

Chapter 40

Rye Day 45

The ash remains of the Kreq's old camp lay beneath my moccasins.

Why did I have to come? I was good at making weapons and beds, not looking into damn fires. Well, I guess it could have been worse. No Kreq were shooting at me and I wasn't being burned alive by the dying flames. I also had a gun in my hands, which gave me more comfort than Teo and Syta's presences. A weapon can't stab you in the back and leave your ass for dead in the snow.

"Why would the Kreq do this?" Syta asked out loud.

Teo held his gun in one hand as he squatted down to look at the burnt remains. "I'm not sure. It's not like they forgot anything important. Why risk coming back?"

Syta didn't respond.

As much as I hated to do so, I had to agree with Teo. It was a completely fucking stupid decision. But, it wasn't as if the Kreq were very bright to begin with. An idea came to me and I realized that nobody was watching behind us to make sure we weren't about to get kicked in our asses.

I turned around and surveyed the entrance to the camp, placing my ready index finger on the trigger of my gun as I did so. My fur began to prickle as I imagined Kreq eyes staring down the barrels of guns at us.

"This could be a trap," I said, while still keeping my attention ahead of me.

"What?" Syta asked, as if I had just told her that I was straight.

My hands awkwardly shifted the gun in their grasp and I examined for any sign of Kreq. My eyes saw nothing. Fuck me. Even my ears couldn't pick up anything. I raised my gun higher, driving its butt into my shoulder so hard that it felt as though it were about to snap the bone. "Think about it. They've ambushed us here before. And who wouldn't see the smoke? We're in the perfect spot, too. They could be circling us right now and we wouldn't know the difference,"

I could hear Teo stand up behind me and knew that he rolled his eyes based on his tone. "Don't be so paranoid,"

After turning my head over my shoulder, I bared my teeth at the dhole. "I'm just saying it's possible,"

Teo glared his fangs right back at me. "Possibilities are never useful. Especially when all they do is scare us for no reason,"

Syta looked at the tree line on the elevated ground above us that circled the camp. "He may have a point, Teo,"

Teo turned and walked deeper into the burned camp. "Yeah. Or maybe he's been locked in his hut for too long,"

Syta followed him and, after a quick glance back at the entrance of the camp, so did I. If we died, at least it wouldn't be my fucking fault. Still, even as I followed closely behind Syta and Teo, Teo's little remark bothered me. What did he know? He was probably just compensating for having a small dick.

"I see something," Teo whispered, just loudly enough for us to hear as hear as he cam to a halt.

Syta and I stopped. We didn't dare to ask him what had caught his attention. Then, Syta must have seen it, too, because she walked over and stood next to him. Her head, like Teo's, was now slightly arched enough that I could tell she was looking at something on the ground.

I took a step forward to see if I could look past them and see what was so interesting. Once I realized that they were blocking whatever it was, I trotted over and stood next to Syta. It took me no longer than a heartbeat for me to find what they were staring at. I joined both Syta and Teo in their stillness.

In between the ponds of ash before us, there was a tiny circle of untainted snow. It was almost as if it was meant to be saved from the blackness that encircled it. Yet, instead of being white, it was drenched in the dark velvet color that can only be created by blood. That's not why we stood around with dicks up our asses, though. No. What had made us become quiet was what had been placed, almost like an offering to a god, in the center of the red drenched circle. A severed ear lay on it's back and faced up at the open sky above us. Based on the still red-pinkish flesh that outlined the base of where the ear used to touch the head, I guessed that it had been freshly removed that morning. The species were unmistakable. Coyote.

I heard Syta whisper under her breath, "Callix,"

"They knew we were going to come," I said. Surprisingly, I didn't even feel the urge to laugh at the double entendre.

Gently, Teo bent down and picked up the ear with two fingers. He kept his eyes on it until he stood back up and put the blood-soaked ear into his quiver. He turned to us. "We should go,"

Just as we began to leave without any argument, my ears heard something come from the trees above us.

I was about to tell Teo, but I guessed he had heard it, since he now sprinted back towards the entrance of the camp with his gun ready. "Come on!" he shouted back at Syta and I, as he reached the bottom of the ground and began to follow it up around the camp to where the noise had come from.

While I hated being told what to do, especially by Teo, I followed him with Syta running just behind me.

While the ground beneath us began to rise, my ears could hear frantic steps just ahead of us. Then, I remembered that Teo and Syta couldn't hear as well as I could. "I hear two different sets of steps just up ahead!" I shouted for whoever was listening.

Teo quickly picked up his pace, so I assumed that he had heard me. In no time at all, he became thirty steps ahead of Syta and I.

The ground soon was not at a slope anymore and was now flat, as well as covered with trees. Based on the current speed of the two sets of steps just ahead of us, I knew that we were going to catch up. Why were they moving so slowly, though? Oh well. Catching up to them was all that mattered.

Out of nowhere, Teo stopped and drew his gun up to take aim, just before firing into the woods.

CRACK!

The dhole lowered his weapon and continued running. He disappeared into the trees.

As we neared where Teo had vanished, I heard no more pawsteps. *But how?* There were two different sets of steps and Teo had only fired one shot. Unless the bullet had hit one of the Kreq and circled back around to hit the other, there should still have been one running away.

A few steps into the swarm of trees, we saw Teo standing vigilant over two Kreq, who were both on the ground. We stopped just behind him and took in the scene.

Both were cheetahs, one female and one male. Neither of them had a gun on them. The female was on her back in the snow with her fur and clothes stained with a wound that was just above her breast. Blood rained out of her and down off the side into the snow, forming a dark stain. Her eyes grew dreary and they lacked focus. She was still alive, but wouldn't be for very long.

The male knelt down with his back to us, who I now assumed was the female's mate. He ran his hand over her head and ears as he tried to softly comfort her with careful whispers. While his whispers were low and unable to be heard by any of us, it was easy to tell that sobs and tears labored them. He placed his hand in hers and held it closely up to his chest.

She said something, but I couldn't tell what. Her eyes flicked to us for quick moment. I could see the fear in her light brown eyes as she took in our every detail. The female began to quiver like a child who is frightened of a thunderstorm. What did the Kreq think of us? Did they see us as savages who ate their young? The idea was entirely possible, based on how the dying girl looked at our patrol. Her eyes drifted back to her mate. From where I stood, I could tell that her breath was slowing down, based on how her chest rose and fell very rarely. She joined her mate in tears and began shaking her head as she continued to speak to him.

Then, her chest stopped moving, her gaze relaxed and her head lay back in the snow beneath her, as if she was a warm bed. If it weren't for the blood, I would swear that it was like watching someone fall asleep after a long stressful day.

The dead female's mate still held onto her hand as he began to cry even louder now. His body began to tremor and his screams chilled my spine with their agony. We didn't stop him from mourning. Shit, none of us even moved. Who could deny him his last moments with her?

After the crying screams had stopped, the cheetah placed his mate's hand back on her chest and stood up. He didn't turn to look at us, though, like I thought he would. We all just stood there in the thick silence of the moment.

Teo cleared his throat and spoke first. "You have to come with us now,"

The cheetah raised his arm and rubbed it against his face, probably to wipe away his tears. After letting his arm fall back to his side, he finally rotated and faced us. His eyes were red, which only added to the hatred they held for us. The Kreq warrior looked at each of our guns and then glanced at our faces. His eyes rested on Teo when he spoke. "That was my mate, Leipa. She was pregnant with our first child,"

I looked down past Syta at Teo, whose eyes were now widened in disbelief. I had never killed a pregnant woman, but I couldn't imagine it feeling very rewarding.

Leipa must have only been pregnant for a moon or two, because she was still thin. Maybe that's why Leipa and her mate didn't move very fast to begin with. Leipa probably wasn't as fast as her mate and he didn't want to leave her alone, especially with a kid on the way.

The cheetah took a step closer, which made Syta and I raise our weapons. He took one more step and stopped. I wasn't sure if he only planned on taking one step in the first place or if the fear of our weapons stopped him. Either way, he stood still.

"My name is Hurq," he told us, while keeping his eyes on Teo. "We were going to name our child Silo if it was a boy or Jiya if it was a girl,"

I could hear Teo swallow to clear his mouth. As much as he tried to hide it, Hurq's words had startled him, probably because he now realized he had shot a pregnant woman. "Why are you telling me this?"

Hurq blinked and continued to stay still. "Because I want you to remember who you have murdered and who you are about to murder,"

Teo seemed to take offense to that. "Who says you're going to die?"

Hurq's tail flicked at Teo's question. "Don't be stupid. In what scenario do I walk away from this without a scratch? How many of us have you killed? What does one more dead Kreq matter to you?"

"Look," Teo said, still trying to sound as though he wasn't bothered by what Hurq had just told him, "I'm sorry about what happened to your mate-"

"Leipa," Hurq told him.

"Leipa," Teo said. "I'm sorry that Leipa and your child are dead. I really am,"

Hurq stared at Teo, hate still burning in his eyes. "If you were truly sorry, Kyan, you would take that gun in your hands, press it against your temple and pull the trigger. You have no idea the meaning of sadness. You deserve to die, not her, not my Leipa,"

"Enough!" I yelled, as I got fed up with all of the guilt bullshit Hurq was trying to put on Teo. "Either come with us now or try to run and I blow your fucking brains out. You can join your mate over there and bleed out. I don't fucking care. So it's your choice,"

Syta and Teo remained quiet next to me, probably as their mouths hung open like jackasses.

The cheetah on the other hand lifted his arms in the air for all of us to see and looked down at me, as I continued to point the barrel of my gun at him. "By all means, let's go then,"

At first I wasn't sure what option he had picked, but he slowly walked towards us just before circling around and heading back towards our camp. Meanwhile, I kept my gun locked on him and my finger steady on the trigger.

Teo passed me and followed behind the cheetah. As his shoulder collided against mine, he whispered, "Fucker,"

After a moment, I glanced to my side and saw Syta standing there, looking at me with gaping eyes. Then, she followed Teo just before shaking her head.

Well fuck both of you!

I lowered my gun and began walking as well.

We had just passed the burnt remains of the Kreq camp when Hurq spoke. "I need to piss,"

I was about to tell the Kreq to shove it, but Teo answered before I had the chance. "Fine. Just don't try anything,"

Hurq slowly lumbered over to a tree and fumbled with his bottoms, just before a yellow stream began to pour out onto the bark.

"You're letting him piss?" I barked at Teo.

The dhole was clearly in no mood for my opinion. "His mate just died. I think he's entitled to a little sympathy,"

My grip on my gun tightened and I felt the blood in my fingers beginning to burn. "We don't have time for this! Did you forget that we found Callix's ear back there? This asshole probably put it there! He may have been the one who cut it off! You think he deserves our pity? Do you think he showed Callix any fucking mercy just before he sawed off his ear?"

Teo took a step closer to me and seemed to double in his size. "That doesn't change the fact that he lost his mate and his child,"

"Fuck that bitch and her little brat! He's alive and they're dead. That's all that matters! We can't keep focusing on them. We have to deal with him!"

Teo pulled back a little and raised his head as if I were a pile of dung he stepped in. "Oh, I forgot. What do you know about losing someone you love?"

I could have broken his little neck with the butt of my gun and made him cry like a pussy in the snow. I didn't. It certainly was tempting, though. He thought he was so smug with that little bitchy remark. Fuck him. He could go suck a dick. As I looked up at Teo, who kept starring down at me like some kind of god, I whispered, "Everything,"

Hurq slowly walked over to us. "Are you two faggots done arguing?"

Neither Teo nor I broke the death stares we were giving each other.

Syta finally spoke up. "You both are pathetic. Hurq, start walking,"

Hurq obeyed the jackal and began trotting towards camp once more. Syta followed behind him.

Teo turned and left me there standing alone in the woods.

I watched them go for a moment. All three of them thought they were so damn smart. Teo tried acting all macho by running his mouth, Hurq thought his mate's death made him entitled to pity and Syta tried playing mommy with us. Sometimes, I wondered why I put up with all of their bullshit.

I began to walk.

When we got back to camp, Eirok was on guard duty and approached us with his rifle in hand while he stared at the Hurq in bewilderment. "Where did you guys find him?"

His mate, Syta, answered him. "This guy was at the Kreq's old camp. He probably was the one burned it down, but we're not sure why,"

It struck me as odd that she didn't mention Leipa's death, or the child the cheetah has carried inside her. Maybe it was because Syta was a mother herself and felt sorry for Hurq. I didn't care enough to ask. I had already fucked myself over once that day by talking.

Eirok nodded. "I'll walk with you to Grix's hut,"

When our group found Grix, he wasn't in his own hut. Instead, he was walking towards us down the center of camp. He probably saw us before we even saw him. Oh well. It made everything a lot easier.

Once Grix stopped in front of us, he spoke. "Where was he?"

Teo took it upon himself to speak. "We found him and another Kreq at their old camp, which they both burned down,"

Grix blinked. "Where's the other one?"

Teo seemed to be taken back by the question. "I'm sorry?"

"The other Kreq. You said there was second one,"

Noticeably, Teo's shoulder sank a little and his ears flattened. "I shot her. They were both running and I..." Speech seemed to have forsaken him.

Hurq opened his mouth and screamed at the top of his lungs. "Your warrior gunned down my mate like she was prey! She didn't do anything! She was pregnant with our child and he murdered her!"

Grix's eyes widened and he stared at Hurq in a lost trance. "I'm... I'm sorry to hear about that,"

"Grix," Teo spoke again.

Now, Grix's eyes shifted back to Teo.

The dhole removed his quiver from his back and set the bottom of it gently in the snow. He slid his arm inside of it and pulled it back out, only now making a fist. Teo then held out his closed hand, just before opening it. In the middle of his hand, Teo held Callix's severed ear, which was still stained with a layer of blood.

Grix stared at the ear for a moment as it lay in Teo's hand. He looked back at Hurq, only now with no pity in his eyes. "Where are they?"

Hurq was silent.

"Where are they?" Grix demanded again. "Tell me what you've done to them! Tell me now before I-"

"You'll what?" Hurq asked, softly. "You'll slaughter me, just like your warrior did my mate and my child? I may never see her again, even if you do kill me, but I know that no matter what happens, I'm taking you with me,"

Out of nowhere, Hurq reached his hand behind his back and pulled out a small gun that he had been hiding in the waistline of his bottoms. He drew the weapon and pointed it at Grix before anybody could stop him.

CRACK!

The Kreq warrior still clutched the gun in his hand as he crumbled onto the ground and while the blood that poured from the back of his head splattered into the snow. Without making a single noise, he laid on the ground as a dark pool of scarlet formed around his cracked head, his body shaking in the snow at our moccasins, just before growing still.

The wind was silent and so were all of the Kyan. The only audible noise was that of the soggy splashes of Hurq's blood being poured out onto the snow amongst bits and pieces of bone.

Everybody turned their heads to see me, standing there with my gun, which now had a stream of smoke crawling out of its empty mouth.

I lowered my gun and jammed its muzzle into the snow, so that the weapon stood upright. "You're welcome,"

Without another word from anybody, I turned and made my way to my hut, where I planned to finally get out of my clothes. As I left, I could feel everybody staring at my back in disbelief. *Good. Let 'em fucking stare.*