

Chapter 4

Meelo

Day 5

Even two days later, I kept replaying what happened that night in my mind. From the time I went to sleep to the time I woke up in the morning and during all of my dreams in between, my thoughts were of Seq. *Seq*. It was no longer a name, but some gift that had been given to me. It seemed as though the world was trying to make up for all of my time with the Kreq. Unfortunately, since our trip to the lake, Seq and I hadn't been able to see each other. He was usually off doing some errand or on a patrol while I was still busy trying to settle into my new home. Since we never got the chance to be alone again, I hadn't really given Seq an answer on whether or not I wanted a relationship. The more time that passed, the more anxious I grew, even though I knew I was going to say yes.

"Do you want to come back later?" Sera asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I blinked. Somehow, I had forgotten that I was inside Sera's hut and that I was standing while she sat in front of me on her chair. My bandages were off, exposing my bare chest and the red cuts that were smeared all over it.

"Sorry," I apologized.

Sera returned her focus to my chest and smiled. "There's no reason to apologize. I'm sure you're still getting use to living here. It can't be easy to leave behind your old home,"

The back of my neck began to burn with nervousness at the reminder that I was once a Kreq. "It wasn't that hard,"

Sera didn't respond.

My tail was on the verge of a twitching frenzy. I hated standing there with Sera examining me, as though I were some slab of meat. It was almost like being on display. At least Sera's hands weren't freezing.

Finally, after what could have been an entire moon, Sera leaned back and stood up. "Well, your wounds aren't infected," Sera said, as I sighed with relief. "You also won't have to wear those bandages anymore!"

My eyes widened. "Really?"

Sera lifted her hands in the air defensively. "Hey, I just said you didn't have to wear the bandages. I didn't say you could fly or anything!"

I could feel my cheeks growing warm. "I...I got excited,"

As Sera began saying something about still trying to keep my wounds clean, I put on my tunic and walked toward the door. "Thank you!"

"No problem," the shaman called after me.

The door creaked open as my right hand pushed against it, letting a stream of crisp morning sunlight pour over me. As I stood there in the doorway, bathing in the newborn sunrays, I gazed over my new home. It was still taking me time to adjust, but at least I had gotten use to the pungent smell of canine. I had even miraculously memorized everyone's names and where their huts were in only two days.

I closed Sera's door behind me and began to walk down the rows of huts. As I walked, tiny snowflakes rained down from the sky. My fur soon became drenched in

the tiny crystals of snow, which slowly melted into water drops one by one. *Snow makes the whole camp look so peaceful.*

"Sure, I'll tag along," Aether's voice came from my right. My ears pricked at the voice of Seq's father.

I turned my head and saw the old fox, Isabel and Callix standing around in front of the next hut over. Curiously, I trotted over to them.

"What's going on?" I asked the trio.

Isabel was the one to answer me. "A patrol found Kreq scent inside our territory, so Grix is sending us to investigate closer. Would you like to come with us?"

My heart sank in his chest. The very thought of possibly seeing my ex-tribe mates made me fall into a deep pit of despair. I could still see their faces. Their eyes burned my mind with their looks of hatred every hour that I was awake.

Yet, I still didn't understand why I decided to join the patrol. Maybe I didn't want to seem rude or make anybody think that I was still loyal to the Kreq. Either way, I was screwed.

Before long, the Kyan camp was completely blocked by the army of trees that stood guard in the forest, watching my every step. Callix and Isabel walked a little ahead of me. Aether, however, walked so closely in front of me that the tip of his tail almost poked my legs.

It was uncanny how much Aether looked like his son, apart from the field of grey hairs around his muzzle. Even his gentle scent was almost identical to Seq's. My eyes drifted down and noticed that they had the same butt, too. *Wait, wait, wait! Don't check out the father of your boyfriend's ass!* Hold on. Seq wasn't my boyfriend, or at least, not yet. So, was it still wrong for me to look at Aether like that? And, it wasn't like I was attracted to Aether or anything. He just reminded me of Seq a lot. Eventually, I decided to keep my eyes off of Aether's backside to make my conscience be quiet.

After my attention wasn't focused on Aether's hindquarters, every step I took caused my body to become consumed with a burning fear. Soon, I began to see Kreq faces on bushes, rocks, clouds, logs and even the powdery-white snow at my paws. They returned my fearful gaze with beams of loathing. Not much later, I began hearing their voices as well.

"Freak," a branch broke.

"Little bitch," a squirrel squeaked.

"Faggot," snow crunched.

"Go die," the wind blew.

Every insult and snide remark that was ever said to me seemed to be coming back as we moved towards the border. I was now thankful for being in the back of the patrol as my fear began to manifest itself physically. My tail twitched, my ears flattened, my steps became uncoordinated and I was trying to keep my eyes from uneasily shifting around. If any of the others could have seen me, it would have been obvious that I was on the edge of running back to camp.

The woods began to slowly come closer and closer. Trees creaked and moaned as they moved towards me. They swallowed Callix and Isabel from my sight

and eventually took Aether. Now, I was alone. I thought that the trees would stop moving towards me, but I was wrong.

Closer.

I tucked my tail in between my legs to avoid touching the trees.

Closer.

My body began to shake and quiver uncontrollably.

Closer.

I tried to cry out for help, but the forest's moans drowned me out.

Closer.

I looked behind myself to see if I could still make it back to camp.

Closer.

It was no use. The trees surrounded me on all sides.

Closer.

Suddenly, the trees began to double their pace.

Closer.

I straightened myself and held my breath.

Closer.

A whimper of dismay escaped my muzzle.

Closer.

I was going to die.

Closer.

I closed my eyes and awaited my imminent fate.

Closer.

"We're here," Callix, announced.

I blinked. No trees surrounded me and no insults crawled into my ears. We were now standing in a close huddle and only a few steps ahead of us lay the border between the Kyan and Kreq territories. I tried to breathe slowly and lower my racing heart, afraid that the others would notice my fear.

"We should spread out and see if we can find anything," Aether suggested.

Our group silently agreed and split off into different areas, but never went out of each other's sight.

I approached the border and got down on one knee. To my right, I saw Aether sniffing some trees, searching for even the tiniest trace of Kreq. Callix was on the other side of Aether and examined the ground for paw prints. I assumed Isabel was on the other side of the coyote, but I didn't bother to check. Based on what Seq told me the other night, I was certain that Callix didn't let Isabel get too far away from him.

Now, I turned my head back to look at the patch of snow before me. Paw prints were imprinted on the white layer of snow, but they only belonged to various prey. It was the same case with scents. *Squirrels, rabbits, deer and a vole.*

After identifying what prey had passed through the area, I looked back around at my fellow tribe members. Based on their frustrated expressions, I could tell that they were having as much luck as I was.

"Can we help you?" a deep voice questioned.

I, along with the rest of the patrol, raised my head to discover three male Kreq warriors, looming on their side of the border.

The present Kreq consisted of a jaguar, a lynx and a black panther. The jaguar was named Hzuk and he had once cut my eyelid by slapping me in the face with a branch. Next to Hzuk was the lynx, whose name was Weko. Weko was known for slowly torturing prey before he finally killed it. His favorite method was removing the limbs, gouging the eyes and slicing the throat. Finally, there was the panther. His name was Kilo and he verbally harassed me whenever he got the chance. Kilo's favorite taunt was "faggot", but that was because he wasn't clever enough to think of something better.

"Did you hear me?" Kilo asked. "Or are you Kyan deaf *and* dumb?"

His companions grinned smugly.

Callix let out a growl, but Isabel began talking before he could say anything rash. "There's been scents of Kreq inside our territory. We're looking to see if there were more,"

"Are you accusing us of something?" Kilo asked.

Isabel kept her calm gaze and shook her head. "No, we're not accusing the Kreq of anything right now. We're only investigating something a patrol reported,"

"Right now? What are you implying?" Weko demanded.

"I am not implying anything," Isabel said.

Weko crossed his arms. "You Kyan always think you're so high and mighty," He then chuckled and grinned.

"What's so funny?" Isabel asked, tensely.

Weko turned his gaze on the rest of our patrol. "What's the matter, guys? Don't have the stones to talk to the big bad cats? Pathetic, making a girl speak for all you ball-less bastards. Of course, for all I know, she could be a huge bitch who likes running her mouth, in which case I feel sorry for you,"

Callix's hair bristled and he growled. "What did you just say?"

"Wow, I guess you guys are deaf!" Weko joked.

The enraged coyote sprang forward and stood on the edge of the border. "Well, why don't you say it again? I never like to make someone lose a few fingers unless I'm completely sure they deserve it,"

Weko's claws unsheathed and he began to walk forward. "Oh, it would my pleasure to bleed you dry,"

"Callix get back here now!" Isabel ordered.

Callix didn't move his gaze from Weko.

Aether stepped forward and put his hand on Callix's shoulder. "Don't waste your time with these guys! They're not worth it,"

Callix pushed the fox's hand off of his shoulder and let out low growl. "No! Someone needs to teach this asshole a lesson!"

"Callix! Stop arguing and get back over here, or else I'll make sure Grix keeps you in your hut for the next moon!" Isabel commanded.

The words of the husky stopped Callix's growling. He gave Weko one last fuming glance before turning around and returning back to Isabel's side.

"Now," Isabel said and turned her attention back to the Kreq. "We haven't found any evidence of Kreq trespassing today, but if we find any in the future, there will be consequences,"

The Kreq did not respond.

Isabel turned and spoke to us. "Come on. Let's go back home. We're done here,"

Isabel turned and led the way back to camp while Callix glared at the Kreq for a moment, before he turned to leave as well.

I stood there looking at the Kreq. Never had I thought so low of them as I did in that one moment. Maybe it was because I knew how loving and warm a tribe should be. Perhaps it was because I saw how the cats endlessly taunted the Kyan and was reminded of how terrible they treated me. Whatever the reason was, I couldn't say. Yet, I continued to stare at the three cats with disgust.

"Hey," Aether said, just behind me. "Come on. Don't waste your breath on these morons,"

He began to walk away and I turned to follow.

After a couple of steps, Hzuk shouted loudly so I could hear him. "I guess Meelo finally found some other faggots,"

The words stung a little. But, I was actually able to shake off the cruel remark and kept walking. I couldn't have cared less what the Kreq thought of me anymore.

When our patrol arrived home, we began walking to Grix's hut. The other Kyan were not paying any attention to us and continued their conversations with one another as usual.

Eventually, we reached the fire to discover Eirok and Sebastian roasting a few of the rabbits that they had caught.

As our patrol approached, Sebastian waved and greeted us. "Hey, Callix! Come help us cook these rabbits!"

Callix walked forward and sat down next to Sebastian.

Aether plopped himself down as well. "Mind if I join you?"

"Sure!" Sebastian squeaked. "The more the merrier!"

Isabel put her hands on her hips and tried to act mad, yet did not try to suppress the smile streaked across her face. "Really? You two want to sit around watching bunnies cook?" She threw her arms in the air in defeat. "Okay. Fine!" She grabbed my arm and started to practically drag me to Grix's hut. "Come on, Meelo! As the responsible ones, we should leave!"

Callix shouted back at Isabel without turning his head around. "Thanks for understanding, Isabel!"

When Isabel and I found ourselves at Grix's door, the husky knocked.

A moment later the door opened to reveal the tall gray wolf. "Oh, you're back early! Come in!"

Without any arguing, Isabel and I strolled inside and closed the door behind us. Grix sat himself down on his bed and offered his chair, but neither of us felt like sitting down.

Isabel began her report. The husky spoke of how when we arrived all we could find were prey tracks and scents. Isabel then went into detail about how the Kreq had approached us, but stayed on their side of the border. Then, she perfectly described the conversation between the two groups. I thought that she would mention Callix's outburst, but, much to my surprise, she happened to leave that part out.

Grix gave a sigh of relief. "Well, at least there wasn't any fighting. Thank you, both of you. You can go,"

Isabel and I turned walked towards the exit of the hut, but before we could even open the door, Grix called out to me. "Wait, Meelo! I'd like to talk to you for a moment,"

I stopped where I stood and turned around to walk back towards Grix. Behind me, Isabel closed the door and left Grix and I alone.

"What was it like, seeing your old tribesmen?" Grix asked me.

I could feel my forehead wrinkle in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Did you feel any sort of loyalty to them?" the wolf clarified.

I shook my head silently.

"No?"

"Grix, when I saw them and heard their voices, I felt nothing but disgust,"

The wolf's ears twitched in surprise. "Disgust? That's harsh. You really hate them for what they did, don't you?"

I nodded.

"I don't mean to pry. I just wanted to make sure that you were doing all right,"

"No, it's fine," I said. "I'm not uncomfortable talking about it. And it doesn't make a difference. I'm a Kyan now, so I shouldn't be bothered by my past with the Kreq. I can't even begin to thank you and the rest of the tribe for accepting me the way that the Kreq never could,"

Grix's widened from my response. "Of course. Is there anything else that you want to tell me?"

I thought for a moment and answered the Kyan leader. "I still need to learn how to shoot a bow. And I don't know how to skin prey,"

The gray wolf gave a sly smirk. "That can be arranged,"