

**EMIL
ALTERNATE
SCENE**

C.M. BANSCHBACH

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EMIL

I came awake with a slight inhale. Yelene still slept beside me, calm finally. She'd apologized in a low whisper as we'd settled in on the benches shoved together, that it took her time to get comfortable. It was something I'd already noticed from the nights I'd dared spend with her over the last countings, but more noticeable tonight, the second I was spending in the open room of Inge's lodge.

I turned to check on Yelene. They'd offered us a bed, and I should have said yes, if only to avoid the way she sprawled out when she slept. But she'd refused, saying we'd be fine on the benches. The soft smile only she could tease out tilted my lips, and I nudged her leg out of my space and back over to her bench.

The sounds of others sleeping filled up the lodge and I almost hated how comfortable I felt there. Like it had taken only two nights to destroy the protective barriers I kept up.

Yelene shifted, sighing restlessly until I reached over and brushed her arm. She'd also warned me this would likely only get worse as our child grew and she got more uncomfortable. The thought again sent that same sort of panicked flare through me as the night she'd told me.

I would be a father. Except now I would perhaps be free to figure out how to be one. Not just sneaking away for visits when I could, trying to explain why this father was one of the more hated men in the tribe. Or watching the light fade from Yelene's eyes as day after day it seemed she'd made a poor choice or had not been given a choice.

No. That was no longer a future. And it was thanks to Davor.

My head tilted to the left, where Marta still sat beside the cot, clinging to his hand. Her head bowed low, barely a shadow in the glowering embers. It was warm in the lodge, the chill of spring nights starting to fade, but Inge had said something about needing to keep him warm.

Slowly, so as not to disturb Yelene, I eased out from under the blankets, making sure they still covered her as much as she preferred before standing. I palmed the small knife from under the pillow, tapping my sword under the bench to make sure it was still there. Then made my way to the fire, straightening the way my shirt and undershirt had bunched against one another.

Over the squeaky floorboard to crouch by the fire. It took but a minute to build it back to a small blaze. I eased back to my feet, halting at the sight of Davor's pale face.

I never thought I'd look toward an older brother with anything but hate. Countings ago, I would have scorned myself for thinking it. But now?

Better. He'd told me with such certainty. I was better without Kamil, without Father. But I didn't know how to keep being better. It rankled me a little that I needed him to wake up, keep living, see what else he would keep doing to turn the tribe upside down.

I cast a glance to Yelene, shifting again, taking over part of my bench. I needed him to for her.

A slight inhale drew my attention back, but it was Marta, sitting straighter, free hand rubbing the back of her neck. She paused when she noticed me, half in the shadows, and I did not miss the quick flicker of fear.

“The fire,” I murmured, flicking a hand to it. She nodded. I glanced to the benches again, but wakefulness had seized my limbs, and I did not feel like lying down to fight it.

“Can I sit?” I gestured to the stool beside the cot. Still wary, she looked to me, and then nodded.

I could have gone outside, found Teren to sleep against instead, or a quieter spot to sit. Anything I might have done in the past. But this was not the past. This was...I didn't know.

She blinked, tugging the shawl around her shoulders.

“How is he?” I asked, the question slipping out before I barely thought it.

“Breathing. Alive.” Her voice held a tremor, and she didn’t really look up from him.

I leaned forward on my elbows, knife still in my loose grasp, one thumb rubbing along the leather-wrapped hilt. There had been so much blood. Once I might have rejoiced at seeing him like this, but now...I did not have a word for what I felt.

“I don’t know how to talk to you.” Her words drew my gaze up to find a mix of wry hesitation in her eyes.

“You don’t have to. I can go.” Another thing I did not know. There was hurt in many different corners, and I had caused some of it. That she managed some civility was almost beyond me.

“No. Stay.” She looked again to Davor. “He trusts you. Michal does. You gave truth to my family.” Dark eyes fixed on me. “I can give you a chance.”

“You don’t have to.” It was almost uncomfortable. Between her, the battelion, and the entire lodge looking at me like I might belong with them, to something better, it had an odd sort of itching under my skin and around my heart.

“I’ll follow his lead.” She rocked a little, back and forth, as she clung tighter to Davor’s hand.

My focus fell to him. *Don’t you dare leave her.*

The first tendril of respect I’d had for her had come when she’d boldly faced down Makar at the trial. I’d been off in the shadows, leaning against a tree, watching what I was sure would be the first of Davor’s caving retreats. But it wasn’t. And Marta had proved to have iron in her veins.

That was the first bit of hope I’d had that maybe he could pull off his plan, his dreams that seemed frailer than a spider’s thread.

“He told me a little...about how it was between you two when you were children.” Her hesitation was back, and it filled me up as well.

What did he remember? What did *I* remember? It was easy to assign motives to past actions and words in the years after we’d been forced our separate ways. But her words held a faint question.

“He was...he was safer to be around.” It slipped out. He’d been patient with me, teaching me things. But he never could disguise the hurt after Father had been around. He never fought back, even when I wanted him to. I wanted him to show me something different all those years ago. The old betrayal and hurt reared up, ready to lash out, dying just as fast at the memories of the last countings.

“I remember a few years when I thought it might not be so bad to have a brother, until...” My lips clamped shut.

“He told me what happened.” And there was just sorrow, for him, for *me*. “You were children.”

A faint scoff built in my throat. “We were warriors born into a losing battle.”

“Not anymore.”

I dragged my gaze up to her, finding a strange look I might label compassion if that was something anyone outside of Yelene turned to me.

“Perhaps,” I said.

“You’ll find your footing.” And there was a faint smile on her face as she said it. “I don’t think they’ll let you walk away until you do.”

I huffed. It might be a threat, but I wanted to see if they would. “Michal’s had high hopes since this all began.”

The smile did not waver. “Are you used to having a sister around, Emil?”

My name caught me off-guard. As did the reminder that I had a sister. It was easier to ignore Janne, one less piece to worry about being controlled. I might have had another. My mother had been so sure the child she’d carried was a girl. Before they’d both been killed. A tightness welled in my throat.

But Marta continued as if she did not see my pause. “Janne and Michal could outdo one another with their brightness. She wants a family just as much as any of you do.”

I forced my eyes to her. Technically, Marta would be a sister now too. But I didn’t know if she’d want me as a brother. Didn’t know if Davor would, even with all his words.

“I don’t know much about sisters,” I said, and she inclined her head slightly. She looked over to Yelene.

"I know about sisters. I also know what being married to a chief's son is like. I was told many felt betrayed at seeing me beside him. She might have it worse."

"She will," I said softly. We'd yet to decide—*I'd* yet to decide, to wear our marriage cords. She wanted to. I wanted to keep protecting her.

"I know about protecting sisters. I know about wanting to lift women up instead of tearing them down with words. I'll do what I can for her out there." Her chin lifted to the door.

The tightness clamped harder and all I could do was nod. "Thank you, *dronni*."

She offered that faint smile again, and we lapsed to silence, but for the first time, it felt almost easy. Marta rubbed her eyes, inhaling again and curling her hand back around Davor's. He still didn't move.

"You should go rest," I said. It had been hours since we'd moved him to the cot, hours since she'd sat there.

"Would you leave her?" she asked.

A faint huff escaped, and I shook my head. The silence fell again, stretching through the hours as we sat. I occasionally caught the faint movement of her lips—prayers to higher beings, or maybe just telling him to stay like she had in the frantic moments when I'd helped Inge press bandages to try to stop some of the bleeding.

But I had nothing. Nothing but the silence and the faint hope that he'd wake up and we could keep trying. Keep walking the paths he'd set us all on. Because I wanted this new way. But I did not know how to do it alone.