

Chapter 2

Meelo

Day 3

My eyes slowly flickered open and I expected to see blue sky, but instead was faced with a roof constructed of dark brown wood that hung overhead.

I sat upright and gently rubbed my head. Drowsily, I looked down and discovered that I was lying inside a sack, which appeared to be made of bear hide. Carefully, I lifted the top of the hide and slid it off of my chest. *What the...?*

There were three bandage strips made of deer hide wrapped around my bare chest. The ends of each strip were sewn together by thin lines of some strange fur and were tightly knotted.

Slowly, I slid a finger under the top bandage and lifted it to peek underneath. Beneath the bandage, I found a few jagged scars that clearly needed a little more time to heal. *Glad I passed out, I guess.*

After letting go of the bandage, I realized that there was something covering my legs. I pulled myself out of the bear hide bed until I could see my thighs and sat up. *I'm wearing...trousers?* I reached out my arm and caressed the part of the dark brown pant-leg that covered my thigh, which was just underneath a leather belt that was coiled around me. The material was different than what the Kreq used for their clothes. *Buckskin.* After removing my hand from my thigh and placing it next to me on the bed, I looked around.

The bear-pelt bed had been placed in a corner on the opposite side of the dwelling from the door. I then turned my head to face the wall that my bed was pressed against. My left hand found its way onto the wall and felt the material. *Redwood. Not bad.* I placed my hand back down and sighed. *I wonder who it was that saved me.*

Then, I turned my head back to the right and examined the rest of the hut. It was a simple home. To the left of the door and at the end of my bed was a desk, which was stained with various green, yellow and red blotches. On the right side of the hut from where I was laying, I saw a second bed that had a large wooden trunk at its base.

I took a deep stream of air into my nose and engulfed myself in the scent of the hut. Then, I recognized a petrifying smell amongst the strong scent of redwood. *Canine.*

I was in the middle of the Kyan camp.

I could feel my ears twitching nervously. Why would the Kyan go through so much trouble to help me? I sank into the bed as my mind began to torment me with every kind of paranoid thought. *Maybe they want information on the Kreq. Are they going to hurt me if I don't give them what they want? What if they give me some kind weird sex torture?* If any of these worries were true, there was no way that I would be able to fight or run without reopening my wounds. My head was also a little groggy, most likely from whatever herbs I had been given for my injuries. *I'm so fucked.*

A voice came from outside. "Hey, Sera,"

Instinctively, I froze and held my breath, as though I was in danger of being seen.

A second voice followed. "Anything happen while I was out?"

"Well," a third voice began, "other than the sun moving over some trees, it's been pretty uneventful,"

A cackle came from what sounded like the one called Sera. By the sound of Sera's voice, I guessed that Sera was a woman and that the other voices belonged to men. Sadly, the hut muffled the rest of their conversation. The two men sounded much closer to the door than Sera was, though. *Probably guards.*

Suddenly, pawsteps approached the door.

I closed my eyes and held my breath.

The door opened, a single set pawsteps entered and the door closed behind them. The pawsteps then went towards the desk. A sudden thump was made, probably from Sera putting something down. Now that Sera was inside the hut, I could certainly tell that she was a Kyan based on her overpowering musky odor. Then, there were a few moments of silence.

"I know you're awake," a whisper came into my ear.

Without thinking, I shifted towards the wall and smacked the canine that crouched next to me across the muzzle.

The Kyan yelped as she stood up, comforting her nose with caring hands. My chest began to rise and fall quickly as I stared at the woman. She was a shepherd with a black face. Her eyes were light brown and, when she lowered her hands, I noticed the very tip of her nose had a jagged scar. Sera also wore a necklace made of leaves over her tunic, which, much like my new trousers, was made of buckskin.

"Ow!" Sera groaned. "You know, it's not very polite to smack around someone who saved your life!"

Her response and the fact that she didn't smack me back were surprising.

"Um.... I'm sorry?"

Sera groaned again and lowered her arms. "I don't think your heart's in it, but I forgive you anyway."

For a moment, I was silent. Then, I worked up the courage to speak again.

"Why did you sneak up on me like that?"

Sera chuckled and grinned. "Scaring my patients is the only entertainment I get," She got down on one knee and moved closer to me.

As she kneeled down next to me, I could feel my body tighten anxiously. Sera reached out towards me and I turned my torso away. After seeing my resilience, she lowered her hand, but still kept it in the air.

At first, I thought that she was going to become irritated. However, she now spoke in a rather soothing tone. "It's all right. You have nothing to fear. Who do you think put those bandages on you?"

My ears fell back and my fur burned with guilt. Maybe I had judged the shepherd too quickly. Or, maybe she was just trying to trick me into thinking that she was friendly. Still, she did sound very kind.

I slowly rotated my chest back and allowed Sera to do her work.

She carefully stretched out her arm and pulled every bandage back to examine each one of my wounds closely. Her eyes flicked upward from my wounds to briefly stare me in the face. "So, what's your name?"

I didn't expect her to try and make conversation. "Hmm?"

"Your name? You know, the thing that people call you?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm Meelo,"

Sera checked underneath the last bandage. "Meelo? Huh. That's a nice name. Well, I've got some good news. First, you're not going to die," Sera then stood up and walked to her desk. "And second, I've got breakfast! Well, late breakfast... Early lunch? Oh, who cares?"

As the shepherd picked up a wooden slab from her desk that had cooked rabbit on it, I noticed a large sack at the base of the desk that wasn't there before Sera had come inside. I could smell multiple scents coming from it, but couldn't identify any of them. *It's probably for carrying herbs.*

Sera placed the food on my lap and sat down next to me while crossing her legs. While she bent over to put the food on my lap, my eyes caught sight the extremely large pair of breasts bulging underneath her tunic that could only have been unnoticeable if I were blind. They were probably the kind of boobs I'd like if I wasn't... *Oh shit. I better not bring that up. Who knows how the Kyan will react?*

I blankly stared at the cooked rabbit placed on my chest. "How did you know I would be awake?"

"Oh," Sera said and laughed. "I didn't. The rabbit was my breakfast, but, since you're up, I thought you should have it,"

Silently, I stared at the cooked rabbit.

"What's wrong?" Sera asked.

I didn't want to reply at first, but realized that I didn't have much of a choice. "How do I know it's not poisoned?"

Sera put her hands behind her on the ground and leaned back. "I put a lot of effort into keeping you alive and even lost some sleep to make remedies. Why would I do all of that just to finish you off with some poisoned food? And my leader is keen on talking to you. He even told me to let him know when you woke up. So, if I actually did poison you, I wouldn't benefit from it. Now, eat,"

How could I argue with that logic?

I slowly picked the rabbit up with both of my hands and started eating it. Surprisingly, the prey was well cooked and sent my tongue into a wave of delight, which resulted in my mouth being overcome with saliva. Once I swallowed the first crisp mouthful, I realized how hungry I was. So, I hastily took a second bite of the meal, right before taking yet another.

"Being hungry after sleeping for a couple of days is normal," Sera explained. "I wouldn't be surprised if you've even lost a bit of weight,"

I almost responded with a mouthful of rabbit, but luckily I caught myself at the last moment and swallowed before I spoke. "Oh, okay. Thanks for taking care of me by the way,"

Sera shrugged. "No biggie. It's my job," The shepherd put her knees up to her stomach and placed her hands on them. "If there's any questions you have, you can ask me,"

My head froze with my open mouth only a finger's length away from taking another bite of rabbit. Gradually, I lowered the meal back onto its wooden slab and pulled my head back into its usual position after closing my mouth. I did have something on my mind, but didn't really have the nerve to ask it. I probably wouldn't have even said it if Sera hadn't been so courteous. "The Kyan tribe usually carries bows and knives. Why don't you?"

Sera's eyes widened, telling me that she was taken back by the question. "Wow, really observant, Meelo! It's true. We do use bows, arrows and knives. But I'm the shaman of the tribe and my job is to heal others, not to hunt or fight. Hey, how did you know what bows and arrows are if the Kreq don't use them?"

To be honest, the question somewhat surprised me, but I knew how to answer it. "The Kreq tell stories about you guys when they're making fun of you. They talk about your weapons, your huts and your...dog parts. That's why I know that that's a desk and this is a bed,"

"Interesting. I never knew that the Kreq talked about us so much. Now, I've never understood why the Kreq don't use weapons to hunt or fight. Do they have a reason that?"

I figured that she would ask that question. "Cats are kind of snooty. The Kreq believe that it's more 'proper' to use your claws and teeth than any weapons. The Kreq make fun of you guys for using them, which is why they think that you guys are inferior," Once I finished my answer, I resumed eating my rabbit.

Then, she asked me something that I didn't expect her to say. "And what do you think?"

It was actually a good question. What did I think? It was strange having someone ask me for my opinion. Out of all my time with the Kreq, I couldn't recall anybody giving a damn about what I thought. I assumed that was what it was like everywhere, not just in the Kreq tribe.

After finishing another mouthful, I licked my chops and thought for a moment about how I was going to word my thoughts. It took me no longer than three heartbeats. "I think it's stupid to not use what's around us and make tools that can help us survive,"

Sera nodded and silently agreed. She probably had heard rumors about how the Kreq treated one another and what standards they held each other to. *She's lucky she never had to live with them.*

To stop the growing dreadful silence, I pointed at Sera's nose. "So what happened there?"

"Oh," Sera said and slowly dragged her hand down her scar, "I'd rather not talk about it,"

"Oh... Okay," *Damn it. Now she's pissed off.* Blankly, I stared at my wooden slab, which now only held rabbit bones.

Sera grabbed the slab off of my lap and walked towards her desk.

I thought that she wasn't going to talk, since I opened my big fat mouth, but she carried on as though nothing had happened. "Well, I've been given orders to escort you to our leader," She placed the slab on her desk as she continued talking. "I decided to feed you first. But now it's time to go,"

My ears fell back and my chest tingled with uneasiness.

The Kyan shaman seemed to pick up on my dread and tried to comfort me as best she could. "If it makes you feel any better, his name is Grix and he's really sweet,"

"Thanks," I groaned.

After letting out a brief sigh, I pushed the bear hide off myself and slowly stood up.

Sera closely watched me, as though I were a cub about to take my first steps, which I thought was funny, considering how tall I was, even for a snow leopard. I hoped that the rest of the Kyan weren't as short as my collarbone, like Sera was. If so, I would have a much harder time not standing out.

The shepherd took a step towards me with her cautious hands slightly raised, ready to catch me if need be. "Do you feel any pain or lightheadedness?"

I trotted closer Sera, showing her that I was perfectly capable of walking. "No. I'm fine. Although...now that I think about it, I do feel a bit weak,"

She nodded and slowly lowered her hands. "That's normal,"

Sera turned and went to open the door of her hut. Once she touched the wood, she stopped and turned around. "Oh, wait! I can't let you go outside only half-dressed!"

The shepherd turned and walked towards the trunk that was at the end of the second bed, which I now assumed was hers. She began to shovel through some of the dusty miscellaneous items while her tail playfully wagged behind her.

Eventually she found a buckskin tunic and raised it up in the air to closely examine it. After a quick once-over, she decided that the tunic was in good condition and shook it free of dust. Then, she dove back into the trunk once more and withdrew a pair of moccasins.

Sera walked over to me and offered the tunic and moccasins in such a manner that reminded me of a child showing off their first kill.

Gently, I took the tunic and moccasins from Sera. "Thanks,"

Sera's tail wagged in appreciation. "No problem!"

I placed the moccasins on the floor of the hut and raised the tunic over myself, just before burrowing through it and sticking my head out the top. "How come I wasn't wearing a tunic to begin with?"

Sera's ears shot up and her tail dashed between her legs. "Oh, I thought that it would make it easier to look at your wounds. Not because...you know,"

"Because?" I asked, while I leaned over to slip on the moccasins.

Sera nervously tapped the floor of her home with her right moccasin.

"Because...because... Not because I *wanted* you to be shirtless,"

I couldn't help but chuckle at the Kyan's loss for words. "Yeah. I know,"

The shepherd let out a sigh of relief and I could tell that she was still worried about me thinking that she wanted to look at my chest, since her tail continued to hide between her legs.

"Great! Everything fits. Now that you're dressed, we should get going," Sera tried to say in the calmest voice possible.

My tail twitched and I felt my heart sink. "Okay,"

Sera walked towards the door and pushed it open with her hand.

Light flooded through the doorway and burned my eyes, as if I had dove face-first into a fire. I lifted my hand up to shield my squinting eyes, which hardly made any difference.

"Too bright?" I heard Sera's voice come from somewhere in the light.

"Yeah!" I shouted back, as though we were far away from one another.

I heard a chuckle come from Sera. "That's normal, too,"

Just then, through the slits between my fingers, I could make out a dark figure in front of me and assumed that it was Sera. "How is this normal?"

"Well, you've been sleeping in my hut for a couple of days now. That's a lot of time to be out of the sun,"

The dim outline of Sera's faint shadow that was only a few steps ahead of me became somewhat clearer. I still couldn't see her clothes or fur, though. Gradually, I made my way forward with a hand in front of me in case I bumped into the doorway of Sera's hut with my side. After a few steps, I noticed that the light had become dimmer, but still continued to strain my eyes nonetheless. Eventually, I could feel the ground beneath my new moccasins being crushed, making me realize that I was outside and standing on the snow.

A voice came from behind me and almost caused me to jump. "Want me to hold your hand for you, kitty?"

I turned around, lowering my hand, and squinted, noticing two shadowy shapes. *The guards.*

Both of the faded Kyan warriors' laughter rang through my ears and diminished my pride. My tail hid between my legs and I could feel the temperature of my face beginning to grow warm with shame.

Thankfully, Sera stopped the two cackling sentries. "Shut it, Callix! That goes for you too, Eirok!"

Sera placed her hand on my shoulder and began guiding me away. Behind us, I heard a very faint whisper come from the one called Callix. "Bitch,"

At first, I thought that the other guard named Eirok would also make a snide comment. Much to my surprise, Eirok actually seemed genuinely concerned. "Do you want us to come with you?"

Sera didn't seem interested in Eirok's alarm and hissed, "No. I think I can handle a half-blind snow leopard!"

The two of us continued walking.

After a few steps, when I was sure that we were out of earshot of Callix and Eirok, I decided to speak. "You heard that Callix guy call you a bitch, right?"

"Yeah," Sera said. "That's Callix for you, though. He's nice guy. He just doesn't know when to shut up,"

I snorted in disbelief. "Last time I checked, guys that call girls 'bitch' aren't all that nice,"

Sera's body shifted and I assumed that the shaman had shrugged. "He's just upset that he got stuck with guard duty. Can't say I blame him. Hey, how are your eyes doing?"

I could barely make out huts around us, but I didn't need my hand to block the sunlight from my face anymore. "Better. I can see as far as that fourth hut in front of us," "

"That's good,"

As we kept walking at brisk pace, I decided to sniff the air. We were now bathing in an ocean of canine aroma that made my tail curl with disgust. *Well, so much for running.*

I began to notice a few shadows of Kyan standing around. Even though I couldn't see their eyes, I knew that Sera's tribesmen were staring at me with judgment because my pelt burned with the sensation of being watched. I may as well have been back living with the Kreq.

Finally, we stopped at a hut, which seemed to be a bit larger than all the others. At this point in time, I was able to comfortably open my eyes completely.

Sera knocked on the door and waited. "Can you see?"

"Yeah. My eyes are fine now. Thanks,"

The door abruptly creaked opened to reveal a strapping gray wolf. While I myself was rather tall, I found that my head only reached halfway up the wolf's neck. A shadow of fright slithered up my back as I realized that the wolf could easily eat me if he wanted to. *Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.*

"Hey, Sera! I see our guest is doing much better!" The wolf's welcoming voice baffled me. How could such a pleasant and soothing voice come from a wolf, let alone the colossal one that towered over me?

I looked down from his face and stared at his large chest. His stomach occupied its tunic fully with what I could clearly see were firm muscles. *Wow.* If the Kyan leader was that handsome, I wondered what the rest of the Kyan looked like. I then felt that maybe I had been staring for too long, so I looked back up at the wolf's face.

Sera didn't seem to share my alarm or my amazement at how tall the wolf was. "Yep! He's doing fine, Grix!"

Grix smiled at the news. "Great. Thank you very much Sera. You can go now,"

Sera nodded and began to walk away. Before she left, Sera turned her head over her shoulder and shouted back at me. "Don't worry Meelo, Grix doesn't bite.... much,"

The shaman laughed and continued to stroll away, leaving me alone with Grix.

I stood there looking at the Kyan leader for a moment in awkward silence. Grix's eyes were light brown and made me feel naked with their piercing gaze. They seemed to sense every feeling of fear and every thought that crossed my mind, making me feel even more at his mercy. The upper part of Grix's face was dark black while the bottom half of his face and his muzzle were both completely white. His clothes were similar to that of Sera's, including the light brown moccasins on Grix's paws. However, the wolf had a sheath on the side of his belt, which held a knife at the ready.

Grix finally spoke and interrupted my inner thoughts. "We should probably go inside before we get frostbite,"

I faintly nodded, not realizing at first that he was joking, and followed the wolf inside the hut. *How long was I staring at him?*

After shutting the door behind me, I took a few steps forward into Grix's hut. Meanwhile, Grix sat himself on the ground and motioned towards a nearby chair. "Please sit, Meelo,"

I stood still at first, but then made my way towards the chair and sat down, fearing that I would appear rude if I didn't.

Grix sighed. "So, I guess I'll start with the most obvious question. Why did the Kreq drive you away?"

My tail gave slight twitch as I sat in the wooden chair. "There... There was a misunderstanding,"

Grix's ears raised themselves, curiously. "What kind of misunderstanding?"

I rubbed my left arm with my right hand and looked at Grix's nose to make it seem as though I was making eye contact. "My brother,"

A moment of uncomfortable silence passed.

"And?"

I looked off to the side of the hut and shrugged. "He had...too many problems and not enough answers,"

"So, what you're saying," Grix tried to clarify, "is that, whatever happened to your brother, the Kreq blamed it on you?"

I nodded.

"Because you're a snow leopard?"

I shook my head. "No, I.... I've never really liked their customs. The Kreq are pretty stuck in their ways. And I...I..."

I didn't know how to say it.

"Like guys?" Grix asked.

My eyes widened while they found their way back to Grix and I sat up in my chair. "How did you know?"

Grix chuckled a little. He leaned forward and whispered as though we were discussing some huge secret. "You know how they say it takes one to know one?"

I nodded.

Grix stared silently back at me for a few moments.

The realization hit me like a punch and I gasped. "Oh! Really?"

Grix smiled. "Yep! And it was kind of obvious that you were checking me out at the door,"

The excitement of meeting someone else who was gay was replaced by the sensation of my fur burning with humiliation. I raised my hands in the air shook them apologetically. "No, no! It's just...you're so big,"

The wolf placed his arms on the ground behind him and leaned backwards as he narrowed his eyes. "Are you calling me fat?"

My fur burned even hotter and my mouth fell open in surprise.

Grix threw a hand up in front of him and held it out. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not judging you if you like big men. It's not the weirdest fetish,"

Both of my hands found their way over my mouth and I mumbled inside of them. "No... I... You..."

Grix's head fell backwards and his chest rumbled as he howled with laughter. "Meelo, I'm kidding. I know what you meant. Why are you so uncomfortable talking about this?"

My hands lowered into my lap and I stared at Grix while I felt my fur still burning with embarrassment. "Um...the Kreq are against all relationships that can't produce offspring. So, I couldn't ever really talk about being gay with anybody. It's just...weird to finally say it out loud,"

Grix whistled in surprise and shook his head. "I've also heard how you guys think it's...what's the word? Oh! Honorable! That's it! Kreq think that it's honorable if you only use your own bodies to hunt. That's why you don't use arrows or knives,"

I gave a small nod. "Yeah. I always thought that was another dumb custom,"

Grix sighed in agreement with me. "I can't imagine living with people who are so critical of what you do and who you are! I mean, even though I'm not interested in having a mate, it's still nice to be accepted for who I am,"

It was odd. Even though I had only been in the gray wolf's home for a few moments, I felt...safe. It was unusual for me to feel that way around someone else, especially someone that I had just met. Being with the Kreq for all of my life had started this habit for me. Then again, Grix wasn't a Kreq warrior. He was willing to share personal details about himself, friendly and, most of all, accepting. I certainly wasn't complaining. This gray wolf was everything that I wished the Kreq were. I could really see myself being friends with Grix.

Then, I remembered why I was in Grix's hut in the first place. I was a trespasser who was a long way from home and didn't belong.

I then realized that it had been silent for a few moments and that I was staring blankly at the wall behind Grix. I shook my head and said, "Sorry. I blanked out,"

Grix only chuckled. "No big deal. We all do that from time to time! So, anyways, you said that there was some kind of misunderstanding?"

I thought that he had let that go. "Oh yeah, well, there wasn't much discussing. Everybody just started coming after me. They managed to hurt me a bit before I was able to get away, though. The last thing I remember before waking up in Sera's hut this morning is walking. I was so weak that I had to lean on trees to keep my balance. I don't even remember coming into your guys territory,"

Grix grunted and remained silent for a while.

I tilted my head to the side. "So...?"

"You can stay here,"

I nearly fell out of my chair and screamed. "What?"

The wolf laughed and held out his arms with a grin. "You can stay here! The Kreq probably aren't going to take you back and I see no reason to send you away. We're also pretty short in numbers, too. And, even if you don't decide to stay, where will you go?"

I never thought about it that way. Actually I never really thought past talking with Grix.

"So, will you stay and be a Kyan? We'll feed you, give you a nice hut and if someone mistreats you, I'll handle it," Grix assured me.

I sat there staring at the floor between Grix and I. My mind was racing. I would never see anybody from the Kreq ever again, not even my family. But then I remembered how they had treated me, how they belittled me and how they

despised me. If they never saw me again, they wouldn't care. So, why should I? *Why not? I already like Grix and he's the Kyan leader!*

"Okay, I'll stay,"

Grix jumped up and gave a bark of joy. "Great! We'll have an initiation tonight!"

My ears fell back. "I-I-Initiation?" Quickly, my imagination showed me eating some deer's still-beating heart and I began to feel like throwing up.

Grix rolled his eyes and scratched his muzzle. "Well, sort of. I guess I could give the speech when we acknowledge a young Kyan becoming an adult, but I'll have to change the words around a little. Oh, this is going to be fun! We haven't had a celebration in a long time!"

"Um, I have one question," I said, hating to interrupt Grix, especially since he was in such a great mood.

Grix looked down at me and I was reminded of how tall he was. "Oh, of course. What is it?"

"What should I do, I mean, between now and then?"

The wolf's gaze wandered as he pondered on the question for a moment. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "I know! I can put you on a hunting patrol and give you an idea of how we do things around here! Don't worry. You won't have to shoot a bow or anything. All you have to do is observe! We'll teach you how to hunt and skin prey later,"

Everything seemed to be moving so fast. In only a few moments, I had woken up in a whole new place, voiced my problems about the Kreq with someone and joined a new tribe. I was also grateful that Grix didn't ask what the Kreq thought I did. Maybe he could tell that it was an uncomfortable subject for me to talk about.

The wolf swiftly moved into the doorway of his hut and opened the door. "Follow me,"

I snapped out of my thought and got up to follow Grix outside.

Now that my eyes had adjusted, I could clearly see the Kyan camp. There were two symmetrical rows of huts going from one end of the camp to the other. Every hut was tan and made of redwood, just like Sera's. All of the huts also had a single window on each of their faces, which was accompanied by a single door. I noticed that some of the windows had pelts hung over them on the inside of the huts. *Probably for privacy.*

As I followed Grix, I began noticing the few Kyan tribe members that were awake that morning. Whenever we walked by, I pretended that I couldn't see the befuddled and aggressive looks aimed at me. Instead of focusing on the other Kyan, I kept my gaze forward and looked over Grix's shoulder.

The gray wolf's fur seemed to glow in the midday sunlight. His shoulders were stout like boulders and his torso seemed to roar whenever he took a breath. I was very glad to have Grix walking with me around the Kyan. *Am I checking him out? Oh shit, I think I am! Wait. Does that mean I was checking him out earlier? Damn it. He was right.*

The Kyan leader stopped and I stood next to his side.

I gazed down and saw three Kyan preparing food over a crackling fire. The prey had already been skinned and now the Kyan were cooking the meaty innards.

The pieces of prey had been impaled with sticks by the Kyan and were being roasted from a safe distance.

A female fennec fox greeted the Kyan leader. "Hey, Grix,"
The wolf spoke in the same cheery voice that he had spoken to Sera with.
"Hey, Fare!"

A male red fox spoke in a playful tone. "Are we keeping the pussycat?"
Grix's tail swished in pride. "Yep!"
The third Kyan warrior, a dingo, didn't look up from his prey. Instead, he only responded sarcastically. "Yay!"

Grix put his right hand on my shoulder. "Oh, yeah! Meelo, the dingo with the sharp tongue is one of the two hunters that found you! His name is Sebastian,"
Sebastian still didn't look up from his prey. "I'm surprised you didn't mention Callix," He gave a small laugh. "Usually people have a hard time forgetting him!"
Grix rolled his eyes. "This red fox over here is Seq,"

The red fox waved enthusiastically with a smile stretched across his face. I slightly raised my hand and gave an uncertain wave in return.

Grix then jokingly whispered in my ear, "You might wanna sleep with one eye open around him,"

"Hey! I'm not *that* bad!" Seq said.
The fennec began to laugh.
Seq's eyes narrowed as he glared at the laughing girl. "What's so funny, Fare?"

Fare continued her cackling. "You went out with Rye! Rye! The guy who flashes everybody every chance he gets!"

Seq put his free hand on his hip, while still using the other to cook his food, and gave the fennec a mocking stare. "At least I'm not his sister,"

Fare held out a hand with her finger raised. "Hey, I was *born* his sister. You, on the other hand, *chose* to be his boyfriend,"

A small bark escaped Grix's throat. "Guys!"
The two Kyan both broke their conversation and silently stared at Grix.
"Since Meelo is new here, I want one of you to show him how we hunt. Do you think you could manage that?"

"Yes," Fare and Seq muttered in unison. However, Sebastian remained silent and continued to watch his meat cook. Although, I figured that Grix was happy that nobody was talking anymore.

"Fare, why don't you show Meelo your hunting skills?" Grix suggested.
The fennec shrugged. "Sure. My meat's done anyways. Actually, Sebastian might want to come with us, since he's good with a bow,"

Grix crossed his arms. "That won't be necessary. We need as many people hunting *separately* and cooking prey so we can get ready for tonight's feast,"
Everybody's ears shot into an upright position, including mine.

"Feast?" Seq asked to see if he hadn't misheard the wolf.
"Yes," Grix said. "Our new tribe member needs a proper welcoming and what better way to welcome him than with a feast in his honor?"

The only noise that followed was the song of the cold wind.

"All right. Fare," Grix began. "You and Meelo go hunt. Sebastian, go hunt somewhere on your own. I'm gonna go assign more jobs,"

With that said, Grix turned and went to find other warriors to help cook, leaving me alone.

Fare then handed her stick to Seq and rose from her seat. "Well, I'll see you boys when we get back. Come on kitty let's go!" Fare then placed her arm around my chest and dragged me towards the outer woodlands.

As we left the Kyan camp slowly behind us, I wanted to ask so many questions, but decided that it was probably best to keep my mouth shut. I didn't want to make anybody hate me on the same day that they met me.

Soon, the pair of us reached the woods and continued to trudge through the snow. After a long period of silence, Fare opened up. "So in case you're wondering, our patrols usually made up of two or three people. They're kept small, so we don't scare off prey. They check the border between the Kreq's territory and ours. Of course, that only happens if they have extra time because finding food is their priority,"

I only grunted.

The fennec fox firmly pressed her hand on my shoulder and we stopped walking.

Fare looked at me with her nightly black eyes and spoke. "I know you're new here, but face it. This is your home and the Kyan are your family now. Yeah, I know it's pretty weird to hear that from someone you just met, but it's true. If Grix says your good enough to join us, then you are! If anybody thinks otherwise, just let me know and I'll kick their ass for ya,"

My ears stood up and my eyes widened in surprise at her enthusiasm. Never in my life would I have ever imagined anybody being so upfront and nice to me. "Really?"

Fare grinned and nodded. "Yep. And that's just for you, kid,"

Without warning, Fare wrapped her arm around me, pulled my head down and began to violently rub the top of my head with her fist. "I think you're gonna fit right in!"

Normally, I would have struggled to get out of it, but there was something about Fare's tomboy-ish charm that I found sincere. I gladly took her horseplay and even grinned while doing so. It was nothing compared to what the Kreq did to me.

Soon, Fare released my head. "Well, better start hunting. Don't want anybody thinking we fucked!"

I quietly nodded. "Okay,"

"Oh," Fare said. "Before I forget, there's a stream just on the other side of camp. That's where we get our water,"

"It's right by your camp?" I said, a little surprised. "Wow. The Kreq have to walk really far to get their water,"

We continued talking as we walked, which slowly began to make me feel more comfortable around Fare.

After a while, the sun began to sink in the sky and sprayed streams of orange light through the frosty tree branches. It was then when we came upon a wild boar that slowly trotted from tree to tree.

I noticed Fare go down into a crouching position and I decided to do the same. The two of us followed the boar and kept behind trees at all times. Soon, the beast found something of interest and began to dig through the snow with its right hoof.

Fare stopped and so did I. We were a good eighty steps away, which meant nothing to me, since I didn't know how far a bow could shoot. I assumed that we were close enough when the fennec pulled untied her bow from her quiver and drew an arrow.

"Hey," Fare whispered. "I bet you my meal tonight that I'll hit this pig,"

I didn't really know how to respond, so I just went along with the bet. "Um, sure, I guess,"

Fare turned and glanced at me with a grin.

Great.

The fennec returned to gazing at her prey. Meticulously, Fare placed the bow's string inside the arrow's nock and took aim. A few moments passed as she perfectly lined up her shot. The whole time, I was very aware of my breathing. Was I being too loud? I even tucked my tail in between my legs for fear of dragging along the snow and making noise.

While I was trying to keep silent, Fare abruptly stopped breathing and released the arrow from her bow. As it shot towards the wild pig, I couldn't help but admire the arrow. The feathers on the back of the arrow and its speed reminded me of a magnificent bald eagle soaring through the air.

Then, just as quickly as it was fired, the arrow struck the pig's side and caused it to let out a squeal of pain. Yet, the boar did not fall over dead. Instead it turned and charged at us with its menacing tusks while leaving a trail of blood on the ground.

"Shit!" Fare cursed, as she quickly drew another arrow and took aim. She fired her second arrow and sent it through the boar's front right leg, causing the boar to slow down, but not to stop.

Fare drew a third arrow from her quiver. "You might want to move,"

"Shouldn't I help?" I asked worriedly.

The boar drew closer.

"No! You're not familiar with a knife!" Fare yelled. "Now move!"

The boar did not halt in its charge.

I didn't ask any more questions and began to run. I felt guilty about leaving the fennec behind, though, so, instead of running back to the Kyan camp, I hid behind a tree a few paces away and peeked out from behind it.

As I took in the scene once again, I realized that Fare only had enough time to shoot her bow once. My body tensed as I unsheathed my claws. If the boar attacked Fare, I knew that I had to step in and help her, which meant putting myself in certain danger. Fare had shown me nothing but kindness and I couldn't leave her alone to be hurt. She deserved more than that.

As the fennec fox released her bowstring for what could have been her last time, I prayed that everything would be all right.

The arrow found itself halfway into the boar's skull. In a single swift motion, the wild boar's body toppled over and its blood began to stain the pure white blanket of snow around it.

Fare gave a sigh of relief. "Thank Taiya,"

"That was close," I shouted from behind my tree.

Fare jumped around and screamed. Once she saw that it was me, she sighed heavily and began rubbing her eyes. "I don't know what scared me the most, you or the boar,"

She turned and crouched over her kill. The fennec then began removing her three arrows from the lifeless body of the pig.

I slowly stepped out from behind my tree and walked over to Fare while keeping my sight on the boar. Fare had now ripped out her last arrow and used the snow on the ground to wipe off as much blood as possible, just before placing them back in her quiver. The huntress pulled out her knife and began to skin her kill.

"Shouldn't we...wait until we get back to skin it?" I asked.

Fare glanced up from her kill. "Normally, yeah, we would. But Grix wants you to get an idea of how we do things here. You won't have to cut anything. Just watch me,"

"Oh. Okay," I said

Fare began her work.

"So...What's Taiya?" I asked.

Fare stayed focused on skinning her prey, but began to speak. "Taiya is the deer goddess that the Kyan believe in. We believe that, when our tribe had just formed, our ancestors wandered these forests. But, whenever they would eat their prey, it would turn to ash as soon as they placed it in their mouths. The reason for this was because they were trespassing in Taiya's forest, so the prey wasn't theirs to eat. Soon they started to die from starvation,"

Fare repositioned her knife and began slicing the pelt in another region of the boar's body. "Anyway, Taiya saw how the tribe was suffering. She felt pity for them and decided to show mercy. One night, she appeared to their leader in a dream and explained that the tribe was starving because they had invaded and stolen from her home. But then she told the leader that she was going to finally allow them to stay and eat in the forest. Taiya even told the leader that she was going to bless the leader and his tribe. The leader promised to tell the rest of his tribe about her blessings. So, the next morning when he woke up, the leader kept his word and told the rest of his tribe what he had seen the night before. He was proven right when a hunting party brought in a large amount of prey and they were able to eat all of it. That night, when all of the tribe was eating around their fire, they dedicated their meals to Taiya. That's the story. Now that I think about it, though, her name will probably come up tonight in Grix's speech,"

"Huh," I said.

Fare looked up from her prey. "Yeah. Kind of a far-fetched story if you ask me, but I have a full stomach and a nice home, so I'm happy,"

"So," I said. "You don't have to believe in Taiya?"

"No," Fare shook her head. "Some people do and some people don't. It's just the way things are. Nobody will bug you if you believe in Taiya. Really, religion is

kind of like someone's sexuality. It varies from person to person and you shouldn't judge someone for it,"

The fennec cleaned her blade in the snow and placed it back in its sheath. She then removed the pelt and held it out to me. Unsure of what she wanted me to do, I stared at the pelt.

The fennec narrowed her eyes. "Would you rather carry the meat back to camp?"

"Oh! Sorry," I apologized, before taking the pelt from the giggling fennec's hand.

Fare picked up the dead boar's bare carcass and stood upright. "Okay. Let's go!"

The two of us turned and began slowly trotting back to camp.

"You know what, Meelo?" Fare said.

I turned my head and perked my ears. "Yeah?"

"I think you're really gonna like it here,"