

Belonging

*For Brennon,
who has always loved me, even when I was not worthy of his affection.
I love you and feel blessed to call you my little brother.*

"You're imperfect, and you're wired for struggle, but you are
worthy of love and ***belonging***,"

-Brene Brown

Chapter 1

Callix

Day 1

“Sure you can you can hit him from here?”

“As sure as I can kick you in the balls,”

I gave a slight chuckle at Sebastian’s remark, just before lying my head down and resting my chin on top of my folded arms, which sank deeper into the icy snow.

While I lay on my stomach, Sebastian stood to my right, motionless as a rock, holding his bow with an arrow that was ready to fire. Even his tail was still. He sure was talented. I don’t think anybody could have disagreed with that. When I was younger, I always tried to be a good archer like Sebastian. Every morning, before anybody was awake, I would go out into the woods and shoot targets with my bow. Once I saw how pointless it was, though, I quit trying. Whatever talent Sebastian had with a bow came from Taiya herself, not practice. While I had stopped trying to be just as good of a shot as Sebastian was, I still couldn’t help but feel the slightest burn of envy in my chest whenever we went hunting together. *You can’t always get what you want.*

Sebastian focused on the wild buck ahead, then the arrow on his bowstring, then the buck and the arrow once again. The buck’s brown pelt perfectly blended in with the crowd of trees that surrounded us, but stuck out on account of all of the white snow. It was about fifty paces away from us and the shot was perfect. But Sebastian, being the hunting perfectionist that he was, always said that, even when you think something is perfect, you could always get bitt in the ass.

The dingo cut his breath short and held still. So did I. It’s never fun to see someone fuck up a shot. If one person loses prey, the whole tribe does, too. That’s the bitch of eating commutatively.

Sebastian released his fingers and let the arrow fly.

The buck gave a loud cry as the stone headed arrow pierced its innards and poured a roaring stream of blood onto the snowy ground. Then, it turned and hobbled off through the trees.

A few moments of silence passed.

THUMP!

Just ahead, the deer toppled over onto its side and lay still. Slivers of blood began to slowly crawl out from underneath the deer’s corpse like snakes and made a mesmerizing red imprint on the snow around it.

Sebastian tied his bow onto his quiver and started to follow the trail of fresh blood that stained the ground under his moccasins. “Let’s go,”

I stood up, wiped the snow off of my chest and followed behind him.

There was a silence in the air between us that tore at me. One thing I never liked about hunting with Sebastian was how quiet he got. Taking pride in your work is one thing, but he always became so preoccupied with hunting that he never really spoke, which was strange, since he usually talked your ear off.

“I don’t know how you can stay so still. I always get bored,” I said, hoping to get some kind of response from Sebastian.

Sebastian sighed and fiddled with his left ear. "To each his own,"
He certainly wasn't in a talking mood. *Figures.*

"Yeah, sure...whatever. Hey, why do we shoot the heart again?"

Sebastian lowered his arm back to his side, obviously annoyed by my question. "If you shoot the heart, the prey dies quickly, so it doesn't suffer and we get to go home sooner,"

I just rolled my eyes. He could have been totally bullshitting me and I never would have known. He sounded honest, though. "I guess I must have been thinking about something else when my dad taught me that,"

Sebastian laughed. Taiya, his laugh. It wasn't loud, but it was high pitched and made you jump if you weren't expecting it. "I'm sure I know what you were thinking about,"

I could feel my lips curl back into a snarl. "What's that suppose to mean?"

He continued to snicker and spoke in a mocking imitation of my voice. "Oh, Isabel! Will you come back to my hut with me and suck face?"

I took a long step forward and punched him hard in the back. "Shut up!"

He may have been screwing with me, but I was kind of glad Sebastian was talking and joking around like normal again.

We grew quiet as we finally came upon his kill. A blank haze now clouded the buck's eyes, which were once filled with a glistening curiosity. The prey had fallen onto the side where Sebastian's arrow had pierced it, pushing the arrow completely through the other side of the buck's body.

"What a mess," I mumbled.

Sebastian leaned over and began to pull the arrow out of his kill.

While I was waiting, I looked around and examined our surroundings. If we were lucky, maybe there was other prey nearby. Then, I saw something beyond a few trees that did not belong with white snow. Blood. Yet, this blood was not a part of the trail left by the deer. It was far away from the deer's body and in the opposite direction from where the buck had come.

I trotted a few paces over to the blood and discovered that it led inside a nearby bush, which leaves were also stained with streaks of red.

My ears perked in caution. I sniffed the air, smelling an unmistakable stench that raised my hackles and burned the insides of my nose. *Kreq.*

I drew my stone knife from its sheath, gripping its wooden handle tightly, and slowly approached the bush. I pointed the tip of the blade towards the bush, to make it obvious to who I was speaking. "Come out where I can see you,"

Sebastian stopped whatever it was that he was doing behind me and joined me by the bush. "Who are you talking to?"

I didn't look over at him. Instead, I kept my eyes on the bloody bush before me. "I'm talking to the trespassing *cat* who is so brave that he's decided to hide in a bush. Now, if you don't come out, I'll come in after you...knife first,"

No sound came from inside the bush, not even a rustling of the leaves.

Sebastian gave a sigh and passed me, just before entering the silent bush.

"Hold on!" I cried after him. "I'm the one with the knife. I should be the one attacking the intruder!"

Not more than a moment later, Sebastian emerged from the bush, carrying an unconscious snow leopard in his arms. "I swear, sometimes you make me want to smack you in the muzzle,"

The leopard's garments were terribly torn and what was left of them was soaked in blood. I couldn't help but notice just how shitty the Kreq's clothing was compared to ours. The material of the leopard's clothes was stitched together very poorly from different hides of wild animals and ran from his shoulders to his mid-thighs. He also wore hide that was tied around his paws, instead of wearing moccasins like Sebastian and I. *Taiya, if I had to wear that crap, I would be begging for somebody to kill me.* I suddenly became thankful for my buckskin tunic, trousers and moccasins. Aside from the fresh blood, slashes and missing chunks of fur were a common sight on the leopard's chest.

"What the fuck happened to him?" I asked, loosening my grip on my blade.

Sebastian looked down at the Kreq warrior. "Judging by his wounds, I guess his tribe turned on him,"

I slid my knife in its sheath and approached the unconscious feline that Sebastian held. "Why?"

"Obviously he did something to piss them off," Sebastian snorted.

"Oh. So, what should we do with him? Are we gonna leave him here?"

"I think we should bring him back to camp with us,"

I shot Sebastian a look, as if he had said I could lay eggs. "What? Why should we do that?"

Sebastian shrugged. "Last I checked, being an enemy of the Kreq isn't a bad thing. Grix might even give him a reward. And we could use more tribesmen,"

"Wait," I said. "You think we should take him in? Like some kind of lost cub?"

"Sure," Sebastian said. "Who knows, though? Grix might not even give him the option to live with us,"

I couldn't believe what was hearing. A Kreq, join us? Yeah right. He'd probably run away the first chance he got. "I dunno,"

"Why?" Sebastian questioned me. "Even if he doesn't stay, we can't just leave him here to die! He's in our territory, so we have to bring him back to camp and report to Grix,"

What Sebastian had said seemed to be nothing but a foolish dream. The Kreq warrior, even if Grix offered, would never stay with us. Still, there was some truth to what Sebastian had said. We had to tell Grix about the leopard. He would definitely want to talk with him. I just hoped that Grix would make the right choice.

Sebastian broke the silence. "Well, if you can't think of anything better, let's go!" He then turned and started marching back towards camp.

I trotted quickly to catch up with him. "Hey! Wait for me Sebastian! You aren't gonna leave me here, are you?"

Sebastian didn't stop walking or even turn around. "You kept standing there with your mouth open, so I figured I'd come back for you in a little while!"

"Wait a minute!" I yelled, slowing to a halt.

Sebastian finally stopped walking and turned around. "Do you want me carry you to camp, too?"

I pointed back to the dead deer. "What are we going to do about the buck?"

Sebastian looked at me, then the deer, and sighed.

When we finally arrived back at camp, Sebastian was still carrying the unconscious leopard while I walked next to him, barley being able to keep the buckskin from dropping out of my hands.

"I...hate...you," I managed to say.

Sebastian gave me big grin. "It's not my fault you weren't strong enough to carry the cat,"

As we made our way through the center of camp, Isabel, a female husky, approached us. "Hey, Sebastian. Hey, Callix. How was-" Her greeting was cut short once her beautiful blue eyes fell upon the leopard.

Without wasting anytime, Sebastian talked in the sarcastic voice he always used when he was trying to be funny. "Well, Isabel, we got a buckskin and one torn up leopard. So, overall, it wasn't bad!"

Isabel just stared at the wounded leopard. "Yeah... I can see that,"

The muscles in my arms were screaming so loudly that I interrupted them. "Um, if you guys don't mind, I'd like to give this to Rye before my arms snap off,"

Isabel's eyes never left the cat. I didn't think she even heard me. "I guess I'll see you guys around,"

The two of us then began to walk once again and left Isabel behind us.

Sebastian turned his head to yell over his shoulder. "See ya, Isabel!"

I also said my farewell. "Yeah.... Later,"

The rest of the walk was about the same. Our tribesman would stop whatever it was that they were doing and stare blankly as Sebastian and I made our way past them. Thank Taiya they didn't stop us, though, since I could feel the weight of the buckskin continuing to wear down the strength in my arms.

When we finally arrived at Grix's hut, Sebastian turned his head and spoke to me. "You can go give the buckskin to Rye now. I'll take our new friend here inside and talk to Grix,"

I sighed in relief. "Thank Taiya!"

Lucky for me, Rye's hut was right next to Grix's.

After I turned and walked towards Rye's hut, I heard Grix open his door and welcome Sebastian into his hut behind me. I was also able to here a spark of bewilderment in Grix's voice. *Cats even make Grix uneasy.* I chuckled at the thought of the big wolf's tail curling in between his legs.

When I had arrived at Rye's door, I kicked it with my right paw. "Rye! I've got a nice buckskin here for you!"

"Keep your loincloth on," a voice called from within the hut.

After a few moments, a series of pawsteps slowly approached the door, which then opened to reveal a completely nude fennec fox.

I stood there silently.

"See anything you like?" Rye teased, as he spread his legs further apart for me to see his unconcealed sheath.

I curled my lips in disgust and held the buckskin up to keep Rye's balls out of my sight. "No. I just can never get used to seeing your dick hang out like that,"

Rye didn't seem to take offense and only grinned evilly, as he let his fingers rise and fall repeatedly on the doorframe. "At least you get the privilege of seeing me naked,"

"Yeah, trust me, everybody's seen you naked. It ain't that much of a prize," I said, after pushing the now laughing fennec aside and stepped inside the hut.

Rye's hut itself was cluttered with assorted pelts that would be fashioned into clothing and un-carved stone that would be sharpened into arrowheads. There also were scraps of food lying about. Rye was in charge of making tools and clothes for the entire tribe, so he had little time to worry about messes. To make things worse, his hut always reeked of fresh cum. I always dreaded coming and giving Rye his pelts, somewhat for the mess, but mostly because of Rye's personality. He was always trying to make me feel uncomfortable by saying innuendos. His dick hanging between his legs for everybody to see didn't help soften my pain, either. Every time I would leave his hut, it would be a miracle that I didn't beat the crap out of him.

I made my way to the workbench in the far back of Rye's hut. After I placed the buckskin on the workbench, I moaned in relief and placed my arms on my now strain-free back. "Oh, Taiya!"

Rye chuckled behind me.

I let out a sigh and turned around to shoot him a dirty look. "What's so funny?" I asked, knowing very well that the answer was going to be some stupid sex joke.

Rye rolled his eyes and shifted his pelvis in way that moved his sheath closer towards me. "Oh, I was just thinking about this one date I had that ended up spending the night,"

"And, on that note, I'll be going," I said, keeping my head high enough to block Rye's crotch from my vision.

It didn't take me long to get outside and start to close the door behind me.

"Hey," the nude fennec called out to me.

I stopped where I was and stared into the darkness of the hut. "Yeah?"

Rye crossed his arms and now leaned back against his workbench. "I looked out of my window and saw the leopard you brought into camp,"

There was a pause.

I shrugged. "Yeah, so?"

Rye shrugged in return. "If you find out he loves a good cock, send him over to me,"

My nostrils flared. Why did I even bother talking to him when I knew he was only going to fuck with my head? Screw it. There was no point in spending any more time with him now. "Sure! In fact, I'm going to go dress him for your pleasure right now!"

I slammed the door behind me and quickly made my way back towards Grix's hut. *Fucking perv.*

"Hey, Callix!"

I looked over my shoulder to see Isabel walking towards me, as the bright rays of the morning sunlight illuminated her black and white fur. *I would live in a village full of Rye's if I could just have one date with her.* The thought made my heart

sink a little. Why was I so good at talking my way into trouble, but terrible when it came to telling Isabel how I felt?

I was so angry with myself that I almost missed what she said. "So, what are you going to do about the leopard?"

"Um," I scratched my head nervously and coughed. "Sebastian is talking to Grix right now. So we haven't really come up with a plan yet. Sebastian seemed think we should take him in or something,"

Clearly, Isabel was startled by the very idea because I noticed that the hairs on her neck stood up. "Why would he think that?"

I shrugged. "I thought it was stupid, too. He said we should take the cat in since there aren't a lot of us right now,"

Isabel nodded. "So.... When you found him, did he say anything?"

I adjusted my quiver's strap and cleared my throat. "No. He was passed out when we found him,"

Isabel sighed. "I wonder what Grix is going to do,"

"I dunno...."

Neither of us spoke for a moment.

"Well," I began, "I better get going,"

"Okay, see you around Callix,"

Isabel turned and walked away.

"See ya," I whispered.

I rotated and walked to the door of Grix's hut.

From inside the hut, I could here the faint sounds of conversation, which were cut short by me knocking on the door.

"Come in," Grix's muffled voice came through the wood.

I opened the door and entered Grix's hut. His hut was bigger than any other one in the entire tribe, which gave Grix more room for possessions and décor, that is to say, if he had any. The gray wolf sat on his only chair and looked up as I shut the door behind me. It was then that I noticed the snow leopard was lying down in the corner of the hut on Grix's bed, the only other piece of furniture in the place, which was next to Grix's bow, quiver and sheathed knife, all sitting neatly at the end of the bed. Sebastian was sitting with his legs crossed on the ground and his back faced me. I walked forward and sat down next to him.

Grix began to address me. "Sebastian just finished telling me how you found our.... guest,"

It seemed like the appropriate time for me to ask the question that was on everybody's mind. "What do you think we should do with him?"

Grix closed his eyes and rubbed them. "I don't know. We can't just throw him out in the woods and let him freeze to death. But there's a chance he'll be hostile to us, even if the Kreq don't want him anymore. I suppose...." He paused and continued to speak. "All we can do now is give him medicine and a place to sleep. Once he's awake, we can question him and better understand the situation. So, until he wakes up, whenever that'll be, he'll stay with Sera,"

Sebastian nodded in agreement, while I simply sat still with an expressionless face. We didn't know this cat and Grix was already willing to let him sleep in our camp? For all we knew, he could slit our throats while we slept.

I leaned in and pointed at the sleeping snow leopard in the corner of the hut. "What if he wakes up in the middle of the night and just starts killing people? And what about Fern and Night? They're kids, Grix! Are you willing to risk their lives, too?"

Grix stared down at me from his chair, but didn't stand up, which I took as a good sign. Still, the menacing look from his dark brown eyes made me shiver. "I have taken that into consideration, *Callix*, and I've decided that there will be guards at Sera's door at all times. In fact, you just volunteered to be on every morning guard duty until the snow leopard wakes up,"

Shit. I'd have to stand in the freezing cold instead of sleeping in, but I remembered that I could just kill the snow leopard if he gave us any trouble. That made me feel a little bit better.

Grix finally rose from his seat. "Let's get him to Sera,"