

Chapter 12

Meelo

Day 8

I followed my brother as he led me further away from camp.

"Come on, we're nearly there," Pytle said, without looking back at me.

I followed the young lion, fresh snowflakes nestled into the swirls of his auburn mane, and we slowly made our way through the woods. The sun peaked through the pale tree branches that ominously suspended overhead.

I looked at Pytle's tail, hoping to interpret his emotions. Sadly, his tail stood stiff and was not placed between his legs.

Usually I wouldn't have followed anybody out into the middle of nowhere, for fear of getting bloodied and bruised, but this was Pytle. My brother wasn't exactly a normal Kreq. Without him, I doubted that I would still be breathing. Whenever Kreq warriors were condescending or even violent towards me, Pytle was there with a rebuttal or a challenge and the other Kreq warriors always backed down. Nobody would dare harm the son that Riter actually liked. Yet, before we left camp that morning, Pytle's words seemed strange and even off-putting to me. I kept finding myself thinking about them.

I need you for something.

I awoke from my nightmare and almost screamed.

It even took me a moment to remember where I was. Still, I felt very little comfort from my efforts to drain myself of fear and guilt.

Then, I sat up in my new bed. I looked down and examined the hide from the bear that I killed, which was currently wrapped around me. I slid my hand against the black pelt and let the hair rush through my fingers as I did so. Rye certainly had talent. It only took him a single night to transform the hide into a well-fashioned bed. I doubted that I could have done such a feat. Still, I was thankful for my new resting place. That old bed in my hut had been ruined by time and dust.

Although, my new bed probably would have been more enjoyable if Seq had slept in it with me. I remembered how Seq had arrived back at camp from a late hunting patrol last night and was clearly exhausted. So, I decided to let him get a goodnight sleep in his own hut. I now wondered if the fox would have agreed to spend the night if I had asked him to.

Oh well. I sighed and lay back in my new bed. I tried to sleep once again, but was still deeply troubled by the memory of my brother. After realizing that I wasn't going back to sleep, I decided to go over to my window and see how early in the morning it was.

I crawled out of bed and trotted over to my window, where I pulled back the pelt that covered it. It was still early in the morning and the sun's rays were barely even shinning up over the trees. Once I let the pelt fall back down, I turned to walk back to bed.

An abrupt snap came from behind my hut.

"Shit," a voice whispered from outside.

My ears perked up. I picked up my bow and put on my quiver, then sprinted out my door as I drew an arrow.

I circled around my hut and found a trail leading out of camp. In the middle of the trail lay a twig that was cracked down the middle. I crouched down in the snow and examined the tracks. Whoever left the trail was obviously not a Kyan. I knew that if a Kyan did walk by my hut, they would have left the specific narrow outline of moccasins in the snow. Even if I hadn't smelled the tracks to be sure, I already knew who had walked past my hut. *Kreq.*

I ran back into my hut, grabbed my knife and ventured forth into the woods. As I walked, I told myself to try and stop forgetting my knife in the future.

"Why did you bring me out here?" I asked my brother, as we continued walking. Pytle groaned in poorly hidden irritation. "You'll understand when we get there,"

I had held my tongue for long enough and now I wanted answers. "Where are we even going?"

Pytle didn't respond.

I grabbed my brother by the shoulder. "What's so important that you had to drag me all the way out in the middle of nowhere?"

My brother stopped walking and stood still with my hand on his shoulder. He looked down at my hand as though it had fallen from the sky and landed on him. He then turned to face me with those brown lion eyes of his. Pytle stared at me silently for what felt like an eternity.

Troubled by my brother's silence, I took a few steps back and gave him some space. I didn't want to say anything because my brother seemed to be deep in thought, but eventually my uneasiness got the best of me. "Answer me, Pytle,"

Pytle met my demand with more silence. He then, in a low and terrified voice, spoke. "Actually, this is far enough,"

The fur on the back of my neck bristled in frustration. "What do you mean far enough?"

My brother then drew the knife that had been hidden between his stomach and the waistband of his pants.

I followed the tracks deeper into the forest. As I was following the trail, I realized that it was leading towards the Kreq territory. *That can't be good.*

Suddenly, I began to hear the faintest sounds of talking.

Immediately, I crouched down, loaded my bow and crept forward while hiding amongst the trees. I could now see two figures conversing about sixty steps away as I crept forward. Fortunately they hadn't noticed me yet, so I decided to stay where I was for the time being.

"I know where all three of their huts are," a voice came.

Wait, can it be...? That voice was the same one that cursed and left a trail behind my hut. How did I not recognize it before? That voice belonged to a black panther named Grym. *Pytle's mate.*

"Are you sure? Even in the dark would you be able to locate them?" a second voice came.

The many fingers of fear began to pluck at my spine, as though it were a bowstring. Now I was truly terrified. Not only was Pytle's mate present, but so was my father. *Dooka.*

I tightened my grasp on my bow and tried to stop my hands from shaking so much. The voice of my lion father reminded me of all the wretched memories that I had of being a Kreq. Not only that, but Dooka's voice also reminded me of Pytle.

"Of course. Do you really think I'd let Meelo, Grix and that dingo that killed Raqa, live?" Grym snarled.

A chuckle came from Dooka. "Of course not. That's why Riter and I picked you for this job,"

I could picture a wicked grin on Grym's face as she spoke. "So, Riter's thinking about launching the attack tonight?"

"Why not? The sooner we attack, the better,"

I sensed that the Kreq's conversation was coming to an end soon. It was now or never. *If you exist Taiya, then please help me. If you do, I'll believe in you for the rest of my life.*

I took a deep breath and pulled my arrow back on my bowstring before stepping out from behind the tree.

"Don't move," I said.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

I stared at the knife that my brother pointed at me. The blade itself was sharpened into a nice clean point. The hilt, unlike the blade, was poorly fashioned. It was simply a wild animal's rib, which was tied to the blade by a single strip of leather.

"I'm doing what I should have done a long time ago," Pytle said, with eyes and words that were hollow of emotion.

I couldn't take my eyes off of the weapon, for fear of it sneaking up on me like a snake. "Where did you even-?"

"Get it? I found the blade near the border one day. It must have fallen off a Kyan's hilt while he was walking. I hid it and walked back home. I kept a rib from a rabbit that I had eaten to make the handle. And..." With his free hand, Pytle pulled up his raggedy shirt and pointed at a torn region. "I used the blade to cut a slice of leather from my clothes to tie it all together. I've had this," Pytle gave the blade a shake, "for moons now. Ever since I put it together I've never..." Tears began to form in the corners Pytle's eyes. The blade began quivering in his grasp, as though it were trying to break free. Pytle sniffed and wiped his tears away with his free hand. "I've never had the nerve to use it until now,"

We stood there frozen in time. I stared into my brother's eyes and he stared back into mine. All I could see was pain inside him.

"So, this is how everything plays out?" I said.

Pytle was silent.

"It looks like my so-called caring and supportive brother apparently isn't so caring or supportive at all. You're just like everybody else here. Come on! Tell me what you think of me. Go on, say it," I said.

Pytle continued to stare at me and didn't speak a word.

I growled, letting my tail lash out to the side. "Call me a faggot, like everybody else,"

"What?" Pytle gasped.

"Do it!" I shrieked. "You might as well since you wanna murder me like everybody back at camp! But before you bleed me dry, let me ask you one thing. Why? Why did try so hard to make me think you were nice? Why not just laugh at me while other Kreq were?"

There was a silence, but only for a single solitary moment. Then, the mixture of Pytle's hysterical laughter and tears broke the hush woods around us. He buried his face in his hand and continued to his laugh manically.

My mouth almost fell open. What was so funny?

Pytle's laughter eventually subsided and he looked up at me with red teary eyes. "You aren't the one I'm going to kill,"

I stood there in the open with my arrow at the ready. The two Kreq warriors hadn't moved or spoken since I had jumped out from behind my tree. Both continued to stare at me with wide eyes. "I can't let either of you leave here alive,"

"Just like you did with Pytle?" Grym snarled.

My ears twitched in rage. How dare she mention my brother? "How many times do I have to tell you that I never hurt him?"

Pytle raised the knife and pressed it against his own throat.

My eyes widened and I somehow became even more terrified than before.

"Pytle," I held up my hands in front of me, as though my brother was in danger of falling off a cliff. "Put the knife down,"

It was now that Pytle's sobs became more louder. "I can't do it, Meelo. I just..." Pytle sniffed and didn't bother wiping away the new tears from his cheeks. "I can't,"

I lowered my left hand and held my right further out towards my brother. "You can't do what, Pytle? Whatever it is, you can tell me! I'm your brother and I won't judge you!"

Pytle swallowed and tried to clear his throat. "I..." He began to weep once again. I suddenly feared that Pytle would accidentally cut his own throat, since his body began to shake from all his crying. "I can't be gay,"

"Why did you do it, Meelo? Was it because you were jealous?" Grym continued to antagonize me.

"Jealous? What could I possibly have been so jealous of that I would've hurt my own brother?" I demanded.

"Oh," Grym rolled her eyes. "I don't know. Were you jealous of how your brother was going to have a family? Were you bitter because he found someone that actually loved him? Or was it because he wasn't a *freak* like you?"

I was silent. As much as I wanted to out of spite, I couldn't tell Grym that my brother was gay like me, a "freak" as she put it. It was Pytle's secret and his to tell, not mine. Besides, I didn't think that she would believe me anyways. I continued to aim my bow and did not let my emotions take control. I had a job to do.

"What?" I whispered. How did I not realize that my own brother was gay?

Pytle shook his head. "I saw how people treated you. So I hid. I felt so sorry for you, though. That's why I always tried to cheer you up whenever I could. There were a lot times that I wanted to tell you, so you wouldn't feel alone anymore, but I-" Pytle took a few hoarse breaths. "I couldn't face the name calling, the bruises, the cuts or all the other stuff. I'm not strong like you,"

I took a step with my hand still reached outwards towards my brother. "What about Grym? Does she know?"

Pytle weakly shook his head again. "No. I married her so nobody would start wondering,"

I took another wary step towards my brother. "Pytle," I said. "Don't do it,"

Pytle shook his head once more. "No. I can't keep living with this secret eating away at me. I just wanted to tell somebody before I leave. It didn't feel right to go without at least saying one goodbye. I know that you of all people will understand why I'm doing this. I... I love you so much big brother. Don't ever forget that,"

Pytle drew the blade across his throat and I began to scream.

Grym charged at me with her claws unsheathed, but I was ready.

I fired my arrow, which impaled Grym's upper chest, drawing a dense jet of blood. Grym stopped for a moment, clearly surprised, and began to charge again, only this time at a slower pace.

I drew a second arrow and fired it. It burrowed into Grym's stomach. Blood now seeped down Grym's chest and the top of her thighs. Tears rolled down Grym's face as she continued to slowly shuffle towards me. It was now that I could see the hatred and rage in those tearful eyes.

Grym was finally in arm's reach. I dropped my bow and drew my knife, which glistened in the morning rays that morning. I then brought the near-blinding blade down into Grym's stomach.

Grym's body became limp almost immediately, as she fell into my arms. Gently, I removed my knife from her body and slowly lowered her onto the ground. As I laid her down, Grym's once hateful eyes were almost completely murky.

Now, it was me who was crying. She lay in my arms, bleeding severely. Death was inevitable. *Just like with Pytle.* "I'm sorry that it had to end like this," I began to stroke her ears gently. "If you see Pytle, tell him that his big brother misses him,"

Grym spat blood into my face, causing me to flinch. "You'll get what you

deserve. One day, it's gonna to be you, Meelo, lying here and bleeding on the ground,"

With that said, her eyes softened and her head rolled over. I didn't bother checking for a pulse.

"No, no, no, no!" I cried, as my brother's body bled and flailed around uncontrollably in my arms. His gaze seemed to be looking through me, as though I were nothing but the morning air. Thick dark blood sprayed out over Pytle's chest and splashed off onto the snow. I firmly thrust my right hand over Pytle's wound to try and stop the bleeding, yet blood ran through my fingers and stained my white fur. The gash was too deep and a great deal of blood was already on the ground beneath Pytle. Meanwhile, my left hand grabbed the knife from him, fearing that Pytle might try to hurt himself again. "Pytle! Pytle, don't you die! Don't die! I need you!"

I looked at my brother's eyes again, which hollowly reflected the sky as his body grew still. "Pytle, please don't go," I whispered. "Don't leave me alone," My tears were of no use and yet I still allowed myself to cry into his warm chest.

He was dead.

I watched him die and I couldn't do a damn thing. Why didn't I try to take the knife from him? How couldn't I know that he was gay? If only I'd known...I could have saved him. He could have still been alive. He could have been happy. And it was all my fault.

"What the-?" a voice came.

I turned to see Grym towering over me.

I tried to speak through my tears. "Grym, Pytle, he-"

"What have you done?" Pytle growled, as she stared at her dead mate.

My heart sank into my stomach and I realized she saw the bloody knife in my fingers. "No! I didn't do this! Pytle and I walked all the way out here and he-"

A sharp blast hit me across the face and I fell onto my back in the snow. Grym placed both of her knees at my sides and bent over to claw at my chest. "YOU FUCKING KILLED HIM! I'LL MURDER YOU, YOU PIECE OF SHIT!" Grym screamed, as she tore at my flesh.

Everything began burning and my body grew warm as I felt my own blood run over my stomach. Instinctively, I lashed my right arm out and bashed Grym on the side of the head with a closed fist. She collapsed on her side into the snow and lay still.

I quickly sat up and checked to see if she was all right, even though I had only punched her. She was still breathing and seemed to only be unconscious.

I glanced back at my brother's body and realized that none of the Kreq would believe me, either. They had always been waiting for a reason to kill me and now they finally had one.

I cried for a few more moments before I finally decided it was time to flee. Before I left, I walked over and leaned down to kiss my brother's forehead. I looked into his dim eyes for the last time. "I love you too, little brother,"

My head was fuzzy as I rose and ran away with Pytle's blood still stained on my fur, just after I tossed the knife into the snow.

I looked up and saw that Dooka was gone. Then, I noticed a trail of tracks leading back towards the Kreq territory. I didn't care, though. I looked back down and Grym's body in my arms and thought of Pytle. Tears joined the memory of my brother.

Then, after a considerable time of mourning, I stood up and removed my arrows from Grym's corpse. After cleaning the blood from my arrows and knife in the snow, I slowly walked back to camp.