

Interwoven

CHOICES: PART ONE

1st Day of the Pure Snow, 16 AoE

The frosts had come early, and they had come *hard*.

By the time the calendar marked both the approach of William's coming of age and the first day of the Pure Snow, the frosts had been mounting for weeks. The days had cooled far faster than any had expected, and the warmth of each day that came was able to thaw less and less of the snow and ice. The castle was only so much insulation against the bitter cold.

The blankets in William's arms were thick and heavy, as was the cloak he wore to stave that cold off. Neither were really his and he probably wasn't supposed to have access to them, but the benefit of spending so much time lurking in the castle's secret passages was that he knew how to get in and out of anywhere without a fuss. The cloak and blankets both were brown and nondescript, a far cry from the fancy fabrics that adorned the royals. They would more than do, and he doubted they'd be missed.

When he emerged into the servant quarters with the blankets, it was to the sound of sniffing noses, coughing throats and groans of discontent. The hyena glanced around as his tail fell slack. "Physician?"

Nearby and beside one of the cots, a black-robed panther stood. His fur blended seamlessly into the thick folds of cloth that covered him; William thought himself staring into two eyes in the midst of a shadow given form. "Hmm? Oh, good lad. Good lad. Thank you. Please, bring them here." He paused as William stepped over toward him. "Where did you find these?"

"Servant stores." The lie was as effortless as it was necessary. The royal physician seldom visited the lower peoples of the castle. The illness that had swept through the servant quarters had warranted him though, and William didn't want him to return with news of theft.

The physician hummed quietly to himself at the sight of them. When he looked up at William as if to catch the lie, he met only a stony-faced teenage hyena in turn. "Hmm. Very well. Distribute them as evenly as you can, please. Rest and water are one thing, but they *must* stave off this cold. If they do not, the tragedy of Keyston will strike again here."

William nodded as he pulled one of the blankets off his pile and draped it over the end of the cot. "Water is one thing, but I was thinking. Do you think some chaava root might be spared as well? For teas, I mean." He shrugged another blanket off onto the bed of another servant; the badger shivered as she reached out with a shaky paw to draw it over herself.

"I... suppose I could check. It would help with the symptoms, for sure." A glance over his shoulder showed the physician once staring at him. "Few servants are given to scholarly concerns. You have an interest in medicines and remedies, do you?"

The hyena almost answered, but bit his tongue before the full truth could spill forth. He shuddered, though it had nothing to do with the cold. "I had a friend. He taught me some things." William's head lifted and he tried a smile. "I guess some of it sank in, despite his best efforts."

"Well, your friend obviously taught you well. Would that I could take an interested student on as an apprentice." The panther reached down to the floor beside the cot of his patient and lifted up and over one shoulder a small bag. "I will see what I can do about procuring some chaava for the servant quarters." The panther hesitated as he glanced at the door. "There... may be some cost involved, if his majesty will not simply relinquish the root. It is fairly rare, and my stock — that of the castle — is limited."

Another of the servants approached, and William nodded to him as he took the blankets out of his arms. He turned back to the physician and frowned. "If there is cost involved, there is little we could do. What little we are given is taken again for food and shelter here." He jogged over as the panther nodded to himself. "You said you could use an apprentice. If you are offering, and there are crowns enough on offer to help, then..." His eyebrows lifted. Ears perked earnestly.

He followed alongside the silent physician as he left the servant quarters, ears drooped. The corridor beyond the room was much more chilly than the room itself had been, and William tugged his cloak tighter around his shoulders. "You could help more. And I could help more, too. We could help each other, and—"

"I wish it were a question of want, my boy." The physician's gait didn't miss a step, but it did slow slightly as he sighed. "These are trying times, and right now my medicines are in short supply and great demand." He turned away from the corridor as they rounded a corner and shook his head at William. "I'm afraid I've not the crowns spare to pay you for the work. Not nearly enough to pay you fairly to help me, and still shy of what is required to meet your needs."

William sighed back and kicked firmly at the ground. Of course. No one could ever help. No one ever had anything to give. "What about something other than chaava? If you had some koridoraan red, maybe? That might break their fevers at least."

At that the physician actually chuckled to himself. William didn't know he had been funny. "Ah, and the limits of whispered tuition rears its head. Koridoraan red flowers are dangerously toxic when administered to a body so weakened by this kind of illness." He patted William's shoulder with his free paw. "You've a sharp mind, lad, and I wish I could do more for you and the rest of the servants. But without the crowns for it..."

The hyena could only scowl as the paw slid off his shoulder. He glared at the ground. "Seems that's the key to everything, huh? More money, more life."

"Everywhere I've ever been, that's rung true." The panther nodded as he paused at the door to a set of stairs. William was certain it would lead down to the main castle dining hall and, if memory served, across to the royal chambers. "Don't lose heart, lad. That's the worst thing you can do. You've already done so much for them." Once more he patted William's shoulder and tried a smile.

The smile was dutifully returned, but William had a hard time forcing any mirth to the expression. “Thank you for your work and your time, physician. I hope we will not have need of you again anytime soon.”

He chuckled at that and nodded. “As do I, lad. As do I. Farewell.” He pulled the door open and, with a nod to William, swept out through it.

William watched the door fall closed again. The sound of the heavy wood sliding into place masked his irritated growl. It wasn’t the physician’s fault. He forced himself to remember that. It *wasn’t* his fault. He didn’t make anyone sick. There was only so much he could do. There wasn’t enough money. Needed more crowns.

It took him a moment to realise that his claws were digging into his palms. William forced them to relax before he punctured skin and heaved a deep, tired sigh. He knew he had to get back. He knew he had to get to work. So many of the servants were out with the illness that had swept through that those unaffected by the worst of it were left overexerted. He had to take over for them, or they’d all be in trouble.

Before he could turn back though, the sound of familiar voices reached his ears. Cautiously, William turned his head and immediately wished he’d not. “Not today. Any day but today...”

Four pairs of footsteps approached, and William fought the urge to slip through the door the physician had left through. The closest set belonged to Zane, which was by far the least objectionable of the four. That he was followed by not one, not two, but all three of the princes of the castle, however, twisted a knife in William’s guts. His eyes brushed past Tobias, draped in a brilliant red robe that had no business looking as good on him as it did, and promptly knelt down to wait for them to pass.

“I care *little* for your excuses, Zane.” The voice and all the petulance that it was laced with belonged to Fredrick, and William closed his eyes against the sound. “Father was most clear. You are to find a solution.”

“Or was his faith in you misplaced?” *That* voice was Brett’s, and it’d only grown more snivelling in the last couple of years. William bit back a growl at the sound of it.

The sigh that rolled out of Zane was more growl than anything else, and it betrayed just how frustrated even the stoic kingsblade must have grown. How long had they been harassing him? “I assure you, my princes, that your father’s faith in me is not misplaced. However, I am no commander. I am not the Strategist and do not sit on his small council. I am his kingsblade.”

“If you cannot be both, then perhaps you have no business *being* a kingsblade.” Fredrick sniffed derisively as William fought to keep his head down. They were only getting closer. “Perhaps I will speak to father myself. Suggest that you’ve grown too old and too slow to wage war anymore. Maybe his protection – and mine – should be left to the *vibrant*.”

“Or at least the less cowardly.” Brett punctuated the remark with a quiet chuckle.

That was it for William. His head lifted and his muzzle opened to fire off a quick comment, but no sooner had he than a paw closed around his muzzle. He gasped in surprise – so too did Tobias, if his ears didn’t deceive him – as he looked up and along his father’s arm. Zane wasn’t even looking at him, but had snapped his son’s muzzle shut in a perfect, tight grip.

Fredrick and Brett turned to look right at him. The latter seemed surprised, but Fredrick looked absolutely disgusted to be sharing the same relative space as William. He understood, of course; he felt much the same way whenever Fredrick was around. Tobias was out of sight, but William knew he had to be about somewhere as Zane spoke. "Then by all means, take up your concerns with your father. I will await his judgement upon my fate." His eyes narrowed as they fixed on Fredrick. "I have a personal matter to attend to. *You* are expected below."

"You presume to order *me*?" Fredrick's fur bristled as he leaned right up in Zane's face. William watched on and his heart skipped a beat. This could be it, he thought. This could be the moment his father snapped and just ran the little brat through. What a time to be there. What a time to be alive. William might have picked one of any of the old gods and started praying if he could remember their names.

But no. Zane simply held the crown prince's angry stare without moving a muscle. "Of course not, my prince. I merely remind you that my master; your father; *the king*, has requested you. I do not presume your actions. If you intend to disobey your father, that is of course up to you." He growled under his breath as he leaned in closer to Fredrick's face, and the prince was forced to pull back somewhat from the overbearing wolf as Zane's tone dropped several degrees. "As would be the consequences."

Fredrick swallowed hard as William watched on. He seemed to be at war; his expression showed outrage and anger, but his tail was tucked and his body curled away, as if already in retreat. It wasn't the prince's bloody execution, but it was still his humiliation and that was at least good enough for William right then. He basked in it. Revelled in it.

All good things had to end however, and it did so as Fredrick sniffed sharply and pulled away. "Come along, Brett. As the *dog* says, we have important matters of war to discuss with father." He turned sharply on one foot and marched right around William, all but shoving the door to the stairs open.

Brett, for his part, snickered to himself as he followed his older brother out. He did spare William a quick glance, his eyes full of contempt before the door closed. William sighed with relief as he tried to stand.

His father's paw was unmoved. It kept a tight enough grip on him that he couldn't rise even if he wanted to. He scrambled for a second as his balance failed him. Zane turned to him as he struggled and shook his head. "You need to learn to mind your tongue, boy."

The paw about William's muzzle relaxed and released him, and he gasped as he shook his head from side to side. "I didn't say anything."

"You were about to, and I have saved you considerable pain. Hopefully next time you will not make the mistake you almost made. I will not necessarily be there to save you." He paused and turned to his side. "Was there anything further you required, my prince?"

Too late, William remembered Tobias was still there. He felt his muzzle curl most sourly as he slowly stood and kept his head bowed. Damn it all.

"Uh, yes, actually. But if you have a personal matter to attend to, it can wait." The younger prince leaned around William's father to look at the hyena, but all William saw was the edge of the tiger's robe. "Good afternoon, William."

“My prince.” He bowed his head a little deeper.

“You, ah... you look well.” He sounded nervous, and cleared his throat quietly as he came more fully into view. “I am glad that you seem to have avoided the worst of the illness.”

William held his tongue. It wasn’t a question, and so he wasn’t obligated to answer. Every now and again, Tobias would do that. Try to make small talk, try to relate. Never apologise for the hurt. Never admit what he’d done.

Never do enough.

Clearly the silence wasn’t what Tobias had been expecting, and he coughed again as he looked up at Zane. “We can discuss later.”

“Of course.” The wolf turned toward Tobias and also bowed his head. “I would like a moment with my son, and then I intend to see his mother. If that is alright, my prince.”

“Oh, it’s fine. I can wait.” Tobias stepped back and almost out of William’s view as the hyena squeezed his eyes shut. Of course he wouldn’t make things easy. “Be at ease, both of you.”

William lifted his head and tried not to look at Tobias. He still caught the hopeful look on the prince’s face as he did so, and he most definitely caught the way that hope died a few moments later as he turned to Zane. “Mother is not well. Her fever is amongst the worst in the castle.”

The wolf hesitated a moment before he nodded. “She’s strong. She just needs time to recover. I intend to see what I can do for her before I-”

“She needs medicines. They all do.” William shook his head as he looked Zane in the eye. He’d approached the wolf’s towering height in the last year; he was just over a head shorter than his father. “There has to be something that can be done.”

Zane grit his teeth. “I am doing all I can, but the situation that I find myself in is... difficult. I have many responsibilities to attend to.”

In the corner of his eye, William could see Tobias watching on with interest. At that moment however he couldn’t care less. “And what of your responsibility to her? To me?”

Zane’s jaw tightened, but his ears folded back rather than forward. William felt a pang in his heart. He didn’t regret the words, but he could see how the normally unshakable wolf had taken them. He had no chance to apologise however, as Zane nodded. “You are right, of course. But just as rightly, I cannot shirk my other duties.” He frowned. “Perhaps... there is something. It may offer the crowns necessary to secure aid for her.”

One of Tobias’ ears perked. William found his doing the same as he tilted his head to the side. “Please, father. If I can do something to earn the crowns to help her – to help *all* of them – I will.” The wolf looked away, and William frowned. “Or... don’t you think I can do it?”

“There is not a thing in this world that I think you cannot do.” He worked his jaw from side to side as he folded his arms. Zane’s eyes flicked briefly to Tobias, who looked up in

interest. “Perhaps you have not heard, but there is... unrest. The army is being deployed soon, and they are in need of new warriors to fill their ranks. You come of age tomorrow, and...”

William’s eyes went wide as his father continued. “Training would be short, but I know you could do it. The work would be bloody and rough, but I know your strength. However...” He shook his head. “Your mother would... not approve.”

Neither would he, if William was given half a say. He almost opened his muzzle to speak those exact words, but caught himself. He glanced over at Tobias. The tiger stared back at him with an expression of concern spread across his face. He’d never had to work for a thing. He’d always been given everything and anything he could have wanted. He’d always had servants – he’d always had *William* – waiting on him paw and foot. If he wanted medicines from the physician, he would get them. Immediately. No questions asked.

But if *William* was gone, then the burden of work would fall more heavily on the overtaxed shoulders of what healthy servants were left. The hyena frowned deeply. If he left, it would be one less able body to share the workload. On the other paw though, he could leave to secure the coin necessary to help those ill servants recover. To help his mother recover. It was no choice at all.

William squared his shoulders and nodded once to his father. “She would be alive and healthy. She could disapprove all she likes. What do I have to do?”

“But you can’t!” Tobias’ outburst came out of nowhere, and both William and Zane turned toward him as he clapped a paw over his muzzle. “Forgive me. I just...” His eyes locked on William as he lowered his paws and brushed down his robe. “You... you’ve not been trained. You don’t know how to fight, and you want to be sent off to a war?”

The hyena held his stare for a moment before he slowly bowed his head. That was a question from his prince. He had to answer. “Like my father said. It will be short training, but I can do it. And if it helps my mother and the other servants, why should I do less?”

A quiet whimper seemed to slip out of Tobias’ muzzle. “I know you, William. The last thing you’d want to do is fight for my family.”

The corner of William’s muzzle twitched. He was absolutely right. “Yeah. But I’m not doing it to fight for *your* family. I’m doing it to fight for *mine*.” He lifted his head again to look up at his father with a nod. “So. What do I have to do?”

With a sad little smile, Zane nodded and patted the top of William’s head. “Nothing, for the moment. I will speak to your mother, and then go to a commander I know and trust. When he is ready to test you, I will send for you.” He leaned his head down to touch his forehead to William’s. “You are strong of body and courageous of heart. Never have I been prouder of you.”

The words warmed William to the core. It bloomed out inside him as he wrapped an arm around his father’s middle. Zane squeezed him back in turn. “Thank you, father. I won’t let you down.”

“Such a thing would be impossible.” He pulled away, and his smile seemed to lose some of that sadness as he nodded. “Be well, William. I will speak to you again soon.” He turned to Tobias and bowed his head briefly. “My prince.”

With that, he was gone. He brushed past William and headed back toward the servant quarter. William watched him go for a long moment, before he realised that it was just him and Tobias. He closed his eyes for a moment to steady himself before he turned back to the tiger.

Tobias simply stared at him, stunned. He shook his head slowly as he folded his arms. “When did you go insane? When did you take complete leave of your senses? You could get hurt out there! Killed!”

The warmth of paternal vindication faded, replaced by an icier chill than the Pure Snow could offer him. “Like my father said, I am of age tomorrow. The choice is mine, and it might earn enough money to help my mother. To help the other sick servants.”

But Tobias just shook his head. “I was the one who sent the royal physician to the servants. I’m the one organising efforts for father to find the best treatment for everyone. I’m the one who’s trying to help them; let me! You don’t have to get yourself killed like this!”

“The same physician who told me he couldn’t even get the medicines that might make some of the servants feel better? That physician?” William snarled at Tobias before he could stop himself, but he quickly bowed his head again. “I’m going to *do* something, not send someone to *look* at the problem. I’m going to actually help people.” He looked up through locks of unkempt headfur to see a hurt and worried-looking Tobias staring back at him. “But thank you.”

The tiger blinked. “For what?”

“For reminding me that I can’t rely on princes to actually help people. And for reminding me that you don’t actually believe in me.” William shook his head as Tobias’ stare turned angrier. “You think I’m just going to die? Just go out there and keel over? How *weak* do you think I am? How pathetic, exactly?”

Tobias’ head shook almost violently from side to side. “I never said that! That’s the sort of thing my brothers would tell you.”

“You didn’t have to say it plain like them. You’re smarter than they are, after all. You can wrap it up with nice words, but in the end you think I’ll not be good enough.” *Like always.* He allowed himself to sink back down to his knees. Right where he belonged, as far as the prince was concerned. “I need to go and prepare, *my prince*. May I be excused?”

The tiger growled back at him for a second. “No, you... ugh.” The growls faded and his voice lowered. “Yes. Of course, you may be excused.”

William nodded and rose. He glanced briefly at Tobias; the tiger was looking away from him, arms tight around his middle. He didn’t look angry so much as he seemed concerned. Hurt. It would have been sweet, if he hadn’t just shown a complete and utter lack of faith in William. He offered his old friend nothing more, but simply turned to head back to the servant quarters. There was much to do.

Especially if he wasn’t going to be there much longer.

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A day later, William was given the chance to experience something he had never experienced before in his life: he left behind the walls of the castle.

He'd exited the main structure before, of course, and many times. But every time he'd done so, it'd only been to retrieve or clean something out in the yards. He was always constrained by the walls that protected the great castle, but no more. As he strode along the streets at Zane's side, the hyena couldn't help but look at the people who bustled about in the lightly falling snow. So many sights, and smells, and sounds to experience. It wasn't quite the birthday gift he'd anticipated a week before but it was, for sure, *something*.

It had almost been overwhelming at first, but Zane had given him fair warning. He'd also kept the hyena's attention focused on the task before them, explaining as they went just what to expect. "Geoffery is a fine commander and a skillful warrior," he had told William early in their walk. "I have little doubt he will see your value."

William himself was less sure, but he also wasn't willing to give himself the chance to doubt it. His mother and the other castle servants were depending on him. If this didn't pay him the crowns necessary... As they walked the streets, William cleared his throat and finally allowed himself to ask the question that had been burning in the back of his mind. "When do I get paid?"

The question drew an immediate and deep belly laugh from the kingguard. So unusual it was to see Zane break from his stoicism in such an utter and complete way that William couldn't help a grin of his own. "What? What'd I say?"

"Nothing. You just speak with the earnestness of everyone who has ever lived, despite this being your first day into the wider world." Zane shook his head but the smile linger. "The soldiers of Ratholarin are paid a regular rate, but it has been many years since I have received it myself. You will have to discuss with Geoffery, assuming he takes you on, to determine what you are to be paid." He perked an ear as William nodded along. "But there is a recruitment price. If he should take you on, you would begin training immediately and be paid twenty crowns."

William's eyebrows might have launched off his head entirely as he stumbled mid-step. That was more money than he had ever *seen*, and he'd spent years as the friend and confidant of a prince! "I... that's..."

"A pittance compared to what you will earn over time." Zane patted the hyena's head and ruffled his headfur. "I suggest you not simply send all of it to your mother straight away. Keep half of it for yourself. Ten crowns will seem like a lot, but it will vanish quickly if you are not careful. The world beyond the castle walls is not like the world inside it, and you may find life more expensive here than you might otherwise like."

The hyena nodded slowly. He'd planned on sending all of it back with Zane, but his father's words had obvious merit. "Thank you. I'll do that... as long as half of the crowns is enough for their medicine."

Zane nodded back in turn, and then lifted his paw to point ahead. "I will make certain of it. And in good time, too; we've arrived."

William looked up as they drew to a halt. The road turned into a circle, rounding a large compound in the midst of the city. A training yard rested before them, filled with dummies and targets and heavily-armed individuals. Several of them sparred with one another, under the supervision of others. One of those supervisors waved for the nearest sparring pair to halt before he started over toward them. The hyena frowned. "This is the army of Ratholarin?"

His father snorted and shook his head. "This is a training camp and barracks, William. The army is currently mustering to the west. If the skirmishes with rebel in the hills pick up, you will likely be soon joining the muster and marching to meet them." He smiled all the wider as he raised a paw high over his head. "Ho, Geoffery!"

The figure that approached them resolved into the shape of a uniformed fox, shorter than both Zane and William but with a stern expression on his face that could have put the wolf to shame. "Well if it ain't Kingsblade Zane! Son of Jakob! Protector of the king and damned preening *cock* of the realm!" He spread his arms out wide. "What, so now you come down here in person? Finally visiting the swords of the kingdom 'stead of just sending missives in your place?"

William stood stock still as his father's arm came down again. He chanced a flick of his gaze upward, but Zane's smile hadn't faded in the least. "Commander Geoffery. Son of whores. Protector of a brothel's full coinpurse and cock of the *cock*. Thought I'd drop by and show you all what a true warrior looks like."

The hyena's jaw dropped. He'd never even heard his father use such foul language before! He gulped and looked back to Geoffery, just in time for the fox to burst out laughing and slam into his father's front, arms tight around his middle. Zane heartily patted the fox on the back as his smile blossomed into a full-blown grin. "It is good to see you, old friend."

"Likewise, you high and mighty bastard. It's been too long. I trust drinks are on you later, or are you intending to skip out on me again?" He smirked up at Zane as the wolf drew back, and adopted a more focused, serious expression as he looked to William. "This is your son, I take it?"

Zane nodded as William bowed his head with a smile of his own. Geoffery seemed very friendly indeed. "Yes. It's nice to meet a-"

"If I'm to be your commander, lad, you'd best get used to calling me 'sir' in short order." The warning stole the smile from William's face, and he recoiled a moment. The fox had gone from jovial to serious so quickly he was left reeling. "Just 'cause your father and I have a history don't mean shit for you'n I. You understand me?"

William gulped. The fox made sense, and it wasn't like he'd expected to not be around soldiers anyway. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Hmm." Geoffery began to look him over, up and down and all around as he circled the hyena. "Had to bring him in the Pure Snow? Not in the hot days when I can actually see more than a thick cloak and a flappin' tongue?"

Zane chuckled as William was poked and prodded; the hyena fought to stay still through the ordeal. "He has spent his whole life as a servant in the castle. He is quick and strong, though

untrained. However..." He hesitated a moment as William looked up to him, and he nodded once. "There is fire in his blood and a strong heart in his breast."

"Mmm. Well, we'll see. Looks to me like he may take after his mother." The fox chanced a quick look up at Zane, who simply shrugged. William frowned a little, but bit his tongue. What was wrong with taking after his mother, exactly? "Well, alright. But only because it's you, old friend. If you think he's got it, I'll see if we can't prove it." He paused and stroked his chin. "You say he's quick? Daniel then, I think. Yes. Yes, Daniel would be a good fit."

The obvious question hung in the air, but William held back from asking it. Geoffery would prompt him if he wanted him to say something; life in the castle had taught William a lot about speaking only when asked to do so. He had no reason to believe this would be any different, given Geoffery's behaviour already. Instead, he watched as the fox turned and started back toward the training yard.

He'd not asked for anyone to follow, but Zane fell into step behind him and guided William to follow. He'd stumbled before he caught up. Ahead, Geoffery called out toward the yard. "Daniel? Stand to, you lazy brute!"

The nearest — and largest — of the sparring soldiers turned away from his challenger and snapped to attention. It earned him the crack of a wooden training sword across his back, and William flinched. The soldier did not however, and turned around briefly to punch the offending warrior in the face. By the time Daniel had straightened back up and turned his helmeted face forward, his partner was in the dirt with a bloody muzzle. William's heart sank into his stomach. "I'm in trouble."

"Do not doubt yourself. Have faith in your abilities. I do." Zane's paw came to rest on the middle of William's back, helping to usher him forward. "Geoffery is honourable. He would not match you against someone he was not confident could test you fairly."

That, William decided, he would have to simply trust his father on. He stared at the soldier who he was to face, and the figure removed their helmet to reveal the brown-furred features of a bear. Bright blue eyes tracked William's movements, sizing the hyena up with every step. William could already tell he was more capable by far than the training cadre he'd dispatched in the castle stables some years prior. He wasn't a cadet, or a recruit. This was a male who knew what he was doing.

Geoffery turned to stand beside the bear. "This is Daniel, son of Amos. Daniel, this is..." He frowned, and glanced aside for a second before he looked up at the hyena.

William cleaned his throat and stepped forward. "William, son of... uh, Zane. Sir." He nodded to the bear.

Daniel cracked a smile as Geoffery nodded back. The fox had frowned briefly at the hitch in his patronage; his eyes locked on Zane for a moment before they returned to William. "Daniel here's a good fighter, but unambitious. Could have made lieutenant, maybe even captain by now, if he could be bothered to apply himself."

"I like where I am jus' fine, sir." His grin widened, but he remained at attention and kept his gaze forward. "Good t'meetcha, William. Promise I'll go easy on you."

William smiled back at him, as Geoffery looked him over with perked ears. “You better not. Beg pardon, but I expect a fair test and a fair opponent. I don’t want easy.”

Out of the corner of William’s eye he caught Zane’s solemn nod. Daniel simply grinned all the wider as Geoffery glanced up at his father. “Well, maybe he takes after you after all, eh?” He turned his back to them and marched over to where Daniel’s opponent still lay on the ground. “Get up now, Kirkem! On your feet, boy! What in the dead gods was that sorry display?”

Zane started toward a rack nearby as Daniel stepped in closer. The bear was just shy of a head taller than William, but he was much more broad. William doubted he was much slimmer out of the armour. “Alright, kid. You’re lookin’ pretty fresh, but pretty and fresh don’t last long out here. Got any experience? Swordfightin’ or archery or whatnot? Y’dad never let y’play with his axes?”

William’s heart skipped a beat. He’d almost forgotten that most warriors were *armed*. “I can punch someone in the face real good.”

The response drew an impassioned laugh from Daniel, deep and booming that distracted some of the other fighters around them. “Ha! Good shit, kid! I mean, it ain’t gonna help y’arm swing a sword, but a good punch’ll do in a pinch too.” He reached out to clap an oversized paw on William’s shoulder. “You’ll do great, I reckon.”

“Uh, thanks.” William shrugged out of the bear’s paw. He seemed friendly, but Daniel was also about to try and beat the tar out of him. He glanced aside to see Zane returning, a pair of wooden training swords in his paws. “You don’t train with real ones, I guess.”

Daniel laughed again. “Be kinda stupid, huh? One slip and y’bury a blade in some poor sap’s chest. This way we can beat on each other all day long and not get too badly hurt.” His grin did slip a little as Zane tossed him one of the weapons. “Wouldja be so kind as to find our guest some armour that fits please, master kingsblade? I bet y’know his size better than we do.”

“Of course.” The words drew a frown from William as his father passed him the other wooden sword and looked down at Geoffery. The fox, with Daniel’s former opponent braced on one arm, perked an ear with interest. “Chain, or hide?”

“Chain. If he’s to march with us anytime soon, I need to know he can take the weight.” Geoffery shrugged Kirkem off his shoulder, and the soldier started to stumble away as the fox turned to him. “You never fought in armour before, William?”

“No, sir.” William immediately stood to attention as best he could. The training sword slapped against his leg.

Daniel chuckled at his effort even as he stepped back. “It’s why you’ll not really wanna go around punching the enemy. A little armour makes that sorta thing lack... *impact*.”

William began to nod, but paused with a little smile. “I don’t think Kirkem there found your fist lacking.”

“Yeah, but my fists’re pretty big and his face was pretty small.” Daniel slammed those fists together with a chuckle. He continued back into the yard, stretching his arms in preparation for the fight.

He was definitely impressive in size and probably in weight. William couldn't help but appreciate his jovial attitude, too. He almost regretted that he'd have to fight him. "You been doing this long?"

The bear snorted, but his grin was undimmed. "Eh, long enough. Five or... no, six years come the Verdant Growths, right sir? Back when you was jus' a captain?" Geoffery seemed to think about it for a moment before he nodded. "Yeah. Signed on jus' as soon as I came'f age. Guessin' that's what you're doin' too? Gettin' out of home, tryin' to make a few crowns'n find a place in th'world?"

William bit his tongue. His father was on his way back over, with a shirt of chainmail slung over one arm. "Something like that, yeah. I guess. My birthday's today."

"Ha! Well, happy birthday; I guess we'll see in a moment jus' how many crowns you're set to make." He turned away as Zane approached, and watched the wolf bring the shirt over to William. "Oof. That's gonna be cold."

So William thought as well, but his father simply lifted it up and held it over him. With a shrug, William reached up and pulled his arms into the sleeves. It slipped smoothly over his clothes and his cloak, jingling as it settled into place over him. He buckled a little at first; the rings were thicker than he'd expected, and the weight that came with it was something he was unprepared for. Zane helped him swiftly buckle it together.

If Geoffery noticed William's discomfort, he didn't say anything. "Alright then, boy. Let's see what you can do." He took another few steps back, and Zane followed suit. "When you're ready."

The hyena frowned as he looked over at Daniel. His sword was held lazily at his side as he continued to smile at William. "Uh... aren't you going to put your helmet back on? I don't want to hurt you."

Daniel just smiled wider as Geoffery choked off a chuckle. "You're sweet, kid, but I ain't worried. Come on, gimme your best shot."

Well, if that was how he was gonna be... William brought the sword up and gave it a couple of experimental swings. It was heavier than he thought it would be, and with the weight of the chain shirt over him it definitely didn't move as quick as he would have thought. He took a deep breath, dashed forward, and lunged at Daniel.

The bear sidestepped him easily and swept his weapon up. It lifted William's to point into the grey sky, and then slipped around to slap the hyena's backside. William yipped, but not so loudly that he couldn't hear Geoffery and Zane chuckling. "Hey!"

"C'mon, kid! You can do better than that!" Daniel turned toward William and shrugged. Suddenly, his grin didn't seem friendly but painfully obnoxious. "Don't just come straight on. Show me you've got some moves in there!"

William's eyes narrowed, but he nodded. Instead of charging the bear, instead he moved in more slowly. His weapon rose to ward off any swings, but Daniel made no effort to hit him. As a couple seconds passed, William held his breath. Finally he swung the sword up from the side, chainmail tinkling around him.

Daniel barely lifted his weapon to block the blow. William reversed the swing, but by the time it moved in toward the bear's other side there was already a slab of wood in the way. William stepped back for a moment, but more sluggishly than he was used to. The weight about his shoulders would take some getting used to.

But Daniel took that opportunity to move. He leaned into William and made a couple wide strikes of his own, much like the hyena's. William frantically swung up and against those attacks, but he wasn't fast enough for a third stroke that came up across his front. The tip of Daniel's sword caught his chin, and William tasted blood and saw stars as it snapped his jaw shut. His head pitched back and he stumbled away. "Ah!"

Somehow he didn't drop the training sword, and his free paw rushed to his muzzle. He could feel a cut on his lip where his teeth had gashed it, and blood came away on his fingers as he glanced to the side. Geoffery no longer looked amused, but disappointed. His attention was forced back to Daniel as the bear approached again, with the same two long swings that he'd made before.

William was ready for them, and this time he pushed through the pain in his muzzle and the weight of the armour to block more cleanly. When the stroke up his middle arrived, he already was half a step to the side and just beyond impact. He grinned with bloody pride as the swipe went up through empty air, and he brought his own weapon up to counterattack.

He never got the chance though, as Daniel ducked down and swept his leg out around William's. The hyena yelped again as his legs were kicked out from under him and hit the snowy dirt below with a gasp. No sooner had he lifted his head than Daniel's sword tip extended to gently poke him between the eyes. "Boop."

It pulled away again as William rolled back up to his knees. Geoffery *tsk'd* beside him as the hyena rolled his shoulder and stretched his arm out. The armour was just too heavy; it kept him slow! "Underwhelming. You said he was good, Zane. That he had promise."

Irritation flooded William as he glanced up at his father. The wolf's expression was unreadable, but he at least didn't look as disappointed as Geoffery was. He simply nodded to William.

The hyena grit his teeth and held a paw up to stall out Daniel. The bear held back, though he looked confused as William forced himself back to his feet. "A moment, if you please."

Daniel nodded in response, and William rested his training sword against his leg as he began to unbuckle and peel the heavy chain shirt up and off him. Geoffery, however, seemed displeased with his actions. "What do you think you're doing, boy?"

"I can't move in this, sir. Too heavy." He looked up at Zane again as he gasped with relief at being freed from the constricting chainmail. The wolf's expression had barely changed, but there was the hint of a smile on his muzzle as he listened. "If you want to see what I can do, I can't do it with this on."

He reached out to offer the chainmail to Geoffery, but the fox continued to look unimpressed. Instead, William turned and offered it to his father, who stepped forward to take it. The wolf nodded to him once more, and he returned the nod as Zane stepped back away

again. William snatched the sword back up and rolled his shoulders again; his arms and body felt much lighter. “Alright.”

“You sure, kid? It’ll hurt a lot more if I hit you ‘thout that armour.” Daniel’s smile had faded somewhat; he seemed to stare at William with genuine concern.

“You’d have to hit me first.” William grinned back at him, and watched as Daniel’s own smile returned in full force. He nodded, and William looked to Geoffery. “With your permission, sir, of course.”

The fox rolled his eyes, but he nodded and waved a paw toward them. William turned back to Daniel, but the bear was already in motion. The sword swung in a tight arc right toward William’s chest. The hyena leaned back from it, eyes wide. He hadn’t been ready!

That didn’t seem to matter at all to Daniel, who continued after him with a series of quicker, sharper thrusts. William danced back from each of them, putting just enough distance between himself and the training sword as he could. Only on two quick occasions did he need to raise his own weapon to block, and Daniel’s much stronger, practiced blows easily swept the hyena’s weapon aside.

William used that momentum though, twisting himself around and darting to Daniel’s side. The bear twisted with surprising grace and released one paw from his sword, leaving it to swing around right toward William’s face. Instead he ducked down, sinking to his knees and skidding under the blow as he twisted his own weapon around. It banged against both of Daniel’s legs as he passed by, and William spun about and stood up before the soldier could bring his weapon to bear again. That time when he lunged forward, it was without Daniel’s blade to block. The tip of William’s sword impacted the bear’s armour and pushed on him as he stumbled backward.

William caught himself and landed gracefully, only barely in time to duck a swing from Daniel’s sword. The swing was sloppy though, and driven more by lingering momentum than a desire to hit. The bear fell still after that, grinning broadly as he looked to Geoffery. “The kid’s *fast*, sir!”

The hyena frowned, wary of another sneak attack as he slowly turned to bring Geoffery back into view. The commander’s expression had changed considerably, from disappointment to keen interest. He looked up at Zane. “You taught him that? He don’t fight like a Ratholarin soldier does.”

“I taught him nothing. He fights with natural skill.” William felt himself swell with pride at the compliment, only for his father to continue and deflate him somewhat. “You will have to drill out his sloppiness, of course, and tighten his swordplay with fierce practice.”

“Of course, of course.” Geoffery stroked at his muzzle as he looked William over again. Perhaps he’d made a decent impression after all. “I don’t know how to do it, though. You don’t fight like anyone else in *my* ranks. You’d foul up any formation I stuck you in unless you could learn to fight like we do.”

William sighed. His shoulders fell along with his ears and tail. They wouldn’t take him. After all of that, they wouldn’t take him. “I apologise for wasting your time, sir.”

“Now hold on a second there, boy. I didn’t say no yet, and you’d do well to let me speak.” William frowned but bowed his head as Geoffery looked up past him to Daniel. “Victor likes the untempered ones in his band, doesn’t he?”

“Less to break in an’ more to enjoy the challenge, sir.” The bear stepped forward to stand beside William. “We’ve taken in strays with less talent. I’m sure Vic and I can beat ‘im into shape without losin’ that speed. Could join us scoutin’ an’ such.”

As William kept his head down, blood dripped from his muzzle to the snow. He flicked his tongue out to try and clear his muzzle of it, instead doing little more than filling his mouth with the metallic tang of the stuff. He didn’t see Geoffery regarding him, or nodding to himself. “Hmm. Alright. Maybe there’s something there we can work with. Hey, William?”

The hyena glanced up again and stiffened at once. Geoffery still wasn’t smiling, but he definitely didn’t look disappointed anymore. At least it was an improvement? “If you still reckon you’re up to it, we’ll slot you in under Victor. He’s one of my most experienced lieutenants.” One of the fox’s eyebrows lifted as he folded his arms across his chest. “Daniel will drill you and give you the basics for now, and Victor will take over once you’re ready for him.”

Zane stepped up beside Geoffery. “You can still back out now, William. I will not think less of you if you choose not to take on the life of a soldier. Goodness knows your mother would prefer you reconsider.”

William closed his eyes. He thought of his mother when he’d last seen her; of the way she’d looked more frail than he’d ever been, struggling to breathe through fits of coughing. She wasn’t the only one, and she wasn’t the worst affected. “For a childhood and half to provide, to a lifetime’s service in repayment.” He opened his eyes and looked up at his father.

The wolf nodded and began to smile. Geoffery put his head in his paws with a deep sigh. Daniel was the one to ask, as he glanced in confusion between his superiors and William. “Pardon, sirs, but what does *that* mean? Was that a yes?”

“He was quoting his father, who was quoting some long-dead scholar or other, I’d wager. But yeah, that sounded like a yes to me.” Geoffery’s paws dropped to his side as he shook his head. “If you’re decided then, say your goodbyes. Daniel and I’ll be just over here; we’ll get you situated and go from there.”

“And hey, welcome to the army, I guess!” Daniel clapped William hard enough in the back to almost bowl the hyena over, but he managed to cough and smile back as the bear brushed past him. He and Geoffery started toward the barracks. William watched them go as a flicker of fear wound its way around his heart. It was really happening.

It didn’t relent, even as Zane approached him. “Are you certain?”

“I have to do this. For mother. For the others.” William set his jaw and squared his shoulders as best he could. “I’m of age. I *have* to do this for them, after all they did for me.” He took a deep breath as he looked up. “Will you take the crowns to them for me? I don’t think I’m getting away anytime soon.”

The wolf nodded as he looked down at William, and the hyena felt the intensity of that stare in a way he never had before. It was almost like Zane was daring him to say it. Or perhaps not daring... hoping? Begging? Did he not want William to go, just like his mother?

He leaned in again to wrap the hyena up in a broad, tight hug. William was all but engulfed by the wolf's great arms, and he sighed as he leaned into the embrace. "Thank you, father."

Zane squeezed back at him again for a moment before he pulled away, though his paws rested on William's shoulders. "You know... your mother and I never said it before. I think you know it, but it must be said now, perhaps too late, as you go."

"Mother was pregnant before she met you. I know. I asked her years ago." William couldn't help but smile as Zane, for perhaps the first time in the hyena's young life, looked surprised with him. "I'm not of your blood. I never have been. I don't care." He reached up with one of his paws to pat Zane's. "You didn't have to be there, and you were. You didn't have to care, but you do. For both of us. You *are* my father."

The squeeze to his shoulder would have been enough, but the tears that welled up in the mighty kingsblade's eyes gave it away in full. It was almost enough to mist up William's eyes as well, but he leaned in and hugged the wolf before they could. The paw that clutched at his back and pulled him in tight told him all he needed to. The warmth of Zane's embrace was greater than the most intense flame.

"Tell Geoffery to send half of your recruitment price to me, and I will see it get to where it needs to go. And if you've anything at all to convey back to the castle, I would be honoured to take the message." He seemed to tremble as he drew back from his son, and William sighed as the wolf released him. A light gust of frosty wind leached the heat from their contact, but did nothing to dim the warmth in his heart.

But William just shook his head. He'd thought that question would come up, and honestly, what was there to say? "I can't think of anything. Mother can't understand this choice. She'll still be sad and angry and... that's okay." He smiled and shrugged up at Zane. "As long as you can use those crowns to get her and the others some medicines, I hope she'll understand. Eventually."

Zane nodded, but paused as he looked up at the castle through the snowfall. "And... is there any message I might take to anyone else?" He hesitated a moment as William followed his gaze, and then turned back to him. "A certain prince, perhaps?"

"A prince who wouldn't do anything useful to help sick people who needed it? The prince who pretended to be my friend, and then threw me away when I wasn't what he wanted anymore?" William felt his jaw clench. After how tender the moment they'd just shared was, why bring up Tobias then? "You know what he meant to me. What he did."

"I know. But you may not see him again for a long time, as well. If ever." He leaned down until his eyes were level with William's. "You do not need to leave it like this, but I understand if you are not ready. I know his rejection of you has hurt him as well."

William scoffed before he could stop himself, and sighed as Zane's ears flattened. "I never wanted to hurt him. He's the one who decided to hurt me. I don't have to forgive him."

The wolf looked his face over, as if searching for something. William didn't know what to say or do, so he simply stood still and allowed his father's examination. Finally, Zane nodded to himself and straightened up again. "No, you do not. But I know you well enough to know that you want to. Perhaps in time, you may have the chance to be the better person and do so." He tried a little smile. "Perhaps even teach him something in turn."

"Yeah. Maybe. I doubt it." William shook his head and glanced back at the barracks. Geoffery and Daniel were waiting for him, he reasoned. The longer he delayed, the less likely the commander would continue to approve of him. "I'd better go, father. Please just give mother my love."

"It would be my honour." Zane bowed his head and touched his forehead to William's. "I am so, so very proud of you, my son. Be safe. Be well."

"And you as well, father." William pulled his head away and nodded once. Zane returned it and let him go completely at last. He didn't move, instead waiting for William to do so. The hyena took a breath. He had to do the rest on his own, he knew.

Fear took hold of him all at once, but he pushed through it. He knew he couldn't afford to be afraid of what came next. He'd never been on his own really, but he'd *always* sort of been on his own. The world was vast and dangerous and new, but that didn't have to bring fear. It could be wonderful. It could be amazing. It could be more than just a new beginning. It could be *everything*.

William put one paw in front of the other. He passed Zane. Left the castle behind. Made for the barracks. One foot. Then the other. Then the other. Then the other. Forwards. For the first time in his whole life, forwards.

A smile touched William's muzzle. He didn't look back.