

Chapter 27

Meelo Day 34

Eirok stood with me in the middle of the snowstorm that made it impossible to see even two huts away. The wind slapped against our faces and we squinted our eyes to even look at each other.

Eirok screamed at me and I could hardly make out what he had said. "Wind's blowing too damn hard for a fire!"

I shrugged and forced myself to grin in an effort to make Eirok feel better. "Well, it's not like any prey's getting caught today anyways,"

The border collie smiled, which made me feel better about my freezing tail. "Lucky them. In the meantime, we get to starve and can't see past our noses!"

"When did it even start?"

"The storm?" Eirok asked. "Hard to say. It sure wasn't like this when I went to bed last night. Probably sometime before sunrise, I guess,"

"See anything suspicious this morning?"

"Meelo, I can't even see the sun. What do you think?"

"So, no Kreq?"

He shook his head. "No. Not unless they became snowflakes,"

"It'd be easier if they were. We could just wait inside our huts for them to melt,"

Eirok rolled his eyes. "That'd be the day,"

"Hey, want to go on a patrol?"

Eirok's ears flattened. "I thought Grix ordered you to stay in camp,"

"He did, but yesterday was my last day,"

"I don't know, Meelo," Eirok said and looked off into the whiteness around us. "It's pretty hard to see. We'll probably just end up shooting some trees,"

I shrugged. "Hey, better to eat tree bark than nothing at all,"

"Fine. Let's go. Can't be worse than standing here freezing our asses off,"

While we walked out of camp, Eirok and I stood close to one another so we wouldn't get lost in the ocean of snow.

"Now I know what it's like to be blind!" I shouted.

"At least the blind can use their noses," Eirok yelled back. "This wind is hitting my nose so hard that I can't even smell you!"

My eyes caught something.

Off to the right, a rabbit sat in the snow, sniffing the cold air. It was brown, which was the only reason I could even see it.

I stopped Eirok by placing my hand on his shoulder, since I was afraid that talking would scare the rabbit off. While the wind probably would have kept the rabbit from hearing me, I didn't want to take the chance. I looked over to my side and saw that the border collie's gaze had already landed onto the rabbit.

I drew my bow, but, before I could even grab an arrow from my quiver, the rabbit scampered away.

"Damn it!" I cursed and ran after the rabbit into the blizzard.

"Meelo, wait!" Eirok yelled after me, but I ignored him.

As I left Eirok behind, I tried searching for even the tiniest hint that I was right behind the rabbit. I couldn't see it through the blowing snow and there weren't any tracks on the ground below me, except for my own. Still, I hadn't been out of camp for seven days and I felt like having a good chase.

In the midst of my pursuit, a few moments later, the ground abruptly disappeared from underneath my moccasins and I fell into nothingness.

My back burned in agony as I slammed against the ground. The pain was so intense that I didn't even have the ability to scream. As I lay there on the ground, paralyzed by my body's agony, I stared up at the air above me. The whiteout must have cleared a little because faint sunlight poured down through a hole that seemed about three times my height towards that sky. The light illuminated the outer lines of the hole and, as I gazed up at the space that I had just fallen through, tiny snowflakes sprinkled down onto me, melting as they touched my fur.

I slowly moved my head, then my arms and legs. Everything seemed to be fine, apart from my back, which was ablaze with pain. After forcing myself to sit up, I looked around for a way out. While searching for an exit, I noticed that ground beneath me wasn't ground at all. I moved my hand against it, pushing the snow aside and feeling what was underneath. It wasn't dirt or more snow that I found. Instead, it was a smooth brown material. Gently, I rose and walked to the nearest wall, noticing that the material was on top of dirt. I bent over and pulled the material off the ground, dragging it to the other side of the ditch. I could now see the dirt ground on which some eaten prey and ammunition for guns lay. I didn't see a gun anywhere, which would have made me feel better if I did. I decided it was time to leave before whoever was living there came back.

I looked at the walls around me in search of a way to climb up. There, just in front of me, hung a long line that was identical to the one that I used to climb onto the traders' ship. *Thank Taiya*. My eyes followed it up towards the opening overhead and saw that it was stuck to the wall by a long skinny sharp piece of a grey rock. It seemed too perfect to be a rock, though, so I assumed that it was handmade.

As I trotted forward, I began wondering who it was that had been hiding here. It certainly couldn't be the Kreq, since there wasn't enough space or provisions. Once my hands wrapped themselves around the line, I realized the awful answer. It was the trader that attacked Seq.

Without wasting any time, I climbed up towards freedom. I had to get back to camp before the trader returned. I would have been able to climb faster, but my back was slowing me down and cried out in agony every time I moved my arms.

After an excruciating climb, I was only an arm length away from the top. Freedom was in reach and I held out my hand to grab the brim of the hole. Instead, as my hand was in mid-air, a shadow crept over me. Before I looked up, I already knew that the trader had returned.

The hyena loomed above me, only a toe's length away from the edge of the hole. His icy stare was colder than all of the snow that day and made my blood freeze. Running wasn't a choice, since the trader could have just pushed me back down into the hole with a single kick in the head. Climbing back down seemed like an even worse idea.

While my mind tried to search for the perfect plan to get back to camp alive, the hyena smiled down at me sinisterly. "Well, look at the nice piece of meat that just walked right into my home. I guess I don't even need to eat this now," The trader raised a dead rabbit that he held in his right hand, the same rabbit I had been chasing.

The trader leaned over the hole a little and widened his grin. "I've heard *plenty* of stories about you, snow leopard. Those other cats sure had a lot to say about you. They even told me that you killed your own brother. Now, personally, I think that's a load of bullshit. A faggot like you could never have the balls to off your own blood, but those other cats, hell, they really fucking hate you. Now, maybe you can satisfy my curiosity," He lowered his voice to a hushed whisper. "Did you slice open your brother's neck and bleed him dry?"

"Fuck you, asshole!"

Unexpectedly, the hyena laughed at my rage. "I'll take that as a ye-" He stopped talking and his ears stood up. After smelling the air, he bent down closer to me, crouching on his knees as he did so. Sadly, he was out of reach, so I couldn't cut him with my claws.

The hyena's mouth went from a grin to a snarl. "You were there that night," I didn't say anything.

"*You* took that little brat that we were going to sell. I remember smelling you after I woke up,"

"So what? You stole him! The way I see it, you deserve to die, just like you're friends did,"

I expected him to laugh again, but instead he drew something from his back with his right hand and pointed it at me. After a moment, I realized that the hyena was pointing a gun at me. For some reason, though, it was small and could be held in one hand. It was also barely shorter than the length between my elbow and my wrist.

The trader could obviously see my amazement and chuckled. "Now it's time for you to die, just like that fox did when I caved in his skull,"

My emotions got the best of me and I hardly noticed that the trader thought that Seq was dead. "Don't you dare mention him!"

"Oh!" the hyena laughed. "Touch a sensitive area did I? Did you two fuck much?"

"I'll kill you!" I screamed up at the trader, trying to keep my claws from unsheathing and cutting the line that I held onto.

The trader stopped laughing. "I'm the only one who's going to do the killing here,"

Without warning, the front of the hyena's skull burst open and chunks of bloody matter splattered down onto my face, just before falling into the hole below.

While I cleaned my eyelids of blood with a free hand, I heard the trader's body fall slam against the ground above me. For a moment, I was frozen, unsure of what to do. Then, I took a deep breath and climbed up again.

Once I finally was standing on the ground again, I found Dooka standing before me with a normal sized gun in his hands. *Today can't get any worse.*

The lion smiled. "Fancy meeting you here!"

I said nothing.

"Shame you won't be able to see that fox of yours again," Dooka said.

"You have no right to mention him! You, Riter, this dead asshole or anybody else that tries to ruin my life can never speak about him,"

"Oh," Dooka mocked me. "Big words for the faggot that killed his own brother,"

"Don't call me that," I growled.

Dooka's raised his voice. "Then what should I call you? Murderer? Coldblooded?"

"Call me by my name,"

There was a moment of silence.

"Meelo," Dooka said, grinning. "I'm going to enjoy the feeling of my fur being stained in your blood,"

Dooka tossed his gun to the side and charged at me with unsheathed claws ready to dig their way into my body. Just before the lion was able to bring his claws down, I was able to step out of the way and nick his right eye with my own claws.

Quickly, I drew my knife with my right hand. At the same time, Dooka turned around and faced me once more. I thought about charging at him, but the sight of him holding his bleeding eye while gasping in pain distracted me from doing so.

"You little shit!" Dooka roared at me.

Before I had time to react, he charged against me and knocked me on the side of my head while cutting me with his claws. Lucky for me, he must have been so angry that his coordination was off. Still, the blow hurt and my vision became full of lights while my head became airy.

Without getting a chance to fight back, I was knocked onto the ground with Dooka on top of me. I stared up at the lion and tried stabbing him with my knife. Right before my blade could carve its way into Dooka's chest, he grabbed my wrist and began squeezing. Before Dooka spoke, I could already feel my bones beginning to be crushed.

"This is for Pytle," Dooka growled.

With a quick twist of Dooka's hand, my wrist snapped loudly and shot pain up my entire arm. As I screamed, my fingers became dead and let my knife fall to the ground. Before I let Dooka twist my wrist even more, I used my other hand to try and shove him off me. He was too heavy and all of my effort was pointless. I let my arm fall down onto the ground next to my side.

Dooka reached down with his free hand and drew my knife from the snow beside me. While he pressed the sharpness of the weapon firmly against my cheek, Dooka chuckled. "Irony isn't it? The murderer meets the same fate as his victim,"

I let a breath of air through my nose in defeat and looked off to the side, unable to watch Dooka cut open my throat. Then I saw it. I saw my chance, my only chance.

Just to my left, lay the hyena's wide-eyed corpse. Blood trickled down off the trader's pinkish-red meat that crawled onto the snow in an effort to escape his gaping forehead. Taiya, his eyes stared at me with such a cold emptiness that I still thought that he was alive for a brief moment. Yet, that wasn't what caught my gaze. My attention fell upon his outreached hand that came near me and still grasped the

small gun, tightly. He didn't fire it. Right? No, he didn't. Thank Taiya. I had thought that the gun may have fallen into the hole, but I was happy to be proven wrong. It was a little far from me, though, so I would need a moment to reach for it, but definitely no more than that. Still, that would be more than enough time for Dooka to see what I was doing and cut me open. I needed to distract him.

I turned back and looked up at Dooka, now with a fake look of confidence in my eyes and a grin under my nose. "Last chance to tell me where the Kreq camp is,"

Slowly, I moved my left arm up, but relocated it near my head to make it seem like I was just getting comfortable.

Dooka laughed in my face, which made the blade dig a little into my cheek and sting me. "And why should I do that? I'm the one with the knife and you're the one with the bare throat," He took the knife from my cheek and put it against my neck.

I moved my hand a little out to the side and let my fingers fall open. "I'll give you information about the Kyan. I bet it'll be more than what Grym had," It was a bullshit excuse, but the worse it was, the more desperate I seemed and I knew that Dooka would take pleasure in that.

My arm was completely outreached and my fingers searched blindly for the gun. I couldn't risk glancing to the side or else Dooka would realize my plan. I resisted the temptation to look to the side and continued to stare the lion that held a knife against my throat.

He laughed even harder. "Oh, I don't give a shit about that. Don't worry, though. I'm still going to kill every Kyan and make them slowly bleed to death. So, why would I care about who sleeps where?" I could feel a few drops of blood beginning to drip down the sides of my neck.

Dooka's smile disappeared and his eyes became dark. "Die, faggot,"

My fingers grasped the grip off the gun and wrapped firmly around it, finding the trigger as they did so. It was my turn to smile. "I could say the same to you,"

In the same moment that it took Dooka's face to look confused about why I had become so confident, I brought my arm up, driving the muzzle of the gun against the side of Dooka's head as I did so, and pulled the trigger.

As the noise from the shot rang out, blood splattered against my face and splashed into my eyes. Dooka's body fell over to the side and didn't move while I rubbed my eyes free of his blood. When I was able to open my eyes without the feeling of warm blood on them, I looked down at the pathetic sight of the man who I once called dad and grew disgusted at the sight of bloody skull fragments laying on the ground next to me.

I gradually pushed Dooka's body off me, which would have been easier if he hadn't broken one of my wrists. Still, I was able to get the lifeless husk off me, spilling a thick stream of blood from the hole in his head as I did so.

After pulling my knife free of Dooka's limp fingers, I placed it back in its sheath using my left hand after setting the small gun in the snow. Then, I picked the gun up with my left hand and turned to walk away from the gory scene. The wind soon hardened Dooka's blood, clumping my fur together as it did so. I ignored it. I had to find my way back to camp.

While I stumbled blindly through the snowstorm, I realized that Dooka was the third relative of mine to die in my arms. While Grym wasn't blood, she was my brother's mate, so I still counted her. I pondered that thought for a moment and pushed it away when guilt began to fill my chest. That made me think of Riter and her judgmental blue eyes. She was the last family member that I still had alive. *And she'll be the last one to die.*

Voices came from ahead of me. At first I thought it was just the wind, but as I continued to walk, I began to make out a single word.

"Meelo!"

I couldn't recognize who it was, but I knew it had to be my tribesmen searching for me.

"I'm over here!" I screamed.

In a single moment, I began to make out to shapes that quickly came towards me. Then, the shapes came close to me and I recognized that they were Teo and Isabel.

"Meelo," Isabel said, gasping once she saw the blood that drenched my fur. "What happened?"

I stared at them. Even before I explained, I could still hardly believe it myself. "I killed Dooka,"