

## Interwoven

### PROLOGUE

#### 54th Day of the Crimson Tree, 352 AoC

“The battle goes well.”

Narrowed eyes shifted from the flickering flame that crested the village before an armoured wolf. They settled on the fearsome visage of the tiger at his side. The light shed by the burning buildings shone off the crown atop the feline’s head; it glinted in baleful yellow eyes. The wolf frowned, but held his tongue. He’d not been asked a question.

His liege’s head turned to meet him. There was a tightness to the tiger’s jaw as he flicked an ear and flashed a thin, cool, toothless smile. “Their resistance is meagre indeed. It was pointless of me to walk the front, wasn’t it?”

“To see their king does the soldiers credit, sire.” The wolf bowed his head slightly before he turned his own eyes back to the carnage. “And all the better for it; the warriors of Caris are not weak.”

The tiger simply scoffed in response and folded his arms. “Perhaps once. Perhaps when their shamans still stood to challenge all that we are. You do the remnants of their society too much credit, Zane.” He waved a paw toward the buildings aflame before him. “The Carisi should have sounded the retreat hours ago.”

Yet still they remained, but Zane would not contradict his king. His paw tightened warily on the haft of his axe as he watched the tiger step forward. “My liege?”

“I would see the strength you claim of their defenders. See it challenged. See it vanquished.” He smirked over his shoulder at the wolf and cocked an eyebrow. “No kingsblade has ever served with greater ferocity and skill than you, my friend. I feel no danger here.”

Zane’s jaw tightened further as he fought the reflexive flattening of his ears. He bowed his head in respect as he snatched up his weapon and fell into step beside his master. “Danger avoided is better than danger confronted. The words of Commander Thannakis Makkalos, and most wise words they are, my liege.”

The tiger chuckled to himself as he led Zane into the streets of the village. He knew the words would fall on deaf ears, but counsel was part of his role. He glanced behind at the arrayed reserves of their forces and nodded to a well-armoured mink. The mink returned the nod as Zane’s gaze turned forward again; the last he saw of his fellow soldier was a motion to others to follow them.

“What do you make of this campaign?” The question surprised Zane even as he scanned the vicinity for threats. “I know you do not approve.”

“I make that his majesty has decreed it necessary, and I serve at his pleasure.” Zane didn’t turn to face his king as a signpost over what had once been a merchant shop snapped in the flames and fell to the ground. Fingers tightened on his axe, and relaxed a moment later.

The king snorted. “I want your opinion, Zane. Speak it.”

Zane hesitated. His liege was not often forgiving of opinions that differed from his own, but then again he seldom invited them. Perhaps, he thought, Ratholarin’s king was as tired of war as its people. “I think... that the Carisi could have been powerful allies. Had they heeded the ways of the world and cast off their past, as we have.”

Beside him, the tiger hummed quietly to himself. The sound could barely be heard over the crackling of the flames all about them, but it was more thoughtfulness than Zane had been prepared for. “I agree. Crushing them is a terrible waste, necessary though it is. The generations to come will understand it for the best, given Markis’ abdication of his responsibility to his throne, to them, and to their future.”

“Their people will not see it that way, my liege.” Zane shook his head as a flicker of motion caught his eye. A short way down a side road in a building that had not yet caught fire, he almost thought he saw the glint of a lantern’s light. “Many may fold into our society well. Many more will not.”

“Those that do not will be dealt with in due time. Those who survive the coming frosts, at least.” Even as the tiger spoke, that almost-but-not-quite glint of light once more drew Zane’s eye. He was certain, then: someone or something was in that building, in an area allegedly already cleared by the attacking commander’s forces. He frowned.

Even the king noticed that something was wrong, and Zane heard his footsteps slow and then fall silent. “Danger?”

“Possibly.” He hefted his axe and weighed his options. His duty was to his king’s protection of course, but the reserve soldiers were needed to march on the Caris capital of Herovir in the days to come. Any wounding of them was unacceptable if they intended to take the great keep. “Please remain here, my liege. Brennan! You are charged with King Eric’s protection until I return.”

“It is my honour, kingsblade.” A gauntleted fist followed the words of the mink Zane had called to follow them as he started down the side street. If the advancing soldiers had missed anyone, their rear guard would be threatened. *Eric* would be threatened. Unacceptable.

He kept his approach slow and methodical. Zane’s eyes darted back and forth across the street. Ash and sparks rained down around him from torched buildings whose flames still threatened to spread. The comparative darkness that stretched out down the street before him was all the deeper for the brightness of the flames at his flank.

The first buildings nearby him didn’t seem to hold anything other than imminent kindling for the continued burning; the doors had been busted down and anything of value had already been looted. If there were signs of life, the wolf could not detect them.

It was the fourth on his right that caught Zane’s eye, however. Its door was still intact despite smashed windows, and the blood-soaked corpse of a Ratholarin soldier lay sprawled

across the ground before it. His gaze flicked to the door. Bloody paw prints. The wolf's jaw set as he lowered himself and brought his axe to bear. An ear perked as he drew closer.

Breaths. Shallow and sharp.

Panicked.

He lifted his axe and tapped the haft against the door twice, loudly. The door didn't budge. "I am Zane, son of Jakob; kingsblade of His Majesty King Eric the Fourth of Ratholarin. I know you are in there." He paused as hushed voices quickly muttered something too quiet for him to make out. "I beg you hear me and surrender peacefully. Do so and you shall not be harmed, on my word and my honour."

Silence was his answer. Zane looked to the door again. If locked, his axe would make short work of it. That said, it might not send the message he was trying to convey. He bit back a growl as he lifted his head. "If you are not soldiers, know that I mean you know harm. I promise you safety and a clear path from the battlefield if you come forth." He paused, before he added, "If you are soldiers, know that I will honour your surrender and treat you fairly. Blood need not spill."

He had barely finished the sentence when the door swung open, hard. It slammed into Zane before he could get out of the way, and the wolf buckled under the force of the blow. The blade of a sword bit deep into the haft of the wolf's battleaxe as the snarling visage of a hyena male, garbed in the thick, leather hide armour of the Carisi military. A splash of purple across his shoulders denoted him as a commander.

Questions as to why a commander would be hiding in an abandoned building had to wait. Zane twisted his weapon around to wrench the sword free of the hyena's grasp, but his eyes widened as the wiry male left the road and twisted with it. His feet planted back on the ground again as he shoved sharply at Zane. The wolf almost tumbled backward in surprise.

One paw left the axe's haft as the enemy soldier reached for the hatchet at Zane's side. He grabbed the hyena's wrist and twisted it sharply, but once again the soldier bent with the motion. One leg lifted high and careened down into the side of Zane's head. The strike was quick but not heavy, and the wolf's ears rung as he snarled back at his opponent.

The hyena seemed not to care about the fierce gesture. He grasped again for the hatchet, and that time Zane let him. He used his free arm to swing an elbow up and into the hyena's cheek. That blow was hard enough to dislodge him, but his grip on both his buried sword and the wolf's hatchet remained tight. Both of Zane's weapons came loose with the soldier.

Zane glared at his opponent as the hyena rolled backward and up into a crouch. He dropped the battleaxe and shifted the hatchet from his right paw to his left. Two quick, experimental swipes did not threaten Zane in the least, and the wolf shifted himself quickly to a more cautious stance. The hyena was testing weight. Balance. He knew what he was doing. This was no berserk warrior, but a seasoned fighter.

When he next leaped forward, Zane was ready. His teeth and claws both bared, he lifted an arm up high to draw a swipe of the hatchet. Black fur cascaded down from the wolf's bare forearm as the blade narrowly avoided scoring flesh. Before the hyena could bring it back

around, Zane thrust forward, claws bared, right for his opponent's heart. The leather bracer of the hyena's other forearm swept in to parry the blow. The hatchet descended.

The wolf's raised arm cut in smoothly. It blocked the hyena's blow at the elbow, holding back the hatchet. He growled in the soldier's face, but the sound cut off as the hyena dropped the hatchet. Zane watched it fall, right into the hyena's other paw. It twisted as Zane leaned back and away.

That time there was no avoiding the blow. His armoured chest took the brunt of the impact, and sparks lit up as the plate deflected the blade. A hiss of anger escaped the hyena as he spun with the hatchet and dropped low to the ground again. Zane had barely begun to frown when the hyena's foot swept up and connected a devastating kick to the kingsblade's chin. The wolf felt himself lifted briefly into the air before he crashed down again. His vision turned spotty for a moment as he gasped for air.

He rolled to the side as the hatchet dropped toward him once more. It sparked against the stone road as Zane kicked out toward the hyena's legs. The soldier deftly leaped over the blow and danced back, but in his retreat the wolf's eyes lighted upon their discarded primary weapons. His battleaxe and the hyena's sword, still buried in its haft, were almost within reach. With gritted teeth, Zane continued his roll and reached out for them.

Fingers closed around the hilt of the hyena's sword just as the hatchet swung down again to take Zane's wrist off. The wolf lifted the sword up, barely blocking the swing of the hatchet before it could connect with his arm. The blow knocked the blade free of his axe haft, and Zane grunted as he shoved the hatchet back. The hyena warily backpedalled as Zane rolled onto his knees, and then up to his feet. He hefted the sword in his grip and gave it an experimental flourish as he looked up to the hyena and gave him a nod.

The nod was returned, and the hyena's snarl slipped for a moment of begrudging respect. It returned as he leaped forward once more, deftly slicing through the air in a series of rapid slashes. Zane leaned away from most and carefully parried the others as he observed the hyena's furious attack. He took one step back as a swing nearly took off his ear. Another step, as a swipe almost caught his side. Watching. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

There.

It was the briefest window, but there it was; a hitch in the hyena's attack as he lifted his arm for a heavy, forearm swing. Zane held his breath as he twisted the sword in his grip and thrust upward. The blade shone in the firelight as it arced upward. Time seemed to stand still as it drew closer and closer. Reached. Cut.

A line of red opened up in the hyena's wrist. He cried out in pain as the sword's edge cut right through his leathers to gash his flesh. Blood ran down the edge of the warrior's sword as the hyena stumbled backward. Zane reversed his grip. Turned the sword over. Thrust in.

The hyena's eyes went wide. He grimaced as Zane sighed. He heard over the crackle of flames the drip of blood to the street below, and reversed the stab of the sword. It came free of the hyena's gut as the warrior brought both of his paws down to shakily hold the wound closed. It did him no favours as his life spilled out between his fingers. Eyes rolled back in his head as he fell forward, face-first into the street.

Zane was already up and moving by the time his opponent fell. There had been more than one hushed voice in the building, and keen eyes narrowed as they peered through the darkness. What had once been a store was all but bare. There was no sign of any other figures, but there was a door behind the counter that could have led to others. The wolf began to make his way toward it, sword warily raised.

He'd not made it more than halfway when a gasp reached him. Ears perked, he turned and flicked the blade toward the sound. A streak of blood arced off the weapon and across the shelving nearby. It just barely missed a cowering figure, slumped against one of the shelves and desperately trying to stay quiet. Zane drew the blade back to thrust.

He held. Paused. The quiet cry that came from the figure was female. There, as he focused, he could make out her figure in the dark. One arm clutched at the shelf for stability. The other curled protectively around her belly, round with pregnancy. A moment's guilt touched Zane as he thought of the body of the hyena outside. Understanding came with it; the wolf knew now why his opponent had fought with such determination. He forced it all aside.

She was a hyena too, eyes wide with abject terror as she saw the bloody, armoured, fire-haloed wolf before her. She shook with fear as she let go of the shelf and reached to her chest. There was an amulet there, inscribed with some symbol for a god or some other such nonsense. She whispered to it and kissed it as her eyes never once left Zane's.

Still, he stayed his attack. His arm and the sword remained raised as he lifted his head. "How many here are you?"

Another gasp choked off. The female glanced around for a moment before she shook her head. "N-none."

Good. She spoke the Ratholarin tongue. Zane allowed his eyes to roam around the store for a moment. He could not hear any others, but that didn't mean that they weren't there. It also didn't mean that there might not be an ambush waiting for him if he lingered. Still, as his gaze returned to the female, there was only fear in her eyes. There was no plot that lurked there in her face; no grand design on his murder. She squeezed at her belly. He understood. "He was your husband."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she rubbed at her belly and looked down. There was that pang of guilt again, but the sound of footsteps came before he could address it. He turned to the side, the hyena still the focus of his attention but with his body narrowed to the entrance just in case it was more enemy soldiers.

He need not have worried though; the familiar speech of one of his fellow soldiers called out from the doorway. "Master Zane? Are you alright?"

The hyena female cowered back from the sound, but there was precious nowhere for her to escape to and she knew it. When her head lifted toward Zane again, the shaking in her body and the terror in her eyes were gone. In their place was a resolute stillness as she stared him down. "Make it quick."

The accented words were not the ones he would have expected from the hyena, as the footsteps of his soldiers entered the store behind him. He frowned down at her. "I don't-"

“Kill me quickly.” Her ears twitched. She drew a ragged breath. “I know what you do to the females you capture.”

The words speared Zane’s heart like ice. Disgust ran as a glacial river through his veins. He swallowed hard; more than a few of the rank and file had indeed been... *overzealous* in their conquest. The commanders had orders to reign them in, but evidently those words had fallen on the deafest of ears as the thrill of battle awakened the basest of instincts in the weakest of souls. The hyena swallowed hard as her eyes shifted to stare behind Zane.

He glanced aside as the soldier who had called from outside – a tall and broad equine – stepped forward. He grinned down at the hyena female. “Well, look what we have here. Tasty. At least we know she puts out, right, Master *Z-ghlk!*”

The rest of the name was stifled by the wolf’s free paw as it closed around the equine’s throat. The soldier dropped his sword and scrabbled at Zane’s arm for purchase as the wolf pulled him down level with his own head. Every ounce of disgust that flooded his body pooled on his tongue and filled his muzzle. “You dishonour her, and yourself.”

He released the horse, and he in turn buckled to his knees before Zane, gasping for breath. The hyena scrabbled back further to give him space as Zane deigned not even to look at him. “Get out. I claim her as my own.”

The female’s eyes went wide at the statement, even as the horse’s blazed with rage. Zane didn’t bother to move or to speak. He simply stood and waited. His fingers tensed around the hilt of the hyena soldier’s sword. If the horse’s ego overwhelmed his military training as clearly as his libido had, then the wolf would be ready.

In the end, that training won out. The horse coughed once as he stood tall once more, head bowed. “Beg pardon, Kingsblade. I recognise your claim.”

“Good. Get out of my sight and attend your liege.” Zane’s eyes narrowed as he finally drew his gaze from the hyena to the disgraceful warrior at his side. “*Now.*”

The horse’s nostrils flared, but he saluted quickly and all but fell over himself to leave the building. Zane turned his attention back to the hyena female. Her expression had turned to one of confusion as much as relief, not that he could blame her. From her point of view, what would he have thought of what had just happened?

That relief faded away as he crouched low and offered her his paw. “I have laid claim. None save the king himself could overrule me.” He kept his voice low and even, as gentle as he could. His natural growl was something he had considerably less control over, but given the circumstances he had to trust that she would understand. “I give you my word to do nothing to sully you.”

Despite his claim, suspicion glinted in her eyes. Her head dipped as she took in her belly once again, now with both paws caressing it. It was no wonder that she and her husband had not fled further. She was doubtless weeks from giving birth, at most. “I cannot promise you much. A claim from the battlefield entitles you to little.”

She bared her teeth in response, but her anger was understandable. “If you will not take my offer for yourself, then take it for your child.” He nodded down to her belly as she clutched it

tighter. “If you come with me, there may be a future for them. For you both.” He shook his head and beckoned with his paw again. “But if not, I can do nothing. Others will find you.”

Her snarl faded as she regarded his paw. “I know you are scared. That is right. I also know that you are tired, and have nowhere to go.” He extended his fingers further as he met her gaze. “I cannot make things right for you. My people and I have taken so much from you. I beg you now: do not make us take everything. Not when you have a choice.”

Zane knew there wasn't much choice to be found in the moment, of course. Smoke was already filling the room. An orange glow crept in at the corners of the ceiling and by one of the windows. The fire was advancing as surely as the line of Ratholarin soldiers. With all that she had lost – with what Zane himself had personally taken – the last thing he could do was take her choice from her. He had made his decision. She would live or she would die, but that would be by her choice and no one else's.

It was clear that she knew the truth. He could see in her face that she knew that there was only one real choice. She closed her eyes and patted gently at her belly. Reassurance? Apology? Something more? The hyena took a slow, deep breath as she closed her eyes. Nodded once to herself.

Zane felt her paw reach out to take a hold of his, and he knew in an instant that everything was about to change forever.