

## Chapter 7

I'm so warm and so comfortable. I squirm, not wanting to wake. Cracking an eye open, I find myself against Anders, his strong arms completely engulfing me in the safety of, well, him. At some point in the night, my hand had found its way under the hem of his shirt where it now rests on his very muscular torso.

Quickly, I pull my hand back, and thankfully it doesn't wake him. He really is handsome. And now that I've been told, it's obvious that he isn't from here. Most people here have dark hair and dark eyes. Don't get me wrong, they all look different from one another, but Anders stands out with his blond hair and deep blue eyes. And the two of us together really stand out, with my bright red hair. I'm used to that, though. My father told me my mother had the same hair, but most people in my village did not.

I wiggle from his arms, trying so hard to sneak out to go to relieve myself in the outbuilding before he wakes. As I push the blanket back and climb out, I see it there on the hay. Blood. "No," I whisper, shocked at the sight. Quickly, I try to gather up the soiled hay to remove it before he wakes, but I'm not fast enough.

Anders cracks his blue eyes open, watching me as I frantically try to hide the hay, knowing that it's going to be on my dress. I look at him, lip quivering as I can see the realization come to his face. He knows. He sits up and looks at me in confusion, taking my hands in his and smiling at me slightly. Perhaps he does not know that this is part of the curse of Eve, he doesn't know that I'm unclean now. I swallow hard as the tears spill over.

He tilts his head at me in confusion before he gets up and climbs down, leaving me in the loft all alone. I search through my belongings, trying my best to find something I can use, but I only have 3 dresses. The underdress I have on will be stained now. Perhaps I can just use that since it's likely ruined. I abandon my search and go back to pulling the soiled hay out, stung it into a bucket as Anders returns.

He sees me and comes over, placing his hands on mine, stopping me. Calmly, he helps me sit back and surprises me as he moves to pick up the soiled hay and sits the bucket to the side. He moves over and pulls out one of his shirts and hands it to me. I shake my head at him, not wanting to take one of his few clothing items, but he grabs his knife and slices through it, making it clear that I need to take it from him.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to him softly. He gently cups my face in his as he smiles at me and leans forward to place a gentle kiss on my lips. He looks back, staring into my eyes and leans forward, kissing my forehead. He brings his rough thumbs up and wipes away my tears before he runs one across my lips, leaning down to kiss me again.

He stands and picks up one of my newly washed dresses for me and hands it to me before he climbs down, leaving me alone in the loft. I bring my fingers up to my lips. He kissed me. He really kissed me. He cleaned my mess, unbothered by it and gave me his shirt... and he kissed me.

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After doing my best with Anders' shirt and changing my clothes, I climb down the ladder and find him waiting outside the barn for me with the older woman.

He stands when he sees me and smiles, taking my hand and bringing me over to her. He reaches out and touches my shoulder. "Eleanor," he tells her and she smiles at me.

"Olga," she says with a kind smile as she touches her chest. She says something to him that I don't understand and takes my hand, placing it in hers.

Helga tugs at my arm, pulling me behind her towards the fence around the farm. I turn back to Anders but he just smiles at me, letting me know that it's alright.

Helga and I walk down a path towards the village. On the outskirts is a hut and she pulls me towards it. As we approach, I can hear a woman moaning in pain and I look to Helga in panic. She places her hand on mine and pulls me toward it, not bothering to knock as we enter.

Inside, a young woman sits on some hay, no clothing on. She's clearly very pregnant and clearly in labor. She breathes deep, a woman behind her dips a rag into a bucket of water and wipes her forehead for her. The woman moves onto her hands and knees, bearing down with a scream.

Olga smiles at them, reaching over to me and placing her hand over my lower stomach. I don't understand, but I can't pull my eyes away from the woman working so hard to bring new life into the world.

A woman approaches us from the left, saying something to Olga and the two women smile. She looks me over, running her fingers through my hair and nods. Olga turns, leaving the room and as I turn to leave with her, she stops me, taking my hand and placing it in the new woman's. Anders wouldn't have sent me here if it wasn't safe, would he?

I'm pulled from my thoughts as the woman giving birth cries out, clearly in pain. The new woman takes my hand and pulls me towards a tub in the back. She reaches down and tugs my dress up and over my head. I attempt to stop her but she swats at my hand and pulls the dress off. She reaches forward and unties Anders' shirt from around me and guides me over to the tub of water, helping me in.

I sit as instructed, and she immediately dumps water on my hair, adding some kind of soap to my hair and scrubbing it. After she rinses it and is satisfied, she helps me out of the water and dries me off. She helps me into a piece of leather that's lined with some moss and shows me how to tie it on before she helps me into my dress and pulls me towards the woman still giving birth.

She taps the shoulder of the girl who has been wiping the mother's forehead, and she gets up to leave, handing the rag to me. I swallow hard, having never been close to a woman giving birth before, but I do as I had seen her do, wiping her forehead while she takes breaths. I notice that her neck and chest have sweat, so I wipe them too, and she squeezes my hand in thanks.

After some time, the mother moves onto her knees and holds both my hands in hers tightly, bears down and the baby nally begins to emerge. She looks into my eyes and I smile at her, knowing that she won't understand anything I could say as she bears down again as the older woman holds up a baby to her.

The mother takes the crying infant and brings her to her chest, sitting back and crying tears of joy as she holds her tightly. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, but I bring the wet rag forward and begin to wipe the babe off. I look to the woman who delivered her, and she just nods encouragingly, so I continue to help her clean off the new life that has joined us.

## Chapter 8

The new mother and her baby are lying on a bed in one corner as the woman who delivered her helps me to another in an opposing corner. She smiles at me as she helps me into the bed, pulling the blankets up over me. She says something that I don't understand but I can tell from her face that it's kind. She leaves me and comes back, handing me a bowl of some kind of stew. I am starving and I happily eat it.

After a bit, there's a knock at the hut and, eventually, Anders appears. He's escorted over to me and he smiles, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. He reaches in his bag and pulls something out, handing it to me.

I take the item and smile at it. It's carefully wrapped in a piece of linen, tied together with a beautiful red ribbon. "Gipt," he says softly, tugging at one end of the ribbon, encouraging me to unwrap the item. Confused, I follow his lead, laying the ribbon on the bed next to me and unfolding the fabric to find a beautiful, brass comb. I look up at him, and he's smiling at me so big as he takes it from me and moves to sit behind me.

He takes my hair and gently begins to comb the knots that have been forming for me. He stays there for so long, making sure that each hair is perfectly cared for, gently running through my hair in sections, taking his time. The older woman looks at us with a smile on her wrinkled face, not saying a word. No one here seems to be bothered that he's here, or that he's combing my hair, and I relax, leaning into him. He's so warm and, for whatever reason, he feels so safe.

When he's finally finished with my hair, he wraps his strong arms around me, whispering in my ear, "minn."

Catherine comes into the hut, looking around and coming over to me. She sits next to us on the ground, saying something to Anders. They speak for a few moments before she turns to me. "It's a gift for you," she says, nodding to the comb. "He wants to know that you are alright. He wants to know that you understand what has happened."

"I don't," I tell her. "I'm unclean. I don't know why he's taking care of me. He shouldn't be around me right now."

She shakes her head at me. "It's not like that here," she says, smiling at him. "It's not something they are ashamed of here. It means you are healthy, that you can bear his children. He is happy and wants to care for you."

"Oh," I say, trying to absorb what she's said. His children? That feels so heavy yet, so right.

"You helped a baby come to us," she says with a smile. "It is good luck here. It means you will be blessed with children of your own. Women come here when sick or in need of care, for this time or to have their baby. They want you to learn to care for mothers."

I look at her in confusion. "They want you to help, to be a midwife," she says with a nod. "They said you did very well, that you have a gift from Frigga."

"Frigga?" I ask, confused.

Catherine says something to Anders and he smiles at me, holding me tightly to him. "She's the Goddess of childbirth. I'll tell you about her soon, but first, you need to learn to speak with your man."

She says something to Anders again and after a brief conversation, she sighs. "He wants me to tell you that he has to go out with the raids again soon. After the full moon."

"What?" I ask, feeling panicked, but he gently rubs my arm.

She nods. "There's more, but we need to be alone for him to tell me," she says with a shrug. "He said for you to stay in the barn while he's gone, that the family will care for you. He needs to raid so he can afford to marry you."

Marry me? He is serious, I can see from the look on his face. I should have known. I nod at her, wondering what else he needs to tell me that he can't say here. He releases me and kisses my cheek. "Kærasta" he says softly in my ear and I don't know what it means, but I don't need to in order to understand that he's calling me his.

He leaves and Catherine takes the ribbon from the bed, but he's moving everything to and using it to tie my hair back. "He didn't want me to tell you, but he's used everything to pay people to help him build a house for you. That's why he's going on the raids."

I nod, knowing that I've seen the amount of items in his bag dwindle quickly. I sigh, not really understanding how life here works, but I have quickly come to understand that the items they bring back are currency for them. How many people will Anders kill to care for me?

"Do you know how long they will be gone?" I ask her as she moves back to my side.

"It's a short trip," she says, patting my hand. "Probably just a few weeks."

I nod, looking over at the small baby who has started crying. Her mother moves her, placing her breast in her mouth and she immediately clamps down, knowing exactly what she's supposed to do. I've never seen anything like this, but it is absolutely amazing. "I liked helping her," I tell Catherine.

"Good," she says with a smile. "The midwife wants you to learn so you can replace her some day. Anders frowned, but he didn't say anything about it. When you leave here, I'll walk you home."

She leaves and I lay down, curling into the comfortable bed and pulling the comb close to me. I don't know what he had to give up to give this to me, but it's the most precious thing I've ever owned.