

Midsummer Festival

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The cloth wrapped around the fist softened the blow, but it still had enough strength to make Diew feel like his jaw would fall off. He fought away the pain and countered with a blow to the gut of his opponent. The young man doubled over and keeled to the ground, gasping for air. The crowd around them cheered, though with twenty men fighting each other at the same time, it was difficult to tell who they were cheering for.

The fight was taking place on a well beaten piece of ground and the men lifted dust from the ground every time they moved. The sun was still high in the sky and there was plenty of light. The area was surrounded by tents of various size and shape and there were several cooking fires on with large portions of buffalo being roasted for the festivities that would start after the fight was over. Much of the inhabitant of the tents were gathered around the beaten field to cheer on members of their clan.

The encampment was surrounded by flat grassland as far as the eye could see, save for the north where one could see mountains looming in the distance. There were no trees and the only things breaking the flatness were a few rare erratic boulders.

The two shamans interrupted the fight and the men stopped exchanging blows and gathered around to their ten man teams. Diew breathed in heavily and rubbed his clean shaven chin with his cloth wrapped hand. He had black hair, which was very unusual for his kind, but a muscular build and height that would have left many southern men envious, though by northern standard he was quite average.

“You all right?” came a question.

Diew glanced at Hyoden, his long time childhood friend. He grinned. “Ain't no deer going to kick down a wolf,” replied Diew.

Hyoden grinned back and flicked some of his long blonde hair from his face. “There's still much of the *Boundering* left. Make sure your teeth remain sharp.”

The Boundering.

It was a traditional event among the northern barbarians. Two allied clans

would meet and their young men would face off on the field in a fist fight and a bit of wrestling. Cloth was used to lessen any injuries sustained. The goal was not, after all, to hurt or kill anyone. It was a competition in good spirit and entertainment while it still offered the winner a reward worthy of the effort.

The prize was of special worth to the young men who were of lesser branches of the clan. While Diew was considered the son of a honourable warrior and skilled hunter, he was far from the families which swayed the most influence within the clan. To his misfortune he had his eyes on the daughter of one of the families higher above his. He would have a hard time convincing her father to allow him to take her hand in marriage.

That was why the event was so important to him.

The winner of the *Bounding* would have the privilege of asking for the hand of any unmarried woman he chose to and the family would have to abide by the decision of the woman. He could still be turned down, but at least it would come directly from whom he wished to marry.

Diew looked through the crowd as the two shamans convened to decide which two would get the next singles bout. The person with the most singles bout victories would win the entire event.

He caught a glimpse of the familiar dark brown hair. She was there with two of her friends. Diew could not help but stare at her.

Unlike others who found her attractive, Diew was not drawn in by the wide hips nor the bosom that seemed to promise a softness rivalled by few. Even the pretty face with its small nose was not what he found mesmerizing about her. No, it was those dark brown eyes that, when ever he had the privilege of seeing them focus on him, seemed to draw his soul out and trap it inside them.

Her name was Leyl.

It was not only those eyes that had caught his attention. When they had been but children they had spent time together and he had learned to know Leyl as someone who could be the pillar a man could lean against during hard times. Once, she had caught more fish than Diew had and upon realizing it she had given him some of her catch so as not to embarrass him in front of his father or the clan. It had been their little secret and despite its nature Diew had never felt

ashamed of it because it had been Leyl who he shared it with.

She saw Diew staring at her, blushed and turned away. Her friends giggled and teased the young man with gestures of questionable nature. He turned away and tried to focus on the event once more.

Hyoden slapped him on the shoulder. "You best keep your head away from her and in this event," he advised him. "The wagging of your tail will only be a distraction."

"She'll be mine tonight," muttered Diew passionately, ignoring his friends crass remark.

Hyoden eyed him, slightly worried. He'd known Diew had a passion towards her, but he'd never fully understood how deep it ran. They hardly ever saw each other, much less talked. Most of the times they had, had been when they were but children trying to catch fish from a stream with their bare hands or finding wild berries. When the time had come for Diew to join the men in hunting, it had also been time for Leyl to begin learning the things a woman needed to know. The two had been separated by the traditions of their clan and the opportunities to see each other, much less talk to each other alone, had become few and far between.

"Perhaps, but you'll have to win first," said Hyoden, trying to bring his friend back to reality.

"I will. That I promise you my friend," said Diew. "Victory or the Great Mother will drag me with her to the forest."

Hyoden shook his head. Nothing he said would change his mind.

The two shamans seemed to have come to an agreement. Unlike the men on the field, who were naked from the waist up, they were fully robed in furs and the other had the pelt of a wolf with its head serving as a sort of hat while the other one had a much similar arrangement with a deer.

"Diew of the Wolf clan, step forward!" roared the shaman with the wolf pelt.

"Thois of the Deer clan, step forward!" roared his counterpart.

Diew received a few pats of good luck on his shoulder as he stepped forward. It was not only the personal gain at stake, but also the bragging rights of the entire clan.

His opponent stepped forward as well and the two met in front of the shamans. Thois was a hands width taller than the six foot Diew, but he had more of a stomach than the well toned man from the Wolf clan. He worked hard and that left little room for the comforts of life to soften him up.

“You know the rules,” said the wolf clad shaman. “First one to get three points wins.”

The two youngsters nodded and bumped their fists together. It wouldn't be a fist fight, but a wrestling match. The one who had the other on his back and covered would win, though it would also count if your opponent surrendered.

“Begin!” roared the shaman and stepped aside.

The two youngsters crouched down and spread their hands, both trying to measure up their opponent. Thois had the lesser patience and he rushed forward and tried to grab Diew's leg. Diew saw it coming and had time to prepare for it. Before the taller man even realized it, he was down on the ground, on his back, with Diew's muscular arm wrapped around his neck.

The crowd cheered, even a few laughs could be heard.

The shaman came and tapped the young man's shoulder who released his hold on his opponent. They both stood up and the scenario was reset. It was a poor showing from the man of the Deer clan. Diew pinned him two more times and was declared victorious by the shamans to the roaring cheer of the crowd. As he looked around he could even see the leader of his clan nod approvingly to him.

What he longed more for was acknowledgement from Leyl, but he could not spot her from the crowd before his childhood friends crowded around him to congratulate on the victory. He feared the congratulatory slaps would harm him more than the cloth wrapped fists of earlier.

“Keep this up and you just might win,” said Hyoden as the others started to give Diew more room.

Diew grinned. “I have no intention of letting down.”

He already had one singles bout victory. It was rare that anyone but the winner got more than two such victories out of the ten total that were up for grabs and it was not rare for there to be no winner at all. Six of the singles victories had been already handed out before his, all to different men. Diew was

determined to grab his second one.

The shamans ordered the groups to arrange again and the brawl resumed. It was a mass of sweat and muscle, grunts and screams as hits landed and bruises formed. It was not uncommon that there would be bloody noses, black eyes and perhaps even a few broken bones as a result from the event, despite the measures taken to make the hits less damaging.

Diew grunted as a hit landed on his side. He didn't even see who it came from, but it distracted him enough that he missed an opportunity to sink his fist in the gut of the man before him. He had barely recovered when the shamans halted the brawl.

Diew knew he would not be chosen for the singles round this time. He had done nothing worthy of note. He spat on the ground with a frustrated look on his face and waited impatiently for the shamans to make their decision.

"Pick a target and bounce on him," said Hyoden as he crouched down next to him.

"I know," said Diew. "I was just caught off guard this time around."

The shamans had made their decision and they walked onto the field.

"Hyoden of the Wolf Clan, step forward," came the call.

"Ryosh of the deer clan, step forward," came the second call.

Diew cursed under his breath. Ryosh had already won a singles round. If he won this one the road to victory would be a hard one for him.

Hyoden grinned. "Don't worry. I'll wrestle him down for you." The confidence in his voice was not completely unfounded. He was known for his wrestling skills.

"Don't do it for me, do it for the clan," replied Diew and smacked Hyoden on the shoulder. He felt he didn't need help from others to take the victory.

He watched his friend step onto the field and face off with Ryosh. The man from the Deer Clan was an impressive sight with well toned muscles, height that rivalled Hyoden's and light brown hair that was cut short.

The two bumped fists as the shamans gave the go ahead. Hyoden didn't waste time and rushed in almost recklessly, but it paid off. He caught his opponent off guard and had him pinned to the ground in a matter of seconds. He let go as the shaman tapped his shoulder.

The first point was his.

Diew cheered along with all the others.

The cheers soon died from the Wolf Clan as Ryosh scored the next three points in a manner that seemed almost effortless. Diew cursed the bad luck, but still offered an encouraging pat on Hyoden's shoulder as he returned back among the group. There was no shame in losing to a better man and Ryosh had clearly shown himself to be that.

The Deer Clan was in full celebration at the victory. History of the event supported their confidence, but Diew was determined to put an end to their celebrations. He clenched his fists with a look of determination on him. As the men once more gathered for the brawl he chose his target before the go ahead was given. As soon as the shamans gave permission, Diew rushed forward.

The frustration of the situation gave him strength he didn't even realize he had. The uppercut he delivered to the jaw of his target was devastating even with the cloth softened fists and sent the man tumbling down on the ground. He moaned, but did not get up.

He did not leave to wonder about the condition of his opponent, but rushed towards another. He roared and raised his fist to deliver a mighty blow to the side of one of the Deer Clan. He received a blow to his own side in return, but the strength of it was not comparable to what he had himself delivered. He grimaced and gave another blow to his opponent, this time to his gut.

The man keeled over, gasping for breath.

Before Diew could move for another target the shamans stepped in and called for a halt in the brawl. The barbarian gathered together with his clan members and took a breather. Even if it had been a short spurt of energy it had taken a lot out of him and he was short on breath.

“What got into you?” asked Hyoden as he got closer. “You knocked that guy out completely.” He pointed towards the Deer Clan where they were dragging the fallen man and trying to revive him.

Diew shook his head. “I don't know. I just felt frustrated. Maybe the spirit of the Mother guided my fists.”

Hyoden measured his friend with interest. Something did seem different

about him. There was an aura of determination about him that looked strong enough to deflect anything thrown at it.

The shamans called out the names once more. Diew was called along with a warrior called Burer from the Deer clan. Hyoden gave his friend a good luck pat on the shoulder as he made his way to the field.

Diew realized the importance of the match. If he lost now there would be no chance of winning. That was not acceptable. He felt like he was in a daze as he walked to the field. He did not even see his opponent. In his place stood a deer and his own feet looked like paws despite feeling like his own two hands and feet.

The shamans gave the signal and Diew attacked with the ferocity only a wolf could. He snarled and growled as he wrestled down the deer underneath himself. He trod off as the shaman raised his hand to indicate a point for him.

He did not hear the audience as it gasped and cheered.

All he saw was the deer getting up and the shaman giving the signal to fight. He launched forward once more like an arrow from a hunters bow and struck his target. The wrestle was short and he scored a point once more. The third point came even easier as the deer looked like it was ready to bounce and run away. The shamans declared him the winner and it was only then that Diew returned to his own self once more.

The audience was letting out a deafening roar as he walked back to his comrades. The roars died down into a loud mutter as people began to discuss what they had seen.

“What in the name of the Mother got into you? You were like an animal out there,” asked Hyoden in wonderment as the pats on his friends back started to wear down and the men got ready for the final round of fist fighting.

Diew shook his head. “I don't know. I saw myself as a wolf and my enemy as a deer.” His voice gave away the confusion he was feeling inside.

His friend whistled. “That's the spirit of the Mother touching you.”

Diew chuckled and shrugged off the remark. “Why would she take an interest in me?”

“Maybe she doesn't want the Deer to win?” suggested Hyoden with a boyish grin.

It was of course possible that the spirit had taken an interest in the events and saw a loss to the Deer clan to be unacceptable, though Diew could not bring himself to believe that his actions would draw her attention. He had done nothing remarkable on his own and now the victory was not entirely his, if the spirit had seen fit to meddle in matters.

He could not bring himself to decide whether he liked what was happening.

“Well, it's the last bout. We'll see who the spirits favour,” said Diew in a grim voice and wrapped cloth around his fists. It was not so much the spirit that had him feeling that way, but the fact that this was the last chance he would have. He needed a victory.

He scanned the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of Leyl. He spotted her with her friends. They were busy talking and giggling and paid no attention to him. Still, the sight of her made his heart race and solidified his determination into hardened steel.

And that laughter of hers. He wished he could have been close enough to hear it as it had matured from the giggles of a little girl into the laughter of a grown woman. Once, he had been. She had been washing clothes at the stream while Diew had been on guard duty. They had exchanged words. It had been a common enough conversation about the clans matters before venturing into other matters.

He had entertained her with stories from the hunts he had been on and the mishaps he had had with Hyoden. She had listened and burst out laughing when she heard how Hyoden failed at honey gathering and dropped the bee nest, forcing the two of them to run for their lives. She had been so alive then, so full of everything that was good in the world, and the remarks she had made had been enough to make Diew laugh as well. Upon remembering the rare encounter he still felt a warmth spread inside him.

The shamans called for the brawl to start for the final time and pulled the young barbarian from his memories. Diew clenched his fists and strode to the field like an autumn storm. Nothing would stand in his way.

Spirits or not, he would win.

He barely noticed the shamans giving the signal to begin the brawl.

It didn't matter. He was ready.

He rushed forward and pounded the nearest man. A hit to the jaw, the ribs, the gut, another to his cheek and the man went tumbling down. Whether Diew himself had been hit he did not know. He had not felt anything.

He moved on to his next target. Ryosh was standing before him, having knocked down one of the Wolf clan. The man from the Deer clan barely had time to dodge Diew's fist. It glanced his ribs, but much of the force from the punch went into thin air. It almost made him lose his balance and that made it harder to parry the retaliation from Ryosh. He did manage to raise his hand to block the fist that had been headed for his face.

He delivered a punch to the Deer clan man's abdomen and pushed himself in close to prevent his opponent from delivering any sort of effective counter attack. He got a light punch in the ribs as a response, but it was far from the blow he himself had delivered.

Diew pushed himself away from his opponent and prepared for another round of blows, but the shamans broke up the fight before then. He breathed heavily as he made his way to his comrades. It was only then that he started to feel the blows that had landed on him. His ribs ached and even breathing in felt uncomfortable. He could only hope none of his ribs were broken.

"You all right?" asked Hyoden as he saw his friend wincing.

"Someone landed a pretty good blow to my ribs," replied Diew and splashed some water on himself from a water skin. The strain of going through ten brawls was starting to show on everyone. The best blows had likely been landed by now.

"Will you be able to continue?" asked Hyoden.

"Will I need to?" wondered Diew. There was no guarantee the shamans would choose him for the final fight.

Hyoden looked at him with slight disbelief. "My friend, you clearly have no idea what you have looked like today." He considered his friend for a moment before continuing. "Perhaps you need to be outside to see it, but I have no doubt in my mind that the shamans will choose you."

"How can you be so certain?" asked Diew.

Hyoden grinned. "They need a winner and you've fought like a mother wolf

protecting her cubs.”

“They could just as easily choose Ryosh and someone else,” reminded Diew even though in his gut he knew the words of his friend to be true.

“And miss giving the crowd the opportunity to witness two men with two victories each fight to resolve a winner? I doubt it.” There was amusement in Hyoden's voice. “And after that blow you landed on Ryosh, I doubt the shamans have any other choice.”

“Well, it would be nice you were right,” admitted Diew. He did not want to get his hopes up.

“When have I ever been wrong?” demanded Hyoden.

“How about that time when you said the cave was empty and managed to rouse the bear sleeping inside?” asked Diew with an amused voice. While at the time it had been a close call that could have easily ended both their lives it had, over the years, evolved into something people used to poke fun at his friend. They had ran fast and hard in the rocky terrain and managed to climb on top of a large stone that the bear could not follow them up. That, or it had decided returning to its nest was a better choice since the intruders had been driven off.

Ryosh grinned at the jab. He had grown accustomed to it after hearing about it so many times. He could laugh at it just as well the others in the clan. After all, what sort of a man had not made a mistake in his life?

He was about offer a witty remark in return when the shamans stepped onto the field. They had reached their decision on the final contestants.

“Ryosh of the Deer clan, step forward!” came the announcement from the shaman of the Deer clan.

Diew's heart skipped a beat. Had they not chosen him? Had they handed the victory on a silver platter to the man from the Deer clan? He looked on nervously and with anticipation as the shaman from his clan stepped onto the field.

“Diew of the Wolf clan, step forward!” echoed the announcement on the clearing.

It took a moment for it to sink in. It was a pat on the shoulder from Hyoden that finally made Diew realize his name had been called. The crowd was already cheering. They expected to see a good fight as it was the two men who had

impressed them the most that evening.

“Go show him what us wolves are really made of,” said Hyoden and gave his shoulder a firm squeeze for encouragement. As he looked around he saw the others from his clan nodding and expressing similar sentiments. He had their full support.

He unwrapped the final pieces of cloth from his hands and stepped forward to the field. Ryosh stepped in a little later as his clans men seemed to have a lot to say to him. They made the customary bump of fists in silence and took a few steps away from each other.

There was nothing they needed to say to each other. They both knew what was at stake.

The Deer clan shaman stepped between them and after a dramatic pause, gave the signal to start the fight.

Diew crouched down, ready to face anything the man from the Deer clan could come up with. The two men circled each other, both ready to bounce at the slightest movement. The crowd around them looked on in an eerie silence.

It was Ryosh who made the first move and lunged at Diew, hoping to grab the smaller man in a bear hug. It was not to happen as Diew responded with the quickness of a wolf and tackled the charging man to the ground and sunk his shoulder in his gut, driving away all the air from his lungs.

The crowd cheered as Diew continued his attack and wrapped his arm around his opponents throat. Ryosh tried to struggle free, but there was nothing he could do for the hold on him was clamped in tighter than a bowstring.

One of the shamans stepped in and tapped the shoulder of Diew. He let go his hold and stood up from the dirt ground. It was the first time he heard the cheers of the crowd. He looked around a bit dazed and saw many approving faces from his own clan. He was making them proud. They would not judge him for the request he would make if he won. He had proven himself to them.

He took the stance once more and waited for Ryosh to get up. The man looked even more dazed than Diew and he shook his head and gasped for breath. But a determined expression grew on his face and he stood up and took a ready position after fully regaining his breath.

The shaman gave the signal to begin the second bout.

This time it was Diew that made the first move and rushed into to test the strength of his opponent. They grabbed each others arms, shoulder, any place they could get their hands on to try and get their opponent down. Ryosh had the advantage in height and in strength and Diew soon found himself losing ground to him. His knees were starting to buckle and it looked like the deer would wrestle down the wolf this time.

Diew was caught by surprise as Ryosh made a sweep at his legs. He found himself hitting the ground hard and the man from the deer clan wasted no time to get on top of him and lock his arms around his neck. It was a similar position he had been in just moments before and Diew knew there was no way out, but still he tried to struggle free until the shaman came once more to award the point to Ryosh.

Diew stood up as soon as the hold was released and rubbed his neck a bit. He was angry with himself. Being surprised like that was not like him. The cheers from the Deer clan echoed in his head, further fuelling his anger. His vision blurred and he felt like he was being transformed into something else all together.

The cheers of the crowd disappeared. The only thing he could see was the deer standing in the middle of the woods. He was the wolf, sneaking up on it downwind. It was the hunt that went on every day in the wilderness. Sometimes the deer got away, but there was nowhere for it to run now.

A quick spurt through the undergrowth and he got close. The deer panicked and ran away, but he already had speed. He sunk his teeth in the deer's rump and dragged it down with him. Quickly, he went for the throat and ripped it open. The panicked cries of the deer quickly died down.

Diew came to and found Ryosh underneath him, struggling. The shaman gently tapped his shoulder, telling him to let go. Feeling confused, Diew let go and staggered to his feet. What had happened?

The shaman grabbed his hand and raised it. Fuzzily, he realized it was the Deer clan shaman. "The winner of the *Bounding*, Diew of the Wolf clan!"

The crowd erupted in cheers, even from the Deer clan side he could hear appreciative shouts. What had happened was beyond him. He didn't remember

wrestling Ryosh down to the ground, much less two times. In a haze of confusion and wonderment, he met the rush of his comrades coming to hug him and congratulate on the victory. He was too stunned to offer any replies.

“You did it!” said Hyuoden excitedly as he slapped his friend on the shoulder.

“What?” asked Diew, still confused as to what had happened.

His friend gave him an odd look. “You won!”

“I did?”

“Yes!” Hyoden shouted louder than he had intended. “By the spirits, did you get knocked on the head one time too many?”

Diew shook his head. “I just..all I saw was a deer being hunted by a wolf.” He sounded confused.

Hyoden grinned. “That's one way of putting it. Ryosh had no chance against you after he managed to fell you once. You took him down twice so fast it was hard to call it a competition.”

“I didn't even see him,” said Diew.

Before Hyoden could reply, the crowd parted and the shaman of the Wolf clan made his way to them, followed by the clan leader, Rothan. Dressed in the pelt of a white Winter Wolf, he stood out from the crowd just as much as any of the city dwellers' leaders dressed in fine silk and wearing a crown of gold and precious jewels. It was no wonder for the pelt he was wearing was more rare and valuable than a golden crown.

Rothan was a man nearing forty, but he still looked as fearsome as he ever had. He stood slightly taller than Diew with a stockier build and hints of grey in his long golden hair and beard. His blue eyes examined Diew with an intensity that made the young man feel uncomfortable even in his confused state.

“You have made the Mother proud,” said Rothan in a deep voice. “Rarely have I seen a man move so much like a wolf.”

Diew was taken back by the high compliments. What had come over him? Why didn't he remember any of the things he had done?

“You are the winner and as such the prize is yours to claim,” continued Rothan, oblivious that the youngster was more confused than anything else. “Do

you wish to claim it now or do you need time to think about it?"

That was enough to make the confusion disappear from the youngsters mind. He had won. He could ask Leyl the question that had been burning in his mind for years. "I'm ready to claim it," he replied with a calm voice, much calmer than he had expected it to be.

Rothan nodded and spread his arms. The crowd around them dispersed somewhat and gave Diew room to find who he was looking for. Many of the young women found their way to the front row, many hoping they would be the target of his claim. Hyoden gave him one last pat on the shoulder and a look that conveyed all the best wishes he could have hoped for.

Diew scanned the crowd, trying to find Leyl. It took him a while to find her, but when he did, he did not hesitate and walked straight to her. Her dark brown eyes widened as she realized he was walking straight to her and the surprise on her face could not be hidden. She looked around as if to make sure he was not walking towards someone else. Her friends stood nearby, but their expressions made it clear they were not his target.

Diew stopped in front of her and looked down at her. He had not realize she was that much shorter than him. Her wide eyes looked up at him and made him forget all about it. He almost forgot why he had walked over to her.

"I have won the *Bounding*," started Diew as was traditional. His voice was nervous. "The right to ask for the hand of any woman is mine. I have chosen." Diew looked straight into the dark brown eyes that so enticed him. "Leyl, daughter of Ridvor, will you accept my request?"

The look of surprise on Leyl was complete and it took her a moment to react. The first thing she did was glance at her father, which Diew did not take to be a good sign. He followed her gaze and was surprised to see that her father gave no clear sign of refusal. He was leaving it completely up to his daughter.

"I accept," came the reply from Leyl after a bit more consideration on her part. Her soft voice was like fresh honey to Diew.

The youngster smiled widely as he heard her answer. The crowd cheered as the answer became obvious to everyone and no time was wasted in starting the preparations for the ceremony.

Tradition was that they would wove themselves to each other that very night.



There was little light in the newly weds abode. It was made up of a wooden frame that was covered with a leather canvas made from the skins of various animals. There were piles of animal skins and furs on the beaten ground to give the couple a soft and comfortable time for the two days they would be locked inside. Food would be provided from the outside, but they were forbidden from leaving the tent. Should either one try they would be beaten and returned to their angry counter part.

As far as either of the young ones knew, no one had ever tried to leave.

Diew cared little for the décor of the place. His eyes were solely focused on Leyl who was already busy arranging the animal skins as a comfortable bed. She offered Diew a good view of her round bottom as she knelt down and reached over to pull an animal skin from the pile. She glanced back and saw him looking at her. She stood up and turned around and stared at him appraisingly with those brown eyes.

Diew felt like the world around him disappeared, leaving only the two of them there.

“Why did you choose me?” asked Leyl with her soft voice. The curiosity was evident from her expression.

“Why did you accept me?” asked Diew after a short moment of thought. His throat felt dry. *By the spirits*, he thought to himself. *Talking to her makes me feel more nervous than wrestling a bear.*

Leyl continued her appraising exploration of Diew with her eyes. Finally she stopped and looked him straight in the eyes. “I know you to be a good man and you have the potential to be something great in this tribe. Your showing tonight proved as much. The Mother favours you. You're not bad to look at. What little I know of you I like and you're certainly better than who my father had his eye on to marry me.”

Hearing the reasons explained so logically pained Diew. His own reasons started to seem childish in his ears. Leyl had made her choice to escape a worse

option in her mind. Her feelings for him had had little to nothing to do with it.

“So why did you choose me?” demanded Leyl as she crossed her arms under her bosom. Her arms pushed up a bit as she embraced herself more tightly, which offered Diew a much fuller cleavage to admire. “Are you hoping this will make you gain more power within the tribe?”

“No, it's not like that..” started Diew, but stopped as he saw the impatient look on Leyl's face. The tight line her lips formed still looked appealing to him.

“What is it then?” she demanded.

“It's because you are you,” said Diew feeling abashed.

The expression on Leyl grew confused. “Explain,” she demanded.

“You have an effect on me,” admitted Diew. “When you look at me with those brown eyes of yours I feel like we are the only two in the world. I feel like you draw out my spirit and wrap it in a warm blanket.”

The expression Leyl had melted into something resembling a mix of confusion, surprise and happiness.

“It makes me feel like I'm incomplete without you,” continued Diew. He couldn't bare to look at Leyl so he had his gaze averted towards the ground. “That's why I chose you. I want you by my side so I can be complete. I want you to be happy with me.”

He finally gathered enough courage to look up. He found Leyl standing closer to him than before. He could almost feel her breath. He looked down into her brown eyes that seemed moist from fighting back tears.

“You make my reasons sound so cold,” she said quietly. Her voice had lost the edge and steadiness it had had before.

“I'm sorry,” stammered Diew.

Leyl shook her head, making her long brown hair flutter around her. “There is nothing to ask forgiveness for.” She looked up at Diew. A small smile appeared on her face. “I'm just happy to hear you say such things.” She moved closer and pressed herself against Diew and wrapped her arms around him. Her fingers gently stroked his back and his sore ribs. “You've got me now. I'll stand with you and do my best to complete you,” she said quietly.

The big barbarian wrapped his arms around her. He felt the softness of her

bosom pressing against him and the warmth of her body adding to his own. He leaned down and planted a tentative kiss on the lips he had longed for for so long. The start was shaky, but soon there was passion in their kisses. Their hands began to wander and pieces of clothing began to fall to the ground.

It was Leyl that guided them to the soft animal skins and furs. Together they laid down, embracing each other in a passionate tangle that only two people could bring about.

Outside the two clans continued the celebrations. The singing got louder as the nearly nightless night pushed towards morning and the laughter continued to ring out, but none of that reached Leyl and Diew.

They had their own corner of the world that night and nothing could disturb them there.