

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART TWO

90th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 20 AoE

“You deserve a better celebration for your birthday, dear.” Catherine sighed as she reached up to gently brush her fingers through William’s headfur, dislodging some of the flakes of snow that had begun to collect there. “The promotion’s nice, but something more. Something good. Not to march off to war again.”

“And you need to get back inside.” William sighed as he glanced behind his mother, tightly wrapped in layer upon layer of warm clothing as she fussed over him. At the cottage door stood a mouse, taller than many of her kind and equally warmly dressed. She nodded back to him. “Karine looks to be getting cold, and you know she won’t go without you.”

His mother drew back and scowled at him. “I am no moron. You just want *me* back inside where-” She broke off, choking up for a moment as she held up a paw. William winced and took a step back for the coughing fit he knew was coming. When it arrived Catherine was left doubled over, hacking and spitting at the ground.

He glanced to his side. Daniel stood with him, his own eyes carefully averted from the sight. “I am not in the grave yet, William. I do as I please.” She did pause as he lifted an eyebrow, and frowned. “Bad enough that you think to dictate terms to *me*.”

William sighed and reached up to gently grip his mother’s shoulders. “This home is yours. Not mine. I bought it for *you*, and Karine is only here to help you. You know that.”

“I worked the castle while you were swaddled. You think I can’t take care of myself now?” The fire in her eyes worked its way into her voice, and William looked away. This was always the hardest part of visiting. Especially right before a deployment. “It’s insulting.”

A flicked glance up at Karine showed a neutral expression on the mouse’s features, but the slow fold of her arms made it clear that she’d heard. Her disapproval was plain. It wouldn’t do. “No, mother. What’s insulting is your treatment of Karine.”

Her eyes went wide. “How dare-”

“I dare!” William’s fur started to stand on end as he drew himself up a little. Karine didn’t deserve this. “I dare because you are my mother and I love you and I want you safe and healthy and well. That is *all* that matters to me, and I have paid Karine to help you to do that. And I will continue to pay Karine to do that, and more besides if I have to make sure she’s well compensated for enduring the cruelty of your tongue!”

Catherine looked as though she’d been scalded; jaw agape as she leaned back from him, hissing between tightly-clenched teeth while he continued in softer tones. “You have spent far too long serving. You deserve to spend some time *being* served, but you know better than

anyone that servants do not deserve to be put down or put upon.” He nodded past her to Karine, who by then wore a soft smile of appreciation. “Apologise to her, mother. Please.”

The older hyena sighed at that and shook her head. “My boy. Look at you. When did you grow so wise?” She turned around and started back toward the cottage, her arms tight around her middle as she cleared her throat again. “Beg your pardon, Karine. I was out of line.”

“It’s no trouble at all, ma’am.” She smiled and reached out a paw toward Catherine.

As his mother took it, William shook his head. “It’s absolutely trouble, Karine. She’s not to use that tone with you again. And *you*,” he added as his mother turned back to him again, “will listen to Karine and take your medicine when instructed.”

Catherine grumbled again, but nodded. “Fine, *Lieutenant*. But I’ll take it with some sweet tea, or not at all. I’ll put a pot on now.” She paused before she reached for the door and met William’s gaze. “Come back safe, William. Please?” She glanced briefly at Daniel. “Both of you. For me.”

Daniel smiled back at her and nodded. “Promise I won’t let anythin’ near him. Anythin’ ‘cept me, ‘course.”

“Well, now I feel relief. Thank you, Daniel.” Once more her eyes came to rest on her son. “*Arevo ne*, William.”

The words drew Daniel’s glance, but William cleared his throat quickly. “*Neva tua, amaa*. I’ll see you when we get back.”

“You better.” She smiled at him once more before she turned and pushed the door to the cottage open. The older hyena vanished inside a few moments later.

Karine pulled the door closed behind Catherine, but she didn’t also enter. Instead she lingered outside and made her way over to William. “Most grateful for your kindness, sir. Very kind words indeed.”

“Just trying to do right. I know she’s... difficult, when she gets in a mood. And in the Pure Snow she only has *one* mood.” He looked to the cottage again and sighed. “She’s not getting any better, is she?”

The sadness reflected in Karine’s eyes didn’t do him any favours, but the smile on her muzzle helped somewhat. “But she’s not getting any worse, neither. Mayhaps you got her out of working the castle just in time.” She fell silent and glanced away. “Honestly, sir, she’s bored. I keep the home all nice and clean for her and tend to her every need, but she’s still so used to workin’ all day that it’s driving her half mad to have nothin’ to do.”

“That, unfortunately, I don’t know how to help with.” He reached into his pocket for the silver coin he’d left there and offered it to the mouse. She looked at it for a moment before she gingerly took it and tucked it away in some pocket somewhere. “An extra crown for the trouble. I’d offer more, but-”

“You’ve already paid me well in advance, and more than I’m worth besides.” The mouse reached up and placed a paw on William’s chest as she bowed her head. “I promise, sir.

I'll do anything and everything I can to keep her well for your return. Whenever you're away, she's always whisperin' your name in the dark."

William smiled back, though his expression was a little sadder than he'd intended. "It's not my name she's whispering." He patted her paw with one of his own, and Karine lowered hers a moment later. "Be well, Karine. Thank you for your efforts."

"It's my pleasure, sir. By your leave." She curtsied gracefully – a difficult task, he imagined, what with all those layers – and turned away. She too vanished into the cottage, and then William and Daniel were left alone.

William's eyes remained on the door for a moment as Daniel patted his shoulder. "You wanna stay? I could speak to the commander for you. You earned some time away."

Part of him wanted to, but the hyena shook his head. Instead he turned away, and Daniel's arm slid down from his shoulder to gently encircle William's waist and back as they started back toward the city centre. "No. Just like her, I'd be bored out of my mind if I didn't have something to do. Besides, it's not like I'm gonna let you go out there without me. We promised, right?"

"Never one without the other." He nodded and leaned down to kiss through some light, accumulated snow on the hyena's head. "Damn. I lucked out better'n I thought with you. I jus' wanted to make sure. I know it's hard, every time y'leave her there."

"She's being well taken care of. That's just what I remind myself." William leaned into Daniel's side as they passed another couple of soldiers making their way more casually into town. "I know father came by to visit a few times, when he had a moment. Well... until she kicked him out and told him the next time he did, she'd gut him herself."

"Can't say she's no firebrand. Probably more fierce than the rebels." Daniel chuckled to himself and shook his head. "Oh, meant to ask. She said that a couple times... arevo ne?"

The lack of accent on the words made William chuckle. He'd thought *he* was bad. "The Carisi tongue. She tried to teach me when I was little, but father said it would just make me more outcast amongst the Ratholarin. Been picking it up slowly these last couple years, now she's out of the castle." He frowned as he nuzzled into Daniel's shoulder. "*Arevo ne* is like saying 'I love you.' I told her to be well or safe... *neva tua*." He shook his head. "Older I get, the more glad I am that I learned more of the language. She's slipping into it more and more lately, and I'm conversational at best. It's part of why I'm glad Karine is there. She speaks fluent Carisi. I can't imagine not knowing it while she..."

Daniel nodded along as the hyena explained. William couldn't help but smile as he luxuriated in the bear's warmth. He could always count on Daniel to listen. "Well, she sounds nice. Maybe you should ask Karine for lessons." He squeezed William tight. "Always liked a male with an accent."

"You always liked a male with a *cock*." William chuckled as Daniel gasped in exaggerated surprise, and he shook his head. "I'm just glad mother liked you. I was scared."

Daniel hummed at that as they leaned in to the side of the road to allow a cart to pass them. "Really? She liked me? Got the impression she weren't too happy about you hookin' up with a Ratholarin soldier."

William shrugged as he began to, however reluctantly, pry himself out of Daniel's arm. Much as he wanted to stay snuggled up against his bear, they'd be in the city proper soon and even in the snow it would be better if he was free to move. "She's still mad at me for *being* one. Not much can be done about that." He let his paw linger in Daniel's for a moment longer and gave it a squeeze. "But the moment you said you'd do anything to protect me and that I had a personal captain looking out just for me? That's when you won her over. She knew you'd do it."

"Yeah, well I could do without us havin' to march off to fight more rebels." Daniel sighed and shook his head as they turned down a different street. The barracks weren't nearby and they still had time; Daniel probably just wanted to enjoy the walk a little longer. "Rumours say we're headin' east, towards Ingsbren. Couple villages near the border been givin' the local garrison some grief and we're meant to put the fear o'the crown in 'em."

William winced but nodded. "It's getting worse. Eric can't get out there anymore and the people know it." He snorted as Daniel looked down at him. "Maybe they smell blood on the air. The wolves are circling now while they can, before Fredrick takes the throne."

"Not sure y'father would like that figure of speech." Daniel grinned back at him and shrugged, brushing some snow from William's shoulder. "And hey, Eric's a tough ol' bastard. I can't see him steppin' off that throne for a good long while. Not until he's done all the things he's said he wants to do."

"He already got his 'Age of Enlightenment.' Not sure what more he really needs." William glanced away in the hopes that his expression of disgust was missed.

But there was no such luck, as Daniel rounded up in front of him to bar his way. His expression wasn't angry, but definitely worried. "What's wrong?"

William opened his muzzle to claim nothing at all, but he knew better. The moment he looked up into the bear's eyes with all the sincerity in the world shining in them, the words died stillborn. Instead he sighed. "It's harder. Doing this, after seeing my mother." He frowned as he stepped forward and slowly wrapped his arms around Daniel's middle. "You heard what Karine said? About my name?"

"You said it weren't yours." Daniel tilted his head a little.

"That's because it wasn't." Again William sighed as he leaned in, head turned to the side. He all but collided with Daniel's chest, and the bear's arms fell protectively around him in an instant. "It's her husband's name. She named me after him... after he died."

The hyena could feel Daniel's arms stiffen somewhat against him, but then they melted away into a warm, tight embrace. "You never told me. But... sweet of her, I reckon, to remember him that way."

"Yeah." William's voice was somewhat muffled, but he knew Daniel could hear him still. The bear was used to it. "But it's a reminder to me, too. Every day, that Ratholarin took him away from her.. from *us*. A Ratholarin soldier killed him." He marked a quick, one-note chuckle. "My father killed my father. It'd be funny if it weren't sad."

The bear didn't really have anything to say there, but that was okay. His arms and his warmth said more than enough, and William hadn't intended for him to feel uncomfortable.

“I’m just scared. That... if something happened to me, it’d be people she knew. Or people that thought like her. Like how things were before the Ratholarin came in and took over their lands.”

Daniel leaned back from the embrace and William took a couple of moments to just luxuriate against him before he lifted his head. Their eyes met again, and there was an earnest glint in Daniel’s eye. “Do you think we shouldn’t fight?”

It was a loaded question of course, and they both knew it. Out in the open, two soldiers – one with Carisi blood no less – discussing such things? “I think sometimes we don’t have a choice.” William shook his head. “Maybe the rebels even have a good point. Maybe. But if they’re hurting other people to get it... that can’t be the way. Right?”

“I think so.” Daniel nodded as he drew William in close again. The hyena sighed and sank back into that warmth. He wished he could stay there forever, and the rest of the world could go on doing whatever it wanted.

But they couldn’t, and they both knew it. Even if Daniel didn’t feel the need to move just yet, William knew they’d be in trouble if they were late. “Come on, big boy.” He patted Daniel’s side as he pulled away. “I’ve always wanted to see Ingsbren. Maybe we can peek over the border while we’re out that way.”

“Hold on.” Daniel didn’t let him go, and William looked up with a frown. That frown vanished a second later as Daniel’s muzzle delicately found the hyena’s, and he murred quietly to himself as he reached up to wrap his arms around Daniel’s shoulders. William pressed into the kiss, less chaste than they could be but more suitable to a public place than they preferred.

There they stood for a few more seconds before Daniel pulled back. He did duck back in to plant another little kiss on William’s nose, smiling at the hyena’s giggle. “There. Much better.” He stepped back and hooked his arm out toward William. “Shall we?”

William rolled his eyes and couldn’t help but smile. All his concerns drifted away as he hooked his arm into Daniel’s and allowed the bear to lead him on. “Thanks.”

“Arevo ne.” The bear tugged him in closer.

He’d butchered the words again, but William didn’t mind. They were, as far as he was concerned, perfect.

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The barracks had barely been a quick stop-in for William and Daniel. There they’d changed into their uniforms – the bear had tried to rile William up and his teasing response had threatened to make them late and terribly unfit to report for duty – and met with their respective charges. The goat Daniel had been assigned was a skittish little thing whose name William still hadn’t been able to commit to memory. His own, a lanky ferret named Merinda, had been ready to go before William even arrived at the barracks. She needed to learn to relax a little.

Merinda talked his ear off on the way in; that was just in her nature, and Daniel had to attend to larger-scale things than William did. That didn’t mean he didn’t miss the bear’s company, or the days when they could have just done everything together. Merinda wasn’t the worst company. She was just... well, a *lot* of company. William didn’t always have the mental

fortitude to keep up with her ceaseless chatter. If he was honest, he was even less looking forward to taking her on a deployment.

But he wasn't paid to be that level of honest, and so he'd bit his tongue as he'd dismissed her to join the rank and file gathering out in the yard. She was already talking to another soldier by the time he'd turned to join the other higher-ranked soldiers making their way toward one of the smaller, seldom-used rooms to the back of the barracks. Built only for the commanders, it served as a secure, out of the way little place where they could make plans and discuss matters out of prying eyes and perked ears. That Geoffery had instructed a selection of his captains and lieutenants to join him there had come as a surprise, especially when that selection had included William as well.

Entering the room after being vetted by the soldiers outside it was a relief as his eyes lit upon Daniel. He began to smile as Daniel eyed him, but the bear didn't return the smile. Instead, his head nodded minutely toward the opposite wall of the round room, across the table that adorned its centre to a couple of figures against the other wall. William's eyes fixed on the closest of the pair and he sagged all at once. Tobias. "*Siatche*."

"Come again?" William stiffened at the sound of Geoffery's voice. He turned his head to see the commander much closer than he'd expected, seated at the closest chair at the table. He'd turned in it at William's muttering, eyes fixed on the hyena.

All at once William felt multiple pairs of eyes on him. Tobias' were doubtless among them, and he brought himself to attention. "Nothing, sir. Reporting as ordered."

He hummed to himself and nodded, waving to the nearest chair to him. "Take a seat. We'll be beginning in a moment, and I want you right here next to me for this one."

William frowned. He glanced up briefly at Tobias again, and the tiger had definitely noticed him by that point. His expression was unreadable. The expression of the rat beside him however was not, as he leaned forward and squinted. He looked familiar to William too, but the robed figure just didn't conjure a name to mind.

He resolved instead to look across the room at Daniel again. He offered William a little smile of reassurance and made his way over to settle down in the chair next to him. In the corner of his eye, the hyena watched as Geoffery turned as if to argue, but Daniel was already firmly seated. His paw reached out toward William under the table.

Gratefully, William took it into his own. Daniel squeezed it as the door behind them opened again, and Geoffery turned to note the intruder. William looked over, and could imagine the thoughts turning over and over in the commander's head before he finally stood. The murmuring around the table fell silent as everyone turned toward him.

The fox waved toward the table. "Please, all of you, be seated." As the other soldiers did so, he turned to Tobias. "Forgive the lack of ceremony, my prince. I suspect you wish to get this underway as soon as possible."

"No apologies are necessary, commander, though I might request an explanation." William stiffened at Tobias' words, though he kept his eyes firmly off the tiger. "I had been informed that I would be meeting with Commander Fornham, son of Duaine, and Commander Elanie, daughter of Sonja."

As William glanced up, he caught Geoffery's wince. "Apologies, your highness. Fornham and Elanie were diverted to the eastern borders by order of Crown Prince Fredrick. He's assigned my company in his place." The hyena frowned. What was Fredrick playing at this time? "Rest assured, my soldiers are more than ready to head to the northern plains. We even have some plainslands blood in this room. Some who know the culture, and the language."

Damn it. That's what Fredrick was playing at.

William kept his head low as he felt Tobias' uneasy eyes on him. He couldn't be certain if thrusting the two together again was something that Fredrick had done deliberately, or if it had just been an unhappy coincidence. Tobias looked distinctly uncomfortable; did he know something William didn't? "Make no mistake, Commander. I have the utmost respect for you and for all of your soldiers." Tobias paused and cleared his throat. "And forgive me for how it may sound, but is yours not a training company?"

More than a few eyes around the table narrowed in response to Tobias' words, and William felt a pang of short-lived sympathy for the prince. It was a fair concern, if he was putting his life in their paws. The rat, familiar as he was, definitely wasn't a kingsblade. Tobias was alone and with one company instead of two, and William knew that neither fact was likely to put the prince at ease. Perhaps that was part of Fredrick's machinations, if any existed.

If Geoffery was also offended he didn't give it away. "Sir, we are indeed a training company. And the only way to test the mettle of Ratholarin's recruits is with the fires of adversity. These recruits stand at the side of only the finest warriors in the realm. I wouldn't entrust the instruction of the next batch of warriors of Ratholarin to anyone else. I can promise you the absolute best of the best, your highness. I swear it on my life."

"I do not doubt, Commander. Pray forgive me how that must have sounded." Tobias bowed his head briefly. "I trust you have been informed, then, of our destination and mission."

"I have, my prince." Geoffery turned back to the table and cast his eyes around. "We have reports of a shaman, and not just any shaman, running amok up north." William frowned as a few more mutters went around the table. "Any shaman'd be cause for concern, but according to what we've heard and supporting information from a scholar of repute, this is a high shaman of the old gods."

The mumbles died off with those last words. William continued to frown as he looked around. Geoffery continued. "Now a regular old shaman would be bad enough. The magic at their disposal is unnatural and dangerous. A high shaman could call on something much, much more powerful." He turned to the rat and nodded. "Master Iannus, if you would."

Iannus. That was the name. He'd been the rat who'd instructed the princes in the castle! William had only met him briefly, but he'd seemed a fine fellow. As the rat approached the table, William felt himself smile. He'd been one of few adults in the castle to appreciate him at all. Now that he remembered the scholar, it was almost embarrassing to have forgotten him. "Thank you, Commander Geoffery. Most gracious."

"From what we have heard from the plainslands, evidence suggests that this shaman is a priest of Miarvis, goddess of the day, and this presents a particularly dangerous threat to those who would oppose them." He paused for a moment to allow those words to sink in, but the bored expressions of the soldiers around the table was likely not the view he'd expected.

William however leaned forward. That was a name he was actually familiar with. “She was also the goddess of toil and flame. Right? Husband of Vicaris and mother of... what, a dozen minor gods?”

More than a few weird looks were suddenly turned William’s way, but Daniel just smiled at him. Under the table, he squeezed the hyena’s paw once more. Iannus frowned at him once more. “What was your name, lad?”

Though he hesitated, a glance at Geoffery earned him a nod. “William, son of Zane. Lieutenant, sir.”

At the mention of his name, it was as if a light had gone off inside his head. His ears twitched as he stood up a little straighter. “Oh, of course! I remember you now; pray forgive me, lad. You were so small at the time. You were... ah...”

He’d turned toward Tobias as the tiger put a paw on his shoulder and gave the tiniest shake of his head. Iannus frowned and looked back over at William, but he must have figured out something was wrong because he gave a curt nod. “Yes. Well, anyway, you are correct. Where her husband Vicaris was the god of leisure, revels, and knowledge, Miarvis most definitely included fire amongst her purview.”

“Can we go back to that god of revels?” The call came from someone at the other end of the table; a look down showed a horse reclining in her chair. “Wouldn’t mind fighting a shaman whose idea of fightin’ was just relaxin’.”

Iannus’ brow furrowed as he locked his eyes on the horse. “Vicaris counted amongst his devout a cabal of witches with the power to destroy you with nary a thought, so perhaps you should count yourself lucky that you face a shaman who may assault you more openly.”

“And maybe we’re wastin’ our time, listenin’ to a Lenkis scholar when we could just go up there and stick ‘im with the pointy end of a sword.” The voice came from the badger at the horse’s side, and his captain’s insignia stalled out any argument William might have been about to indignantly make. “Honestly, Commander? What are we doin’ here? Let’s just quick-march up there and cut this off at the head.”

“Knowledge is power, Captain. You would do well to remember that.” Irritation filled Iannus’ voice.

The badger just leaned forward over the table. “And maybe you should run back to your homeland, *malakis*.”

Iannus’ eyes went wide with a sudden surge of anger. William leaned back in his chair; the rat might have been old and frail, but he’d not expected to see him ready to leap across the table to strike a soldier.

In the end it was again Tobias’ gentle paw on his shoulder that stopped him. His composure returned quickly as he turned to the prince, who nodded back to him. The scholar brushed down his robes as the badger snickered to himself. In the end it was Tobias who turned to Geoffery. “You promised me the finest soldiers in Ratholarin, Commander. The best of the best.” He waved his free paw toward the horse and badger. “Is this the sort of behaviour I should expect is instilled in our newest recruits?”

“No. You should not.” As William finally glanced at Geoffery, he could see that the fox himself was not looking all that pleased. “You two. Out. Now.”

The horse rose from her seat right away, but the badger paused. “Commander, if I may speak freely-”

“You may not. Get out of this room before I throw you out myself.” Geoffery planted both paws on the table and slowly pushed himself up and out of his seat. “You speak out of turn, and I can deal with it. You insult the wisdom of one with the knowledge to forewarn you about what you may face, and *you* have to deal with it.” He growled and tilted his ears forward. “You ignore this order now and you cannot even *imagine* what you’ll have to deal with next. Get out.”

If looks could kill, the glare that the badger captain fixed Iannus with would have incinerated him on the spot. He held that stare as he rose from the table, and only looked away as he stomped over to the door. It was flung open hard enough to impact the wall, and it swung back closed under the force of his pull a moment after he’d cleared it.

William winced. The silence in the room was filled with a tension he’d never experienced since he’d become a soldier. More than a few eyes in the room met, but few seemed to be aimed at the scholar, the commander, or the prince. The hyena’s were a rare exception. Tobias looked tired. Iannus, sad. Geoffery, calm despite his outburst. He watched as the fox slipped back down into his chair again. “Apologies, Master Iannus. Please, continue.”

The rat seemed more uncomfortable than before. He fidgeted with his paws as he looked around the gathered soldiers. In the end, it was Tobias’ nod that calmed him enough to speak. “I understand, truly, that you have all put the old gods behind you. That the stories and legends of old fade into little more than fairy stories, if they are told at all. Ratholarin has, for hundreds of years, been working towards this age of enlightenment we now find ourselves in. Free of gods, and of their whims and magic.”

The gnashing of the scholar’s pronounced front teeth might have gone unnoticed by most at the table, but William watched closely. There was still anger and frustration that lingered there, and it hitched his words ever so slightly in that last sentence. He suspected Iannus was not so invested in the Ratholarin ideology as he claimed, and if he was honest William wasn’t so sure that the rat was entirely wrong.

But even as he mused, Iannus turned and waved toward Tobias. “I would come with you and impart what I know during the march north, but my body is too frail to make the trip. In my stead, Prince Tobias has been entrusted to you.” Another series of whispers made its way around the table. In the corner of his eye, William caught a lifted eyebrow and a brief glance from Daniel. “He has been a good and faithful student in matters of history and legend, and King Eric has chosen him to accompany and instruct you all in what you may face.”

“Commander, if I may?” A mink wearing a captain’s insignia raised her paw. Her eyes were on Iannus and Tobias. She didn’t lower her paw until Geoffery gave her a curt nod. “Sir, with all respect. I’ll follow you anywhere. Lay my life down for this kingdom.” She shook her head and frowned at the rat. “But I am opposed, sir, to being instructed in the ways of old gods and their shamans. I don’t want that tripe in my head, sir.”

A few more quiet voices rose in agreement with the captain as Geoffery sighed. All at once, William thought he could feel the weight of command that rested on the fox's shoulders. The strain that came with inflexible thinkers. "You're free to reject it if you don't like the message, but Prince Tobias is putting himself in our care to make sure you don't get burnt to ash by a Lenkis shaman." He sat up higher as he looked around the gathered soldiers. "Ratholarin prides itself on reason! We've cast off and cast down the superstitions and limitations of old! And you're all sitting there now, muttering about how *knowledge* is your enemy?"

If the cry had been intended to rally his troops, Geoffery may have underestimated his audience. The grumbling only seemed to intensify. The closer they were to the mink, the more likely it was they would ignore him. William frowned deeply; he'd never seen the soldiers of Ratholarin so disorganised. A glance up showed Geoffery seething and Tobias utterly confused. The commander was on the verge of losing control of his own army, and for what? Over what? It made no sense that the hyena could parse.

And so he let go of Daniel's paw under the table and stood. He was up before he knew what he was doing, and all eyes once again turned to him. He ignored them as best he could and nodded to Tobias. "I welcome any knowledge that you can provide me, the better to serve those under my command and those people of Ratholarin whom I protect."

Those words almost completely shut down the muttering about the table, but Daniel's bulk rising alongside William certainly did the rest. He nodded once to the prince. "As do I. Any information y'have what keeps my people safe? I'm listening. I'm not 'fraid to learn how to protect m'self and mine. No good captain should be."

Geoffery nodded to both of them, but Tobias was where William was focused. Even as others around the table began to rise and offer their support, the tiger's gaze was dropped away from William's. The barest hint of a blush showed beneath his fur, so subtle as to be invisible to anyone who wasn't looking for it.

Or who knew what to look for. William did catch the nod of approval from Iannus, but only as he turned back to Daniel. The bear's eyes were on Tobias, but he did glance aside and give William a little smile. The hyena felt his fingers tingle and had to fight the urge to reach back out for Daniel's paw. He never failed to support William. Always there. Always, unlike *some* people.

But that blush under Tobias' fur lingered, and sparked new questions in William's head. What was he thinking? It wasn't as though the hyena had said or done anything exceptional. They'd barely seen each other in years, and not for more than moments at a time save for that particularly painful conversation in the dark. Surely after everything he wasn't still holding onto any old feelings?

If he was, William didn't care. He put the prospect and the irony it invoked out of his mind as Geoffery called on the soldiers at the table who had risen – the hyena looked around at last and saw nearly everyone had stood after his example to offer their assent – to resume their seats. There was still much to discuss, after all. "I hope you find that response satisfying, my prince."

“It... is most unexpected, and very appreciated, yes. Thank you, Commander.” The tiger paused and nodded to William as he retook his seat. Under the table, he reached back for and found Daniel’s paw. “And thank you, William. All of you.”

The hyena tightened his jaw and nodded back, but Tobias had already turned to the rest of the table. “Ensure you pack warm. The Pure Snow of the plainslands is mild compared to here, but we have a ways to go before we get there. Any of you who have soldiers under you who speak Carisi will also be especially valuable, as-”

“Excuse me.” William almost stammered as he blurted the words out, and Tobias turned a curious glance on him as the hyena’s muzzle suddenly went dry. “Sorry. Did you say Carisi?”

“Yes.” Tobias frowned, though he didn’t seem to be irritated with the interruption. Geoffery seemed to have given up his attempt to prevent them, too. “The high shaman is believed to operate out of Herovir, in old Caris. The former capital of their kingdom.” He paused and glanced away again. “In all the Ratholarin demesne, the people of Caris have had the hardest time integrating into our culture. Many still resist and resent Ratholarin rule.

“But make no mistake; the people of Caris *are* Ratholarin now. They are not our enemy.” Tobias’ voice grew firmer, but it had almost entirely been shut out. William leaned back in his chair as Daniel squeezed at his paw, and he half-heartedly squeezed it back. “There will be those who take up arms against us, and it will be our duty to drive them back if necessary. The shaman is the threat, not the people. Bear that in mind.” The tiger nodded and turned to Geoffery. “Commander.”

“Thank you, my prince.” He bowed his head and rose from the table again, though he did glance down at the still somewhat stunned William. “Assignments will be forthcoming over the day from me. Get your charges rested and packed to march. We leave at dawn in two days.” His glare came to rest on the mink from earlier, but she didn’t flinch from it. “Dismissed.”

William didn’t feel it as he rose from his chair again and made for the door. He didn’t feel Daniel’s paw break from his own, nor the pressing of bodies as they eagerly left. He barely took in the brightness of the sun as it burned through a gap in the clouds outside. Instead, the hyena stumbled along on instinct and muscle memory more than active thought and direction. Caris. After all this time, Caris.

“Will?”

He blinked and turned his head. The rest of the world might have been a fog, but William’s eyes fixed clearly on Daniel. The bear’s ears were low with worry. “You alright? You look awful.”

“No, I’m... fine. It’s just...” William shook his head. What could he say? Forget that; what was he even feeling? Nothing settled long enough for him to get a good grip on it. His stomach was aflutter, excited and terrified in equal measure. His mind spun. “It’s Caris. We’re going to Caris.”

“And you aren’t happy about it.” Daniel reached out to pull William close, and the hyena allowed him to all but crush him into a tight hug. “Nah, ‘course you’re not. Why would you be? Are you gonna be alright?”

“Yeah.” The answer came automatically, even as William shook his head. Would he be? “No. I don’t know.” He swallowed hard at nothing; his muzzle was still bone dry. “That’s where all my family is from. Mother, father... all of them. They were all from Caris. A dozen generations, she said.” He looked up as some of his fears finally started to burst through to the surface. “What if they... I mean, if I have to-”

“Sshhh.” Daniel squeezed him tight as he started to rock back and forth, and William leaned in all the harder against him. “Damn. Haven’t seen you so shaken since your first blood.” William shivered against him; that wasn’t a memory he was eager to relive. “It’s alright. I got you. You’re alright, Will. I got you.”

The whispered words were like a mantra, and they had their intended effect. With every repetition and every assurance, William felt those fears retreat. His concerns and discomfort went with it, as he just allowed himself to listen to Daniel’s voice. The bear’s smooth tones called him back to reality. They sharpened the world around William and culled the excesses that his mind conjured. His heartbeat slowed as he sighed against Daniel’s chest. He had him. He’d be okay.

He didn’t let himself think about the possibility of facing his own blood in combat. He didn’t let himself think about what his mother would think of it all, and of him in turn. He definitely didn’t about being stuck with Tobias for weeks. William didn’t let himself focus on any of that so long as he was in Daniel’s arms. The bear had him.

Would that they could stay that way forever.