

Chapter 31

Seq Day 35

I sat on the floor next to Meelo in Sera's hut. While I updated him on what had happened that morning with Callix and Isabel, I noticed that his wounds didn't seem much better from the previous day.

"We searched for them everywhere," I groaned and rubbed my forehead. "We even went back and looked around the Kreq's old camp,"

Meelo's ears twitched and he gave me a look of disbelief. "And you didn't find any tracks or scents to follow?"

"No," I told him for probably the third time. "They must be using snow to cover their tracks, but I have no idea how they're hiding their scents,"

Meelo placed a gentle hand on top of mine and held it. "Hey,"

After realizing that I was now staring at the ground, I arched my neck and looked up at him.

His eyes looked into mine. "You did everything you could,"

I sighed and didn't pull my hand away from his. "I know, but I just feel like I caused this. Maybe, if I had stayed behind, they would still be here,"

"If you stayed behind, you probably wouldn't be here, either,"

Maybe he was right. I sat there, pondering all of the different possibilities that could have happened if I had stayed with Callix and Isabel.

I must have been quiet for a long time because Meelo asked me, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I told him. It was a lie.

When I grew quiet again, Meelo desperately tried to change the subject in an effort to comfort me. "So, Sera thinks I'll be ready to get out of here in a couple of days,"

My ears guiltily feel back. "Oh. Sorry. I forgot to ask how you're doing,"

At first I thought he was going to be offended, but, much to my surprise, he laughed instead. "That's okay. And when I'm better, I'll help you look for Callix and Isabel,"

I gave Meelo a grin. "I hope that's not *all* you'll help me with,"

He smiled and tightened his grasp on my hand. "Oh, that? I thought *that* was a given,"

My grin became a smile as I shrugged. "Just making sure,"

We kissed and hugged each other goodnight.

As the door closed behind me, I saw Sera out of the corner of my eye, leaning against the far side of her hut. Her eyes gazed out into the shroud of darkness over our camp, as she was lost in thought.

I sauntered over to her. "You know, you don't have to leave every time I visit. It's not like we're getting naked in there or anything," *Not that the idea hadn't crossed my mind.*

Sera raised her right hand and massaged the back of her neck. "I just prefer to not be in there when there's visitors. If I do, it feels like...I'm invading their space, like I'm an intruder. I don't know. It's just something I've always done,"

I leaned onto the wall of the hut next to Sera and rolled my eyes. "Please. You're taking care of people that would be dead if it weren't for you,"

She didn't seem convinced. Sera lowered her arm back down to her side and licked her lips. "Still, it feels weird,"

A toothy grin cut across my snout. "You know, if it makes you feel any better, you and I have both seen Meelo naked,"

Her ears fell back and her mouth fell open as I reminded her of when she had to put Meelo's clothes on him when he was unconscious. "How is that supposed to make me feel better?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. In a sense, I guess it kind of makes us family,"

Now it was Sera's turn to roll her eyes at me. "Thanks. And it wasn't like I wanted to see him naked! I had to get him out of those bloody rags,"

"Sure," I agreed, sarcastically. "I've seen what he looks like without clothes, Sera. No need to explain yourself to me,"

"Shut up,"

I laughed and leaned my head back against the wall, so that I stared up at the starry sky that night. Sera was probably the only Kyan other than Meelo who could tell me to shut up and get me to laugh. "Hey, how come you've never dated anybody?"

Sera's voice adapted a more serious tone now and her posture stiffened. "You know why,"

"Yeah, but I don't think 'because I need to focus on my work' is a very good reason,"

She didn't answer me at first, which made me think that she didn't hear me. As I turned my head to ask my question again, I saw Sera gazing outward again, only this time, her eyes seemed to be staring at something beyond the darkness that night. "I've just...never found anybody interesting like that,"

As she spoke, I noticed her tail twitch uneasily between her legs.

"Really? Guys or girls?"

"Well," Sera tried to explain, "I mean, I like the idea of having someone who's always there for me. I just don't really find anybody in camp 'hot'. I've always thought that maybe I'd end up together with a friend, since we would be so close already. But I'm too afraid of ruining a good friendship and making a total idiot out of myself to do that,"

I had never felt so fucking stupid in my entire life. Why did I have to ask her such a personal question and joke about it, too? *Taiya, why didn't you just take my tongue away?*

For an eternity, I stumbled to find words, any words at all. "I'm... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you about that,"

Sera shot me a glance that was reassuring. "No, it's fine. It feels good to talk about it with someone. I get so lonely, since most of the time I'm busy tending to sick people. And, when there's nobody to take care of, I just sit alone inside my hut.

Sometimes I wish that I was normal and had a mate to keep me company whenever I'm alone. Talking to you helps me a lot. You make feel less...worthless,"

What?

"Worthless?" I repeated. "Sera, you're not worthless. Without you, everybody in this camp would be dead,"

She lowered her eyes to the ground and shook her head. "No. If I wasn't here, someone else would be doing my job and it wouldn't be any different,"

I continued to look at her, but she did not gaze up at me. "Sera, just because you're not in a relationship doesn't mean you don't matter. Look at Grix, he's not in a relationship,"

The shepherd's hackles raised and her hands tightened into fist as they trembled. "That's because he's actually good at what he does. I'm just a useless old bitch who can't do anything properly. I couldn't even-" Sera choked on her own words and had to swallow to clear her throat. "I couldn't even kill myself right,"

Oh shit.

Sera...tried to kill herself? Why would she do that? She's saved lives and was even a great friend, who always had a listening ear ready. What could possibly make her that depressed?

"You...?" I said, but stopped myself. Should I mention suicide to her? She had mentioned it, so it might have been okay for me to talk about it.

Before I could make up my mind, Sera spoke again, this time with a shaking voice. "I tried to kill myself? Yeah. Hard to believe that the useless dog has feelings, huh? It was right after all those people died from the tainted meat. I saw parents, children, brothers, sisters, boyfriends and girlfriends die all because I couldn't figure out what was making them so sick. I couldn't-"

Sera let out a tiny sob and a tear droplet rolled down her cheek onto the snow. "I couldn't save any of them. They're all dead and it's my fault, just because I couldn't do my damn job. You wouldn't believe how many goodbyes I had to watch or how many people begged their dying loved ones to just hold on so I could help them. I was supposed to help them and in the end I couldn't. It was all because of some tainted meat, Seq. That's it. Not some horrible disease. Not war. Just a few pieces of food. How pathetic is that? If I can't protect people from some sick dead prey, how am I supposed to be a shaman?"

Finally, Sera looked up from the snow at me with red puffy eyes. She lifted her hand and pointed to the scar on her nose. "This is my constant reminder of how much of a useless failure I am. I was alone in my hut, about to slit my own throat, when Grix showed up and wrestled the knife from me. I probably would have gotten the best of him if I wasn't sobbing so hard. Just as Grix pulled my knife away, it cut me. He talked to me for a while, trying to convince me that I had a reason to live, all the while I kept thinking about taking the knife back from him and slitting my throat. I want to die sometimes, Seq. It's horrible, I know. But I don't deserve to live. I don't. Why should I still be here while all those Kyan aren't? Why me? I'm not important! I'm not special. I don't have any unique talents. And whenever people look at me, they remember how I failed to save their loved ones. That's all I am, a constant burden and reminder of their misery. I just wish I could go away and make everybody's lives easier,"

Sera's words made my body grow numb. How could she think so lowly of herself? She made a mistake, sure, but she tried her best and that's all that really counted. My mind reflected on my conversation with Grix the night before when I had asked him what he thought happened to people that commit suicide after they die. *Are you asking because of what happened to Meelo's brother?* He must have thought that I knew how Sera tried to kill herself, but asked me if it was about Meelo's brother just in case.

I looked at Sera, whose eyes were now completely covered by a layer of tears. She buried her face into her hands and started crying. In between her sobs, the shepherd started saying that she was sorry and that she didn't mean to depress me. How could someone so good think so badly of themselves, especially Sera? I thought about Pytle and how he killed himself because he couldn't bear being gay. I thought about the pain that Meelo felt when his brother killed himself and wondered just how much it would have hurt to lose Sera that way. It made me sick.

"Bullshit," I said.

Sera's ears perked up and she lifted her face from inside her hands. "What?"

My hands shook uncontrollably and I rose up from the wall. "Bullshit!"

I walked closer to her and took her hands into mine. She looked down at me in confusion and tried pulling away. My eyes began to water. "You are an amazing, beautiful and unique person. You have a perspective on things that nobody else can say that they have. You are loved and worth listening to. Never forget that. Now say it,"

Her eyes widened and her hands stopped trying to pull free of mine. "What?"

"Say it!" I nearly screamed as I began to cry. "Say it,"

She blinked and saw that I wasn't going to let go without her repeating what I had said. "I..." Her tears made it difficult to speak. "I am beautiful and unique. I have a perspective that nobody else has. I am loved and worth listening to,"

"Again,"

"W-What?"

"Say it again!"

She seemed adamant about not repeating it again, but she did so anyways. "I'm beautiful and unique. I have a special..." She sniffed and a few fresh tears emerged from her eyes. "I have a special perspective. I am loved and worth listening to,"

"Say it again,"

"I..." Her entire body shook as the next wave of sobs came forth. "I'm beautiful...and unique. I have a...special perspective. I am loved and...worth listening to,"

Without a single warning, Sera buried her muzzle into my neck and continued to cry hysterically.

As her tears dripped down my fur, I wrapped my arms around her, stroking the back of her neck gently, letting her know that everything was okay. "Sera, it's my turn to talk now, okay? You don't have to say anything. I know what you feel makes you want to kill yourself. I can't say that I know what that feels like, but I do know that I would miss you if you ever decided one day to leave. My life wouldn't be the same and I don't care what that sad part of you says, I would miss you more than

you can imagine. Sera, I love you. Don't ever forget that. Even when things get bad for you, just know that there will always be one person here for you. Me. If you ever want to die, or just cry for no reason, come find me and I'll listen. Don't think that you'll be bothering me because helping you is much better than you being dead. I love you, Sera. Never think any differently. Accept yourself for your successes as well as your failures and you'll be able to see why I am proud to call you my friend. Don't give up. Be strong. Please. For me,"

I let Sera finish her crying after that. She wept for a little longer than I thought she was going to, but that was all right. I was just happy to she was still alive.

When she finally stopped crying, Sera gently pulled her head up and wiped away the excess tears that had been on her cheeks. I let go of her and asked if she was okay. She said she was.

"Sera?"

Her eyes blinked and her ears twitched. "Yeah?"

"Thanks for taking care of Meelo,"

"Oh," Sera said and shrugged. "It's my job,"

"He means a lot to me and I'm grateful that you are the one taking care of him. I wouldn't trust anybody, but you,"

The shepherd's eyes widened when she realized that I truly meant what I was saying. "You're... You're welcome, Seq,"

I gave her a little wave, just before walking away. "Goodnight,"

As I brushed by her, Sera looked down at me and smiled. "Goodnight,"