

THE LORD OF THE CLANS

Beyond the edge of the world, darkness bides its time.
Only power and strength can fight it...not a simple girl.



CHRIS LANGE

THE LORD OF THE CLANS

Chris Lange

Erotic Romance

Secret Cravings Publishing
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A Secret Cravings Publishing Book

Erotic Romance

The Lord of the Clans

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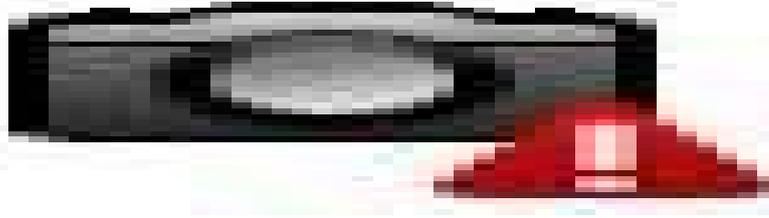
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Best wishes,
Beth Walker

THE LORD OF THE CLANS

Chris Lange

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Chapter One

She screamed.

A trail of blood ran down her forearm as the tribesman removed the tip of his long knife and sneered at her.

“You’d better tell me, you know. Because if you don’t, he’ll make you talk and it won’t be pretty.”

Breath coming in short rasps from the pain in her left arm, she nevertheless strained against the iron bands around her wrists. The chains rattled, but didn’t budge. Fastened to the cave wall, they looked like they’d resist the test of time much better than she would.

“Who’s *he*?”

Her captor seemed to hesitate for a fleeting instant, but just as quickly, he narrowed his eyes and moved the knife toward her face.

“Don’t try anything smart, I can promise you’ll regret it. So we’ll start again from the top. What’s your name?”

“I’ve already told you.”

Although she could use the wall behind her for support, her arms hurt from hanging, and the metal rings bit her wrists. She tensed when he pressed the knife inches below her right eye.

“Do you really want me to slice you up?”

“My name is Ariana.”

“Where do you come from?”

“The Healers Tribe.”

The sneer came back as if she had insulted his intelligence, or attempted to sway him from his interrogation technique.

“Is that so? So you won’t mind telling me why you sneaked into our territory in the middle of the night?”

“I had no idea these caves belonged to your tribe. I got lost, and I was just looking for a safe place to spend the darkest hours.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you?”

She flinched from the stench of the man. Did he happen to have a good scrub since his childhood?

“Yes. Why would I lie?”

“Because you’re a spy.”

“Oh, for the love of the Creators, this is ridiculous.”

She couldn’t bite the words back, even threatened by the blade against her cheekbone. She realized her tone might anger him, and she’d better put things right before panic clouded her judgement. Summoning her sincerest expression, she spoke in a low but firm voice.

“I’m not a spy. I’m a healer.”

“Sure. Yet I don’t remember any of my people asking for a healer. Besides, you could have shown up during the day.”

“Nobody called for me. I was on my way to visit my ailing aunt, and night fell before I knew it.”

“You don’t say! ~~The little girl was visiting her sick aunt. This is such a charming story, I might even shed a tear.~~”

His scoffing tone contradicted the danger she read in his gaze. How come she had ended up here, chained to a wall, tortured by a scum whose stench and filth repulsed her?

She shouldn’t have listened to her shaman. After all, he was the one eager to see her embark on this perilous journey.

“Look, if I had come here to snoop around, I’d have devised a much more believable excuse. Right?”

He took a step back, and his brow furrowed. Hazardous as her situation was, she pressed her lips together at the sight of his sudden confusion. She blinked when he scratched the side of his head.

His men had captured her as she had been entering a cave she thought deserted. Fighting hadn’t crossed her mind because, like her, they belonged to a clan. The four of them would have subdued her anyway, and she wished for the thousandth time that she was stronger.

Figuring they’d at least treat her with politeness, she’d been surprised when they’d handed her over to the tribesman currently torturing her. He’d stripped her of her weapons without a word and tied her to the wall. The key to her chains lay out of reach on a table.

This one wasn’t a great thinker, although he appeared to command one of several units. When she didn’t add a new comment, he scratched his head some more, dirty fingernails rubbing on his short hair. Was he finally starting to believe her?

To her dismay, he brought the knife back against her face.

She whimpered, yet managed to keep her fear in check. The cold wall behind her prevented any movement. The iron bands around her wrists struck it as he threatened her with his blade, and the short chains rattled. He snorted at her alarm. Beads of perspiration dampened the hooked bridge of his nose when he applied pressure on the corner of her eye.

“Don’t try to confuse me, wench. I ain’t nobody’s fool, and your charms won’t work on me. So what do you say I gouge out this little piece of you? Would you be more talkative?”

Not a chance, given that she’d definitely be half-blind and screaming her lungs out. A shiver coursed through her when the long blade touched the inside of her eye.

He grinned. “Come on, out with it. I’m your best bet, you know. He won’t be as indulgent when he gets here.”

Who was he talking about? Why did the mention of this mysterious person make her stomach churn?

Too terrified to blink or swallow, she held her breath while the wild thumping of her heart tolled against her ears. The scumbag grinning in her face was going to cut her up, and the idea of such raking pain dried her mouth. Heedless of heroism, she uttered a small, pitiful sound.

“Refresh my memory, would you, Blahort? When did I ever order you to interrogate prisoners?”

The question shattered the moment of torture, and the tribesman wheeled round at the sound of the chilly, commanding voice. She breathed a sigh of relief as the knife left her face. Before her eyes, her tormentor dropped down on one knee.

“I’m sorry, my lord. We caught her entering our caves, and I thought you wouldn’t be back before dawn.”

“That’s when you took upon yourself to extract information out of her, because she’s a spy?”

Try as she might, she couldn’t make out the source of the authoritative voice. Because the candle didn’t light the entrance of the cave, she only saw a dark shape. Tears blurred her vision, and she wondered if the tribesman might have scratched or damaged her eye with his knife.

“Right, my lord.”

“I see. You may leave us now.”

~~Her tormentor scrambled up to his feet and took hesitant steps toward the silhouette. As he went past the man in the shadows, his name clacked throughout the cavern like the strike of a whip.~~

“Blahort!”

He froze.

Blinking to expel moisture from her eyes and get a better look, she watched his slumped shoulder

“Yes, my lord.”

“Don’t ever disobey my orders again.”

With a vigorous nod, the tribesman scampered away. The big, dark shape moved forward. Breath caught in her throat, she tensed as the mysterious man finally appeared in her range of vision.

He wore the usual sheepskin coat clansmen favoured but his size made her pulse race. She was very tall for a woman, yet she wagered the top of her head wouldn’t rise above his neck. Shoulder-length, straight fair hair framed a face chiselled in ice.

A long scar ran from his temple down to the side of his mouth. With eyes the colour of a still lake on a cloudy winter morning, his gaze blew away her ability to think. She prayed he wouldn’t take another step because the gray eyes seemed to see right through her while an aching pulse took complete possession of her body. She flinched, unable to meet his icy stare.

So this was the man her former tormentor had warned her about. The man who would now torture her to no end to get what he wanted. Teeth clenched, she strained against the metal rings.

As if to confirm her worst fears, he seized the key to the chains, looked at it for a second, and put it back on the table. Then he moved toward her. Even if she’d been free, her feet would have refused to shift. His sheer size made her think of a mountain giant, and his steel gaze pinned her to the wall.

“Welcome to my humble dwelling, Ariana.”

She swallowed, but her throat still felt like a patch of dry ground. Her blood raced for no logical reason. Her insides burned with something she couldn’t define. Although he addressed her with politeness and respect, he didn’t make a move to untie her.

She forced the words out of her mouth. “Would you mind telling me who you are?”

“Not in the least. My name is Cameron, but you may call me ‘my lord.’”

By the Mighty Gods, she should have known. He was the Lord of the Clans. The legendary leader of all tribes—feared, hated, and revered throughout the Four Kingdoms. Which meant she also owed him fealty and obedience. As member of the Healers tribe, she was sworn to him.

“I’m sorry, my lord, I didn’t realise.”

A hundred stories about him rushed to her mind, along with the recollections of long winter evenings spent around the fire while their shaman recounted the Lord of the Clans’ exploits. She had no way of knowing if the heroic tales were true, but seeing him in the flesh, she thought so.

She should probably bow now that he had introduced himself, but her suspended arms hurt too much. Awed, yet still fearful of his next move, she managed to keep a composed tone.

“How long have you been listening?”

“Long enough to know you told him the truth.”

“So you believe me?”

She shivered when he eyed her slowly from head to toe, his penetrating gaze making her feel completely naked.

“Let’s say that if my man had more juice in his brain, he’d have noticed the pouch at your belt. May I venture it contains healing herbs?”

“Indeed.”

He nodded, face expressionless, and closed the short distance between them. Her pulse jumped and a trickle of sweat slowly slid down her side. What was he going to do now? Did he really believe he

Although he didn't carry a knife, there were still a thousand ways he might hurt her.

~~She waited while he focused on her neck. Did he have a mind to strangle her? She tried to remain motionless and appear brave, but couldn't suppress a shudder when he raised his hands toward her cleavage. Heart banging hard, she watched him grab the open collar of her outfit.~~

“What—”

Before she could add more, he ripped her shirt apart.

Chapter Two

The leather string tying the neck of her shirt snapped. Cool air brushed her bare skin. Utterly exposed, she pulled on the chains, and the metal rings grazed her wrists. Goosebumps broke all over her body as the Lord of the Clans stared at her nakedness. Muscles taut to the point of pain, she braced herself for a rush of fear to kick in.

It didn't.

Her stomach hardened, taken over by the need to be touched. Pins and needles crawled inside while a sultry rush forced her to clench her fingers. Unable to control her body's reactions, she winced when she looked down at her erect nipples. How in the name of the Creators could she be excited by the man who had the power to crush her like an insignificant bug?

"You're beautiful."

His simple words ignited a low throb between her thighs. His steely gaze fastened on her uncovered breasts and held her against the wall in a way the chains never could. She took a deep breath while he stared at her aroused nipples. His kind of torture didn't hurt. But if she had been a spy, she'd have told him everything he wanted to know.

Whatever feeling passed between them, she'd be better advised to nip it in the bud. Her shameless years spent teaching her discipline and self-control. As he used to repeat, mind over matter in all circumstances. He'd be so ashamed of her right now, dangling half-naked and craving the strokes of their ruler. Before all common sense deserted her, she inhaled to gather her wits.

"Are you going to rape me?"

He wrenched his gaze away from her breasts to look up at her. The gray in his eyes turned to the colour of smouldering ashes.

"What is offered cannot be ravished, don't you think?"

Heat converged to her cheeks as a small grin lifted the corner of his mouth. Somehow her awareness of her condition embarrassed her even more than the waves of desire she tried to suppress. How many women swooned over him when he stepped outside? How many had he taken to his pallid bed with a snap of his fingers? She didn't want her name to be added to the list of his conquests.

"Don't get ahead of yourself. I'm only reacting to the cold."

"And I'm only verifying your story. I can't release you without proof of your identity, but it seems I was right to believe you."

The true reason for ripping her shirt apart entered her mind. He had never intended to gawk at her naked body. How could she have failed to recall the clan's symbol? Inked above her belly button, the small tattoo branded her as member of the Healers Tribe. Her cheeks burned anew.

"Am I to understand you're letting me go?"

Despite the fact that he knew where she came from, he didn't seem in a hurry to answer her question. Instead, he looked at her tattoo.

"The coiled snake. You bear the mark of the Ancients."

What was he talking about? Hoping he didn't view her as ancient, she tugged at the iron bands around her wrists.

"It's painful. Would you mind, my lord?"

The jangle of the chains broke his concentration. Although he towered over her, she did her best to maintain a confident attitude. ~~But when he raised his hands toward her breasts, she had to open her mouth to breathe.~~ Her nipples puckered, and the fine hairs on her skin reached out to him.

As if time altered its course, she watched the movements of his fingers in slow motion. When he let them linger inches from her expectant flesh, her chest caved in. He was going to touch her. He would do it, and she'd burst into flames.

Tiny droplets of sweat dampened her brow. She expelled a puff of air and her eyes stung from concentrating on the nearness of his hands. While she knew her banging heart might not take the strain, he grabbed the ruined lapels of her shirt and tied them without hurry over her nudity.

"As much as it pains me to be robbed of such a beautiful sight, I believe your honour has been restored."

She wanted to feel relieved but the fierce disappointment suffusing her every nerve wouldn't allow it. She met the gray eyes that sparkled with enjoyment while attempting to conceal her confused emotions. Although she apparently had the ability to amuse him, she wouldn't be swayed.

"How about my freedom?"

"Yes, there's also that matter."

He didn't even pretend to ponder the issue but turned his back on her. Before a coherent thought formed in her mind, he'd covered the short distance to the entrance of the cave. Just before he disappeared, she noticed for the first time that he was limping. He never glanced back. He just left her there—bedraggled, dishevelled, and hanging from the chains.

The famous tales about him, his reputation, and the long scar across his cheek proved he belonged to one of the Warriors tribes. Whether her instincts responded to his powerful stance, his steely gaze, or the courteous way he expressed himself, she'd have to keep them in check.

She had never reacted so strongly to another man, not even to Kelton. If the Lord of the Clans would just let her go, she'd make sure to put leagues between them. First of all, she needed to get out of these metal rings.

Pulling on them wouldn't help her, and she might get injured in the process. Although the shallow cut inflicted by the tribesman had stopped bleeding, her arm needed treatment. One of her potions should take care of her abraded skin as soon as the chains fell. If they ever did.

She pricked her ears as a shuffling sound interrupted her train of thought. Her heart leapt, then sank when a strange woman entered her prison. She went straight to the table, without a word, and picked up the key. With her long, dark hair braided around the back of her head, slanted eyes and flawless skin, she resembled a goddess from the old scriptures.

Guts twisting with a weird, unfamiliar sensation, she watched the newcomer unlock the iron bands. A rush of blood dizzied her when she let her arms down to rub her wrists. The tribeswoman took her weapons off the table, along with the double sling crafted to carry the light swords, and walked back the way she'd come.

Unlike Lord Cameron, the girl stood by the entrance while she waited for the spell of lightheadedness to wear off. When the rock walls and rounded ceiling ceased drifting like a trail of smoke, she joined the silent woman who led her into a maze of wide tunnels lit with candles.

Some passages appeared natural while others had a distinct man-made quality. Every ten feet or so, and on both sides of the tunnels, drawn curtains barred large openings in the walls. Probably caverns.

Behind most of them she heard snores and groans. How many people lived under the Longrock Mountains?

Already lost by the third bend, she got the distinct impression her guide wouldn't answer any question, so she just followed her. They soon turned into a much wider tunnel where a large curtain closed off an entrance. The woman pushed it open and signalled her to step inside.

Bright draperies hung from the walls, bearskins and various pelts covered the cold floor, and a fire crackled in a corner of the stone chamber. On a square table, mouth-watering pieces of meat filled a wooden platter. Beside the tempting strips, loaves of bread, cheeses and fruit cluttered the table.

The tribeswoman brushed past her. She dropped the swords on top of a flat trunk and then went to tend to the fire. Once she'd eased a stocky log into the flames, she added branches and twigs. A few feet from the controlled blaze, a large, empty pallet sat in the centre of the cave.

"Come on in, Ariana."

She turned her head toward the now familiar voice. The Lord of the Clans sat on a chair, stark naked but for a thin cloth draped over his loins. Heat whooshed to her face. Acting on impulse, she quickly averted her gaze and refrained from shivering. Why was she so aware of his closeness? As she stared at the opposite wall, she heard him chuckle.

"By the Mighty Gods, don't look so shocked. I'm sure you've seen an undressed man before."

Of course she had, but not in such bewildering circumstances. Although she'd only glanced at him for a brief instant, his powerful body seemed etched in her mind. She took a silent breath to dispel the compelling image of the broad shoulders and hard muscles while staring ahead.

"I am your lord, Ariana. It's very rude to avoid looking at me when I'm talking to you. Didn't your shaman teach you manners?"

"He did. But he never instructed me on how to behave as captive."

"You don't look like a prisoner to me. Are you locked up in some dreary dungeon? Do you see chains around your body?"

She didn't mean to sound disrespectful, but the light banter challenged her. Eyes riveted to the irregular stones jutting out of the wall, she enjoyed his witty replies as well as the way he taunted her. No man from her tribe or from the villages ever spoke to her in that manner.

"Am I free then?"

"You're free to join me."

Still unwilling to look his way, she nevertheless caught a slight movement from the corner of his eye. He got up, hobbled to the table at a broken pace, and sat down on one of the benches.

She fancied she saw him wince, but the sight of food drew her more than his obvious physical distress. A whole day had gone by without a chance to eat, and the idea of fresh meat increased the hunger she'd felt since entering his chamber.

Now that the private part of him she didn't want to think about was out of sight, she walked to the table and chose the bench across him. He handed her a bowl and a knife with a wink.

"Help yourself."

As she took strips of warm beef and chunks of cheese, she wondered about the reason for his limp. Was he born with this deficiency? More likely, he had received a nasty blow during a battle. Whatever the explanation, she wasn't about to ask but chewed on the savoury food instead.

By the time she'd emptied her bowl, she realised he didn't eat much but observed her with the intensity of a starving animal. While she hesitated between an apple and a pear, he pushed back his platter, propped up his elbows on the table, and rested his chin on the flat of his fists.

"I won't go back on my word. You're free to leave whenever you please, but I need a favour from you."

"On the grounds that your man wanted to torture me?"

His sudden grin made her heart skitter. Then leap and drop. He looked younger when he smiled, the sparkles in his cold eyes softening his expression. Yet he left her question unanswered to swivel his head toward the tribeswoman who was now rearranging heavy pelts on his pallet.

"Coreen, help me up, would you?"

She hurried to her lord, slid an arm under his shoulder, and pulled him to his feet. Together they

shuffled to the bed where he sat on the edge without grace. While the girl fussed about him, he beckoned to her.

“Come over here.”

Even with the limp impeding his progress, he remained dangerously naked. What did he have in mind? She could leave now, but he'd mentioned a favour and she never turned away from someone in need.

She approached the pallet with cautious steps, very conscious of the irregular pulsations beating inside her veins. Mouth dry, she sat on the low stool he'd pulled close to him. Although she reminded herself to look only at his face, she flinched when he ripped the cloth from his loins.

Chapter Three

“If you stare at that wall again, I’ll have you flayed alive.”

Did he mean that? In any case, her gaze already travelled down to the place he revealed. She ignored the part of him that rested on his left thigh to concentrate on the top half of his right leg.

About four inches long, the injury might have appeared minor to an untrained eye, but she assessed the damage in a wink. The blade had cut right through flesh and sinew, leaving in its wake a very deep wound. He must have stopped the bleeding a while ago, but he needed to be treated as soon as possible because the sides of the wound festered.

“What happened?”

“I got too close to an enemy’s dagger.”

“My lord, you should pay more attention.”

A flash of amusement lit his eyes, and she felt drawn to him again. Silently cursing this newfound weakness, she looked back at the gaping, feverish gash. At least she knew the origin of his limp.

“When were you hurt?”

“Earlier today. We came across two patrols from Borgom, and they didn’t seem happy to see us.”

Hours ago. So he had fought, ridden back to his caves, and taken some time to release her before dealing with his injury. How could anyone sustain such pain without screaming or crumpling to the floor?

“Who stopped the bleeding?”

“My medicine man took care of it once we’d cleared the battlefield. Then he examined my injury again when we got back here. He told me the wound is so infected I will lose my leg.”

“And now you’re asking for my opinion.”

He nodded. The scar on his cheek whitened, proof that in spite of his composed attitude he suffered excruciating pain. As a woman and a healer, her heart went out to him.

He was in charge of his men, not responsible for the actions they took behind his back. Pushing the memory of her detention into the background, she let a smile touch her lips.

“You’re lucky it rained today.”

“How so?”

“Because I need mud to heal you. I’m sure I’ll find plenty outside, if you’d just point out the way.”

He seized her forearm before she had time to stand up, rooting her to the stool. Even under duress and diminished by a serious injury, he was much stronger than she would ever be.

Why did women have to be so weak? And why did she feel this warmth where his fingers held her?

“What else do you need?”

“A clean cloth.”

“That’s all?”

He sounded either disappointed or suspicious that she didn’t require a whole battery of instruments and ingredients. He had obviously never met a true healer. Well, she’d just have to show him.

“Yes. Though I should start now.”

“Coreen!”

The tribeswoman ceased clearing up the table. With a nod, she walked out, and drew the curtains.

shut behind her. He let go of her forearm as soon as the girl disappeared. The pleasant sensation of warmth vanished, but a strange tension stirred within her stomach.

They were alone. He was still naked.

Unable to quench her instincts, she grabbed the discarded cloth, and dropped it over his healthy thigh. He uttered a bark of laughter.

“You’re such a prude. I wonder how any boy has found the motivation to get into your britches.”

“I’m sorry, my lord, but that is none of your concern.”

“So why are you blushing?”

She felt her cheeks burn and her armpits dampen with sweat. But in spite of her uneasiness, she had no intention of explaining he was the only source of her discomfort. Not other men. Just him.

True, the people of her tribe always viewed her as modest, especially for a healer, but the feeling certainly worsened around the Lord of the Clans. She nudged his shoulder with one finger.

“Lie down.”

She figured he wouldn’t appreciate her help, so she set about finding strips of fabric and a clean bowl while he changed position. She heard him breathe hard, but not a single groan came out of his lips.

When she found the desired objects, she came back near the pallet. He’d managed to lie down on his own but his jaws stood out, the old scar on his face looked paler than before, and his stomach muscles appeared to be rock hard. The small tattoo right above his belly button showed he belonged to a warriors’ tribe: a bear holding a dagger.

Head resting on a pillow, he made a big show of concealing his private parts with the used cloth, though he wanted to ensure her cheeks stayed rosy.

She sat beside him on the edge of the pallet, fully aware she shouldn’t react to his teasing, and placed the bowl on the floor. Once more, he watched her every move with uncanny intensity.

“Tell me, where’s your settlement?”

“My tribe lives at the south end of these mountains, a few leagues from the border with Moonstill.”

“The armies of Borgom haven’t penetrated that far south yet, but I’m afraid they might. Should the war start again, even Moonstill won’t be able to protect you for long.”

“I pray to the Mighty Gods every day.”

He clucked his tongue while raising a sceptical eyebrow. Did he believe the Creators would abandon their children? Didn’t he have faith in them? Although she’d never heard of anyone doubting the gods, she had no desire to start an argument.

Besides, she didn’t want to leave him suffering any longer than necessary. He tensed as she glided her hand above his wounded thigh.

“I won’t hurt you.”

“Of course you will, but I can bear the pain.”

“Trust me.”

He didn’t comment but regarded her as if she’d insulted him. Didn’t he rely on anyone? True, they were strangers to each other, yet she was offering him her healing skills and experience when she could have walked away and left him to rot. Had the situation been reversed, she’d have trusted him.

He blew out a long breath when she placed a thumb on his kneecap, two of her fingers touching the soft skin underneath the knee. She saw him clench his fists in anticipation of gut-wrenching agony. Then his eyes widened, incredulity glittering in their gray depths.

“The pain is gone. What have you done?”

“I put your leg to sleep.”

“You...”

He stared at her. The beat of her heart sped up under his unwavering scrutiny while pins and needles travelled down her spine. Out of the blue, she felt like discarding the remains of her shirt, and lying down against his powerful body. She wanted to feel their bare flesh meet, touch, and love.

Before this demanding need for him overwhelmed her, she summoned the face of the man she was destined to. What would Kelton think of her now? How would he react to her unfaithful thoughts and betrayal? This had never happened before, and she didn't know how to fight it. Beside her, the ruler of all clans propped himself up on the pillow.

"How did you achieve this miracle?"

"Years of training. The human body is extremely resourceful once you know how to use and treat it."

"Who taught you?"

"My shaman. I believe he's by far the best healer in the Four Kingdoms. I've learnt so much from him."

"Still, you must be a very gifted apprentice. One might even say you're blessed by the gods. What else did he teach you?"

"To fight."

In spite of her explanation, he looked doubtful. Yet she didn't hold it against him, given that many people responded to her cures the same way. As she cast a glance at his furrowed brow, the curtain opened. The tribeswoman came in carrying a bucket, linen, and a new shirt. She deposited the fresh fabric beside them and placed the pail at her feet.

"Thank you."

Coreen gave a brief nod before leaving them alone again. Without wasting time, she removed the pouch hanging from her belt. She picked some devil's claw, used the bowl to blend the yellowish flowers into a small amount of mud, and kneaded the thick mixture for a few seconds.

She had worked with this concoction dozens of times, but never with tiny shivers coursing through her. The Lord of the Clans' gaze on her felt almost too much to bear. When he realised his treatment was ready to be applied, she heard disbelief in his voice.

"Mud and some herb. That's how you plan on healing me?"

"Yes. Before you accuse me of malpractice, my lord, let me know how you feel in the morning. We'll take it from there."

Doing her best to ignore his distrustful expression, she spread the mixture in the centre of the linen, folded it into a square, and placed it gently on his open wound. A lump raised the cloth covering his crotch as soon as she touched him. Her stomach lurched.

Their eyes met. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Looks like you're going to blush again."

"You're an animal."

She blurted out her reply without thinking, and regretted it at once. He was her ruler. As a member of a tribe, she owed him respect and allegiance. She had no right to talk to him this way, and she couldn't give anything to take the harsh words back. But he heard them.

"No, I'm a man. As such, I respond to softness and beauty. You're a very desirable woman, Ariana."

"I apologise, my lord. I didn't mean to be so rude."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to raid your settlement because you addressed me like a regular nobody."

Cheeks warm, pulse wild, she looked down to break eye contact. She shouldn't have. The thick lump under the cloth had turned into a stiff spike and seemed to be pushing toward her.

For the love of the Creators, why didn't he get a grip on himself? Control his instincts? Although

she focused on holding the concoction against his injury, she couldn't help muttering.

~~"Stop doing that."~~

His chortle sounded like he was making fun of her. When he spoke, his tone matched the amused sound.

"I can't. As I said, I'm a man and this is nothing but proof of my longing for your natural charms."

"You're hurt. All you need is rest."

"Don't you want to please your lord?"

Was he threatening her? If he ordered, she'd have to submit. Yet her obedience remained beside the point, because the more his hard-on taunted her, the hotter she felt. Wishing his erection would drop down, she loosened her grip on the square linen and faced him.

"Would you hold this for me?"

A slow grin curved his full lips. Just when she feared he wouldn't comply, he reached out. She whisked her hand off. He only had one topic in mind, and she needed a diversion to cool him down.

She fumbled with the strings of her pouch, but soon found some rosemary. The cut on her arm wasn't deep, so she rolled the green leaves between her fingers and applied them directly on the slash.

She'd need to be strong for the day to come. That was if he decided to let her resume her journey.

Reluctant to look at his very healthy manhood, she turned away from him and grabbed the clean shirt. She'd feel much safer in his presence if he allowed her to wear this garment.

Keeping her eyes on the fabric, she held it higher for him to see.

"Is it for me?"

"Absolutely. You may change in front of me. I don't mind."

She glanced at him. The expression of lust painted on his face mirrored his teasing tone. No wonder numerous tales were recounted about him—the man was so compelling. She stood up while fighting off the sudden urge to undress, spread her legs before his rigid staff and ask him to take her right there.

"My lord, I'd rather be alone."

His smile vanished. Not a single muscle in his body bulged, but the colour of his eyes turned dark ashes.

"And I'd rather not."

Chapter Four

She hesitated. The idea of him running his eyes over her body, of his steely gaze caressing her breasts, made her ache with desire. Yet she didn't want to be ruled by the low throb between her thighs.

"Is it an order?"

The cloth over his loins looked like a tent. The scar on his cheek paled, but she knew it wasn't due to pain this time. Although keeping the mixture in place didn't require much effort, his chest and arm muscles stiffened.

"Would you like it to be an order?"

"You know I'm a loyal subject."

"That's not what I asked."

No, but the real question bore too many implications. Had circumstances been different, she might have agreed.

But he would always be the Lord of the Clans, the ruler who possessed the power of life and death over his people. She'd never be anything but a simple healer. With any luck, an agreeable recollection buried in the back of his mind. And Kelton was waiting for her return.

"My lord, I'd be grateful if you'd allow me to spend the rest of the night in one of your caves. I'll be gone in the morning."

Although his countenance didn't change, she felt hit by a potent sensation of disappointment. His or hers?

"As you wish, Ariana. I'll be happy to provide shelter for you. Now, you can put your shirt on. I won't peek."

He closed his eyes. Positive he wouldn't try to cheat, she discarded the ruined garment before donning the new shirt. She watched him the whole time, but he stayed true to his word.

Once properly dressed, she noticed his weary features. Even though he desired her, a long day, battle and a severe wound got the better of him. He looked tired at present, somehow vulnerable, and the realisation stirred a new feeling in the pit of her stomach. She wanted to cuddle him.

He'd lay still as she would slide an arm under the nape of his neck, draw his face into the crook of her shoulder, and hold him until dawn. Until the beginning of a new day shattered the illusions of the night. Throughout the remaining darkest hours, he wouldn't be a mighty ruler anymore, but a mere man taking comfort in the arms of a woman.

For the love of the Creators, what was she thinking and what brought this on? If she didn't want to end up at the bottom of the long list of his used and forgotten conquests, she really needed to come back to reality.

Shaking her head to dispel the sweet aftertaste of her unexpected reverie, she pinched the back of her hand.

"Thank you for the privacy."

He opened his eyes at the sound of her voice. Struck anew by the intensity of his gaze, she shivered. He was no mere man, but her lord.

"You're welcome."

Switching hands to hold the healing concoction against his thigh, he patted the empty spot beside him. Surely he didn't mean for her to lie at his side? Not after she rejected his offer? The palms of his hands itched.

"I don't understand."

"You want shelter, you have my cavern. Could you blow out the candles on your way, please?"

Stunned by his boldness, mind blank, she did as she was told. A comfortable gloom fell over the cave. She let the fire smoulder, a thin column of smoke rising into a hole dug through the ceiling.

While the light dimmed and shadows lengthened, she approached his pallet with slow steps. Her hand tapped the nearest fur.

"Come on, I won't eat you."

She wasn't exactly concerned about being eaten. He didn't appear about to jump on her, so she sat on the edge of the bed to remove her boots, lie down beside him, and bring a heavy pelt over her. He also covered himself, yet the distance between them remained the same.

"See? I'm not the big bad wolf."

His comment made her smile. If she wasn't careful, she might get addicted to his company. A wave of tiredness seeped into her bones. Her heavy eyelids drooped and then popped up when he broke the silence.

"Where are you going tomorrow?"

"To pay a visit to my aunt. She's ill."

"Oh yes, the story of your sick aunt. I guess it slipped my mind for a while. Blahort loved her, though."

His ironic tone wasn't lost on her, and she wondered why everyone around here seemed so keen on doubting her motives.

"It isn't a story. I have to get to her as soon as possible. By the way, I thought you believed me earlier."

"I trusted you weren't a spy, but a healer. Whether you're a good one remains to be seen, given that I can't feel my leg."

While delivered with a soft tone, his words nevertheless hurt her. She sat up in bed, irritation stiffening her neck.

"I can revive your leg and make the pain come back anytime. Would you like that, my lord? All you have to do is ask."

"Hey, don't get your britches twisted, flower. I'm sure you're a good healer, I was just teasing."

Her resentment died out the second he called her flower. Resisting the urge to reach out to him, she feigned bitterness.

"Well, I don't appreciate your sense of humour."

"That's what makes it all the more enjoyable."

She shot him a dark glance. So close to his warm body, she couldn't miss the sparkles of mischief lighting his eyes. He sighed.

"Where does your aunt live?"

"In a village called Frahern. She belonged to my tribe until she married an outsider and left with him."

"I can't say I've heard the name. How far is it?"

"I'm not sure. My shaman told me to go straight west, all the way to the border with the kingdom of Agravar."

"What?"

He straightened up in spite of his sleeping leg. All trace of fun gone from his face, he shook his head in a negative gesture.

“You can’t go there. The border is crawling with soldiers from Borgom and Agravar. They’ll capture you in a heartbeat.”

“In that case, I’ll have to be extra careful.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re just a girl.”

His solicitude ignited her anger. She was so tired of always being treated like a weak kitten, simply because she had been born a woman. In the Four Kingdoms, only men were considered worthwhile and the unfairness of it revolted her. Slight contractions knotted her belly.

“I’m not helpless or stupid. I can fight better than most men, and I also have no intention to go as far as the border with Agravar. Why do you think my shaman selected me for this task?”

“From what you said about him, I assumed he was a wise man. Now I understand he’s a fool.”

“You have no right to insult my shaman.”

“On the contrary, I have all the rights. Not only will I speak my mind, but I forbid you to go there.”

“You can’t!”

“I can, and you will obey me.”

Brow furrowed, he regarded her like a spoiled, featherbrained princess child. She cringed when his features turned to stone.

Not a muscle in his body twitched. The tone of his voice suddenly as cold and hard as his silver gaze, he indicated the spot around her wrists where the metal rings had left a reddish tinge.

“Do you not remember the first cave you were brought into? The chains can be used on you again, and I won’t lose a wink of sleep over it.”

Air departed her lungs. Shock numbed her. He wasn’t making fun of her now, and she wondered whether the wounded man whose company she gradually came to enjoy had ever existed.

In his place, eyes flashing, a commanding ruler caused her insides to flutter with growing alarm. She took a deep breath, the tips of her fingers rubbing the straw mattress.

“My aunt will die if I don’t heal her.”

“If I let you go, you’ll both die.”

“You don’t know that. I might get lucky.”

“Don’t you see what goes on around you? The Four Kingdoms were at war for over a year before Palance and Moonstill decided to form an alliance against the territories of Borgom and Agravar.”

His explanation sounded familiar. She rarely listened to talk of war, but maybe her shaman had discussed the matter before her departure and she’d registered parts of his discourse. Still, she didn’t view herself as an expert on strategic manoeuvres, so she let him continue.

“There was a truce a few months ago, but don’t think for an instant that the soldiers guarding the borders are cute farm boys. They still kill and fight every day. As it happens, the village of Frahern is rather close.”

“So? I don’t mean to make their acquaintance.”

The strain tightening his features loosened. He either figured she wouldn’t see her plan through, or he pictured her waving at hordes of barbaric soldiers, and the idea entertained him.

“Just out of curiosity, tell me something. Your shaman instructed you to ride due west toward Agravar, didn’t he?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“So you left your settlement and followed the Longrocks Mountains. Eventually, you ended up here.”

“That’s what happened.”

“I thought so. Given that our mountains range is to the north, at which point exactly did you intend to veer west?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it when the implication contained in his question hit home.

Hadn't she been riding west for the past three days? Could it be possible that she followed the wrong course?

Glad he wasn't able to see her toes curling with embarrassment, she swallowed, and then stammered a little.

"I might have gone...astray from the original plan...somehow, but it doesn't mean I wouldn't—"

"Save it, Ariana. You have no sense of direction whatsoever."

"Are you saying this because I can't find my way out of your tunnels?"

She left him speechless this time, but not for long. He laughed and ruffled her hair with his fingers.

"What am I going to do with you?"

His tone sounded softer, although she didn't do an astounding job of arguing her case.

"Does it mean I have your permission to leave?"

"No."

He rolled onto his side without another word. Gathering the conversation was over, she watched his bare back, the long muscles she longed to stroke with the palm of her hand.

She'd never been torn between frustration and desire before. He puzzled her a lot more than she cared to admit, and she had no idea how to fall asleep with such conflicted emotions coursing through her.

He obviously didn't have the same problem. Yet as she tried to slow down her frenzied heartbeat, he let out a deep sigh.

"I'll provide a guide for you in the morning."

She crossed her fingers over her stomach and, unwilling to say anything that might change his mind, smiled at the ceiling.

From what she could tell, his main concern would always be to protect his people. So the stories about him must be true. He was the fierce defender of the tribes, the Lord of the Clans who would die for them.

Something pulled her out of her slumber. She didn't remember falling asleep, yet a tingling heat coming from her hand woke her.

She opened her eyes partway, exhaustion clinging to her more forcefully than a heavy cloak. Thanks to ambers glowing in the dying fire, she could still make out the outline of his motionless body.

He slept on his side, whereas she had moved during the night. Her breasts and belly were pressed against his strong back, the whole length of her legs touching his. Somehow, she had slung her right arm over his hip and the reason for the warmth along her fingers made her gasp.

She was holding his cock in her hand. His hard cock.

Chapter Five

His rigid flesh radiated heat, and so did her flushed cheeks. Her hand felt like an independent limb intent on stroking and squeezing the thick shaft that lengthened by the second. As if a blaze ravaged her body, her nipples itched to be rubbed, and the place between her thighs yearned to be fondled.

She caught the flow of his regular breathing, in spite of the cacophonous thuds of her heart. O dear Creators, what had gotten into her to grab his manhood? Sleep certainly wasn't a valid excuse and she'd better release the erect matter at hand before it roused him.

Inch by inch, she loosened her grip. Her fingers twitched from maintaining the same position. She ceased breathing. Then she flexed her hand a little, hovered over his hip, and drew her arm toward her. When she felt certain he remained fast asleep, she unglued herself from his back and rolled away.

Sweat dampened her brow. Wetness ran out of her fluttering pussy. Wild with desire, her pulse competed with the furious rise and fall of her chest. What had she done? He might have woken up to find her fingers coiled around his erection, and what then? She'd have died of shame.

Near darkness reigned over the cave. The fire gave off its last sparks while she willed herself to cool down.

She wouldn't have succeeded after a full night's rest, but she thought only a short moment had elapsed since she'd fallen asleep, and a deep weariness settled in her limbs. Listening to his steady respiration, picturing a peaceful meadow in the countryside, she closed her eyes.

She woke up with a start. When only silence welcomed her into a new day, she prayed and fervently wished for the indecent scene to be a dream but already knew that wasn't the case.

Last night, in a state of semi consciousness, she had been about to jerk off the Lord of the Clans. Who did that? Which woman, in her right mind, would perform an act so shameful, offensive, and unworthy of such a mighty man? Apparently, she almost did.

Even without looking beside her, she perceived he'd already deserted the pallet. His warmth was gone, leaving a vague coldness in its wake. Lit candles diffused enough light for her to spot the bucket of water sitting in front of the fire. Very thoughtful of him.

She cleaned up before putting her clothes back on. Once refreshed, she appeased her hunger with bread, cheese, and fruit. The food filled her stomach and helped take her mind off last night. Sex with a mate wouldn't have troubled her, but masturbating one of the most powerful men in the Four Kingdoms reached a whole new level.

Where was he? Already outside and busy doing whatever he did with his time? A sensation of restlessness got her on her feet. She sheathed her swords, fastened the double sling across her back, and pulled the entrance curtain open. Lit with candles every ten feet or so, the tunnel in front of her chamber stretched both ways. Right or left?

The previous evening she'd followed the beautiful tribeswoman without paying too much attention. She'd better turn left and retrace her steps, if memory served. Although that might only lead her back to the cave with the chains, she didn't have a whole lot of other options.

The first tunnel opened onto another one with empty caves on both sides. They all looked like the Lord of the Clans' chamber, but without anyone inside. If the tribe people were all outside, what time could it be? She started chewing her lip when the main tunnel branched off in three different

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