

Chapter 21

Meelo Day 26

"Dooka was watching the border," I realized aloud, recalling the lion standing at the border when Rye and I had gone on our patrol together, the morning after Aether's vigil.

Isabel's ears twitched as she turned and looked at me. "Huh?"

I explained to her how Rye and I discovered Dooka at the border a few days ago.

As I spoke about how I ran into Dooka, my mind kept returning to what Syta had said that morning. *Night, he's...he's gone.* It was so strange seeing Syta so emotional. Usually, the jackal carried herself with a certain stoutness that made her a bit intimidating, but, after seeing her cry while holding her daughter, I couldn't help but feel sorry for her.

Grix had sent patrols to search for any trace of Night. Sadly, they all came up empty handed. At first, everyone assumed that maybe he went for a walk and got lost in the dark. But, once the patrols failed to find any sign of the boy, fingers began pointing towards the Kreq, who, coincidentally, had also seemed to vanish.

Tonight, Grix ordered that a patrol should go and investigate the traders' camp, in an effort to find where the Kreq were hiding and possibly locate Night. I was on the patrol because I knew where the foothills were. Seq and Isabel were going to accompany me. I was happy to be on the patrol, especially when I recalled the pain in Syta's eyes from that morning. Yet, despite my eagerness to help Syta, I still felt bad about how we were unable to hold vigils for Sebastian and Dew. While they had only died the day before and we couldn't have held a vigil due to the events that took place after their deaths, I still felt a tiny piece of guilt. I pictured their bodies lying in Sera's hut waiting to be burned. *They must have begun to reek by now.*

"So, I think that he had something to do with Sebastian and Dew's deaths. He may have even been there when they died," I said, concluding my idea of Dooka watching the border.

Isabel squinted her eyes in puzzlement. "Then why didn't he kill you and Rye?"

I thought for a moment and sighed. "I don't know. Maybe he was just seeing how often our patrols came,"

"That makes sense," the husky said. "They could plan their attack precisely that way. How long do you think they've had their guns?"

"I don't know,"

Neither of us spoke another word.

Luckily, we didn't have to wait in silence once Grix approached us. "So, you guys ready?"

Isabel rotated her shoulders, almost as if she were preparing for a race.

"Yeah,"

Grix nodded. "Good. Seq's waiting for you guys on the other side of camp. He just got off guard duty,"

I gave a fake grin so Grix wouldn't feel worried about us. "Thanks. See you later Grix,"

"Bye. Good luck," the wolf wished us.

We left Grix and picked up Seq before walking out of camp.

Soon, the dark woods surrounded us and I began to wish that we were allowed to bring at least one gun with us. Then again, our bows would be quieter and easier to reload. *It's better than having no weapons at all.*

Once we arrived to the bottom of the foothills past the Kreq's old camp, we immediately began searching for a stream. When we found it, all three of us drew our bows and began to follow the running water up towards the dark tops of the foothill.

As we snuck forward, a figure came into view.

Quickly, we fell down and lay on our chests in the snow. While we lay on the ground, I was able to see that it was a male hyena, at least, it looked like a hyena, one of the animals from stories that I was told while growing up. *Does this mean otters and kangaroos are real, too?*

I looked around to see if there was another lookout nearby, but, as far as I could tell, the hyena was alone. We waited to see if he was going to move, but, after a few moments, it was clear that he wasn't going anywhere.

I turned my head over my shoulder and whispered, "I'll sneak up behind him and take him out,"

Isabel and Seq both nodded. Both of them loaded their bows.

A few moments passed by as I crawled around the hyena, until his back was to me. While I crept around the sentry on my belly, I noticed an opening in the foothill to the right of the hyena. Normally, I wouldn't have been able to spot the entrance, but an orange light flickered from inside, outlining the outer edges of the entrance. *Fire.* That was it. That had to be the entrance to where their camp was.

I carefully raised myself off the ground using my arms. Once I was on my paws, I bent my knees to keep low and slowly drew my knife with my right hand. As I got closer to the hyena, I was able to hear him whistling. *Good. He won't hear me coming.* He was finally in my reach.

In one quick lunge forward, I brought my left hand down over the hyena's mouth and slit his throat with my knife. He tried to scream, but was muffled by my hand over his mouth. His body tried to twist around to face me, but I held him tightly against my chest. It only took a moment for him to grow limp in my grasp. I plunged my knife into his side, drawing blood as I did so, to see if he was still alive. The hyena remained still and silent.

I let go of the body and it fell to the ground with a thump. Before sheathing my knife, I turned my head to the right to see if any of the other traders had come outside of their hideout. The only thing that occupied the entrance of the hole was the orange light and a tiny trail of smoke.

As I turned back, Isabel and Seq stepped next to me. I pointed out the entrance of the traders' camp. "I think only one of us should go in. That way, we can eavesdrop and see if they mention where the Kreq are hiding,"

I could tell that Seq hated the idea almost as quickly as the last words left my mouth. "We should all be together in case we have to fight,"

"Who says there's going to be fighting?" Isabel asked Seq.

The fox shook his head. "I'm not saying there's going to be, but we just killed their friend. Somehow, I don't think they'll be open to talking."

I sighed. "Either way, someone has to go in. I just think it's better if two of us stay here in case everything goes to shit. That way, if one of us dies, the other two can take them by surprise or hurry back to camp,"

All three of us grew quiet.

Seq shook his head. "I still don't like it. Besides, who's the one that'll be going inside?"

My ears flicked. "I will,"

Seq's eyes widened and his tail sank between his legs. "No,"

I rolled my eyes and glared down at my defiant boyfriend. "Oh, come on. I'll be fine!"

"What if they kill you, or capture you?" Seq asked, fearfully.

My nostrils flared. I knew that Seq was concerned for my safety, but he had to accept the fact that somebody had to go inside. "It's my plan. If anybody's going to do it, why not me?"

Isabel took a step forward. "How's about I do it?"

"What?" I asked, baffled at the idea.

Isabel shrugged. "You two are dating neither one of you wants the other one to go in. I'm not dating anybody and don't have any living family members. So, really, me going inside makes the most sense,"

I looked over to Seq to see if he was just as against the idea as I was, but, when I looked at his face, I saw no sign of protest.

My eyes widened and I looked back at Isabel. If Seq wasn't going to say anything, I sure was. "I can't let you go and-"

"Nobody's letting me do anything," Isabel said. "I'm *choosing* to go and to do what's best for our tribe. Now, do either of you have anything else to add?"

I shot Seq a glance and then looked back at Isabel.

The husky's eyes widened in sarcastic surprise. "No? Okay then. See you two in a little bit,"

With that, she placed her bow onto her back, put her arrow in her quiver, drew her knife and walked into the flickering light of the cave.

"Be careful," I said, as Isabel disappeared into the dark tunnel. I wasn't sure if she had heard me.

I took a step toward Seq with my fists clenched, once Isabel had been gone for a few moments. "What was that?"

Seq scowled at me as I stood over him. He didn't move from where he stood, his face guiltless and his eyes unmoving. "What was I suppose to do, let you go in by yourself and get hurt?"

"I wasn't going to get hurt,"

Seq huffed his chest and his ears fell back. "How do you know that? How could you possibly know that everything would be all right?"

I could feel my tail bristle as it swished against my leg. "Why are you being so paranoid? And how could you let Isabel risk her life for *my* plan?"

"Because I can't lose you, too!"

I felt my fur beginning to burn with anger. "What?"

Seq bared his teeth at me and took a step closer. "I just lost my dad, one of the only two people that I love! I'm not going to lose you, too. You're all I have left and if something happened to you, I'd be alone,"

My anger calmed a little, but I still thought that what Seq had done was pretty shitty. "Seq, everyday we risk our lives. Whether we're hunting or going on a patrol, there's always a chance we'll get hurt,"

My boyfriend lowered his head a little, his lips drawing over his fangs and his eyes softening. "I know, but still. If you did get hurt, I would never forgive myself. I'd feel guilty and would be alone. Meelo, I can't...I can't be alone,"

He stood there, staring up at me with somber eyes. I couldn't think of anything to say. Seq *did* just lose his dad, so I couldn't blame him that much for not wanting to lose me as well. Would I have done the same thing if I were him? Would I be willing to let someone else risk their life instead of the one person alive that I truly loved and cared about? As I took a step forward, quietly wrapping my arms around my boyfriend and putting my head over his, I knew the answer.

Yes.

Seq hugged me back as the light breeze that night blew against us. After a few moments, we broke the hug and waited for Isabel to return.

A few moments later, the husky emerged from the cave entrance while keeping a hyena in front of her, with her knife around his neck.

We hurried over to Isabel and readied our bows.

"What happened?" I asked when Seq and I got close.

Isabel shrugged. "I improvised,"

She dragged her blade across the hyena's neck and covered his mouth as he bled to death. "Come on," she said, after dropping the corpse. "His friends will start looking for him when he doesn't come back,"

Without questioning Isabel, Seq and I ran behind her as we hurried away.

"This way!" Isabel shouted back as we kept running.

"Where are we going?" Seq yelled back at her.

"I'll tell you once we're far away from here,"

Isabel kept her word and didn't speak until we made our way over the foothills. We ran deep inside the forest and didn't stop until we were sure that we were far enough. After we felt safe, we stopped and stood still, slowly catching our breath with deep heaving gasps.

Once, we were able to breathe normally again, I asked the most obvious question. "What was with your knife around that guy's neck?"

"Well," Isabel tilted her head and gave a grin at the memory, "I went inside the cave and followed the light. I could hear talking coming around a corner that I came to and listened. From what I could tell, there were about seven of them. They said a lot of stuff I didn't understand, though,"

"Like, what?" Seq wondered.

Isabel shook her head. "I don't know. One of them said, 'First thing I do when we get back home is pay for a nice whore'. After that they mentioned Night."

"Where is he?" I asked, my tail growing stiff.

The husky held her hands up in front of her. "Hold on. I'm getting there. And then, another trader said to the first one, 'If the ship's there tomorrow,'

"Another trader said, 'I'd hate to be Donner right now, having to stay on that ship with that little brat,'

"One of them went on saying, 'So, who do you think we'll sell him to when we get back? I know a couple of slavers who'll be more than happy to pay a lot of coin for some fresh meat,'

"One of them said 'I know a brothel that has younger whores. They'll pay twice as much as any slaver. Little brat will be quieter with a cock down his throat,'

"I heard pawsteps coming and one of them said, 'I'm gonna get some fresh air,'

"I pulled out my knife and saw an outline of one of the traders come around the corner. When he got close enough to see me, I put my knife against his throat. Just as he was about to yell, I covered his mouth with my other hand and told him I'd slit his throat if he tried screaming.

"I asked him where Night was and he told me, 'He's on our ship, just over in the water. It's anchored down off the mainland. You can't miss it,'

"I asked where the Kreq were hiding and he said, 'Kreq? The hell's that?'

"Instead of wondering what 'hell' was, I pressed my knife closer against his throat to show that I was serious. I told him 'Those cats that you traded guns with,'

"His eyes got big once he realized what I was talking about and he said 'Oh, you're those Kyan they always went on about,'

"I pressed my knife harder against his neck, just short of drawing blood.

"I don't know where they are,' he told me. 'They came to us and we gave them some guns for a bunch of pelts. We never once went to wherever they live. They just left and we never heard from them again. We didn't complain, though. Coming to this island was a risk we took, since we thought nobody lived here. We were just happy to have gotten some new merchandise to sell when we get home,'

"He seemed to be telling the truth, so I moved on. 'Okay,' I told him, 'I'm going to walk back up to the entrance with you. If you try to get away, I won't hesitate to kill you,'

"He didn't have a problem with that, so we went outside and that's that,"

"What does a 'ship' look like?" I asked. For all I knew, it could have been some giant bird that the traders had ridden.

Isabel sighed. "I have no idea, but the trader said that we couldn't miss it,"

We walked in the direction, toward the ocean. As we got close enough to hear the small waves splash against the land, I looked out across the water. All my life I had wondered if there were places where other people lived and I now I knew the answer. Yet, as I looked out across the waves, which reflected the light of the moon that night, I felt little comfort by the answer. Somewhere nearby, Night was probably scared to death and hoping for someone to save him. We had to find him. I only hoped we could find this 'ship' that he was on. *What does a ship even look like?*

Thankfully, we didn't have any trouble finding the ship. It was floating in the ocean, where the water was chest level. The ship itself was incredibly huge and I wasn't even half the height of its base, which had tall tree-like columns that

sprouted out of it and held giant white leaves. Then, as a finishing touch, the ship had a massive log sticking out towards us in the front.

"Well," Seq broke my silent amazement, "it wasn't hard to find,"

"No kidding," I said.

The three of us trudged through the freezing nightly water until we stood next to the ship.

There was a line made of some light-brown material that hung over the side of the ship. I was the first to get close enough to it and gave the length a tug to see if it was stable. It didn't fall or break, so I put a little of my weight onto it. The line still didn't break, so I began to climb up it. I put one hand above me onto the line and then eased it between my moccasins. I repeated this over and over until I eventually stood on top of the ship.

I looked back down to see Isabel right below me, while Seq was just beginning to climb. I reached out a hand once Isabel got close and helped pull her up next to me. "How does the ship not sink?"

Isabel placed her dripping wet moccasins on the ship and looked around. "You're asking the wrong person,"

After I waited for a moment, I helped Seq onto the ship, too. As I turned my head, I saw a door that was in the middle of a wall near the back of the ship. I walked over to it and my friends followed me.

I drew my knife while Seq and Isabel took out their bows.

As I pushed on the door to open it, it didn't move. I pushed harder, but it still refused to budge. I looked back to my tribesmen who appeared just as confused as I was.

"Try that thing," Seq suggested.

I looked back at the door and noticed a grey round object that stuck out of the door. Carefully, I placed my hand on it and almost pulled away. *Wow, that's cold.* After trying to push on the strange round object, the door still didn't open. *Come on!* I began shaking it and suddenly heard a tiny *click*. Slowly, I pushed forward on the door, which began to squeak open.

I took a step inside. A desk was centered in the middle of the room, which held big square blocks of various colors that had some strange black markings on them. Then, just behind the desk, I saw hyena sitting in a chair.

I raised my knife, ready to attack the charging trader, only to find that he didn't move.

As I lowered my knife, I took a deep breath and cautiously took a couple of steps forward. Once I got close enough, I discovered that the hyena's eyes were closed and he was in a deep slumber.

I let out a sigh, just before seeing something move out of the corner of my eye. My grasp on my knife tightened and I turned to face whatever danger I had almost not noticed, only to find a bounded and gagged Night sitting in a chair, gazing up at me with joyful eyes.

"Oh, thank Taiya," I whispered and moved toward him. Quickly, I began to cut the binds that were wrapped around the young jackal, which were made of the same material that we used to climb onto the ship.

Once the young jackal was free, he hugged me tightly. His body was cold and began to shiver as he held me. "Thank you... Thank you," he whispered.

Stunned for a moment, I stood there listening to Night thank me over and over again. I wrapped my arms around his body and returned his embrace.

After a moment, I broke the hug. "Let's get back to camp, okay?"

Night looked up at me with unbelieving eyes. "Okay,"

Without any arguing, we made our way out of the room. Night took one look off the side of the ship and asked if he could hold onto my back as I climbed down. I couldn't say no.

We made our way back to camp once we got out of the water and onto land. As we walked back home, we made sure that we stayed far away from the trader's cave as we walked over the foothills. It took a little longer to make it back to camp, but it was necessary.

As we entered the front of camp, Syta and Eirok were waiting for us. I probably would have been waiting at the front of camp, too, if it were my child that had been taken. Syta and Eirok, once they saw that we had Night, got down onto their knees and held their son in a warm embrace.

Syta brushed her head against her son's while Eirok stood to look our patrol in the eye. "Thank you. We'll never forget this,"

They walked together to their hut while Eirok carried Night on his shoulders. Night was a few moons away from puberty, so he certainly wasn't young enough for Eirok to be comfortably carrying him like that. I didn't think Eirok cared, though. He seemed happy just to have his son back.

I was so busy being in awe of Syta and Eirok's happiness that I didn't realize Grix was standing next to us until he spoke. "What happened?"

A grin spread across my face. "We were able to find Night and got him back!" I chirped, as though I was a bird.

The wolf didn't smile at the news. In fact, I noticed that he was giving me a cold hard stare as I finished speaking. "You forgot to explain one thing,"

Uh-oh.

"What?"

Grix folded his arms and kept his uncaring glare on the three of us. "You forgot to mention the part about how the traders knew you were Kyan and came to attack our camp,"

My tail sank in between my leg and my heart seemed to stop. "What?"

"The traders realized that you were in the same tribe as Night and came here after they found out you killed two of them," Grix roared at me, not caring that I had no idea what had happened.

"Wait," Isabel said and took a step next to me. "How did they know where our camp was?"

Grix lowered his arms. "Apparently, they were the ones who took Night in the first place and recognized your scent. We were able to kill all of them, but four of our warriors are now in Sera's hut, wounded. Thank Taiya we spotted them before they attacked, but that's not the point,"

The wolf stalked closer towards us and looked down as if we were prey that he was about to devour with his powerful jaws of teeth. "You were sent to rescue

Night, not to fight. What's even worse is that you carelessly left your scent all over the bodies. Now, I want to know who is responsible,"

Isabel spoke up, ready to take the blame. "It was m-"

"It was me," I blurted out.

The husky mouth hung open as she turned her head to look at me. I didn't look back at her, but I could see her surprised blue eyes out of the corner of my gaze. My neck even burned as I felt Seq glaring at my back.

I kept my eyes on Grix, who now turned his complete attention to me. "I went inside their cave and got information from one of them," I said. "When I was done, I killed him,"

Sure, it wasn't completely true, but I did kill the other trader and came up with the plan to sneak into the cave. So, for the most part, it was my fault that those people in Sera's hut were injured.

Slowly, Grix crept closer toward me until he was only half an arm's length away. His breath scorched my face as he silently stared down at me with his judgmental eyes. "You will stay in camp for the next seven days. You won't be allowed to join any patrols and will help have three guard duties every day, one at sunrise, one at midday and one at sunset. Is that understood?"

"Yes," I said.

The wolf turned and walked away without speaking another word.

"You didn't have to do that," Isabel said, once Grix was gone.

I turned my head and looked at her. "Yeah, I did,"

Isabel blinked and her gaze relaxed. "Thanks,"

"No problem,"

She left Seq and I alone in uncomfortable silence.

My boyfriend, surprisingly, walked forward and put his hand into mine. I looked down at him, expecting him to criticize me for taking the blame. He didn't. Instead, he was quiet for the entire walk back to my hut.