

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART THREE

21st Day of the Pure Snow, 20 AoE

If Tobias believed in the old gods, he might have thought his continued existence to be a divine punishment. A condemnation to the hells, because he absolutely couldn't for the life of him imagine a fate worse than his own in the days following the start of his march north. How the soldiers did it with such ease he simply couldn't fathom.

It wasn't the walking. That was easy enough; the prince was as fit as any of them thanks to the insistent efforts of both his father and his brothers forcing him to maintain a certain athletic competency. It didn't hurt that Juni had done wonders for his heart, stamina and endurance, what with the hyena's insatiable appetites. No, the walking was fine.

Juni was in fact part of the problem, if he was forced to think about the matter for more than a moment. Almost every day of his life for the last few years had seen him spilling his seed with the companionship of another with what he'd come to realise was alarming and probably shameful regularity. The first day hadn't been quite so bad. The second had seen the tiger forced to conceal his arousal as it randomly and inconveniently announced itself. By the fifth day, the lack of meaningful relief and privacy combined had driven him half mad. Tobias wondered if he'd thought and felt like that in the days before Juni entered his life.

Where it wasn't the lack of a suitably private place to relieve himself – a problem that he noted consistently that most of the other soldiers didn't share for whatever reason – it was the soldiers he was to instruct. As grateful as he'd been to William's interjection during the briefing before they'd left, most of the rank and file had been utterly uninterested in heeding his words about the threats the shaman could pose.

And as he picked his way through the dimly-lit camp set up along the roadside, William himself was utterly, utterly unhelpful since they'd headed off. The tiger frowned as he dodged packs and other supplies. It wasn't entirely William's fault. He knew that. That the hyena had become a lieutenant since they'd last crossed paths was equally unsurprising, but it meant that pulling him aside for a talk was all the harder.

Tobias stumbled as he found himself tripped up by the red- and black-furred leg of one of Geoffery's soldiers. It stuck far out from inside the tent, its owner either incredibly tall or long but definitively unsuited to such a small space, and he muttered a curse as the soldier went right on snoring. The tiger rolled his eyes. When royalty had more marching stamina than a soldier, something was truly wrong. He resolved to mention it to Geoffery.

But at last, he could see his destination. William's tent, he'd been reliably informed, was often at the edge of the camps. It befitted his role as an instructor of scouts, able to rouse and act quickly if the camp were infiltrated. It also allowed him more privacy than his peers. Certainly more than Tobias, in his somewhat larger tent in the very heart of the camp. Tobias unhooked an oil lantern from a nearby post and started over.

He did, however, recognise that something was wrong well before he'd made his way over. It was a clear night but the moon was dim, so he had to focus to make sure he'd seen right. It had seemed like little more than a rustle; someone or something that had shaken the tent. An attacker? A wild beast? Tobias reached to his hip and clasped the hilt of his dagger in his free paw as he crept closer.

Heat rushed into his ears when he heard the moan.

Oh.

The sound didn't come again, but Tobias doused the lantern all the same. He fell absolutely, perfectly still. But for the rustle of a frosty wind in the trees, there was nothing else to hear. Even the tiger's breathing was muffled as he brought his scarf up to cover his muzzle. Ears pivoted and twitched. Maybe it'd come from elsewhere. Maybe it hadn't been that tent. Maybe it hadn't been William.

When the moan was repeated eventually, it was longer and deeper. The heat that flushed Tobias' cheeks burned all the hotter, and he felt his sheath twitch in sympathetic response. He gulped as he crept closer, almost entirely outside of his own control. With every careful, silent step he could hear more. Hearty slaps of bodies colliding. Panted breaths. The wet sounds of lustful kisses. Moans and groans of pleasure. There was no way to mistake what was going on inside that tent. Tobias almost turned around.

But then he heard William's moan, different from the ones he'd heard before. Lighter, breathier. Almost familiar; a sound he'd never heard from the hyena, but one he'd wished to hear so very, very long ago. It stirred something long dormant. His sheath twitched again. Pulsed. His malehood throbbed inside.

Tobias knew he should turn away. Knew he should leave and put it all out of his head and never, ever, *ever* think of it again. And for all that he knew for absolutely certain, it didn't count for one whit against the sounds emerging from within that tent. Tobias might as well have been utterly ensorcelled. He dropped to all fours, gloved paws guiding him forward as he crept toward the flap of the tent, slightly ajar.

Part of him wondered if they could possibly be comfortable in there, exposed to the cold night air as they were. But the nights were less severe there than in Ratholarin's heartlands, and he didn't doubt William was more than a little warm in the tent. The wind shifted direction as Tobias drew closer. It drifted right across his face, and then he was hit with it even through his scarf. The heavy, damp scents of sex.

He inhaled more in surprise than intent... at least at first. The smell was borne on musk he was all too familiar with, but there was more to it. There wasn't a trace of anything feminine about what tickled the inside of the tiger's nostrils. It was heady, powerful, and overwhelmingly *male*. The whimper that left Tobias' muzzle was caught much more effectively by the scarf, even as he clapped a paw across his face to stifle it. In his pants, he found himself rapidly stiffening to his full, if constrained, length.

It was just the neglect, he told himself as a paw lifted to squeeze gently at himself through his pants. He was only that aroused while around Juni when the hyena was teasing him with her heat. If he'd not gone days – *weeks* – without relief, he'd not be so worked up. Tobias was sure of it. This was nothing. It didn't mean anything. It *didn't*.

But as the music of the coupling inside that tent mounted and built toward its crescendo, he still couldn't tear himself away. Eyes adjusting to the darkness were finally able to pick out the motion of the bodies through that flap, though details eluded him completely. He could almost make out William, hips thrusting away with determined eagerness as he hoisted aloft a pair of legs almost as thick as the hyena's middle. The bear. It had to be.

Jealousy coiled in the pit of Tobias' stomach and shamed him with the knowledge of what it was. The tiger forced it down, even as his eyes fixed on the silhouetted scene before him. He watched as William leaned forward, and another shadow met him halfway. A kiss, breathy and hungry in the midst of the hyena's bucking efforts. A ragged sigh from William as they broke. Another heady, deep moan from the bear. A whisper, carried on that faint breeze. "R-right there..."

Tobias' eyes went wide. His own length pulsed almost painfully with need inside his pants, untempered by the idly, rhythmic squeezes of his paw through the fabric. His mind ran wild. It sifted the shadows and imagined them as they were, caught in that private moment. Tobias knew he was intruding. He also knew he couldn't look away. His imagination wouldn't let him.

"I'm close." Those whispered words from William sent an electric tingle through Tobias. He gasped, thankful again for his scarf and the direction of the wind and the intensity of the sound of their own coupling in their combined efforts to drown him out. Tobias' mind ran amok as he watched the shadows shift faster and faster before him. His paw squeezed tighter. Shadowy legs wrapped around William's middle. Tugged him tight.

And then William launched into a long, shuddering, ragged moan. He hunched forward, and the two shadows melded into a single form. Tobias could see nothing. Hear everything. Imagine more. And then, far, far too late, he realised where his paw was. What it was doing. His eyes widened as his other paw reached up to cover his muzzle. Another whimper, but the thoughts wouldn't let him stop. In his mind it was him in the tent. His upraised legs, wrapped around the hyena. William's body against his, seeding h-

The whimper turned into a squeak as Tobias felt his shaft pulse in orgasm. Hot, sticky seed flooded his undergarments as the pleasure washed over him. Shame and discomfort were forced aside as he whined, his sounds overridden by the moans and pants of pleasure from inside the tent. Tobias could only squeeze himself all the tighter through his pants, pumping his paw over the bulge in them as his load spilled out, pooling within his clothes. He couldn't think about that. His mind was fixed on a single moment. A single instant. A single idea.

It couldn't last. Not alone, and not in the cold of the open, Pure Snow air. Despite the volume he'd shed into his presumably ruined undergarments – he bit back a groan of consternation as he temporarily put out of his mind what to do about *that* in the dead of night – he could hear that the climax of those inside the tent rolled on much longer. Once more that jealousy returned to plague the tiger, as a shaky paw lowered from his pants to brace against the ground again.

"How do you... *always*... do that?" The voice was definitely the bear's, quiet but audible enough to Tobias in the dark. The tiger froze in place as he suddenly realised the precariousness of his position. If the captain left William's tent, he'd stumble onto the prince.

The prince who'd just spilled his seed to the mere sound of what they were doing. Tobias stilled himself completely; even his breathing stopped as he listened, ready to make a move as needed.

A glance inside showed their shadows not yet moving. Perhaps they were still stuck together, or perhaps they felt no need to move from their position. Tobias always had a hard time wanting to pull out of Juni; was it the same for them? "Do what?" William's voice, that time. Slightly out of breath. Airy. He sounded pleased. Happy, even.

Tobias' heart thawed enough to ache.

Shame filled him as he heard the bear chuckle. "All *this*. Dunno what it's been, but this deployment... whatever it is, I sure like it."

"Mmm. Me too. It's like... bringing some home along with us. Feels like home with you around, at least." The sound of another kiss reached Tobias' ears, as he started to realise that he'd not just intruded on a simple sharing of pleasure. It was an intimate moment. One he, and anyone else in the camp, ought not be privy to. Shame filled him, and he sighed to himself as he started to back away from the tent. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm more'n happy to oblige." Again the bear chuckled, and he sighed as Tobias reared back to try and rise to his feet. The tiger knew it'd be awkward to make his way to his own tent, but the sooner he got there the sooner he could clean up. "Mmm. Not that I'm complainin' but... sure it's not because of a certain prince followin' y'about all day?"

Tobias froze again. His head turned slowly back toward the tent. What? "What do you mean?" William sounded almost as confused as the tiger. Tobias crouched low again.

"I jus' know what he meant t'you. That's all." The shadows shifted slowly, and the bear gave a little gasp and sigh. "An' hey, you've turned into the best damn lover I ever had. Practice sure counts for somethin' after all, and you know I love you takin' charge."

"Something sure gave it away, yeah." William's chuckle came as Tobias began to blush anew. William, conqueror of bedchambers. Who knew? "But you don't have to worry about anything. Not me, not Tobias."

"Who's worried?" Again the bear chuckled, and there was a shift in the shadows. William yipped, ostensibly more loudly than he'd intended before there was a *thump* in the tent followed by a quiet giggle. "I jus' know you aren't happy he's around again."

Tobias' heart sank. He sagged forward even as an ear perked to continue to eavesdrop. "Don't know what he expected. The way we keep leaving things? The things he keeps saying to me?" William sighed, and his voice grew somewhat muffled. "I don't care what he thinks anymore, Daniel. I haven't for a long time."

"Aww, c'mon. That ain't true." Tobias closed his eyes as he felt them start to well up. He'd not been prepared for the surge of pain that came with those words. Was that it? Was that what William really thought? Had he really messed things up with the hyena that badly?

William muttered something, but it was too quiet for the tiger to hear. On some level he was kind of glad he couldn't hear it, but then the bear's reply perked his ears again. "No, really. I think I got a good idea of who you are now. You're not the kinda person what stops carin' and you know it."

“He hurt me. And he *keeps* hurting me.” Tobias shuddered. His muzzle trembled as the words echoed through his head. “When I needed him to hear me, he started ignoring me. When I needed *him*, he pushed me away. And then, when we could have maybe spoken like adults, he...” A gust of wind hit Tobias’ face hard enough to dislodge the tears that had been building in his eyes. “He was my *everything*. Look what he did to me.”

“And to himself too, mind.” The bear’s words were gentle, and almost too quiet to hear. “I got an idea, you know. I think I know how it’d feel if, y’know, I had to leave. If I had t’run away and do somethin’ like... I dunno, bein’ a prince? And leavin’ you behind... I don’t think I could do it.”

William just snorted. Tobias bit back another little whimper. “I wouldn’t *want* you to do it. I didn’t want him to do it, too. But you wouldn’t, and he... he did.”

The tiger bowed his head and squeezed his eyes shut. “I didn’t want to...”

But William continued on, the prince’s whisper clearly unheard. “I lost the only friend I’d ever known. I know, Daniel; I get *why* he felt like he had to do it. He probably thinks I’m too dumb – too simple a little servant boy – to understand, but I do. I just hope it was worth it for him.”

That wasn’t a question Tobias could answer. Instead, as the two snuggled up together in the wake of their lovemaking in the tent, all he could do was sit there in the cold, sheath and thighs sticky with the seed he’d spent listening to them and heart laden with the shame of what he was hearing. “Why? What d’ya think he got out of it in the end?”

“Oh, I don’t even know. Don’t even care, really.” Again came a muffled sigh as fresh tears spilled across the ground under the tiger. “If it were a different world, maybe it’d have been different. Maybe we could have been friends. Or brothers. Or lovers. I would have liked that. I *wanted* that more than anything.”

The bear hummed as Tobias hugged himself. His muzzle fell slack, screaming silently. He held back the cries with everything he had, his whole body seizing up with the effort. He wanted to speak. To scream. Or maybe just to melt like snow; to sink into the ground and just be soaked up. Invisible. Impersonal. None of the pain that every word seemed to drive into his heart like a spike. “And now?”

Tobias knew the words that were coming, but still couldn’t help but hear them. He felt like he *needed* to hear them. And then they came, and broke his heart all over again. “Now I have you. I don’t want anything else.”

The tiger forced himself up to his feet as best he could. As he stumbled, he could still hear William behind him. “I mean, I’ve got you. I’ve got the coin to live, to take care of my mother... why would I need anything else in all the world?”

A choked sob escaped Tobias, and he froze up. He waited to listen for the two of them to notice; to hear him and discover him there, utterly compromised. Utterly pathetic. Utterly *Tobias*. How could he be anything else?

But they were silent. There was nothing that indicated that they’d heard him. Indeed, if he listened, he could hear the sound of muzzles working against one another again. Tobias

wasn't surprised. If he'd heard that he was all that William wanted in the world, he'd want to kiss him, too. They were distracted. It was time to leave.

He still needed to speak to William, of course. How he was going to do that after what he'd seen – what he'd *heard* – was a mystery. How to pretend he hadn't heard it? How to pretend it didn't cut him up? How to manage the feelings that were on the verge of overtaking him entirely; feelings that he'd not been touched by in years? And why? Why now, of all times, did they surface again?

Tobias grit his teeth as he started more quickly back toward the centre of camp. Years. Years he'd been sleeping with Juni. Years and years of ordinary, normal princely ruttings with a beautiful female. A betrothed lioness that awaited his return for more of the same. Years and years and years to get over whatever William had sparked in him... so why? Why was it still there? Why was it back? Why did it hurt so badly?

Seed-soiled undergarments offered no answers. Tobias' heart just begged more questions.

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The next morning saw the shame had not relaxed in the least. Tobias had been up a not insignificant part of the night, cleaning and carefully – though not *overly* – perfuming his clothing to hopefully hide the mess he'd made of them. A proper clean was out of the question, of course. He'd have needed to soak his undergarments and then hang them, for all to see, by a fire. It was just another aspect of soldier life he had been woefully unprepared for when they set out, and one he was still, weeks later, not comfortable with.

In the end, he'd buried his sins in perhaps the most drastic fashion available to him, even if one he admitted must have been oddly appropriate. Before anyone had truly risen in the pre-dawn, he'd started a fire himself and committed to burning the offending undergarments in the flame. They'd crackled and ignited with remarkable ease, and before anyone had risen in the morning there was nothing left of them but ash and the tiger's lingering sense of shame.

He'd almost missed breakfast as he'd tried to return to sleep afterward, and had longed to delay the resumed march of the day. That wasn't something he could do, of course. Any delays just bought the shaman they made for even more time to prepare for their arrival. Besides which, it was the only chance he knew he'd be able to get William aside for a conversation. A peek at the plans for the scouting parties showed that for once, William's squad was not advancing ahead of the main host.

Actually finding him was the harder part. He was somewhere amongst the thousands of Ratholarin soldiers that made their way north toward the plainslands, and more than half of the day's march was done before he had any success. For as few hyenas as there were in the ranks, William didn't exactly stand out. Not even his lighter, less shiny armour gave him away.

But as the afternoon arrived and the soldiers were approaching the time when the shortened days would force them to break for camp, he stumbled upon William almost by accident. He walked in a group of eight, one of three whose armour bore the insignia of a lieutenant. The ferret at his side, barely of age if he had to guess, was an excitable thing that seemed to all but bounce with every step she took. Tobias couldn't help but crack the littlest of

smiles; even the events of the night before couldn't stop it. The hyena's bored expression told him everything.

He noticed, of course, as Tobias approached. He didn't try to hide it as he shouldered his way delicately through the ranks of the company, and watched as William held up a paw to the ferret beside him. He waited until Tobias was at his side before he nodded. "My prince."

"William." He glanced aside at the ferret, who simply stared up at him with wide eyes. Was this the closest she'd ever been to royalty? "May I have a word, please? In private?"

"Not much privacy on a march." The matter-of-fact response made Tobias blink. Was William really so averse to him that he'd outright refuse to speak to his prince? "Merinda?"

"Sir?" The ferret didn't even look away from Tobias.

If William noticed, he didn't seem to care. "Go ahead and form up with Victor and Carradin, please. I'll be along shortly."

"Yes, sir. Uh, nice to meet you, your highness." The ferret smiled wide as she bounded forward.

"You too." Tobias watched her leave, though his words made her turn around and grin all the wider. He waited until she was safely out of earshot before he leaned in toward William. "She drives you mad."

"You have *no* idea. That muzzle doesn't shut for anything short of sleep or a meal, and they don't last nearly long enough for my taste." Tobias chuckled in response, and he looked up to see William was also smiling as he watched her go. "But she's a good kid. Lots of potential. She'll make a good soldier someday."

"Like you. You've really taken to this life." As soon as the words left him, Tobias watched as William's smile faded away. He didn't turn toward Tobias, but instead kept his eyes forward. "I need to ask you something."

The hyena sighed. "Spit it out then, Tobias. I do have a job to do."

Irritation spiked. It breached the film of shame that had tamped down most everything else Tobias had felt since the morning, but he swallowed it down into those dark waters once again. After what he'd heard William say, there was no way he could blame the hyena for how he felt. "I need to know how much you remember from our lessons."

Again William didn't turn to face him, but his brow furrowed. "That was a long time ago. Bits and pieces, really. Not an awful lot; I try not to think about those days. Why?"

It was Tobias' turn to frown. "You don't think about them?"

"Give me a reason to. Tell me why I'd wanna remember the times that made what happened hurt all the more." William's tail tucked in against his legs.

Tobias cast his gaze around. The words had been quiet, but they weren't exactly isolated from the rest of the company and voices carried further than he'd imagined. The previous night had taught him that lesson. "I'm not here to be your friend, William. I'm here about this assignment. I'm here as your prince."

The hyena frowned but nodded sharply. His attitude dropped and suddenly he was just another soldier. “Apologies, my prince. How may I serve?”

Again that irritation and indignation rose up inside him. That time it was harder to quash, but Tobias *had* asked for it. “What do you know about the area we’re traveling to?”

William was silent for a moment. “Not a lot. Mother rarely travelled to Herovir. Apparently her husband lived there before they were wed.”

“You mean your father.” Tobias cocked his head and perked an ear. “Why call him ‘her husband’ instead?”

“Because he *was* her husband, before my father killed him for being on the opposite side of a war neither of them chose. He didn’t raise me, and so he is not my father.” The hyena’s head turned slightly and Tobias could see the irritation burning in his eyes. Had he made a mistake? “Perhaps he would have been, had there been no war. Had Caris been left to its own devices and *your* father not bloodied himself further.”

That time it was anger that broke the surface and spread across Tobias’ face. “Oh, I see. Now that you’re heading to your family’s homeland, you intend to hold me accountable for the actions of my father. Truly fair of you, William.”

“As fair as the warrior who raised me being the one to spill the blood that flows in my veins. As fair as you leaving your nice, comfortable castle to march through the muck in danger with the rest of us common folk. Don’t talk to me about fair.” William closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. “You might not be Eric, but you’re leading an army north into Caris just like he did. And this time instead of my father at his side, you’ve got me. What do you make of that, *my prince*?”

“I make of you a very irritated young male with something to prove, and I haven’t the faintest amount of time for it.” Tobias glared at the hyena as he was ignored further. “I am not my father. This is not the war that took your family from you. Don’t you dare put the actions of others on my shoulders.”

“Of course not. The only weight you must bear is a crown, not responsibility.” The hyena growled to himself as his lips peeled back into a tight, brief-lived snarl. “You have asked and I have answered. Does this satisfy your curiosity, my prince?” He looked forward again and Tobias ground his teeth together.

“No.” Tobias’ claws unsheathed in his gloves just barely far enough to prod the ends of their fingers before he forced them to retract. He didn’t have the time or patience for this.

William stumbled in place for a moment at the word, though he quickly collected himself. “No?”

He didn’t even face Tobias as the tiger shook his head. “I told you I’m here about this assignment. I’m not interested in the games you and I play, and I’m not interested in irritating you any more than you are me. I am tired and ill-tempered to such things today, so please. Just be direct and open with me. Don’t fight me. Help me. Please.”

William paused, but slowly turned his head. His eyes met Tobias' at last, and the prince felt his heart skip a beat as the anger melted away. He stared at the tiger for a few more moments before he nodded. The hyena's expression softened. "I'm sorry. What do you need?"

"To *understand*. I need to understand the people we're going to encounter within mere days, from what your commander tells me." Tobias held William's stare for as long as he could manage, before he turned his eyes forward again. He could only hope the fading sunlight hid his blush. "I've been informed you learned some of the language. Stories and legends. I need to know if there's anything I don't know. Anything I should know."

The hyena cocked his head in that way he did and Tobias looked away again. "Mother's been teaching me here and there when she can. It's hard. I spent all my life in Ratholarin, speaking Rathin." He shrugged. "Some of the legends are fun. Interesting stories. Probably nothing you don't already know. Master Iannus probably taught you anything I could tell you. He'd get in less trouble for it, at least."

That was probably true, but Tobias shook his head regardless. "I just figured as a Carisi native, you'd-"

"I'm not a Carisi native." William stopped his march and turned to more fully face Tobias. His eyes had narrowed, and the tiger recoiled at the firmness in his voice. "I have never been a Carisi native. If I were, I don't think I'd be marching with a Ratholarin army."

"And why is that?" He followed the hyena as he sidestepped a few more soldiers and made for the edge of the formation.

William just narrowed his eyes. "Because I don't *have* a home. Not really." His brow was knit tightly as Tobias swallowed. He'd not been prepared for the intensity of his glare. "I was born in a camp like the one we'll be pitching in a couple of hours, surrounded by soldiers just like everyone around us. My first memories are of *your* home. *Your* castle. *Your* barracks. And I'm one of the lucky ones." He waved up the road. "Caris lost everything when your father marched. Ratholarin made it a crime to even tell the legends of old, because they're thought to glorify magic."

Tobias blinked. "But didn't they?"

The hyena folded his arms, and Tobias could see just how tightly William clutched those limbs. "You were taught the history of Caris. How close they were with peoples like the Lenkis and the Yaroven." When Tobias nodded, William just growled under his breath. "So you tell me why it's so hard to learn the stories and history of Caris as they really were, when Ratholarin has spent *years* erasing it."

There was force and reason both behind William's words. Still, the hyena had missed something vital. "Lenkis was ruled by its priesthood. Yaroven taught sorcery to its rulers. Both of them used the gods and magic to ensure their rule." He leaned forward. "Is that right?"

William tilted his head up. "I don't know. Is it right that a single bloodline gets to decide the fate of everyone else in the land just because we decided that their blood is more special?"

Tobias opened his muzzle, but shut it again instantly. He'd not intended to debate the hyena on the merits of rule and its various systems, but he'd made a good point. A better point than Tobias had been prepared for. He mulled it over in his mind for a moment as he watched

William start to relax somewhat. Perhaps his thoughtfulness in the face of such an insult would earn him a little favour with the hyena moving forward. “People can leave Ratholarin. There is nothing to stop them from moving elsewhere, if it would suit.”

“Could do that in Lenkis, too. In Yaroven.” William shook his head as he dropped his arms back to his side again. He no longer looked so standoffish. “Then Ratholarin took Yaroven, and Sylaria and the Marovani took what was left of Lenkis. Where do the people who want to follow the old ways and old gods go when any place of refuge is just another name on some king’s list of conquests to be?”

The tiger swallowed. When had William learned to argue so persuasively? “And so what do you propose? That each and every person in all the world be free to do as they please? Can you not imagine the madness that would follow? Maybe there’s a better way, but what you propose would only lead to destruction.”

William just sighed at that. “Why’s it got to be so extreme? Why’s the choice submission or absolute chaos?” He shook his head and looked back up at Tobias. “What do you really want from me? It’s not information about Carisi culture and stories. You know I speak a bit of the language now. Do you just want to... what? See if I’m loyal?”

The question hadn’t even entered Tobias’ mind, but given what they’d discussed he’d be hard pressed to say it wasn’t something tickling him in the moment. “Are you? If Ratholarin isn’t your home and you’re sympathetic to the people of Caris...”

“I can’t... actually believe you just asked me that.” William reached down and drew his sword. Tobias eyes went wide and he took a step back before William reversed the blade and slapped the hilt into one of Tobias’ paws. He stepped forward until the tip was pressed right up against his chest, eyes locked on the tiger’s. “Go on, then.”

Tobias looked down at the sword in his hand. It was heavy, far heavier than he’d expected. It was only the pressure that William’s chest pushed against the tip with that kept it in his grip. He tried to draw it back, but the hyena moved with it. “You’re mad.”

“You’re the one doubting *me*.” William glared as he shook his head again. “I’ve got a job to do, *my prince*. If you think I’m a traitor, your job’s to execute me. You’ve got the sword. You’ve got the power. You’ve got the *responsibility*. Goodness knows I don’t get to argue with a prince.”

“I’m not going to execute you, William, for the love of... what even is this?” He yanked the sword back from the hyena and lowered the tip to point at the ground. He thrust the hilt back toward the weapon’s owner and relief washed through him as William took the sword back and sheathed it. “Why are you being like this?”

William’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You don’t even know, do you? Haven’t the slightest idea.”

“And I *won’t* until you explain.” Tobias folded his arms. “So go on. Explain.”

The hyena scoffed and started to turn away, but he stopped himself. His eyes didn’t meet Tobias’ again, but they continued to seethe. “You’ve spent so much time casting me out that you don’t remember all the things you’ve said. How you reacted when I became a soldier.

How you reacted to me going to war. And now this.” Each word added more growl to his voice, as if his anger were on the verge of bubbling over. Tobias took a step back.

But the anger died off. William sagged as he closed his eyes, tail and ears drooped. “You don’t believe in me. Why should I be surprised you’d question my loyalty?” He shook his head once more. “Let me make it clear, since you obviously didn’t hear me the first time.

“I am *not* loyal to you. I am not loyal to your crown, or your kingdom. I am not loyal to your father.” His head turned slowly until his eyes fixed Tobias with a resolute stare. “I am loyal to my family. This is what allows me to provide for my mother. To be with someone who loves me. To have a *life*. I only wish I didn’t have to be a soldier to do those things. To have a life of my own... *my* family.”

Tobias shivered as William stepped in closer to him. The hyena lowered his voice. “And once, a *very* long time ago, you were family to me. I would have done anything for you. Everything for you.” One of the hyena’s eyes twitched. “No more.”

The tiger shrank back from William bit by bit as he spoke. There was no preventing the tears from forming in his eyes, though the sight of them did seem to ease William back. He took another step away, and his voice returned to normal volume as he brushed down his armour. “Will that be all, my prince? I have a charge to attend to and the day grows late.”

“Y-yes. Of course. You’re excused.” His voice was meek, barely more than a raspy whisper as Tobias nodded. What else could he say? The hyena was done listening to him. He’d done it again. He’d ruined it all again. Why? Why had he asked that question? Why had he thought William might not be loyal?

That he admitted to it didn’t change Tobias’ certainty in William’s path. He watched as the hyena saluted sharply and turned to jog back up toward the ferret girl. Tobias had lost sight of her quite some time ago, and he didn’t relish much the idea of having to hurry back toward the head of the host.

Especially as he was. The prince reached up with one paw, running his fingers up the length of his muzzle to rub at his moistened eyes. The fingers came back damp, and Tobias forced himself to an image of calm and poise and grace. It was a mask he was used to donning, though never so far from home.

Not that it ever felt like it fit right after speaking with William. After the night before, and what he’d just heard... what could he have expected? What had he even intended with all of this? He slid back into line with the other soldiers as he held his head high with all the confidence of a stronger person. Tobias could have asked any of the other former Carisi in the ranks. Any of those with Carisi parentage. There were several, after all.

It hadn’t been because William would have known more. It had never been about the hyena’s knowledge. After everything... had he just wanted to see William? To look him in the eye? To speak with him again?

Had it been to confirm how far he’d moved on from the tiger after what he’d said to the bear the night before?

It would freeze Tobias to the bone, but he wished for rain. Perhaps then he could allow himself to shed the tears that built behind his eyes. Maybe then he could allow himself to mourn... whatever it was that he felt. Whatever they had been. Could have been. Never were.

Tobias had thought he was past the hyena. That he'd moved on from the feelings, so powerful and so unsuitable and so painful, that William had sparked.

He'd thought wrong.