

Chapter 29

Seq Day 35

“Are you sure you’re ready? You just got out of Sera’s hut,” Isabel asked me.

She had obviously already forgotten that she was injured when the traders attacked our camp, but I tried to keep my tail from bristling. “Isabel, you were in Sera’s hut not to long ago, either,”

Isabel shot Callix a look with her light blue eyes, which the coyote responded to with a shrug and open hands. “He’s got you there,”

Despite Isabel’s still present hesitation towards my presence, we made our way out of camp.

Isabel and Callix walked together, and I followed closely behind. I don’t remember what exactly it was they started talking about, but I do remember that it sounded boring to me, so I tuned both of them out. My eyes drifted to the guns that were strapped to their backs by a piece of hide and I suddenly wished that I had brought one as well. I even longed for the small gun that Meelo got from the trader.

My discomfort wasn’t eased as the ammo in each of the new pouches that Rye had made clanked together with every step Callix and Isabel took. The pouches were actually quite handy. Each one was made of buckskin and had two different pockets. The first one, which was near the front of the pouch, held the powder sacks. Meanwhile, the second slot, which was closest to you belt, held the balls that were put on top of the powder. It certainly was better than putting them in our quivers.

Grix had been sending patrols to the Kreq camp, looking for Taiya knows what. Since I had only gotten out of Sera’s hut the day before, I decided to ask what we were suppose to be doing. “So, what are we looking for when we get there?”

Since I had zoned out, I had forgotten that Callix and Isabel were talking. Callix cut their chitchat short and answered my question. “We’re just looking for any signs that they were there,”

“Have we had any luck so far?” I wondered.

Callix’s tail drooped a little and I already knew his answer before he told me. “No, but Grix still wants us to check on the off chance that they come back,”

“We’re the second patrol to go today,” Isabel added.

I put both my arms behind my head and stretched my back for a moment. “You really miss a lot when you get your head bashed in,”

Isabel’s ears rose stiffly and she glanced back over her shoulder at me with a look that a mother gives her cub when it has fever. “Is your head hurting? We could go back if you want,”

I gave her a wave to let her know I was okay. “I’m fine,”

When she turned her head forward again, I rolled my eyes.

At first I thought Isabel was going to ask me if I was feeling all right again, but, luckily, Callix began to talk. It was strange to be happy that Callix was talking, but it was better than Isabel acting so overdramatic. “At least we don’t have to worry about that last trader anymore. Or Dooka,”

Isabel turned her head back slightly, but not far enough for her eyes to see me. "How's Meelo doing?"

I wasn't sure whether she was asking about Meelo's injuries or how he was dealing with the fact that he had killed his own father, so I decided to give both answers. "He wasn't hurt that badly and Dooka's death didn't really bother him all that much. So he's doing pretty good,"

"Good," Isabel said, just before facing forward again.

Callix spoke once more. "So, are you two getting along?"

Isabel turned and hissed at the coyote with her hackles raised. "Callix!"

He turned to look at her and I could see enough of his face to tell that he was confused. "What? I just asked how they were doing, not what their favorite position was!"

"Still, that's private," the husky lectured him.

Callix groaned and returned his head to its normal position. "Fine,"

As much as I tried to suppress it, a giggle escaped my muzzle.

Both Callix and Isabel's ears stood up as they looked back at me with bewildered stares.

I smiled and shrugged to show that I wasn't offended. "It's fine, Isabel. Callix, Meelo and I are doing great. Thanks for asking,"

Callix faced Isabel again and held out an open hand toward me. "See? He's not offended,"

Isabel turned her head forward. "He could have been,"

My grin became even wider as a mischievous idea came across my mind.

"Yeah. He's really wonderful, especially when he slaps me on the ass,"

Callix covered both of his ears with his hands and his tail dashed between his legs. "Why, Seq? Why?"

I was laughing so hard that Isabel had to answer him. "You asked how they were doing,"

The coyote let go of his ears, assuming that the worst was over. "Yeah, but I didn't ask *what* they were doing. Oh, Taiya. I can't get it out of my head!"

"You like that?" I teased him. "Well, every once in a while, Meelo loves it when I use the tips of my teeth while I'm-"

"Stop!" Callix whined and covered his ears again.

I pestered him for the rest of the walk and enjoyed every moment of his torment along with Isabel.

When we finally arrived at the Kreq camp, I stared out at it and examined the layout. I found it particularly odd that the majority of the tipis circled around one, which was in the center of camp. Meelo never really talked about how the camp was set up, so this was all new to me. I couldn't imagine living in such poor dwellings, especially during snowstorms. The nights must have been especially cold as well. I shivered at the thought of wind blowing against my bare ass during sex.

"Okay," Callix said, interrupting my miserable thought. "Let's see if anybody's been here,"

The three of us split up. Isabel searched the left side of the camp while Callix and I went to the right. Callix walked in front of me as we both looked for any sign of the Kreq. We even looked inside the tipis, only to find flat empty snow.

While we moved onto what must have been our third or fourth tipi, I looked over and saw that Isabel was halfway up her side of the circle. I knew she was out of earshot, yet I still whispered when I spoke to Callix. "So, have you kids started dating yet?"

Every hair on Callix's body rose and became rigid as he turned away from the tipi with a single finger raised against his mouth. "Shhhh!"

We moved to the next tipi and Callix looked over the empty campsite to see if Isabel was close to us. I stood idly by as Callix stuck his head into the tipi and searched for tracks.

"Come on, Callix!" I whispered. "You've liked her since you were, what, six moons old? What are you waiting for, her to show up naked at your door?"

Callix took his head back from inside the tipi and shrugged. "I dunno. The right moment,"

We walked to another tipi and I snorted. "Yeah, cause girls *love* guys who aren't spontaneous or surprising!"

The coyote stopped and his tan colored tail wrapped around his leg as he turned to shoot me a questioning look. "How would you know what girls like?"

I put my hands on my hips. "Everybody knows more about girls than you, Callix,"

Even with him facing me, I could see Callix's tail dip between his legs from embarrassment. He scratched his head and looked away from me for a moment. "So...what do you think I should say?"

"Just tell her how you really feel,"

Callix rolled his eyes and looked into the tipi behind him. "Gee, thanks. There's no way I could fuck that up,"

As I walked closer to him, I thought about slapping him on the back for being rude. "I'm serious. Being open with your feelings shows that you're willing to be honest and that you're more than ready for a relationship. Trust me. Even if what you say is completely sappy, she'll respect you for it,"

He pulled his head out from the tipi and gazed at me with a look of worry in his eyes. "But what if she doesn't feel the same way?"

I almost told him "that's life", but decided not to, since it would have probably hurt his feelings. Instead, I went the reassuring route. "Nobody would spend as much time with you as she does if they didn't like you,"

Callix's eyes softened as he laughed. "Thanks,"

"Of course,"

"I'm not sure whether to feel offended or not," he said.

"Hey," I said with a shrug, "if you do start dating her, I'm sure you'll know what exactly you'll feel,"

A gunshot echoed throughout the camp.

Before I had time to react, Callix ran through the circle of tents with his gun already drawn. "Isabel!"

I drew my bow and readied an arrow as I soon followed behind him towards the shot.

When we both arrived at the entrance to the camp, we saw Isabel at the tree line, reloading her gun with her back against one of the trees. Without question, we took our places on either side of her, finding our own trees for cover as we did so.

Isabel finished reloading when we got into place. "There's Kreq here! I'm not sure how many there are, but I saw at least four or five,"

She leaned out from behind the safety of her tree and fired outwards into the woods.

I looked down at my bow in regret for not bringing a gun instead. The Kreq were probably using their own guns, so I knew my arrows would hardly make much of a difference.

I peaked out enough from behind my tree for my eyes to see into the forest. A few figures were visible and were about eighty paces away. I counted all of them before moving my head back behind my tree. "I see about five Kreq,"

"Damn it!" Callix cursed.

Callix stuck his gun out from behind the tree and held it close enough for its side to touch the bark. He fired and returned quickly behind cover before reloading, smoke still rising from the gun's tip. "One less now,"

"Good thing we got some ammo from that trader Meelo killed," I admitted, remembering Syta and Vern coming back with oodles of ammunition.

"What should we do?" Isabel asked, just before taking another shot. She scowled and I assumed that she had missed.

Since Callix was busy reloading, I answered her. "I say we run back to camp. We need help and we'd be a lot harder to shoot if we're running. We'll have to circle around these guys somehow, though,"

The husky looked at Callix, who didn't have a better idea. "It's better than staying here," he agreed.

Both Isabel and him tied their guns onto their backs again while I put away my bow.

When we were all ready, Isabel began counting. "On three. One...two...three!"

All three of us took off sprinting at full speed to the left. Callix and I were side-by-side, while Isabel followed closely behind. We traveled a good distance and began to turn to run directly towards camp. Eventually, the old Kreq camp was out of sight behind us.

A shot boomed and was followed by screaming.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw that Isabel had fallen onto her back in the snow.

No.

She had been shot in her right leg and blood began to seep out of an open wound that was just under her knee, which formed a red puddle around her. In an effort to stand up, she placed her knee up and her paw on the ground, only to yelp in pain before lowering her knee back down.

"Isabel!" Callix cried from beside me, before turning around and running to her aid.

I ran after him and tried to grab his tunic. "Callix, don't be stupid!"

When I caught up to him and placed my hand on his shoulder, Callix was bent over, examining Isabel's leg. "We have to go, Callix. If we don't get backup, she's going to die,"

Callix shook his head and continued to look at Isabel's wound. "No,"

"We can't stay here!" I said.

He rose with his back towards me. "I don't think you understand, Seq,"

My tail twitched as uneasiness spread throughout my body. "What?"

"You have to go back to camp and get the others. I have to stay here and hold them off,"

"I can't leave you both here!"

Callix didn't seem to hear me and drew his gun before taking cover behind a tree, just beside Isabel.

Once again, I tried to take him back with me. "Callix-"

"Go!" he screamed at me with his eyes engulfed in determination.

I didn't respond and yet Callix still looked at me with that unwavering gaze of his. Never had I seen him act and speak so firmly.

I was about to argue again, but was stopped by Isabel's soft whispering.

"Hurry, Seq,"

After taking a final look at both my friends, I turned and ran, knowing that I might never see either one of them alive again. The thought reminded me of Sebastian and Dew's distorted bodies being dragged into camp.

The idea was pushed from my mind when I heard a gunshot come from behind me and I began to run faster. I heard another shot not more than ten steps later. A second, a third and a fourth shot followed.

Then, a grim silence filled the forest.

I almost turned around right then to go back and save them, but I knew that it would have been suicide. With every step, my chest became heavy and my thoughts tortured me with the thought of Callix and Isabel lying together in a patch of bloody snow. Yet, I kept running.

When I finally made it back to camp, breathless, Fare, Teo and Syta greeted me.

Fare was the first to reach me and held a gun in her hands. "Seq, what happened? We heard shots!"

I stopped running and tried to catch my breath.

"Hey," Teo spoke up and lowered his gun. "Where's Callix and Isabel?"

"Isabel," I gasped for air, "got hurt...and Callix... stayed behind... He told me to...to get help,"

"Shit," Syta said.

"How many were there?" Teo asked me.

I gasped for more air, giving my throat a burning relief sensation. "Five...at least...maybe...more,"

Syta turned to Teo and Fare. "We need to send warriors now,"

Fare jumped in. "Seq should probably go since he knows where Callix and Isabel were,"

"Yeah," Teo agreed.

Syta quickly jogged away and shouted back at us. "I'll go tell Grix,"

When the jackal was gone, Teo turned his attention back towards me and asked more questions. "How badly was Isabel hurt?"

I could speak normally now, as long as my sentences were short. "She was just shot in the leg,"

Teo grunted for me to continue.

"I heard a couple of shots when I was running. Then, nothing,"

Fare's eyes slightly widened. "They may already be dead, then,"

Nobody spoke or even moved.

Thankfully, Syta returned with Grix, who walked with urgency in his step.

"Syta told me everything. How far away from camp were you when Isabel got shot?"

"We had barely left the Kreq's old camp," I told him.

Grix gave a sigh.

"What should we do?" Fare asked, without caring to hide the urgency in her voice.

Grix looked off into the forest beyond me, almost as if he was expecting to see Callix and Isabel come out from behind the trees. "I think it's best that you three go and have Seq show you where he last saw them. Taiya willing, they might still be there,"

Everybody gave an acknowledging nod and we set out in search of our friends.

It was awkward walking in front of a patrol for once. Usually, whenever I was at the front, I walked shoulder-to-shoulder with someone else, but I was the only one who knew where we were actually going, so I had to put up with the fur on my neck prickling at the very thought of everyone behind me, watching every step I took. I hoped that I wasn't accidentally taking them in the wrong direction.

Then, we were there.

"Here," I announced as I came to a halt and so did everyone behind me.

Fare stepped next to me. "Here? Are you sure?"

"Yes!" I declared and walked forward. "Isabel was lying right here and Callix was using that tree for cover,"

"Why aren't there any tracks or blood then?" Teo demanded of me.

He was right. There was no blood or tracks that had been left in the perfect layer of white crisp snow before us.

"Maybe," Fare began, "it was here, just not in this exact spot,"

Syta seemed to agree with that idea. "Maybe. Let's look around,"

Our patrol silently dispersed and began looking for any trace of Callix or Isabel, all except me.

I was so sure that this was where it happened.

After ignoring the directions in which my tribe mates were going, I trotted forward and crouched at the base of the tree that Callix had taken cover behind. I had to be absolutely sure. Slowly, I let my eyes drift closed and blocked out the sounds of my tribesmen, as well as the forest around us. I allowed the burning cool mid-morning air pass through my nostrils and into my chest. Something had to be here. Something. *Wait...*

My nose twitched and my eyes snapped open. I took another sniff to be sure and my nose detected the same thing. Yes. There was no mistaking what was on the trunk of the tree, not after double-checking. *Coyote*.

"I found Callix's scent!" I happily cried out for my tribesmen to hear me.

Pawsteps rushed towards me.

"Are you sure, Seq?" Syta asked when she arrived.

I rose from the base of the tree and smiled in delight. "Yes. It's barley here, but I can still smell it,"

"But," Fare interrupted my joyful moment, "where's all the blood?"

"Wait," Teo said, just before stepping forward and crouching down where I said that Isabel had been laying. The dhole set his gun onto the ground next to him and began digging through the snow with his bare hands. After excavating a heap of snow, Teo found a red layer of snow just half a leg's length into the ground.

"They covered her blood," Teo whispered in bewilderment.

"Probably did the same with their tracks as well," Syta added. "They could be anywhere by now,"

Fare looked around at our faces for even the slightest sign of hope. "Wait. What about Callix's scent? Can't we just follow that?"

I shook my head and felt something colder than snow growing inside my heart. "No. It's only on the tree,"

Teo rose from the ground, gun back in his hands. "Taiya help them,"