

Chapter 37

Meelo

Day 42

Meelo.

My eyes snapped open and I sat upright in my bed. Seq was still asleep and breathing quietly with his back pressed against my side as he faced the door, so I knew he didn't whisper my name.

I looked over at my window and saw little streaks of black around the border of the pelt that hung over it. *Probably still a little while before sunrise.*

After thinking that it might have just been the wind, I lied back down and tried to go back to sleep.

Meelo.

With a flick of my ears, I sat back up in my bed. It definitely wasn't the wind. Yet, I didn't recognize the speaker, whoever it was. They couldn't have been a Kyan. And, if it was a Kreq, why hadn't they already killed me?

I glanced down at Seq and figured that I should wake him up. After I lowered my hand down onto Seq's shoulder, I gently shook him.

Do not wake him.

The words made my hair stand up and all of my blood chill in terror. Whoever was speaking could see me, yet nobody else was in my hut other than Seq.

I peered over at my window, which was still covered by the pelt, so nobody could see inside. What was going on?

"Why should I listen to you?" I whispered.

At first, I thought the voice hadn't heard me so I opened my mouth to repeat what I had just said. The words never left my mouth.

If I were going to harm you, would I have not done so already?

The voice's words matched with what I was already thinking and made perfect sense.

"What do you want, then?" I asked.

Come outside.

It became apparent to me that I was probably dreaming, so I got out of bed and walked to the door. "Fine,"

In case I wasn't dreaming, I stepped over Seq's body and got dressed. After I finished getting ready, I approached my door with my knife drawn. If I was going to meet some stranger in the middle of the night, I wasn't going to take any chances.

I pushed open the door and stepped out into a perfect coat of darkness. As I released the door and shoved it back behind me, I looked around for whoever had called me.

After a moment, the darkness wasn't becoming easier to see through. Why weren't my eyes adjusting? Somehow, it was even darker outside than it was inside my hut. I looked up and saw that the stars and moon weren't out. Maybe that was why I couldn't see anything. There were probably clouds overhead that were blocking everything in the sky.

Wait.

My door hadn't made a noise when it closed. I was sure that I had pushed it hard enough.

I turned around and tried to reach for what should have been an open door. Instead, my hand found nothing.

I now gazed at the space behind me, where my hut should have been. All I found was the blackness that surrounded me. My hut was just there, though. I hadn't walked anywhere. What happened?

Suddenly, a grim thought entered my mind. When I had stepped outside of my hut, had I been murdered by whoever had been calling my name?

I looked around at the empty space around me. Was this death? Just this? If I was dead, maybe I was some kind of ghost.

I drew my arm close and poked myself in the chest with a single finger. It didn't go through, so I figured that I wasn't a spirit. Then, as I stared down at my finger, which had failed to pass through my chest, I realized that I could see myself perfectly clear. Usually at night, you can see yourself with a little darkness around your body. Yet, now I was able to clearly see myself, as if it was the middle of the day. Every hair on my body was perfectly visible, despite there not being a single ray of light anywhere. Even the ground beneath my paws was of the black nothingness.

I bent over and pushed down with my free hand, feeling a force as I did so that was similar to ground. Yet, nothing was below me or above me. Fear grew inside my chest. I was alone in nothing.

Meelo.

The voice came from behind me and I quickly turned around, only to be met with a flash of light that sent my head spinning. I saw every color imaginable: white, black, purple, pink, green, orange, blue, red, yellow, brown and many other colors I had never seen before, as they began to burn the insides of my eyes. Even with my hands outstretched in front of me, the light was too bright.

"Taiya, make it stop!" I screamed.

Just as fast as the lights had appeared, they vanished.

I lowered my hands slowly, afraid that the lights would come back. They didn't, but now, I wasn't alone anymore.

In front of me, where there had been nothing but empty space a moment ago, stood a deer. This deer didn't stand on four legs, though. It stood on two and held the rest of its body upright just like I did. The creature was also a full arm's length taller than me. Its colors were normal, yet they were much more vibrant than a normal deer's. The white on its belly made snow seem grey and tainted, while the brown was darker than any tree bark.

I blinked and my fur grew warm. Quickly, I covered my eyes and hid my face. The deer wasn't wearing any clothes. On the bright side, at least I knew it was a girl.

"Why do you hide?" the doe questioned me in a soft, yet concerned, voice.

"Um," I said. "I don't know if you've noticed, but your naked,"

A moment of silence passed, which was followed by the deer's response. "You are not wearing clothes, either,"

I snorted and opened my hands. "Yes I a-,"

As I peered down my body, I saw my exposed chest, legs and sheath all out in the open for the doe to see. My knife, which had been in my hand, was also gone.

I let out a squeal as I covered my crotch with both hands to make sure that no part of me was hanging out.

I looked back up at the deer, which had not moved from where she had stood. "What did you do with all my stuff?"

The doe's face failed to show even the tiniest emotion. "You never had it in the first place,"

My tolerance ran low, mostly from being naked. "Yes I did! I came out of my hut with my clothes and now I'm standing here in the middle of nowhere, naked!"

The deer only shook her head. "You are dreaming,"

"Great,"

"It was the only way that I could speak with you,"

I nearly raised my arm to point a finger at her, but then I remembered that my hands were covering my balls. "Really? Cause I've had a lot of conversations before and I was wearing clothes during plenty of them!"

"Well," the doe said, rolling her eyes, "being a goddess has its drawbacks,"

Every single hair on my body prickled and I became increasingly aware of the fact that I was holding my sheath. "You're...Taiya?"

She stood still. "Yes, Meelo. I am Taiya,"

My mouth had become drier than a bone. "How do... How do I know that it's really you?"

"You will see soon enough,"

With that, Taiya turned and walked away. After a few steps, she turned back around and looked at me, waiting for me to follow.

Seeing as I really had no other choice, I followed her and kept my hands placed between my legs.

When I reached her, she did not move. She only stared down at me. "You do not have to cover yourself. I am the protector of these woods. I am familiar with how and when its inhabitants breed,"

I considered saying that I would prefer it if I could keep covering myself, but, after realizing that she wouldn't move unless I did so, I drew my hands up and away from my privates.

She began walking again and I followed, assuming that she was pleased with my obedience.

As we walked, I became more and more tempted to break the silence between us, but was afraid of saying something stupid. Yet, the further we walked, the more my questions nagged at me.

"If you wish to ask me questions, you may," Taiya said, almost as if she sensed what I was thinking.

My ears fell back. "Are you sure?"

"Certainly. Not many receive the opportunity to meet me before they die. You, on the other hand, have the chance to ask me anything that you desire. I surely will not try to stop you,"

I was silent for a moment. Then, I asked the singular question that I had asked myself my entire life. "Why was I born with such hateful parents?"

Taiya didn't seem off-put by my question, as if she had expected me to ask it. "Nobody chooses their parents. You simply must deal with what you are born with,"

My tail swished. I had been expecting a much better answer than that. "But aren't parents suppose to love their kids no matter what? How can Dooka and Riter have hated me for something that I can't help?"

To my surprise, Taiya showed no sign of frustration and continued to patiently answer me while we walked. "You, me, or anybody else cannot control how others think, no matter how ignorant their thoughts might be. What truly matters is the family you make, not the one that you are born into. Blood does not create a family. Love, acceptance and closeness do. Anybody who does not show you any of those characteristics does not deserve to be a part of your family,"

I thought over her answer and couldn't find a single problem with it. In my short time of living with the Kyan, I knew what the deer goddess had said was true.

This led to my next question. "What happens when we die?"

Abruptly, Taiya stopped walking and so did I. "Watch,"

Quickly, I became afraid that Taiya's purpose for visiting was to take me away. Luckily, I was proven wrong as she raised her arm and pointed to something in the distance.

There, before us, were rows of white lights that ran up and down, like trees. They hadn't been there before when I asked her my last question. These pillars of light were also spread as far out to our right and left as I could see. They weren't as bright as Taiya's lights from earlier or even as beautiful. Yet, they still glowed with a discreet elegance.

I walked forward and stood in front of the nearest white pillar. As I stared at it, I asked Taiya the most obvious question. "What are they?"

Taiya stepped to my right and gazed at the light as well. "You asked what happens when you die,"

My head snapped to the side and I gazed at Taiya in confusion. "We turn into lights and stay here? In nothingness?"

"No. These lights before you are merely reflections of those who have passed on. Just as the Kyan say, you remain in the forest with me forever. Although, it is not the forest that you may know. The real spirits are currently residing in their own camp, which is much larger in scale than yours. There is no pestilence, starvation nor wounds. Prey is endless. Nobody argues or fights. All they do is laugh, hunt and share stories from when they were living. They even have feasts,"

"Feasts?" I asked.

The deer goddess nodded and smiled. "Yes. It is a custom to have a large feast when a new soul joins, not just for the spirits of the Kyan, but the Kreq spirits, too. The feasts are even grander if it is more than one person has died in a single day,"

"Why do the Kreq get to join?"

"They live in the forest as well, Meelo. It is their home just as much as it is yours,"

"Then, what, does that mean Dooka's hunting prey and laughing his ass off right now?" I asked, rage starting to build up inside of me.

The deer goddess shook her head and her smile faded. "No. I do not know what happened to Dooka, or what happens to others that preform deeds equally as cruel as his. They simply become lost,"

"So," I tried my best not to sound impatient, "what about the lights?"

Taiya turned her head and looked down at me. "What about them?"

"I asked if we become them and you just told me that we don't. So why are the important?"

Taiya turned her gaze back forward at the white pillar before us and I followed her example. "Yes, it is true, you do not become these lights when you meet your inevitable fate. In fact, you are always lights, from the time that you are born to the time that you die; you are a beautiful light that shines brightly in this world. Unfortunately, as the living, you cannot see how truly magnificent you are. All you are able to see is fur color, species, gender, height, weight and sexuality. That is why there is so much misery in the world. Living beings only see the differences in each other and choose to look down upon those that differ from them, rather than see the beauty that each of you contains. You cannot see the creativity, gentleness, imagination or the love that resides in every person as I can. It hurts me deeply when the living argue over such petty matters and push away their true selves, rather than channel their inner talents. I only wish that everyone could see what they really were created as and not the shell that they dwell inside of,"

I pondered the goddess's words as I continued to stare into the light. Who had this person been during their life? Did they have children? Were they a talented hunter? Could they have been a past Kyan leader? I wondered if they would have been friends with me if they were still alive.

"Would you like to know who this is?" Taiya asked.

For a moment, I only stared at the light, considering Taiya's proposal. Then, I slowly turned my head to look up at her and I nodded.

Gracefully, Taiya reached down and took my hand in hers. Her touch was warm and welcoming. Gently, she guided my hand up and towards the light.

At first, I thought that the light would be solid, like rock. However, both of our hands penetrated the light's warm surface and reached its center. The light had a thickness to it, almost like water. I spread my fingers and let the light pour between the empty spaces between them.

Everything began to hurt.

Nothing mattered and neither did I. No. I was much more pitiful than that. I was shit. I was nothing. Nobody would miss me if I suddenly vanished. I hated the world for how ugly it truly was, but not as much as I hated myself. I could have crawled into a hole to die and nobody would have fucking care. They didn't care if I cried, so they certainly wouldn't care if I died. I would slit my wrists or drown myself and let sweet relief wash over me as I left this shithole behind me. Why? Why couldn't I just be normal? It would be so much easier. Everything would be great. Why did I have to be gay? There wasn't a chance that I could ever be loved. Who could ever love me? I had no chance, or ever had one. If only I could be strong like my brother, Meelo.

Taiya released my hand and I wasted no time pulling it out from the light. I hadn't noticed before, but now I realized that tears had begun to roll down my face.

Because I had been so stunned, Taiya spoke as she gazed down at me. "Those emotions that you felt were those of the dead person. They are an echo of the heart and mind during the spirits life,"

I turned to Taiya with tears still forming at my eyes. "T-That was...Pytle?"

Taiya nodded.

I turned my head and looked back at the light, which was my brother's. How could he have felt all of those things? Didn't he know that I would always be there to love and support him? While keeping my eyes on the light, I asked Taiya, "Why didn't he ever come and tell me what he was feeling?"

"Your brother was taught all of his life that being gay was wrong," Taiya said. "He saw how they treated you and, when he realized that he was the same, Pytle became terrified. He began to tell himself that he was not gay, just curious. Your brother suppressed himself and yet, as much as he tried to hide from his sexuality, it always found him. As time progressed, his emotions ate away at him. First, it started off with him wishing he were not gay, which led to him wishing that he had been what he was taught to be 'normal'. With those feelings of misery, Pytle drew inward and the anguish tore at him. His emotions went into a spiral and he soon began contemplating suicide. Yet, despite his hatred of the world, he loved you, Meelo. Pytle loved you more than anything. He idolized you and wished that he could be just like you,"

I turned to the deer goddess and my eyes burned with more tears. "Then why did he kill himself? How could he have done something like that, knowing that he would hurt me?"

Taiya looked away from me and into the light. "When a person is overcome with so much sorrow, the sufferer wants nothing more than their pain to end. Every single day, every step and every breath is a war against themselves. The sunlight mocks them because it knows that they have awoken, for nothing is more relieving to someone in that state of mind than sleep. In their dreams, they don't have to live up to standards or deal with relationships. They are able to be free of any struggle. Eventually, if the pain becomes too great, they take their own lives because, everywhere that they turn, they see their faults instead of their beauty and potential. They are in so much pain that they believe only death will comfort them. They think that it will solve everything. Can you imagine living everyday with those feelings? Do you know what it feels like to be so miserable that your tears become comforting? The pain becomes so great that they forget about others, not because they are selfish, but because they are overpowered by their suffering. It is the only thing that they know and it poisons their entire world,"

My eyes became drenched with tears and I began to sob. *Pytle...why?*

Taiya, as if reading my thoughts once again, answered, "As a former Kreq, Meelo, I am sure you understand why your brother spoke to no one about his sexuality. They would have ostracized him and made him feel worse. He could not turn to you, either, even though you would have helped him, because he deemed himself unworthy. He felt that if he asked for your help, he would have been a burden to you,"

I quit my sobbing and wiped away the fresh tears from my face. "Why did you want to speak with me?"

Taiya remained silent and continued staring into the light.

Frustrated, I raised my voice. "Come on! Why would you bring me here and tell me all of this stuff? Just for fun?"

Slowly, Taiya turned her head and looked at me. "Meelo," she whispered.

My fur bristled and my ears flicked. "Don't 'Meelo' me! What is it? What is so important that you have to tell me?"

With a sigh, Taiya hung her head a little, but kept her eyes on me. "The battle between the Kreq and the Kyan has never been avoidable. Ever since the border was established between the two, the tribes were destined to have a war. And yet..." She paused for a moment and then continued to speak. "Despite all of the bloodshed and the tears that have happened, and will eventually happen, you will be the one who loses the most,"

What could she possibly have meant by that? I was about to ask what she was talking about when a realization hit me and my heart sank inside my chest.

Seq.

A burning mixture of rage and desperation boiled inside my chest and I took a step closer to the goddess. "No! Don't hurt him! I'll do anything you want! Anything! Please, just let Seq be okay!"

Taiya simply shook her head. "It is not my will for this burden to fall upon you,"

I stepped closer and threw my hands onto Taiya's shoulders, holding them, tightly. "Then stop it! Don't let Seq die. Please!"

Nothing changed in the deer goddess's expression. "This is the only way the fighting will stop. It cannot continue any further than it already has. Meelo, I am sorry. I wish that there was another way, but there is not. I have looked at the war from every possible angle and this is the only solution that will work. I am sorry, Meelo. I am so sorry,"

Everything stopped.

I jolted up in my bed, breathing heavily. The deer goddess was nowhere around me, nor any of her lights. Instead, the walls of my hut surrounded me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the orange bare back of Seq, who slept soundly next to me. A sadness washed over me as I recalled Taiya's words.

You will be the one who loses the most.

I laid myself down next to Seq and pressed my chest against him. My arms wrapped around his stomach and pulled him close enough that I could feel his breath.

Why did he have to die?

No. I wasn't going to just stand by and let anything happen to Seq. I made a silent promise that I would make sure we grew old together. Never would one of us leave the other alone and miserable. We would be together, always.

I closed my eyes and let sleep wash over me, as Seq continued his calm breathing.

You will be the one who loses the most.