fingers deeper. He pulled away enough to watch me, his face lax as he took in my expression.

“Oh, Finn. You are such a delight.”

“Please. More...”

His eyes slipped shut for a moment and he took a deep breath, like he was trying to calm himself, but when he opened them, his eyes were alight with passion. He pulled his fingers out, coating them with more oil, then pushed back in with a third finger to join the other two.

The burn was stronger this time, enough to make me hesitate, but then Rath did something with his fingers, crooking them somehow, and it felt as though a bolt of pleasure shot up my spine, making me cry out. He played with that spot, brushing over it with every thrust of his fingers, until I was almost sobbing with the desperate need to release.

“Rath, please!”

“Anything you wish for is yours, my sweet Finn.”

I protested when he pulled his fingers free, but he ignored me, gripping me by the hips to flip me onto my front. When he dragged me onto my hands and knees, I recognized the position and anticipation made my stomach clench. I looked over my shoulder at him, watching him use the oil on his cock. Shuffling closer, he pressed kisses along my back until he reached my mouth, capturing my lips just as he pushed inside.

“Oh, Rath !”

He groaned my name, fingers digging into my hips as he slid in one inch at a time. It hurt, but it felt like something I’d been missing my whole life at the same time. Tears spilled down my cheeks, even while I pleaded for more, until his hips pressed against

mine and the entirety of his length was buried inside me. He paused then, draping his body against my back with one arm hugging my chest.

“Are you alright, my Finn?”

It took a few moments to take a breath deep enough to answer him. “Y-Yes, but... I need— I think I need you to move. Please.”

He obliged, rocking his hips, and my mouth fell open in surprise. “Oh. Oh, gods! Rath!”

“Yes, Finn. Just like that.”

His hips slowly picked up speed, each thrust sending explosions of pleasure throughout my entire body. Tension coiled low in my belly, tightening further with every slap of his skin on mine. I’d never felt anything like it before, and I never wanted it to end. But my body was making demands, and I didn’t think I’d last much longer either. It was too good. And the moment his oiled hand wrapped around my erection, I had no choice in the matter. I came with a scream of pleasure, suddenly grateful he thought to bring us away from the clan for the night.

Rath straightened suddenly, holding my hips as his thrusts grew rougher and more powerful. He grunted with each thrust, sending shivers up my spine. That feeling of pain and pleasure mixed together picked up again, pushing me towards the edge again. When he pushed harder with his thumbs, tipping my hips just a little, it changed the angle and that spot that he introduced me to while prepping me was struck dead on. A strangled cry escaped me. Rath took notice of it and aimed for that spot, making my eyes roll into my head from the pleasure. I clenched automatically, which seemed to set Rath off.

“ Ungh ! Finn!”

It was too much. I couldn't take any more. The tension snapped and I exploded again, this time coming so hard, I couldn't hold myself up anymore. Rath caught me before I could collapse, groaning long and loud in my ear as he reached completion inside me. It went on and on, until we both toppled to the side, wrapped around each other and out of breath.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am

I didn't realize we'd both fallen asleep until I felt Finn squirming again. It couldn't have been long, it was still dark and the lantern was still lit, but he was moving like he wanted to get free of my hold.

"Finn?" I asked blearily.

He froze, looking over his shoulder at me guiltily. "Y-Yes?"

"What's wrong? Why are you trying to pull away?"

If he was uncomfortable or in pain, I wanted to know so I could take care of him. I asked the healers for a salve to help his discomfort, but I'd fallen asleep before I could use it on him.

"N-Nothing is wrong. Go back to sleep."

That sounded suspicious, and not like my Finn. Sitting up, I looked down at him to better understand what was going on. And what I found surprised me. Finn was aroused, trying to hide his cock behind his hands as he blushed furiously and avoided my eye. A smile tugged at my lips, but I pursed my lips to hide it, guiding his chin so he could look at me.

"Kolrav. Why are you hiding from me?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, his shoulders by his ears. "I'm sorry! I didn't want to wake you, but I couldn't stop thinking about what we did and how amazing it was, and I couldn't calm down. I was only going to step outside to cool off so you could

rest, and– mmph!”

It took very little effort to flip him and pin his hands above his head, exposing his needy cock to me. Pushing my tongue into his mouth stopped his rambling, and after a quick check to make sure he was ready, I was pushing inside him again. He let out that sound he’d made when we started, a desperate sort of moan that told me he was getting exactly what he craved. Guiding his legs around my hips, I rocked into him, swallowing his moans until he stiffened and came with a cry. The tight grip of his ass on my cock was enough to drag my release from me moments later. Breathless and still buried inside him, I shifted my weight to my forearms and ran my fingers through his unruly curls.

“No matter the time of day or night, I will gladly give you what you need. Had I thought you were ready for it, I would have asked right after the first time. But you needed rest. I don’t want to hurt you.” He opened his mouth to argue, but I silenced his protests with a kiss before leveling him with a look. “You never have to go off alone anymore. It’s my job as your bondmate to take care of you. I want to take care of you. You are not a burden to me, Finn. You are my everything.”

Big tears filled his eyes and he closed his eyes when I leaned my forehead against his. I knew this was not about me but the way he was raised. It was hard for him to see himself as worthwhile after years being on his own. I would spend my life showing him he deserved to be cared for, until he finally believed me.

“I love you,” he murmured. He’d said that before, but I still didn’t know what it meant, as he always said it in his language. But then he repeated it in the clan tongue, and I finally understood.

“You are my other half.”

My chest felt tight as my heart filled to bursting. Dipping my head, I took his lips in a soft kiss, pouring every ounce of my love for him into it. When I lifted my head, his

tears were accompanied by a smile. Happy tears. I could accept this.

“And you are mine, kolrav. You will always be mine.”

It took some reassurance from Rath that I wasn't being bothersome by asking for more of his attention. After I woke him for the third time and he smiled as he pushed inside me, I was beginning to believe him. The fourth time surprised even me. I was insatiable, finally experiencing the kind of pleasure I'd only ever dreamed of. I recreated waking him up that morning, but this time by sitting on his cock. He woke up with his head thrown back, groaning out his pleasure, and took me with a punishing pace in response.

I passed out after that round, too exhausted to go again. Rath used a salve on me after each round, but I didn't even feel him apply it before I was asleep. I woke up tucked against his side, covered in soft furs, and so unbelievably sore, it brought tears to my eyes.

“I worried you would feel like this in the morning,” Rath said, worry in his voice. When I looked up at him, he was already awake, his thumb stroking my cheek as he studied me with a frown. I wanted to complain about the pain, but I couldn't regret what we'd done.

I shook my head, forcing myself to remember the pleasure as opposed to the pain. “I'm okay.”

He raised a knowing eyebrow and I corrected myself.

“I'll be okay. I don't regret it. I don't regret a single moment with you.”

A smile spread across his face, and he distracted me from the pain for a little while with soft kisses and loving caresses, until my bladder protested and we had to get up.

“You know what would help ease the soreness?” he asked as I came back around the tree I’d used for privacy.

I tipped my head curiously. “What?”

He gave a significant look to the river.

“Oh no. No! It’s too cold!”

He didn't let me argue with him, plucking me off my feet and into his arms with a laugh. I tried to wriggle free, but he was too strong.

“Please, Rath! It’s too cold!”

“I’ll keep you warm,” he said, kissing my forehead as he walked us straight into the icy water. He wasn’t wrong that it helped ease the pain, but it also made me numb all over, and the little fire he built in front of our tent wasn’t enough to warm me. I curled under one of the furs, shivering, while he made the flames a little bigger, but it wasn’t until he picked me up and sat in front of it with me cuddled in his arms that my teeth stopped chattering.

“You’re mean,” I whined when I noticed he was fighting off a smile.

Chuckling, he peppered my face with kisses until I smiled back at him. “I’m sorry, my Finn. I only wanted to help.”

I pushed out my lip in a pout. “Maybe it helped numb it, but it didn’t make it go away.”

“No. That will take time. The salve helps. I’ll apply more after we eat.”

The clan had provided a gift basket of smoked meats, breads, and fruit for us so we

could hole away together for a few days without being interrupted. No one had told me about this part, and I was thrilled when Rath said we'd be staying together in bed for three days. I was less thrilled when I realized I would be too sore to enjoy it past the first night.

"You're pouting," Rath pointed out, rubbing his forehead against mine. "Tell me why so I can fix it."

That made me smile. My big barbarian was always so determined to take care of me. I just wish he could do it in the same way he did last night. One night wasn't enough.

"I wish we could've had more than just one night. We can't do anything more because I'm sore."

If my family saw me pouting like this, they would have berated me for days about acting like a man. Rath only smirked and shook his head.

"No, kolrav. There is more. Much more."

He had a look in his eye that promised I'd enjoy the things he was thinking about. Maybe not with him inside me, but there was more than just that to explore.

"Really?"

"Want me to show you?"

My sweet barbarian had already shown me so much. Kindness, patience, acceptance. From day one, he was determined to make my life better than I ever dreamed it could be. He showed me what it meant to be a true family, and how to trust someone after I'd been so hurt before. He showed me how to love. How to accept love in return, though I was still learning that one. He never rushed me or demanded more than I could give. And each lesson only made me fall further in love with him.

I looked forward to whatever it was he wanted to show me next.