

## **Interwoven**

### **RESPONSIBILITY: PART FOUR**

#### **27<sup>th</sup> Day of the Shining Light, 18 AoE**

The Great Hall of Sanwell was a place of ceremony and community both. The great construct stretched deep into the western district of the Ratholarin capital city, and had long been hailed as a place of equals amongst the people of the city. Food, drink, dance, even theatre filled the hall every single day of the year. It was more than a cultural icon for Ratholarin. It was the realm's heart.

The first time Tobias had laid eyes on it, he'd been too young to appreciate the communal unity that it fostered amongst the common folk. Older and far more the wiser, the nineteen year old tiger could see its value. That it had been ever used for the event to come was not surprising.

From atop a stage that loomed large over the centre of the hall, he looked across the arrayed individuals that had gathered. More than a few were soldiers and their families, but more and more of the general populace had begun to filter in from outside. A cool breeze blew in from the doors at either end of the hall, easing some of the heat – and thankfully the *smell* – that suffused it.

As stuffy as the martial dress of the royal family was, it cut an impressive figure. The blue and white uniform all but gleamed in the sunlight that filtered through the windows, though a glance at Fredrick to his left put the meagre medallions on his uniform to shame. He sat on a makeshift throne, Brett on his other side and with Zane stood impassively between Tobias and the heir to the crown. He sighed. It should have been their father sitting there.

A call for Zane drew Tobias' attention, and both he and the kingsblade turned to the stairs that led up onto the stage from below. A rat in ceremonial purple robes nodded to him and Zane returned the nod. Tobias took a deep breath as the wolf leaned in to whisper into Fredrick's ear. It was time.

Damn. He wasn't ready.

He knew in advance that he wasn't going to be, but that didn't stop the hitch in Tobias' throat as Fredrick rose from the throne. From it he snatched up a ceremonial staff, iron and thick and heavy and engraved with the ancient Rathin symbols for different weapons and concepts of war. A grand, curved blade rested atop the staff, making the whole thing look for all the world like a terribly disproportioned sickle.

The heir slammed the non-bladed end into the stage twice, and the conversation all throughout the hall was cut off in an instant. The people more distant from the stage began to approach, huddling closer as they stood beneath the glowering stare of Fredrick. Zane stepped

forward to the prince's side and cast his voice throughout the hall. "All deference to Crown Prince Fredrick, heir to Ratholarin. We bow in humble accord." His head dipped.

As did all the heads of the people arrayed before them. Tobias refrained; behind Fredrick, there was no chance of his elder brother seeing his minor act of insolence. He caught the swell of Fredrick's chest and the pleased smile that tugged at his muzzle, and Tobias felt his stomach twist. There it was. His first true taste of what awaited him. Disgusting.

The bowing went on for longer than was traditional as Fredrick refrained from giving the order. The people were just left there, eyes to the floor, as he basked in his moment. Tobias thought briefly of clearing his throat, but cast the notion aside; that staff could do some damage. Finally, Fredrick beat the stage with the end of the staff once more. "I thank you, gracious people of Ratholarin. You may rise."

They did so, many faster than Tobias had expected. Fredrick's eyes zeroed in on a few of them and his smile slipped for a moment, but even Fredrick wouldn't ruin the spectacle of an important day with his petulance. "Though the warriors of our fair kingdom fight in the name of my father, King Eric the Fourth – the illness of whom robbed him of the privilege of standing before you today – know that it is not for he, nor I, that they toil." He pointed the staff out toward the crowd, still trickling in from outside as he gave his speech. "It is for you. They fight in *your* name, to protect *your* homes; *your* loved ones; *your* lives.

"And today, following intense skirmishes in the western villages driven to violence by the foul practices, magics and faiths of old, we stand not in humble accord with the crown and the throne of this great land, but with the heroic warriors who themselves stand, day and night, Shining Light to Pure Snow, in righteous defence of all that is just, and right, and true." He lowered the staff again and stepped back from the stage, head turned toward the rat that still lurked in the wings. He nodded once.

Tobias caught the rat's return not in the corner of his eyes, and he turned to mutter something too quiet to hear to someone further in the shadows as Fredrick continued. "Gentlefolk, I, Prince Fredrick, your Crown Prince of Ratholarin, am honoured to present the commander who led the offensive to you now, and the greatest heroes of Ratholarin to stand beside him." He swept his free paw out toward the wings of the stage. "Commander Geoffery! Son of Landry! Hero of Ratholarin!"

The crowd began to whoop and cheer as the neatly uniformed fox stepped out of the shadows and onto the stage. He looked more than a little uncomfortable before all those people, and his steps hitched once as he made his way to Fredrick's side. He caught a quick glance between himself and Zane, and the slightest hint of a smile on the kingsblade's face seemed to ease the fox's nerves somewhat. He turned toward the crowd and bowed to them, before doing the same to Fredrick.

If Fredrick was irritated that he'd not been bowed to first – and on some level Tobias knew that exactly that sort of thing *incensed* his brother – he didn't show it. Instead he hefted the staff high over his head. "It was Commander Geoffery who struck the fatal blow against a vile sorceress in the village of Kurest. She who had bewitched the minds of the townsfolk and turned them against the very soldiers sent there to protect and aid them. She who, with the aid of those beyond our borders, would have torn down the entire kingdom in the name of decrepit and dead gods."

Tobias felt his brow furrow but said nothing. That was the first he'd heard of any sort of foreign interference. His eyes flicked to Zane, but the kingsblade's face gave nothing away. He wondered sometimes if Zane even could show emotions besides stoicism and irritation. Nevertheless, Fredrick continued to speak. "That so few lives were lost as a whole village rose up in a surprise attack at the command of this foul magic is a testament, not only to the strength of the Ratholarin people but to the leadership and training that Geoffery, son of Landry, has exercised in the field of duty." He turned to the side and nodded to someone waiting in the wings.

That someone turned out to be the rat, who shuffled onto the stage in his thick robes. Tobias kept his face even despite the urge to wince. How *hot* was it in those robes? The rat's arms carried a thick cushion, plush velvet of brilliant azure upon which sat a brilliant silver medal. No sooner than the rat arrived and sank to a knee before Fredrick did the crown prince pluck the medal from the cushion and step forward to Geoffery. "We stand here today in recognition of your bravery and valour; your skill and your cunning; your loyalty and your ferocity in the face of overwhelming evil. To wit, I bestow upon you this accord: the Sigil of Rathin."

Fredrick wound up fumbling briefly with the medal, but eventually was able to affix it to the fox's uniform in a fairly straight and neat manner. As he did so, Geoffery was turned back toward the crowd for them to cheer once more, their voices loud enough to almost rattle the stage. How the rat in his thick robes managed to make his way back off into the wings without tumbling over was beyond Tobias.

As the crowd cheered, Fredrick slowly raised his empty paw. The roaring for Geoffery wound down as the fox clasped both paws behind his back. He looked as uncomfortable with the praise even as Fredrick revelled in it. "And while each and every soldier and guard is a hero of the kingdom, from the newest recruit to the most seasoned kingsblade, Commander Geoffery has singled out the finest of the soldiers under his command. Captains, lieutenants, and even new recruits at his recommendation are to also receive commendation for their valorous efforts in securing your homes from destruction."

Again the tiger turned toward the wings and nodded. This time it was not just the rat who returned, but an otter and a fox who followed. Each carried cushions of their own bearing insignias and medals, and the three lined up before Geoffery as the fox turned his back to the crowd and to the attendants. He looked up again at Zane, and Zane smiled back at him. The pride radiated off the kingsblade for the commander's accomplishment, plain to see.

And then, as Geoffery turned to the wings, the procession began. Soldiers, many of them wounded, began to make their way across the stage. Tobias shuddered at the sight of a horse with a stump where his forearm had once been. Of a wolf with a vicious, fresh scar down the side of his face and a missing ear. Of a goat with shattered horns. They each clearly were pained as they made their way across the stage to the cheering adulation of the crowd, but their faces betrayed so little.

Not all of them were so badly hurt. A pair of tigers seemed relatively unharmed, as did a lion and a bear that emerged right after them. Tobias frowned as he noted the bear's familiarity; he couldn't quite place the face for a second. Then however, a hyena stepped out

after him and Tobias remembered him immediately. He'd stood by William at the inspection as well, before they'd been deployed.

William was different. He moved stiffly as he made his way across the stage behind the bear, lining up for his accolade. There was a new scar on the side of his neck, his fur had lost much of its old lustre, and as he focused in the hyena seemed to have picked up an ever so slight limp. Tobias felt his blood run cold. The William that had returned from battle was not the boy he'd known before. What had happened to him? What had he seen?

He said nothing, of course; to speak or stand out would incur Fredrick's – and thus his father's – wrath. Nevertheless, Tobias still tried to attract William's attention. It was without success however; the hyena was focused fiercely on the bear's back, and on his approach toward Fredrick. He could see flickers of unease on his face as he watched Fredrick shake the paw of the soldiers ahead of him, leaving Geoffery to affix their medals that time. This was something Tobias didn't envy one bit.

But as William arrived before Fredrick, Tobias watched his brother's expression turn from a pristine image of jubilant pride to a vicious snarl of abject disgust. He paused, fingers outstretched to the cushion that bore the medal for William. Tobias swallowed hard. He wouldn't. Surely he wouldn't. It just wasn't done; he *couldn't*...

"Commander." Fredrick spoke the word slowly. Clearly. Quietly enough that the people behind Geoffery couldn't quite hear, but loud enough that everyone on stage most certainly could. "What is this... *filth*, doing before me?"

William twitched. Tobias caught the flash of indignation cross his face, and the confusion that touched Geoffery's. "My prince? I don't understand the question."

"Troubling. It is a simple enough one." Fredrick leaned in toward William who, to his credit, didn't flinch as he met the prince's hateful stare. "This one. I know him *very* well. There is nothing honourable or valorous about him."

Zane stiffened beside Tobias, but the kingsblade held his tongue. Geoffery's eyes flicked up to him before they settled back on the crown prince again. "My prince, with all respect and deference to his majesty... William, son of Zane was wounded — nearly mortally — in combat while ensuring the protection of his fellows, his kingdom, and its people from the very ambush you just lauded me for. His promotion and his honours are well-earned, I assure you. If he is unworthy of accolade, sir, none of us are."

Tobias' stomach churned and he forced down the urge to vomit. William wounded? Nearly killed? And now *this*? He watched as Fredrick's expression turned from disgusted to angered. "Truly? You would defy me? Do you wish me to strip you all of those very accolades I have just bestowed? What has been given can be taken away, *Commander*."

"No, it cannot." Tobias' steady voice surprised Fredrick almost as much as it surprised him. He kept his tone low as Fredrick turned toward him, and he stared down his older brother. "You do not have the authority to strip those awards on father's behalf. These soldiers have already been approved for these rewards." He tilted his head up as Fredrick dared to bare his teeth. "And you have just called these people heroes of the kingdom. Do you think those below would be pleased to see you strip them of the honours you've just bestowed?"

Fredrick's jaw tightened, but his eyes did dart to the commoners behind William and Geoffery for the barest moment. Perhaps he then realised his position and the wisdom of Tobias' words, for he straightened up and smiled once more, the perfect picture of royal beneficence. Tobias knew he'd pay for his defiance later, but a glance at Geoffery knew he'd won at least the commander's respect. The fox nodded to him, and he returned the gesture.

The crown prince wasn't dissuaded completely, though. "No, I cannot go against father's wishes and strip such a decorated commander of his hard-earned rewards." His eyes turned on William however and, once again, Fredrick bared his teeth for a moment. "But you get *nothing*. Not a single thing more. No accolade. No honours. No *promotion*. You will watch your fellows lauded and see how little you are by comparison."

William's jaw tightened and right then, in the glare in his eye, Tobias could see Zane's stoic and restrained irritation on full display in his son. William really did take after his father. "My prince's wisdom is on full display for us. Thank you."

Tobias gaped, but Fredrick must have missed the insult. His grin turned briefly cruel as William turned, his medal left on its cushion, to march off the other side of the stage with the rest of the awarded soldiers. He quickly composed himself before Fredrick eyed him up again, but Tobias could see out into the crowd of faces and knew that *they* knew something wasn't quite right. That something had gone on up on the stage, and how every single person on it seemed rattled.

That seemed to ease back as the next of the soldiers to be honoured arrived, and Fredrick continued just as he had before. There was no mistaking however that the mood had soured high above the common folk. Fredrick's smile was forced. Geoffery's discomfort had only grown. Zane, Tobias could tell, was furious and doing his level best to conceal it.

Tobias didn't know if the people below knew the full extent of what had happened. If even one had overheard the kerfuffle on stage, then it would spread like wildfire through the community. Everything that the Great Hall stood for would come undone in an instant, all because of Fredrick's pride and cruelty.

Or perhaps, he wondered, that was as much an illusion as the display on stage itself. The royalty acting out its role, rhetoric and award to the military that they depended on to enforce and expand their rule. Lip service paid to the common folk, as they ignorantly cheered on the idea of heroism and valour and ignored the apathy of their rulers. Was their community under the layers of performance any more real? Or was it just like Fredrick: just more performative display, concealing something rotten within?

The young prince shuddered to think. Hopefully he would never have to find out.

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At least a performative event did one thing that was always guaranteed to provide the common folk and nobility alike a little levity and calm in the midst of chaos: fine food and voluminous drink.

In the wake of the ceremony honouring Geoffery's soldiers, the Great Hall was filled with tables and chairs and foods of a near infinite variety. More than a little had been donated for the event by local bakers and butchers and merchants in the hopes of building rapport with

the crown and its grand coffers, and prepared in conjunction with the cooks of the castle. Anyone and everyone in the city was free to partake, even if all they did was drift in, grab some food, and leave again. The harvest was looking promising that year, and so there was much to spare.

Throughout it all, Tobias had remained on stage with the rest of the royal family in attendance, Zane and the other kingsblades there to protect them, and Commander Geoffery. He'd found his appetite lacking after what Fredrick had done and tried to do during the ceremony. Zane had been forced to encourage Tobias to eat, and he reluctantly had. Well... as reluctantly as one could with moist, perfectly cooked waterfowl to fill one's muzzle, anyway.

He had, however, taken the very first opportunity he could to leave the stage and make his way down into the crowds. Zane had warned him against such things, but the volume of soldiers all around Tobias stole any fear he might have had. He couldn't do what he needed to do from up on the stage. William was about. He had to see his old friend. He had to make sure William was alright. Those horrible words – *mortally wounded* – continued to echo through his head, louder than the laughter and merriment of the Great Hall.

He'd been reluctant to approach when he finally found William — along with that bear *of course* — off in one of the corners of the hall. They sat alone and quiet, a tall, full mug of ale in the bear's paw and an empty one at William's side. A pang of jealousy speared his heart.

“Do not even think it, brother.”

Fredrick's words in Tobias' ears caused him to jump half out of his fur. He whirled to find the crown prince right there at his back, and a clearly unhappy Zane right behind *him*. “And what, pray tell, am I not thinking this time, oh illustrious brother mine?”

“There are people within earshot. Show me the respect accorded.” Fredrick's eyes narrowed. He wasn't wrong; there were plenty of people who could probably have heard them if they cared.

Or if Tobias did. After the wounds in his shoulder had healed, he'd learned that none of his brother's warnings meant a damn thing anymore; he'd do what he liked regardless of sense and reason, and he would do it even if all it did was cause someone he disliked pain. “I owe you no such respect. You're only here because father is not.”

The hiss that slipped out of Fredrick's muzzle was the sort of thing Tobias was glad he couldn't hear over the din of the Hall. “Do not speak to that sloppy excuse for a male. Not today. Not *ever* again.”

“On your order? Your authority?” Tobias stared Fredrick down as the older prince nodded. “You have no power over me. You don't have your throne or your crown, and I'll do what I please until then, thank you very much.”

“Then you accept the consequences.” Tobias glared back at Fredrick as he spoke those words. “Say I do nothing to you. What of your precious whore?”

“And how many times are you going to threaten our servants? And how *loudly*?” Tobias' eyes narrowed as his patience wore thin. That was the same line he trotted out every time he wanted Tobias to do something, and he'd proven himself to be all bark and no bite as regarded his threats. Perhaps their father or mother were aware and still reined him in.

Still, the reminder didn't seem to do Fredrick's mood any favours. He glanced around; more than a few of the commoners had their eyes on them as their confrontation drew more and more attention. Perhaps even memories of the events on stage but a few hours earlier were being conjured to mind once more, and perhaps Fredrick himself was even aware of that possibility. "Consider what I could do to him if you test me."

Tobias just sighed. That was it? That was all he had? "The same things you already have done? Would do anyway, regardless of what actions I do or do not take? Please. You'd rip his throat out with your teeth if you could."

It was chilling the way that Fredrick grinned at that, those very teeth on full display. Tobias shuddered and shook his head. What should have cast a pall on his character was something that Fredrick seemed happy to wear as a badge of pride. "So you have nothing more to threaten me with. You ought enjoy the festivities your way, brother. I have someone to see." He tilted his head up and nodded to Zane. "Kingsblade. Have you a message I might deliver?"

Zane hesitated as Fredrick glared wrathfully at his brother, but eventually nodded once. "Just give him my love, my prince, if you should speak with him. And that of his mother."

"I would be honoured. Now, if you'll excuse me, brother?" Tobias took a step back, testing Fredrick's reaction. If he'd pushed too far, then Fredrick could snap.

But no. The very public nature of their position meant that even Fredrick wouldn't allow his foul temper to cloud his better judgement. He turned around and began to smile and wave to the commoners about him, brushing off their paws as they reached out to shake his and offering small talk. Tobias was safe.

For the moment, at the very least. He watched Fredrick and Zane head back into the crowd, and breathed a deep sigh of relief. One day he knew he'd figure out how he'd lacked the courage to stand up to Fredrick when they were younger. This day would not be it however, and he shook his head as he turned back to William.

And froze. Both the hyena's eyes and the bear's were fixed on him, watching intently. Tobias gulped. How much had they seen? What *precisely* had they seen? He looked on as William leaned in closer to the bear and whispered something to him. The bear's ear flicked once and he said something in return, and whatever it was made William stand up.

He thought for a second that William was going to leave the Hall entirely, but instead he made his way directly through the crowd toward Tobias. The tiger's breath caught in his throat and he brushed down his uniform quickly. He then realised how silly that must have looked and forced his arms to his sides as William arrived. "Good afternoon, William."

"My prince." William bowed his head immediately and clasped his paws together before him. "I got the impression you were coming to see me."

"And here I thought I was being subtle again." He smiled, but William's head remained bowed. A scowl touched Tobias' expression. "You can look at me, you know. You've never had to stand on ceremony with me." William didn't really have an answer for that, but he did lift his head to meet Tobias' gaze. "By the way, your father couldn't get away from Fredrick, but he wanted me to pass on his love, and your mother's as well."

“Please send mine back in turn, if it’s no trouble.” William sounded a little more like his old self then, and he even offered a little smile. His eyes shifted over Tobias’ shoulder; he didn’t doubt he could still see Zane tower over everyone else. “It’s been a long few months. I...” He swallowed and glanced aside for a moment. “I’m worried to ask since I haven’t heard anything from her, but mother...”

Tobias frowned. Odd that he’d received no word of her; he’d have thought Zane would have sent messages on her situation. “She is well, last I saw. Well enough, at least.” He cleared his throat and looked down. “That fever that went through the castle has left her weaker than she was before, but she still works hard. She and many of the servants are only there because of the medicines your crowns purchased for them.” William all but sagged in relief to hear that. Had he truly heard nothing?

When Tobias lifted his head again, he couldn’t help but look back at the bear. He sipped on his ale, attention drifting from one person to another around him but not currently on the two of them. “Look... may we speak in private? Please? I haven’t seen you in so long, and...”

William frowned at that, and for a moment Tobias was certain that he was going to be rejected outright once again. But then the hyena glanced back over to the bear, and Tobias’ eyes followed. A quick wave earned the other soldier’s attention and something in William’s face must have conveyed a question. The bear’s eyes fixed on Tobias for a moment before they flicked back to William. He grinned and offered two positively enormous thumbs up.

The tiger blinked in confusion; what exactly had William conveyed anyway? The hyena shook his head and turned back to Tobias mid eye-roll with a nod. “Yeah. Sure, we can talk.”

“Thank you.” Tobias glanced around until his eyes fell upon one of the surreptitious side doors that led to the backstage area. He started toward it and William cautiously followed, though he paused as Tobias pulled the door open. “Come on. We won’t be bothered here, and it’ll be much quieter.”

“If you say so.” William nodded once to the prince and reached out to hold the door open for him. Tobias slipped inside and into the darkened space, only for William to close the door behind them and pitch them almost instantly into total darkness. “Oh. Uh... should I open it back up?”

“No, it’s... fine. Not like we’ve not spent a lot of time alone in the dark, right?” Tobias let off a nervous chuckle.

It wasn’t a sound William shared. In fact, his tone shifted to something that came awful close to accusatory. “And if memory serves, it’s the sort of thing that earned you a lot of trouble. Painful trouble, for both of us.” He paused as those words sank in. “I don’t think I’m comfortable going through that again, Tobias.”

“We’re not doing anything wrong, William.” Even though he couldn’t see William through the darkness, he couldn’t help but scowl at him. Maybe if he scowled hard enough, the hyena would feel it.

“We didn’t do anything wrong before, either. Look how that turned out.” He sighed. “Look. Let’s not waste time; the longer we’re in here together the worse it’s gonna be for both of us. What do you want?”

The bluntness of the question came as a surprise. “Can’t I... just talk with you? Like we used to?”

William’s sigh was more answer than anything Tobias could have expected. It also cut deeper than he’d feared. “No, Tobias, we can’t. Because you cast me out and broke my heart and betrayed our trust and friendship. What makes you think we can just go back to the way things used to be, when you’re the one who constantly said how much you’d changed, and you’d grown up, and you’d done what you had to do to protect yourself?” The hyena’s words grew a little louder with each sentence, only for it to drop back to barely above a whisper a moment later. “You hurt me. Bad.”

“And you hurt me, too.” Tobias couldn’t keep the edge out of his voice. Why was William acting like the prince was the bad guy? Like he’d done everything wrong? “Remember that inspection? I wanted to talk to you.”

“You *humiliated* me in front of the whole company.” There was no mistake of the growl in William’s voice, and Tobias knew from the first word that he’d made a mistake. Zane’s explanation of what had gone on filtered slowly through the tiger’s head as William reminded him. “The commander, a captain, *and* my lieutenant all raked me over the coals. They wanted to know what I’d said or done or *not* done to earn a prince’s attention. And do you know how much everyone else started to pester me? To mock me for standing out to you? For your... *familiarity* with me? I had to fight twice as hard and three times as vicious so they would stop calling me soft.”

Tobias had no answer for that. At the time he’d been so sure. So certain that he’d been doing the right thing. He shivered; he’d thought that when he’d cut William out of his life in the first place, too. Had he been wrong? Had he *actually* been the bad guy the entire time? “I had no idea.”

“I know you didn’t. But you know what? It doesn’t actually matter, because that’s exactly what it’s all about with you, isn’t it?” The anger ramped up in his tone again, and Tobias found himself backing up a step even though he couldn’t make out William’s exact position or expression. “You had no idea. Right? You’ve got an excuse there. Not an apology.”

Tobias’ jaw dropped. “Of course I’m sorry! Why wouldn’t I be sorry for hurting you? I never wanted that. I’d *never* want that. Why would-”

“Because you’ve never *told* me!”

The snap came out of nowhere, full of pain and rage and grief. It was followed by deep, slow pants, as if William was fighting to keep himself under control. Tobias’ breaths were quick and quiet, with fear and shame upping his heartrate rather than anger. “You’ve... *never*... told me sorry. And... what? Until right now, you thought I was just ignoring you? When everything I was doing – to keep my *mother* safe and well – was put at risk?” He growled wordlessly before he sighed. “You don’t even see it, do you?”

Tobias felt his heart tremble in his chest. “... see what?”

“What you did. You looked at everything that happened and... and you thought *I* was the one who did *you* wrong.” He paused, and Tobias noticed the waver in his voice. Even now, years removed, he knew the sound of William’s voice as he cried. “What did I do to you? Why

did I deserve this? Whatever I did, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry, but you..." He choked off his tears, and the hyena's voice came back much firmer. Angry again. "But you... can't say. Can you? You don't even know. Because it wasn't me. I didn't deserve this. I didn't do *anything* to you."

"You did plenty." Tobias' voice sounded so small and pathetic by comparison. As, he reasoned while his heart shattered deep inside, it should. "You were my only friend. Always there for me, no matter what. I could trust you with anything. I *did* trust you with everything. You *were* my everything."

"Yeah? I loved you."

Those three words came as a gut punch, and they hit all the harder for the implication it was past. Tobias gulped. He'd never expected the confession. Not ever in his life did he think William would admit what he'd long known. What they'd both long known but never said. "Loved?"

"You heard me." William quieted again. "I loved you. And you knew. You knew *damn* well I did."

"How could I have *known*, William?" The words came with more force than Tobias had expected. "If you really want to make that argument, alright. Let's make that argument. If I can't be sorry without obviously, deliberately, *specifically* saying sorry, then how was I supposed to know what you felt?" There was heat behind Tobias' words, but the tiger knew his heart wasn't entirely in them.

It didn't seem to have done him any favours, though; the growl in William's voice was back in full force. "Really? So because I couldn't tell you how I felt; how I felt *in spite* of how you were starting to push me away – out of fear you'd push me away *faster* — I don't deserve for you to even try making amends?"

"I have tried! I tried to speak to you after it, and you know that!" Tobias' voice pitched up as his tail fluffed out in the dark. He was glad William couldn't see him curling in on himself. Every emotion was wrapped up tightly together and the tiger wasn't able to separate them. Anger and loss and longing and sadness and a million, million other feelings snarled and ate each other inside him. "I'm here now. I'm still trying. I'm *always* trying!"

"But you never apologise! You never apologise, because you decided *you* were right!"

"And I was *wrong*!" The words shot out of him in something that almost resembled a shout. His teeth were bared, fur on end as his paws squeezed each other tightly. His muzzle worked at the air, stale and hot in the dark under the stage as he sighed. "I was... I was wrong."

"And I *am* sorry. I cannot undo what has been done. I was wrong and I hurt you and nothing I can do for the rest of my days will change what has been." He shook his head and opened his eyes again, even though he could still only barely make out the outline of the hyena in the dark. What was he thinking? How did he react? Tobias didn't know. Couldn't know.

There was a quiet sniff. Apparently the tears weren't too far away from William still. Tobias lowered his head again as the hyena spoke. "So we're back at the start again. What do you *want*, Tobias?"

The tiger's muzzle opened, but no sound came out. He'd spent so much time thinking about that question and even more time besides doing his best *not* to think about that question. It was the bane of his existence. He knew the answer. He'd always known the answer, but now with the chance to speak it, he hesitated.

And William noticed. "Can't even say it, can you? Damn it all, after this... you still can't even bring yourself to say what you feel. Just expect me to... to sidle up and do it all for you, like a good little servant."

That let a surge of anger break briefly to the surface. "Well if you know so precisely what I think and feel, then please. Speak for me. Tell me what I want."

"Damn you, Tobias." William's voice wavered as he spoke those words. "That's not my job. You're not my responsibility and I don't have to dance this dance anymore. I don't *want* to do it." Something rustled from the same direction as William, and sank down toward the floor. He wasn't standing anymore. "You've never been able to be honest with yourself. Not to me, and for sure not *about* me." His sigh was muffled by what had to be a paw or two. "I'm done playing this... this game, with you. I'm not gonna make it easy for you, and I'm not gonna save you the trouble. You want something? You need to do the work."

Resentment joined the anger, and it was just as hollow. Tobias felt his claws flex for a moment, but his fingers relaxed almost immediately afterward. "If that's how you want to be... fine. No games. No dances." He started in William's general direction, but the hyena wasn't his target. A paw lifted to feel before him, and fingers brushed the wall. Tobias made his way along it until the wall gave way to the door they'd entered through. "Take your time leaving. Wouldn't want anyone to think you'd snuck off with a prince, would we?"

The barb left his muzzle before he could stop it. He shuddered in turn when William offered a quiet, tearful, "Damn you, you utter... *utter* bastard. Damn you..."

Tobias set his jaw. If that was how William was going to be and what he was going to say, then he'd made a terrible mistake. The hyena didn't want to help him. Didn't want to fix what they'd had. He had his new life and his new friends and he didn't need Tobias. Well, that was fine. The tiger didn't need him either. He had a wife-to-be, and an insatiable lover, and the wealth and comfort of the crown at his back. He had more than William ever would, and if the hyena wanted to keep playing soldier and insulting him, fine. Tobias didn't need him.

Or so he tried to tell himself. All it took was the swivel of an ear to bring the hyena's quiet crying into sharp focus. It broke his heart all over again; chest aching as he felt the urge, nigh-on irrepressible, to turn and wrap him in a hug. To apologise. To make things right. Even if he couldn't, to at least try... if not for the fact that he knew William wouldn't have wanted that.

That in and of itself was a gut punch that the tiger wasn't prepared for, but on some level one he felt he deserved. He'd done it again, and hurt William. Of course William didn't need Tobias to comfort him. Who wanted to be comforted by the person who'd just hurt them? No, he was the last thing William needed.

But he knew enough to have an idea of what William *did* need. What he deserved.

And so, he composed his face as best he could and pulled open the door again. Light streamed in from outside as the noise and bustle of the feast near overwhelmed him. The tiger squinted through the daylight and revels and stepped out, before quietly closing the door behind him. Eyes blinked as if to clear the sun itself from his glare-stricken vision. He cast his gaze around. *There*. He started over.

The bear soldier was still seated where he had been before, but there was a new mug of ale at his side. He was talking to a fox who seemed to be utterly drunk – such events didn't do much for the citizenry's temperance, Tobias had learned – but the moment he saw the prince on approach he quickly finished up his conversation. The fox lingered, but when he saw Tobias on the way over he made a surprisingly swift getaway.

By the time Tobias stood before him, the bear was on his feet with head bowed. "My prince. This is an honour."

"Please stop that." The words made the bear's head lift, his brows knit together in a confused frown. "I'm quite certain William has said enough on our history that your hatred for me must run quite deep, and I need you to know I don't give the slightest hint of a damn about that."

That changed the bear's stance in an instant. He drew himself up to his full height, well more than a head above Tobias as he stared down at the prince. "For royalty, you're makin' some pretty big presumptions there. I thought y'were meant to be smarter'n that."

Tobias felt his eyes narrow. He wasn't looking for another fight, damn it all. "Well then, here's something smart that I know you will appreciate. I do not know if you're sleeping with him. I do not know if you are entangled on any deeper level than the carnal." The bear's eyes narrowed slightly, but Tobias held up his paw for silence before he could say anything. "It does not matter. What does is that it is clear to me that he trusts, respects, and cares for you. And right now, that is what he needs."

The bear's muscles tightened all over his body. "And why's that, then?"

"Because he is in pain, and despite my best intentions I am... yet again the cause." The words tasted like ash. Bitter. Burning. "He needs someone right now who will care for him. Someone who will help him; someone whom he trusts." His jaw shifted as he swallowed. "He needs *you*. Not me. Go to him, please. Do what I cannot."

The frown remained on the soldier's face, but any anger or suspicion on it seemed to drain away as he looked up at the door that Tobias had returned through. It lingered for a moment before he shifted his gaze back to the tiger. "I respect that, for what it's worth. That can't have been easy to say."

An understatement for the histories, perhaps, but Tobias shook his head regardless. "Clearly I have done what is 'easy' for far too long. He deserves better than that." He nodded once. "Go. Please."

He needn't have said another word. The bear was already on his way past him, making for the door. Tobias turned, watching him as he opened it up and looked around. His heart ached anew as the bear obviously caught sight of the upset William; he gasped, expression

softening in an instant as he rushed out of sight to kneel down. The door swung closed again behind him, clicking quietly shut under the noise that filled the Great Hall.

And that was it. All he'd done was hurt William again. The first chance they'd had to be alone and talk as adults since they'd both *been* adults, and he'd ruined it. Even then, the urge to blame William for being so aggressive and testy and holding grudges tried to force its way to the surface. Tobias pushed it back down again as he eyed that mug of ale the bear had left behind. Before he could talk himself out of it, he reached down, grabbed it by the handle, and knocked back a deep swig.

It might have been cheap and watered down to account for the vast number of people served at the feast, but it was still ale and far from Tobias' personal tastes. He struggled to gulp it down and gasped once he'd managed to do so. The tiger drained the whole mug with a couple more deep, unpleasant pulls and set the mug back where he'd found it. One of the servants could attend to that. He was done.

The warm tingle of the alcohol would run through him in due time, and Tobias had no desire for drunkenness to strike in public. Instead he made for one of the Great Hall's main doors. The castle. Home. That's where he'd go. Collapse in his chambers. Let himself feel everything. Let it all out. Maybe even find some harder drink to help lubricate those awful emotions. Right then, he'd do anything to excise those feelings – and William – from his heart.

It wouldn't work, of course. That didn't mean that it wasn't worth a try.