

Chapter 20

Meelo Day 25

I sat around the crackling fire with Vern and Teo, as the sun climbed to the highest peak in the sky.

While I wasn't hungry, I watched and conversed with my tribesmen, who were each cooking their own prey. Their two dead voles slowly began to blacken and roast inside the fire. The voles didn't look too filling to me, but the snow never allowed any easy kills. Sometimes, I wished that there wasn't always snow in our woods. *What would the island even look like without any snow?* As far as I could remember, I'd never heard of there being no snow before, even in stories. Was it like this in other places on the other side of the ocean? Were there even any other lands, or people for that matter? Or, were we all alone in the world? *Wow, that's a depressing thought.*

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

The friendly conversation was silenced, along with every other noise throughout the entire camp. All six of our ears stood and pointed in the direction from which the strange sounds echoed from the forest. Warriors slowly began peeking from the doors and windows of their wooden huts, all with cautious and curious eyes. Eventually, every Kyan stood around us, staring into the mass of trees. Nobody spoke a word. Nobody would dare. For all we knew, the next person who spoke could bring forth whatever created those ominous noises.

Finally, Grix, who I didn't notice until then, broke the stillness. "That couldn't have been lightning,"

It was true. There wasn't a single cloud to block the sun's outreached rays, or any other sign of an incoming storm.

"We should send out a patrol to investigate," Callix suggested.

Everyone mumbled in quiet agreement.

"Vern, Teo, Meelo, Callix, you feel up for it?" Grix asked.

All four of us nodded.

"All right," Grix then focused his attention on the rest of the tribe. "Everybody else, prepare for the worst! Get your weapons and keep your eyes open! Until the patrol comes back, we need to be ready for anything,"

Callix, Vern, Teo and I listened to Grix give various orders as we ventured into the woods, uneasy about whatever we were going to find.

Wait. The sounds had come from-

"Hey, this is the way to the Kreq territory, right?" Teo said.

I felt little comfort from Teo coming to the same realization as I had. "Yeah, it is," I answered him. "But let's hope it's just a coincidence,"

I could sense everybody silently agree with me.

Sadly, I knew that the Kreq were involved somehow. Riter and Dooka obviously still held a grudge against me, which meant the rest of the Kreq did too. Maybe today was the day that the Kreq chose to take action. If so, then our patrol was heading straight towards battle-ready Kreq. I prayed to Taiya that I was wrong.

"Look!" Vern said, as she began to pick up the pace when we neared the border.

I tried to follow the corsac fox's gaze and was able to see a shapeless mass far away, lying on the ground. It wasn't the same color as a rock or even the shape of a log. Other than that, I couldn't surely say what it was, unless we got closer.

"Wait!" I said.

The patrol stopped walking.

"It could be trap," I said. My eyes looked at the trees surrounding us, searching for any sign of danger. The rest of the patrol did the same.

Teo drew his bow and readied an arrow. "Be ready,"

The rest of us followed his example and drew our bows as well.

Slowly, we eased our way up to the mysterious mass, while using trees for cover. My hands tensed and held my wooden bow tightly. If any blood was going to be shed that day, it would be then and I couldn't afford to hesitate. *Kill or die.*

As we worked our way through the trees, I slowly began to make out more physical features of the shape. No, there were two shapes, not one. Both had slightly dark color features, but still unclear from where I stood. I had to get closer.

"No!" Callix screamed, as he ran from behind the safety of his tree.

"Callix! Get your ass back here!" Teo called out to him.

The coyote didn't seem to hear Teo's command.

"Damn it!" Vern cursed, as she ran after Callix.

"Is nobody fucking listening to me?" Teo said, as he and I followed closely behind.

Callix was standing still once the rest of us caught up to him. His hands were curled into fists and he said nothing.

I was about to ask what was wrong, but then I saw why Callix had become so quiet. The rest of the patrol followed Callix's silence, as it seemed the only appropriate response.

Before us lay the bloodied corpses of Sebastian and Dew.

Both of the Kyan warriors were surrounded in blood soaked snow that also contained tiny pieces of their flesh, which had been torn away from the rest of their bodies. Their bows still lay in their hands, as though they held onto life until the end. However, that wasn't what stuck out to me. What was really startling, were the dead warriors eyes. They were foggy, yet colorful, empty, yet reflecting of the blue-sky overhead. I could only imagine what thoughts went on behind those eyes as the two Kyan were cut down. Did they think that they could make it back to camp? Were they able to go down fighting, knowing that they would lose? Did the faces of all of their friends and loved ones rush before them as the last breath left their chests and their hearts slowed to a stop? No question eased the pain that I felt for my fallen friends. I could no longer talk to or laugh with them. Instead, they lay on the ground with their spirits gone, along with their kind words.

Nobody spoke for sometime. Not even the wind uttered a breezy whisper. It seemed as though the entire forest gave a respected silence for the dead warriors.

Teo broke the silence. "I forgot they went on a patrol,"

Vern cleared her throat. "They have the same wounds that Aether did. But..." She paused and thought over her words and continued. "Each one of them has at least twice as many as Aether,"

I hadn't noticed the wounds. In fact I'd been so taken back by the discovery of the bodies that I didn't pay much attention to why the two warriors were dead.

Both Kyans' furs were almost completely soaked in dark blood that dripped out of every hole. Dew had hole were her left eye had been, which exposed the mangled bone and flesh inside her body. The side of Sebastian's snout had been disturbingly torn, causing the pinkish-red inside of his mouth to crawl out and reveal his teeth, some of which were cracked or dislodged. While these were the grimmest wounds, the two Kyan were covered by gaping-hole injuries from head to paws, all of which had obviously inflicted a great deal of pain upon the warriors.

Vern suddenly gasped and drew me out of my inner thoughts. "Do you smell that?"

I closed my eyes as to get a better chance of discovering any possible scents. At first, I didn't know what Vern was talking about, but then, after it sank in, I came to a realization. The scent was unmistakable.

Kreq.

I opened my eyes to the sight of Teo nodding. He smelled it as well.

"We should head back down now," I said. "Everybody's gonna be worried,"

"THOSE FUCKING KREQ DID THIS!" Callix screamed, causing everyone else's ears to twitch and eyes stare at him in alarm.

Vern was the only one who attempted to calm him down. "Callix, you're emotional. We all are. But we have to keep quiet, or else we might draw the Kreq back here,"

Callix only shook his head and tighten his fists even more. "LET THEM COME! I'LL KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM! I'LL MAKE SURE THEY ALL DIE!"

The furious coyote then passed by the two bodies and began walking towards the Kreq's territory.

Before Callix ever got the chance to cross the border, or before anybody could say anything, I sped up behind him and grabbed his arm.

Callix turned around and stared me in the face with his damp eyes and curled snarling lips that showed off his pointed fangs. He let a growl slip through his teeth. "Let go,"

I couldn't let Callix walk into the Kreq camp, much less alone. I knew what would happen. "No,"

Callix's head lowered and his lips drew further back, revealing more of his fangs. "Let go of me, Meelo,"

I was thankful that Teo stepped in when he did. The dhole trotted forward from where he had stood, but still was not within an arm's reach of me. "Callix, we can't go rushing into the Kreq camp. I agree with you, we should fight back, but we need to wait, or else any fighting that we do will be pointless. There are four of us and an entire tribe of them. If we head back to camp and get others, we'll have a chance. But in the numbers we are in now, we'll be lucky to kill a five or six Kreq at most,"

Callix managed to push my arm away. His snarling was now focused upon Teo. "And what? You know that Grix won't risk launching an attack! He'll play it safe, just like he always has, and Sebastian and Dew won't get any justice!"

Now, Vern stepped forward. "No. Grix won't let this go. He gave the Kreq one last chance and here are two dead Kyan at the border with Kreq scent all over them. Callix, they're finished. Grix and every other Kyan will be screaming for war,"

Callix gave snort of derision and shook his head. "Do you really believe that?" Vern was silent.

I decided to speak again. "Callix, it's just like what Teo said, if we go into the Kreq camp by ourselves, we'll be massacred, even with our weapons,"

Callix's lips slowly slid forward and covered his teeth once again. His eyes softened and he didn't respond.

After a moment of silence, Teo turned around and walked over to the bodies of our dead tribesmen. He tied his bow to his quiver and leaned over. After lifting Dew over his shoulder, the dhole turned. "Could you help me Vern?"

Vern put away her bow and quickly headed over to take a hold of Dew's upper body as Teo held the legs. They began to hobble back towards our camp.

I glanced over at Callix, as the coyote watched our tribesmen carry the lifeless body of the elder away. It was time to get moving, whether Callix liked it or not.

I turned and walked over to Sebastian's body and waited for the Callix to join me. After a moment, he trotted over and helped lift Sebastian. As we lifted the dead dingo into the air, I held the head and shoulders while Callix held the legs.

All of the patrol was silent for the rest of the journey back home.

As we finally entered camp, the rest of the tribe stared at the dead bodies as we passed by. Every Kyan was silent. Instead, their wide eyes spoke the words that their mouths failed to say. When we arrived to Grix's hut, we found the wolf waiting for us in front. Our patrol came to a stop and joined the rest of the camp in a haunting stillness.

Teo and Vern lowered Dew. Callix and I then lowered Sebastian. After the two dead Kyan lay in the snow, the patrol arose and waited for Grix to speak.

Grix swallowed nervously. His hypnotized eyes never left Sebastian and Dew. "What happened?"

Teo began to speak. "We found them at the border, on our side. Both Sebastian and Dew have the same wounds that Aether did. And we could smell Kreq,"

"But, the wounds on Aether weren't claw marks. So, it couldn't have been the Kreq," Syta said, from inside the crowd of Kyan that stood outside Grix's hut.

"But whatever made that sound earlier could have been something that that the Kreq used!" Eirok added.

"Why would the Kreq start using weapons now?" Seq pondered.

Callix stopped the needless chatter and stepped forward. His tail was stiff, as the rest of his body. "What do we do Grix?"

Everybody listened, absorbed into what Grix's decision would be. I glanced at Callix and wondered how the coyote would react if he was right about what Grix would choose to do. Then, I wondered how I would react, too.

Grix still stared at the contorted bodies of his two Kyan warriors that lay before him. Without even raising his head, Grix gave his answer. "We'll send a patrol to attack their camp," Some Kyan mumbled in agreement. "If we wait until later tonight, they'll be expecting us. But if we attack now, we might catch them off guard,"

"Who will go?" Teo asked.

Grix thought for a moment. He then made his decision. "Callix, Vern, Fare, Eirok and Meelo. You all will go to the Kreq camp,"

Those of us whose names were called all nodded.

The Kyan leader then turned his attention to the rest of the camp. "Everyone else, have your bows drawn with an arrow ready at all times. Take up positions around the camp and keep your eyes on the tree line. If the Kreq decide to launch another attack, we'll be ready,"

As I walked out of camp for the second time that morning, everybody was taking up positions around the lines of huts.

While our patrol walked through the woods, I began to wish that I had said goodbye to Seq.

"So, Meelo," Eirok said. "What's the layout of the camp?"

I was a little surprised by the question. "Uh, well, it's nothing like our camp. They don't sleep in huts. Instead, they have tipis made out of deer, bear and moose hide. Riter and Dooka's tipi is in the middle of camp, and the rest of the Kreq warriors' tipis surround it,"

Eirok nodded, taking in all of the information.

The patrol probed me with other questions, such as possible fighting strategies and tactics. Although, much to my despair, I couldn't answer the rest of their questions very well. The Kreq never had plans for a large-scale battle, or a small one at that. They followed instincts. The only fighting techniques that I knew of consisted of using claws, all of which would be useless against bows and knives. As I thought about how the Kreq might have fought back, I began to wonder how they had killed the two Kyan warriors. I recalled the distorted face of Sebastian with the torn snout and Vern's missing eye. *What kind of weapon could tear apart flesh like that?* Whatever weapon it was, we would have to be careful. The only other possible useful information that I shared with the patrol was that the Kreq camp was against the bottom of a small cliff.

"Is it climbable?" Eirok asked.

"Well..." I thought aloud. "*Maybe*. But you would have to take your time to climb it,"

Eirok grunted in understanding. "So, with the entrance of the camp to our backs, they'll be cornered,"

I silently nodded, not caring to mention that the Kreq still outnumbered us.

When we were about to come into the clearing of the camp, everyone readied their bows. As we carefully floated through the field of trees silently, we kept our eyes open for any movement.

The Kreq camp slowly came into view. The seventy tipis lay in a wide circle, each one five wide steps from its two neighbors. And there, in the center of the tipi circle, sat Dooka and Riter's tipi. The camp was exactly as I had remembered. I

couldn't help but wonder why the Kreq hadn't changed the camp's layout since I became a Kyan. *Maybe it would have taken too much effort.*

No Kreq were outside standing guard, so I assumed that they were all inside their tipis.

Callix, Fare and I broke from the group and walked to the front of the closest tipi. Meanwhile, Vern and Eirok followed our example and went to the tipi just to the right.

I placed my hand on the closed tipi flap and looked over at Fare, giving her a slight nod. I then pulled the tipi flap back. Once the tipi was open, I peered inside, ready to attack.

The tipi was completely empty.

"What the fuck?" Callix screamed.

I looked over to the right, noticing looks of confusion on both Eirok and Vern as they peered inside their tipi.

"Where are they?" Vern asked.

Before anybody could respond, thunderous rumbles echoed throughout the camp.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

The bangs echoed and I heard tiny buzzes pass by me, spraying up snow from the ground behind me onto my lower legs. I looked upwards and saw three Kreq standing on the edge of the cliff ahead, each holding a long thick stick.

"Shit!" Eirok cried out.

I rotated and saw the border collie holding his left shoulder, which oozed out a heavy stream of blood. Eirok's face contorted in pain and his eyes were tightly clenched.

"Get to the trees!" I yelled.

We began to run back towards the tree line while I brought up the rear with Eirok, making sure that he would make it to safety. We all took cover behind a tree of our choosing and awaited what to do next.

I looked to the tree at my left, which Eirok took cover behind. He lifted up his hand to glance at the wound on his shoulder. After a small peak, he re-covered his wound with his hand and let his head fall back against his tree.

"Is it bad?" Fare asked, from the other side of Eirok.

Eirok licked his lips and groaned. "Yeah. It's pretty deep... I think I can see the bone. There's no way I can shoot my bow,"

"What fuck was that?" Vern cried from the other side of Fare.

"I saw some Kreq on top of the cliff. They were holding-" I said, before being interrupted by another set of deafening booms and the sounds of our trees' trunks being splintered into pieces behind us.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

After the sounds stopped and the camp grew still again, I kept talking. "They were holding these long sticks,"

"Sticks? Since when do sticks do this?" Fare said.

"Well, however they're doing this, we need to be careful," Vern said.

Eirok's ear slightly flattened. "Should we run?"

"We need to fight them, here and now," Callix said at my right, determined to not leave without avenging Sebastian and Dew.

"How are we gonna even get close to them?" Fare asked.

I looked to my right, past Callix. "We could move along the trees and get up there,"

Everybody looked past me, realizing that the ground circled around the Kreq camp and up to the cliff where the Kreq stood.

"Shouldn't someone stay with Eirok?" Vern said.

"I'll do it," Fare volunteered. "You guys go on ahead,"

"Great," Eirok moaned. "I get some company,"

"All right," I said. "We should get going,"

"Wait!" Vern said, stopping us from moving out of the protection of our trees. "We might want to wait until the next time they attack!"

"Why?" Callix demanded. "We need to go!"

"Don't you get it? Why are their attacks so spaced apart? Why don't they just keep doing it over and over again? There must be some wait time in between before they can attack again, like loading an arrow," Vern explained.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

"Good enough for me! Let's go!" I screamed over the ringing in my ears.

The three of us ran out from behind our trees and began to run the curve around the Kreq camp. Each of us held our weapons as we ran. Vern and I held our bows, while Callix gripped his knife.

As I ran through the series of trees, I looked over at the top of the cliff that hung over the Kreq camp. The sun was in my eyes, so I couldn't see very much. However, I did see the Kreq doing something to the tops of their sticks. Then, after a moment, I saw them point their sticks at us.

"Get to cover!" I shouted, as I stopped behind the closest tree. Vern and Callix stopped behind trees of their own and waited for the attack to come.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

We continued this process and quickly made our way around to the Kreq while taking cover behind trees. Eventually, we were behind cover and only twenty steps away from the Kreq warriors.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

As soon as the last bang was heard, we stepped out from behind each of our trees and sprinted forth at the Kreq warriors.

Vern and I shot a bobcat, Fryku, with both of our arrows. My arrow found its way into his chest while Vern's decided to go through the bobcat's eye. He fell back onto the ground, oozing red from his open eye and chest, and didn't stand up again.

Even before the bobcat's back slammed against the snow, Callix threw himself at an ocelot, Okila, who was fumbling with her stick. As Okila fell backward and tried to stand back up again, Callix held her down by her neck with his arm. As the ocelot gagged and her eyes widened, Callix plunged his blade into her heaving chest. As he drew his blade from Okila's chest and raised it in the air before bringing it back down again, blood droplets splattered on his face and fur. He didn't seem to notice. Callix continued to pierce Okila's torso in a crazed frenzy, as though his very life depended on it.

Just a moment after tossing my bow to the side, I drew my knife and rushed at the third Kreq. As I dashed with my blade in my hand, I could feel my pulse quicken and warm my entire body. Vern had drawn an arrow and could have finished the third Kreq herself, but was probably afraid of hitting me by accident.

As my blade cut through the air, just an arm's length away from the Kreq warrior, a serval named Pyka, my attack was blocked. Pyka held his narrow long stick outwards with both hands, deflecting my blade. I drew back my arm and was about to strike again, but was stopped by the flat end of the stick, which the serval had smashed against my face, stinging my nose and forehead.

I fell backwards into the snow and my eyes were filled with bright blurry stars. Once my vision had become somewhat clearer, I saw Pyka standing over me, ready to bring his stick down once more against my skull, and I braced myself for the pain.

It never came.

In what seemed like a fraction of a moment, the serval collapsed to the ground with Callix on top of him.

The Kreq's weapon had fallen off to the side, just barely out of reach. His arms lay sprawled outwards from his sides and the snarling coyote, who held a knife to his throat, weighed down his chest.

Pyka was short of breath. "What are you waiting for?"

Callix breathed heavily and pressed his knife even closer against the Kreq's warm neck. "I just wanted you to see the eyes of the Kyan who slit your throat,"

I stood, blade still in hand. "Wait!"

Callix's ears twitched, but he didn't look back at me.

I walked forward to the side of Callix and Pyka. "Don't kill him,"

Vern trotted to the opposite side of Callix with her bow still ready with an arrow. "Why shouldn't we? These bastards killed our friends,"

I looked down at the Pyka, who kept his eyes on the blade below his chin. "We can get information out of him,"

Vern lowered her bow slightly. "What kind of information?"

I made a motion with my head toward the stick, which lay in the snow next to my paw. I bent over and picked it up with one hand. The wood was unusually smooth. The stick also had two different parts on either end when being held long ways. The first side had a small circular opening. The second end, which the Kreq had hit me in the face with, had a flat edge that was about the same length as a hand. In the middle of the underside of the stick, was a small pointed rock, which curved out from the main body of the wood.

"Let's ask him about this," I said.

After a brief moment of examining the bizarre weapon, I turned my attention back down towards Pyka. "So, Pyka, feel like telling us anything?"

Pyka struggled under Callix's weight for a moment, but stopped once the coyote growled, "Answer,"

Pyka gave a slight laugh. "And if I don't?"

"I'll cut out one of your eyes," Callix said.

Pyka flicked his eyes from Callix to Vern. "They're called guns,"

I was the first to ask the next obvious question. "How do they work?"

Pyka slightly shifted in his position. "Reach in my pouch and take out what's in there,"

Vern bent over after setting down her bow and did as the Kreq said. As the corsac fox's hand untied Pyka's boar skin pouch, which was securely tied around his stomach, I could distinctively hear a clacking noise. When the pouch was open, Vern's fingers closed around whatever was making the noises and drew them slowly out from Pyka's bag. In the center of her hand lay several beads, which were clear and reflected her image like water.

Vern held the beads out for Pyka to see. "These?"

The Kreq warrior nodded.

Vern rose and continued to gaze at the beads in curiosity. "What exactly do they do?"

Pyka licked his lips. "Those are bullets. They fire from the gun, just like an arrow from your bow. You put powder down inside the guns, put the bullet on top and shoot,"

I held out my hand toward Vern. "Here, let me see,"

Vern picked up one bullet from her hand, using her index finger and her thumb, and placed it into my hand.

I then set the gun down, shoving the flat end into the snow so that the weapon would stand upright. "Where's the powder?"

"I ran out. Fryku and Okila probably still have some, though,"

I went over to the bodies of the two Kreq and opened their pouches, finding more bullets and some brown objects that felt like leaves. I pulled one of the brown objects out.

Sensing my confusion, Pyka explained. "Tear open the brown thing with your teeth. The powder is inside,"

Following his instructions, I bit into the brown flimsy object and carefully opened it with my teeth. A strange smell entered my nose, one that smelled like nothing that could have come from a forest. After looking inside the brown leaf-like item in my hand, I saw black sand. *I'm sure it tastes as strange as it smells.*

I poured the material into the gun, listening to it swim into the deepest part of the weapon's belly. I then slid the bullet through the opening and into the inner darkness of the strange weapon.

CLUNK!

"Now, put the flat side against your shoulder and look across the top to aim,"

I cautiously lifted the gun upwards and held it tightly against my shoulder. It was heavy to hold onto and I took a moment to become accustomed to the weight. Then, I closed my left eye and used my right to look down the top of the gun, pointing it at the nearest tree. "All right. Now, what?"

"The part on the bottom that sticks out is the trigger. Pull it with your finger to shoot,"

I wrapped my index finger around the smooth cold trigger. When I pulled it, the weapon kicked backwards against my shoulder. The recoil took me so much by surprise that I almost dropped the gun onto the ground. My shoulder felt like it had been punched and my ears rang as though somebody had hit my over the head with a rock. Slowly, the ringing ceased and the usual noises of the forest returned. Once

my hearing was back to normal, I looked to see if I had hit my target. The tree, which I had been aiming at, was missing a patch of bark that lay on the ground around its trunk. In the center of the tree's now bare side, was a tiny black hole.

Trying not to show pride in my shot, I returned my attention once again to Pyka. "The Kreq don't use weapons. Why would they start now? Where did you even get these guns?"

The Kreq gazed at me silently. He pressed his head slightly against the snow on the ground underneath him. "You've got a lot of nerve, you know. First you kill your brother and then you kill his mate? What kind of monster are you?"

My insides churned.

Before Pyka or I could even say anything, Callix grabbed Pyka's head with his free hand and slammed it down against the ground. "Answer the damn question before I choose which of your eyes to carve up first,"

Pyka didn't need anymore convincing. "Riter and Dooka decided to make an exception for their least favorite son. We traded them for food and pelts,"

Vern closed her hand full of bullets and picked up her bow once again. "Who did you trade with?"

"Some...travelers. They said they were here to find someone to trade with or...they had another word for it... Sell?"

The corsac fox's tail swished. "Where is their camp?"

Pyka turned his attention once more towards me. "Do you remember where those foothills are?"

I pondered this for a moment and then nodded.

"There's a stream that comes down one of them. If you follow that, you'll find a hidden cave. That's where they're staying,"

"ENOUGH!"

Callix raised his knife into the air and plunged the blade into Pyka's throat.

I pushed Callix off of Pyka and leaned over to apply pressure to the bleeding wound. Blood bubbled out of the slit that Callix had made in the serval's neck and began to stain my hand. The serval began to gasp for air, only to cause more blood to gush out of his now open throat. Pyka's whole body began to spasm in my grasp. It was only a moment later when the Kreq became still, his blood ceased its bubbling and his eyes grew dim.

I released my hold on Pyka's throat, which allowed one last portion of blood to burst from his neck. As I stood upright, I flicked the redness that coated my hand onto the snow and looked up at Callix. "Why did you do that? He could have told us where the rest of the Kreq were!"

Callix showed no sign of remorse. "You just kept asking him questions. Tell me, when where you going to kill him?"

My legs seemed to think on their own as I sprang forward and grabbed Callix by the front of his tunic. Then, I pulled the coyote almost up to my eye level, nearly taking him off the ground. "We could've finished this today! But now we have no idea where they're hiding!"

The coyote's free hand burst forth in the form of a fist and struck me in the cheek. As a result, I lost my grip of Callix and stumbled back a few steps. I placed a comforting hand on my own cheek and tasted blood.

Callix stood where he was. "And what about Sebastian, or Dew? Don't they deserve justice?"

I lowered my hand down to my side. "Do you really want to do this?"

Callix responded by throwing his quiver, bow and knife onto the ground behind him, while never taking his eyes off me.

I did the same.

I sprinted at full speed toward Callix and tackled him to the ground. My blood rushed as ears grew hot with rage. Ignoring every muscle in my body, I began landing blows on Callix's vulnerable chest.

The coyote was agile and rolled over on top of me, where he then punched my nose twice. I knew that I couldn't throw Callix off me, so, naturally, I did the next best thing. I brought my knee upward and drove it into his crotch. Callix let out a yelp and collapsed to the side, not showing any sign to try and climb back on top of me. Since the coyote was off of me, for the most part, I was able to stand up.

Callix didn't rise to continue fighting. Instead, he stayed on his knees while gently cradling his groin, which allowed me to catch my breath for a moment. Then, I began to kick the coyote in his ribs. After the first kick, Callix fell from his knees onto the snow and did not make any attempt to rise as I continued to kick him.

I had lost myself in pure rage and forgot that Vern was there with us, until she screamed. "Cut it out, you dumbasses!"

I stopped my paw in mid-kick and lowered it back on to the ground. My anger began to wear off and I gazed down at Callix, who was quivering in the snow.

The coyote slowly raised his head and peered up at me with cautious eyes. To show him that I meant him no more harm, I crouched down and held out an open hand. At first, Callix stared at my hand and then looked back at me. After a moment, he slowly reached out and grasped it.

As I helped Callix stand up, I patted the coyote on the back. "No hard feelings?"

Much to my surprise, Callix gave slight grin. "Sure,"

Both of us began to picking up our equipment. As we proceeded to do so, Vern only stood by with her arms crossed. "I'll never understand men,"

After I picked up my weapons, I began to search the other two dead Kreq for bullets.

As I finished removing the pouches that held bullets and powder from the last dead Kreq, Callix came over with two guns, with one in each hand. He held out his left hand and offered a gun to me as a friendly gesture. I nodded gratefully and accepted the weapon, taking it with my right hand.

Callix and I walked over and joined Vern. It was then that I noticed that Vern had the third gun in her hands. The three of us then walked back down around the outer ledge of the Kreq camp together.

I was happy Vern and Callix didn't pay attention to the "kill your brother" comment that Pyka had made. Like Rye, they probably figured I wasn't the type of person to murder my own sibling. *At least something good happened today.*

As we came back to the tree line at the entrance of the camp, we found Eirok and Fare still behind their trees.

Fare took a step out from her tree when she saw us approaching, believing that it was safe. "What took so long? I almost went looking for guys."

Vern walked over and helped Eirok stand up. "We got some information out of a Kreq, but then he died before we could ask anything else. How's your shoulder doing, Eirok?"

Eirok kept his hand on his shoulder. "It's still bleeding. So, it could be better,"

Vern chuckled. "Well, at least you haven't lost your sense of humor,"

Eirok rolled his eyes, which then fell upon the weapon in Vern's hand.

"What's that?"

Vern held the gun outward to Eirok like a prized hunting kill. "This is the very same thing that blew open your shoulder,"

The collie fearfully looked down at the gun, ready to back away if it suddenly attacked.

Fare spoke once more. "We should probably get back to camp. On the way, you can tell us more about...those things,"

Nobody disagreed, so we set out.

When our patrol finally returned to camp, the sun had set and a dense darkness had poured through the forest.

As the other warriors and I entered camp, Isabel approached us with a ready bow. I assumed that she had been guarding that side of the campsite. The husky opened her mouth say something, but stopped once she saw Eirok's shoulder.

Eirok noticed Isabel's reaction and smiled to show that he was fine. "If you let me get to Sera's, I'll show it to you,"

"I'm okay," Isabel chuckled, realizing that Eirok wasn't on the verge of dying.

Eirok then made his way towards Sera's hut and was guided by Fare.

Vern took in a deep breath of air. "Well, I guess I'll stand guard here with you, Isabel,"

The corsac fox then handed her gun to me and drew her bow. She and Isabel walked away.

Once Callix and I were alone, the coyote spoke. "Hey, Meelo?"

"Yeah?"

"How's about I go report to Grix? You know...cause of earlier. I'll even take him the guns," Callix offered.

The small thread of remorse in Callix's words made my ears twitch. I had assumed he wasn't going to mention our fight earlier, much less feel guilty about it.

"Sure. I mean, if you want,"

Callix nodded. I then handed him my gun and the one Vern had carried, which Callix both held against his side with his left arm. The coyote began walking away.

"Callix!"

The coyote's ears stood up and he turned around to face me. "Yeah?"

I held up the ammo pouches in the air with my left hand. "You forgot the bullets and powder,"

Callix rolled his eyes and walked back to me. "Honestly, it's a miracle that I don't forget how chew my food, either,"

I chuckled. "I'll put them in your quiver,"

The coyote turned around and let me drop the pouches into his quiver. As they bounced against the bottom of Callix's quiver, the bullets clicked against each other and rolled around.

Callix began walking away once again. "See you later, Meelo,"

I knew that Callix couldn't see me, but I still waved goodbye for some reason. "See ya,"

Now that I was finally alone and didn't have any responsibilities to deal with, I decided to go search for Seq.

Fortunately, it only took a few moments to find him. Seq and Teo had been stationed on the opposite side of camp where Isabel and Vern were, so all I had to do was walk straight down the two rows of huts. When I was only a few steps behind him, Seq flicked his ears and he turned around. Teo saw that something had caught Seq's attention, so he turned as well.

Much to my surprise, Teo was the first to greet me. "Hey, Meelo,"

I stopped walking. "Hey, Teo,"

Seq's tail swished happily. "What happened?"

"The Kreq were using these weapons they got from some traders called guns. They're what made those loud noises earlier. When we got to the Kreq camp, everybody was gone. Well, not everyone. Three of them stayed behind and attacked us. Eirok got his shoulder wounded, but, other than that, nobody really got hurt. We killed two of the Kreq and got information out of the third. We would have gotten more out of him if Callix hadn't killed him,"

Teo sighed and shook his head. "Callix,"

"Yeah," I said.

There was an awkward silence that crept between the three of us.

Teo's eyes widened. "Oh, sorry. I'll leave you guys alone,"

Seq shook his head. "No, Teo, you don't have to-"

"No, no, no! It's fine! I understand," Teo said and then walked away.

As soon as the dhole was out of sight, Seq swiftly moved towards me and wrapped his warm arms around my body. I could tell by the tightness of Seq's grip that he had been worried about me. Still, I didn't say anything. Instead, I embraced my boyfriend in silence.

When we broke our hold on each other, Seq looked up into my eyes. "I was worried about you,"

I tilted my head slightly and caressed Seq's cheek with my hand. "And I was worried about you,"

Seq's eyes widened and were accompanied by a playful smile. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah,"

I leaned in and gave Seq a small kiss on the muzzle. Seq snickered and returned the gesture. Then, for a moment, we stared quietly into one another's eyes. Then, we continued to kiss again.

My ears caught a sound behind me and my eyes snapped open. I turned around to see every Kyan in camp trudging into their huts for the night.

Just then, I spotted Fare, who was close by. I walked over to the fennec with Seq closely following behind. "Hey, what's everybody doing?"

Fare stopped walking. "Grix said that everybody could go to sleep. He doesn't think the Kreq will attack tonight,"

My shoulders loosened. "Oh. Thanks,"

The fennec nodded. "Sure thing," She began walking once more and went on her way.

I turned around and looked back into Seq's eyes once again. "We should probably turn in, too,"

A smile sprouted on Seq's muzzle and his tail playfully swished. "*Oh*. Is that an invitation?"

Now, it was my turn to smile. "You know what I mean,"

"Aw, that's no fun,"

Even though I wasn't in the mood, Seq did everything but short of humping my leg until he fell asleep that night. I didn't mind it that much, to be honest. I was just happy that both of us had survived the day. Yet, an unsettling thought plagued my mind as I drifted off to sleep that night. How many more days were going to be like this?

I opened my eyes and gazed over at the sleeping fox, whose arms where wrapped around me. Seq's chest slowly rose and fell, then repeated. I couldn't imagine going to sleep at night without my boyfriend next to me. The very thought burned my chest with terror. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *Stop it. Seq isn't going anywhere*. I knew that everything would be fine in the end.

It had to be.

Screams awoke me the next morning.

Before I could jump out bed, Seq was already out of the door with an arrow on his bowstring. Quickly, I grabbed my bow and began to ready an arrow as I stepped out of the door and into the early light of morning.

After I stepped out of the door of my hut, I turned my head to the left and saw Seq running. I charged after him and kept looking around the camp for any sign of Kreq. Were they here? Was somebody hurt? Whatever it was, I knew that it wasn't going to be a pleasant morning.

When I finally did catch up to Seq, we were both standing in front of Eirok and Syta's hut. Syta was sitting on the doorstep with a teary eyed Fern in her arms. The mother slowly rocked her daughter and stroked her head in an effort to calm the girl.

Seq lowered his bow and held it to his side with one hand, as he squatted down only half an arm's length in front of the jackals. "Syta, what happened?"

Syta's eyes were red and nearly as watery as her daughter's. The jackal reached up an arm and cleaned her eyes with her hand. "Night, he's...he's gone,"