

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART SIX

56th Day of the Pure Snow, 20 AoE

Herovir was, in many ways, superior to Sanwell. The city itself was cleaner, maintained carefully by its occupants. William didn't know if that was a result of the Ratholarin administrator forcing them to keep the streets pristine or if it was a point of pride for the Carisi. The architecture was, at least in the areas that had been spared the worst of the war in decades past, far more aesthetically pleasing to the hyena's eye as well.

The people didn't seem particularly friendly, but then he wasn't expecting that sort of reception. He strode through the clean, neat streets near the heart of the city alongside a half dozen Ratholarin soldiers, himself wearing the rank insignia of an officer. The surreptitious glances and muttered growls directed his way were as unfortunate as they were completely reasonable. William wasn't going to hold it against them. Here, he was the invader. They were the ones whose lives had been disrupted by the arrival of a Ratholarin army. Again.

The sound of an all-too-familiar snarl behind him caused the hyena to stop in the middle of the street. William took a long, deep breath. The scent of fresh-baked bread from a storefront nearby tempted his nostrils, but it did nothing to ease what was about to come. "Did you say something, Robert?"

"Just remindin' these curs not to go lookin' down their noses at me." William turned. The brusque voice belonged to the tiger at his back, almost as tall as the hyena. Contempt was written plain across his face even as he snapped to attention under William's gaze. "Hearin' more'n more grumblin' around here. They need to learn t'respect us, sir."

A glance to the side showed the staff of the bakery that had so teased William's nose a few moments ago had heard the conversation. They looked on with interest, but malice glinted in their bared teeth. He couldn't blame them. "And is that your *job*, soldier?"

The tiger's nostrils flared as he lifted his head a little higher. "My job's to do anythin' and everythin' necessary to protect Ratholarin. If I gotta crack their heads open to do it, so much the better."

"The correct answer was 'no.' And they are not the ones who need to learn respect." William leaned up toward Robert's face as it twisted sharply toward anger. "You are making a scene. Comport yourself with honour, soldier. We are guests in their house and you are disrespecting them."

Robert didn't seem to have an answer for that as William turned away, but the hyena had scarcely had time to nod to the bakers than the tiger growled again. "It's *our* house now."

"Come again?" William grit his teeth as he whirled back on the tiger. Beside him, Merinda flinched. This had gone on long enough. It wasn't enough that Robert was

badmouthing the locals. If he was going to backtalk his lieutenant, then something needed to be done.

What he wasn't ready for was the tiger's glare. It stuck him immediately and, even though Robert remained at attention, his stare was *withering*. "I said it's our house. *Sir*. We claimed it."

William narrowed his eyes. This wouldn't do. This was not what they needed – what *he* needed – right there and then. "Yes. We did. Which makes these people Ratholarin citizens. Your charges. Those you've sworn to protect." His muzzle parted a little, allowing his teeth to be bared. "You are disgracing yourself, Robert. Do yourself a favour and shut your muzzle before I have to shut it for you."

"No, sir." The tiger's muzzle twisted dangerously. "Not this time."

Silence. It held for a few long moments as William forced himself to hold the angry tiger's stare. There would be consequences for this, one way or another; Robert might have proven to be a fine recruit, but as a soldier he seemed to have lost all respect for his officers. Nothing about his behaviour on the march north had implied to William any capacity to be a functional member of his new squad. This now was insubordination, pure and simple. And in public, too.

But he didn't even seem to care. Why? "Alright, then. I'll indulge you just this once. Let's say you're given an emergency promotion. You're now in Commander Geoffery's position. What do you do?"

"Burn this whole damn, disgusting city to the ground, like they shoulda done years ago." He snapped out every single word, spit flecking from his whiskers. William ignored it as he forced down his disgust. "Look at 'em. They're all complicit. Hidin' the shaman from us. Worshippin' their gods in the open. Flauntin' it at us!" He spat on the street. "Hoped you'd wise up, *sir*. Get us doin' what needs to be done."

"Very well. I suppose I could begin now." William leaned back, curled his paw into a fist, and brought it slamming down hard against the side of Robert's muzzle.

There was a crack and the tiger's blood splattered the street alongside his spit. To his credit he didn't fall, but his head snapped to the side nonetheless. Before he could retaliate, William straightened up again. "Restrain him."

A wild swing went up from the tiger, claws extended. It narrowly missed Merinda as the ferret bent almost unnaturally out of the way, and she was on his arm before it could recover. On his other side, a thick-set fox grabbed Robert's other arm. They both pulled until Robert cried out and stopped his sudden, almost crazed thrashing.

William leaned down to stare at Robert. "You have an issue with my command, you take it up in private. You want to burn this city to the ground? Fine. You can keep that to yourself. Be thankful that when I go to the captain I'm not going to recommend dismissal *this time*. Do not let there be a second time." It was kindness. Kindness the tiger didn't deserve, but kindness extended anyway. Who knew? Maybe his fiery blood was just his youth and he'd mellow out after being brought down a peg.

But when he lifted his broken muzzle, blood dripping down his jowls, there was only rage in his eyes. “Any other captain’d reward me. He’ll punish me just cause you’re the one ruttin’ him.” He grinned through red teeth as he spat again on the ground. “Makes sense he’d be just as big a traitor as you. *Carisi*.”

The urge to hit the tiger again rose in William. He entertained the thought for a second before he let it drift away, though his paw still clenched tight. Instead he straightened up and nodded to Merinda. “Take him back to the main camp. Bind him, and I’ll see to him after patrol.”

Merinda nodded, and the fox gave a quiet, “Yes, sir.” They glanced at one another, and lingered long enough that William started to frown. Was there a problem? Merinda had always been reasonable...

No. They continued to grip the tiger tight and held him in place while another of William’s soldiers disarmed him. He nodded and turned toward the bakery, and the people still watching on. No more growls and no more glares came from their quarter; if anything, they seemed to look on William with new respect. <I am sorry for this shameful display.>

<His are the sins to be judged this day, not yours. Dawn guide your way.> The bakers – a pair of wolves and their daughter – each bowed their heads and touched a paw to their chest. William mimicked the gesture before he turned away from them and started on down the road again.

He’d barely made it more than a couple of steps before mumbling behind him drew a sigh from his muzzle. “Please don’t make me hit anyone else.”

A cleared throat sounded. “No, sir. Of course not. I just...” The voice was from one of the other recruits under his watch. Jacob. Easy to remember; he was a coyote with the same name as his father’s father, albeit spelled differently. Good kid. Good soldier. “I didn’t know you were *Carisi*. Sir.”

William closed his eyes. Not for the first time he found himself wishing that his deployment had been south into the frostlands instead, as had been originally intended. “I’m not. My mother is, but I was born in Ratholarin.” He turned slowly to face the coyote, and the poor boy seemed scared that William was going to strike him too. “I’ve never known *Caris*. I am not *Carisi*. This is not my home, and I am not a traitor to my duty.” He tilted his head to the side. It was madness that his own soldiers needed to be reminded of that. “Are you satisfied?”

Jacob straightened up immediately. “Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

The hyena’s eyes drifted across the other two remaining soldiers with him. Neither the badger nor the rat seemed inclined to argue, and they too stood tall and nodded back to him. “Good. Now. Do any of you have an issue with the way I handled Robert?”

Jacob and the rat both shook their heads immediately. The badger hesitated, but she soon joined in. He didn’t blame her; he’d been seeing her and Robert growing closer during the march. “Remember. Whatever they were before, each and every single citizen of this city is a citizen of Ratholarin now. They live under King Eric’s rule. They follow our laws. They are as worthy of your respect and protection as anyone in Sanwell, or any other town or village in the kingdom.”

That time all three nodded their agreement. William fought back a sigh of relief. It was maddening that he'd had to explain that *again*. Ratholarin was supposed to be a beacon of reason throughout the world. Why, he wondered, was it so hard to treat people with dignity and respect? Why did it have to be that so many people were just so... cruel? What was the point?

As he started back along the street however, the hyena began to frown. He looked around at the bustling townspeople as they carried out their daily tasks. Some people carried things back and forth. Some merchants offering their wares. Every now and again a child skipping about and doing whatever it was that children not raised as a servant in a castle tended to do.

But too few of them. They'd spent two days in Herovir by then, and while William expected that wasn't enough time to get a real feel for how the people there lived, he'd seen something similar in Sanwell. In the Ratholarin capital, it was always abuzz with activity. Every day. Sometimes, in some districts, well into the evening as well. Herovir had seemed much the same, but what few people were visible were... off. He couldn't put a finger on why just yet.

A small smithy was being tended by a rabbit, sword laid across an anvil. He pumped the bellows, but his eyes met William's for a moment. Just a moment, before he looked away. The hyena followed the rabbit's gaze to an otter selling flowers across the street. She too averted her eyes, but the otter had definitely also been staring at him. The pattern repeated. People looking at them, sizing them up, and away again. Like they were watching for something. Waiting for something.

Dread began to slither its way up the hyena's spine. William began to frown as he slowed his pace down and leaned back toward his remaining squad. "Stay calm, now. Ears up."

"Sir?" The voice was Jacob's.

"Just do it. Nice and easy, just follow my lead." He forced his breathing to relax into a regular rhythm. His heart started to beat faster as that dread began to coil around it. Surely not. Surely he was wrong. Surely they'd move past the immediate area and he could tell his charges to relax again.

He was almost to the flower girl when he smiled in as friendly a manner as he could manage. <Good morning, ma'am.>

She almost jumped clear out of her fur, and the basket of flowers on her arm almost spilled out across the street. <O-oh! Good day, good sir. Am I... have I done something wrong?>

<Nothing I know of.> He forced his smile a little wider as he let one paw come to rest on his sword's hilt. William's eyes glanced past her; a couple members of the city watch were conversing quietly as they made their way down the street toward them. <Please, relax. I do not mean you any harm. I wish to ask about your flowers.>

Her nervousness didn't seem to have abated much as William's eyes turned back to her. Her own were locked on the basket and the various, richly aromatic flowers there. <I... well, yes. What would you like to know, sir?>

He shrugged in turn, and William held his breath. If he was wrong he was about to start an incident. If not... <Well, you have some beautiful blooms there. I just wondered if you had anything that might suit... me, for example.> He reached up to brush his headfur from one ear as he drew nearer. <My partner likes flowers. I would like to surprise him. But I think you would know something about surprises, would you not?>

Again her eyes darted behind William for the barest of moments. They shifted to the side twice more before they settled on him. Three, then. That wasn't good. <I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean.>

William squeezed his sword hilt. The guards glanced their way, and then resumed their conversation. <We are about to be ambushed.> Her eyes went wide. <I do not wish to hurt anyone, but we will defend ourselves. Please call them off.> The hyena's eyebrows lifted. <Please. There does not need to be bloodshed.>

He watched as she turned her head to the side. He didn't bother to look after her, especially given how she nodded a second later. A cry went up from that direction as the otter girl thrust a paw into her basket. Flowers went everywhere. A metallic glint caught the sunlight. A dagger, in her paw.

William's sword in her chest.

His blade was buried in her before hers was even pulled clear. Her muzzle froze in a snarl of anger and pain, and a swift kick to her stomach sent her spilling off the hyena's weapon. Flowers spilled across the street. "Backs up!"

He immediately found himself jostled by the three soldiers with him as they pressed in tight, each facing out in a different direction. All around them from stores and buildings boiled out armed Carisi. Their weapons were crude and improvised. Their rage was anything but. William watched as an older horse charged straight at him from behind a merchant's cart, a large cleaver brandished in a tight grip. Behind him, Jacob and the others prepared to defend against their own aggressors.

The horse's swing met an equally hard slice from William's sword. The hyena's blow knocked the weapon clean out of the horse's grasp, and he turned with his swing to kick the equine hard in the gut. He stumbled back, winded and left to crumple to the street as a pair of foxes surged out from a store nearby. Crude clubs were clutched in their paws.

<We do not mean to harm you!> William's shout was met with no response, and the foxes both took their swings as they closed in. William brought his blade up to block one while his forearm raised to shield himself from the second. He grunted and flicked his sword to the side, burying it in the arm of the vulpine who'd struck him. His club clattered to the ground as he screeched with pain and cradled his gashed, gushing arm.

The hyena's weapon was up again in time to catch the other fox's next attack, but this time he ground the weapon to the side and punched out with his other paw in a smooth uppercut. The fox's eyes crossed for the brief moment William saw them, before he stumbled backward and limply hit the ground. Lingering pain from when he'd struck Robert throbbed sympathetically in William's knuckles.

But then, as he looked up along the street, he saw the city watch members, closer than he'd expected. Armed. Armoured. Pikes lowered and legs braced. Braced to charge at their enemies.

Braced to charge *William*.

"Break!" He dove to the side as soon as the order went up and just before the guards launched into motion. A spike of pain exploded out from William's shoulder as he caught the road awkwardly and rolled back up, but he put it out of his mind as he raised his sword to defend himself. Beside him was the rat, Hicker, similarly picking himself up. He could see both Jacob and the badger, Neani, had also managed to avoid the charge.

But now their little formation of four had been split into two formations of two, and the Herovir soldiers were joining the fray. William grunted as he swept his sword up quickly to batter aside a jab from the nearest of the guards. "Hicker, backs!"

"Sir!" The rat pressed tightly to William's back as he turned to face the greater threat. Or, at least, what seemed the greater threat. As the guard pulled back his pike for another stab, William just sighed. He watched. Waited. Waited...

The stab came a moment later, and once again he swept his sword up and across its path. The blow was harmlessly deflected to the side, but this time William stepped in and turned along with the pike. The tip of the weapon sailed wide of Hicker as the hyena spun in toward the guard. His empty paw came around to hit the helmeted warrior in the side of his head. A metallic clang went up from the impact, and the guard staggered for a second.

A second was all William needed to bring his other arm around his front, line up his sword, and thrust upward. Instead of driving through the warrior's chestplate, instead William stabbed *along* the armour. His blade skidded up across it, sparking at the contact before his tip breached the guard's throat. Head. *Skull*.

When he met that much resistance, William knew to pull back. Blood sprayed across the ground in the wake of the wound he'd left. He stepped around the fallen guard as his partner prepared for a wild swing across both Jacob and Neani. The blow never came; William reached up to grab the haft of the pike. When the soldier twisted his head and tried to bring it down, William sliced his blade across the back of the guard's legs. A howl of agony went up from him before Jacob silenced him with a gash across the neck.

William turned back to Hicker, but the rat had held his own well. A mouse and panther lay at his feet, blood spilling across the road. His eyes were wild and as twitchy as his tail, scanning the immediate area for any more threats. None seemed to be coming, but none had seemed imminent before the flower girl, too. Good that he was cautious.

Neani and Jacob seemed fine as well. The four coalesced back together, back to back to back to back as they looked up and down the street. Quiet pants for breath rose above them. "What was that?" Jacob muttered.

The hyena opened his muzzle to reply, but found himself silenced by the sharp, crystal clear toll of a bell. It rose not from the nearby great keep, but further down the road. His eyes zeroed in on the source all at once as he frowned. The spire that rose above the buildings of Herovir was unmistakable. "The temple bell."

The ring was answered across the city, and then answered again, and again. More and more bells rang out as, all around William and his squad, those Carisi who hadn't taken up weapons against the Ratholarin began to lock their doors and bar their windows. "It's a call to arms. A city-wide surprise attack." William grit his teeth as he turned and craned his head up.

The great keep towered over the whole city, but its bells were silent. There had been a meeting planned for later in the morning. That meant Tobias was in there. That meant Geoffery was there. That meant *Daniel* was in there. William had almost taken a step before he stopped himself. If there was trouble city-wide, it could only be the work of the shaman. He couldn't just run off to Daniel's side. He had a job to do. A responsibility to his squad.

He snarled wordlessly as he squeezed his bloody sword tighter. He could do both. "The keep. We're going to the keep. The four of us, right now."

"Sir?" Neani sounded confused.

"The prince is there, with our commander and his best captains." William's eyes continued to scan the street warily. The first wave was done, but there would be more. Other squads might not have been as lucky as they were. "All together. If I wanted to hit this army hard, that's where I'd go; take out the leaders. So we're going to move in. Protect them. Questions?"

"What about Merinda? Burke and Robert?" Jacob's voice was clipped. The coyote seemed almost manic. Poor thing hadn't seen enough combat yet for it to have gotten easier.

"There's dozens of squads patrolling the city centre. Dozens more between here and the main camp. They'll be fine." William's eyes tightened as he felt his muzzle curl downwards. Hopefully it wasn't a lie. "But if they're throwing the common folk at us here, it's a distraction. Where are their warriors? Why only a few in the city? No, they're fortifying the keep."

"Can we even take it?" Neani again. Now she sounded worried.

William couldn't blame her. "Take it? Maybe not. But if we can find a way in, maybe we can clear a path out for his majesty and anyone else we can find. We don't need to hold it." He nodded once, almost as much for himself as them. This was the right thing to do. He had to get to Daniel. If this was happening everywhere, Tobias was the obvious target. He *had* to get to Daniel. "Clear?"

Three calls of, 'Sir!' came back in response, and William allowed himself the barest of smiles. They could say what they wanted. William was glad to have his squad at his back. "Alright. Ears up, eyes open.

"Let's move."

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Access to the keep had not been the hard part. William and his squad made it to the main entrance without much fuss, along with another lieutenant and her remaining soldiers. They had served as a distraction, drawing off the guards to allow William a way inside. He'd been unwilling to leave them so outnumbered, but she'd insisted that their duty was to their commander and the prince.

However, once inside, William realised he didn't have the faintest idea of where to go. A grand hallway stretched before them, lined with doors and columns. Slits in the walls caught his eye, but no storm of arrows erupted forth from them to strike him down.

He wasn't the only one to notice. Hicker cursed under his breath as he stepped forward. "Where is everyone? Did we make a mistake?"

William had wondered the same thing, but he shook his head as he turned the problem over in his mind. "No. The army here has the numbers to take the keep. They can't win in a long fight. They need to cull our numbers fast; that's why they ambushed us." He turned back to the squad. "They can't afford to fortify. They've only got one shot to cripple the army, and give them the advantage they need." He looked to Neani. "You studied the layout of the city. Did that cover the keep?"

She nodded back, and the badger started to make her way down the hall. "This way." William fell in behind her. Hicker and Jacob stayed at his flanks. The four moved as a single unit as Neani led them along.

William's eyes were on the walls and doors. There was no movement, no *nothing*. It was almost as though the keep had been left completely unguarded. All the logic in the world that he'd offered his squad – that the ambush was their full focus, that they couldn't win a straight-up fight, that they needed to hit the Ratholarin hard and fast – didn't help him shake the unease. If he was right, it felt *wrong*.

Until they reached the end of the hall. Neani paused at the door and nodded to it. "Three flights up. The royal chambers aren't much further than that."

"Assumin' the prince is still there." Hicker didn't sound reassured.

Before he could answer, the door to the stairway burst open before Neani. A flash of firelight blinded her as William recoiled, one arm raised against the glare. He blinked as her scream of pain went up. Flames danced before his eyes as they began to focus again.

The badger's fur was alight. It burned through her armour as she flailed wildly in an attempt to put it out. A strike across the neck silenced her cries; the blow delivered by the ignited blade of a Carisi sword. Two warriors stepped out of the stairwell doorway, each holding a sword that shimmered with magical firelight. The one that hadn't struck Neani turned to William.

The hyena's weapon lifted in time to fend off the blow, but the heat of the sword's flame pushed William back all the same. He grunted and parried another blow as Jacob and Hicker moved in to strike at the other soldier from both sides. He was forced to leave them to their own devices, backed up step by step by the rapid-fire slices from his opponent.

The dance of that fiery sword made it all the harder to see where exactly the next blow was coming from. It forced William to move further and further back under the withering, relentless assault. Over the clang of iron against iron, the sound reached his ears of laughter. Derisive. Contemptuous. *Cruel*. The enemy soldier was *enjoying* this.

And still William was pushed back. Block. Block. Sidestep from an overhead slice. Block. Parry. Block. The hyena rolled to the side as he glared up at his assailant. Every strike

gave him new information. Parry. Block. Block. Sidestep. Block. He narrowed his eyes. There it was! Block. Block. Parry.

Riposte.

The tip of William's blade barely pressed through the leathers of his opponent, but it was enough. As the enemy warrior stumbled back, his flaming blade fell aside. William pressed the attack; a quick swing sent sparks cascading across the stone floor as the Carisi's weapon was knocked clear of his paw. William took the hilt of his weapon in both paws as he brought it up and around, and then down with all his strength.

Had the blow been aimed at the warrior's neck, it would have cleaved his head clean from his shoulders. As it was, the stroke buried William's weapon several inches deep into the Carisi's shoulder, and he roared in the soldier's face as he wrenched his blade free. A gush of blood came with it, and he leaned in to slam his knee up into his enemy's chin.

He used the same motion to launch into a run, all but leaping over the failing body of his opponent. William saw by the doorway the flashing of the other Carisi's burning sword. Hicker's body smouldered and smoked on the floor alongside Neani's, the rat writhing where the badger lay still. Jacob was still on his feet, furiously blocking the assault of the enemy warrior.

There wasn't any time for William to waste. He charged forward, sword at the ready before him. It was impossible for the soldier to miss his approach. Indeed, he swept his own blade up in a broad arc in an attempt to ward Jacob off before he turned toward the sprinting hyena.

It cost him the chance to respond to William. The hyena's sword swung around, battering away the Carisi warrior's flaming weapon before he crashed full-force into their chest. Weapons scattered, the fire on the Carisi's blade sputtering out as the two tumbled end over end together.

William managed to brace himself against the floor with a leg, stalling out his momentum. As the Carisi rolled off after him, he hooked his arm up and around their head. Caught, William's arm slid down under their helm to the warrior's neck. He squeezed, tugging the Carisi's back in against his chest. Desperate, choked scrabbling ensued as the soldier tried to free themselves. Too late, however, as William's other arm came up to provide just enough leverage to twist the Carisi's neck hard enough to produce a sharp, sickening *snap*.

They fell limp instantly as William panted for breath. The world around him swam as a combination of adrenaline, dizziness and the surprise of the attack all vied for his attention. He could do little more than force himself to breathe, sat still on the floor as he cradled his enemy's dead body.

It wasn't until a shadow fell over him that his eyes refocused. It hadn't come from the stairs but behind him, and he twisted to see Jacob kneel down beside Hicker and Neani. The rat's burns were severe, but he still seemed to be breathing. A cut along Jacob's forearm also could have been much worse than it was. "How is he?"

The steadiness of William's voice came as a surprise, but Jacob shook his head. "If we don't get him out of here? Dead. Don't even know if we can move him. I..." He shook his head

sharply as he reached down to squeeze the rat's paw. It gave a weak twitch in return. "We gotta get him out."

William nodded even as he looked down at the soldier in his arms. He slowly rose as he let the dead body go; it slid out of his grasp and off him as the hyena shuddered. "Stay with him. There'll be reinforcements. Someone else'll come."

"And what about you?" The coyote looked up at William. Tears shone in his eyes.

It was a good question. In his heart, William knew that there wasn't a choice. He cast his gaze to the stairwell, now visible beyond the door that they'd been ambushed through. Geoffery was up there. Tobias was up there. *Daniel* was up there. "I'm gonna keep going."

The coyote gasped behind him. "Sir-"

"You get help." William stepped over quickly to snatch up his sword. The last thing he wanted was for Jacob to question him now. "You make sure you get Hicker some help. That's an order, soldier." His eyes fell on the discarded Carisi sword. Broader than the Ratholarin weapons, sigils and runes were engraved along the flat of the blade. The source of its magic, maybe? The hyena reached down to pick it up. The weapon was lighter than it looked.

The metal was cool to the touch, and William squeezed the hilt tightly as he sheathed his Ratholarin-made weapon. There was something about it; familiar but alien all at the same time, and there was almost a hum that came from somewhere deep within the iron. The feel of it curled William's fingers all the tighter. He felt his fur stand on end as he turned to fix Jacob with a firm stare. "You *get* him some help."

"Yes, sir." Jacob's muzzle twisted into a silent snarl as he nodded to his lieutenant. "Whatever it takes."

"Good lad." The sword in William's hand almost bounced as he thought of Daniel again and turned to the stairs. If the bear wasn't in trouble yet, he would be soon enough. William ran.

He rose through the stairwell several steps at a time. Every step; every floor that he cleared brought him closer to Daniel, but it also brought him closer to something else. He could feel it tug at him from somewhere inside the Carisi sword. It came through the hum. Intensified as he passed the first floor. Became a proper vibration as he rose through the second. By the time he reached the door to the main third floor corridor, it was practically a rumble. Had it a mouth, William might have thought the sword ready to roar.

He shoved the door to the corridor open, but there was no one there to greet him. His focus narrowed to the hallway as he broke into a sprint. Daniel. He needed to find Daniel. That thought fed down into his swordarm, and the growl of the weapon almost felt like it dragged him forward. Like a beacon to the bear; like it knew. William didn't resist it. He didn't have the time not to trust his instincts. That was what it had to be.

He didn't stop when a Carisi guard was exposed on the other side of a corner he raced around. If anything, the soldier seemed all too slow. He turned toward William, but the hyena barely stalled his charge. William watched the pike lower toward him. Gripped the sword in both paws. Swung upward.

It shattered the haft of the pike. Splinters flew everywhere as William used his momentum to spin completely around. It added power to the stroke he levelled at the Carisi's throat, and he barely felt the resistance as his stolen sword cleaved through fur, flesh, sinew, and bone. He didn't miss a step as the enemy warrior's head was separated from its body. *Daniel*. He had to find Daniel!

There was a tug from the sword and William found his mad dash halted in an instant. He paused before a large wooden door, scorched and scarred. The bodies of several Ratholarin soldiers lay before it, burned. Their bodies sizzled; whatever had done this had done so extremely recently. The rumble in the sword died off. Here. This had to be it. Tobias' room. Daniel would be inside, protecting him. There wasn't time. William grit his teeth and kicked the door in.

He stepped into the room as the door slammed back on its swing into the wall. Two sets of eyes lifted to meet William's. One pair belonged to Tobias, wide with fear and horror. One pair belonged to Daniel, standing in front of the tiger with sword drawn and a look of determination that gave way to sudden worry.

The owner of the third pair of eyes didn't look at William as Daniel shouted to him. "Run!"

That figure, wrapped in hooded robes of white and yellow and red and with a golden-gloved paw wrapped around the haft of a gnarled wooden staff, ignored the shout entirely. They brought the staff down toward Daniel as William stepped forward, only for the bear to block it with his sword. Fiery sparks rose from the contact as Daniel leaned into the block with his full strength.

Only for the figure, with just a single paw on their staff, to swing back against Daniel's locked weapon. The push didn't seem like it ought to have been too strong, yet it rotated the bear around the point of their weapons' contact. He was lifted easily into the air, where he sailed into the nearby wall and slammed into it with a metallic *clang*. William's eyes went wide as Daniel slumped limply to the floor.

Tobias cowered back further in the corner, panting and shaking his head as the figure turned toward William. The hood was supported on the horns of a goat, male and well into middle age by the looks of him. Bright yellow eyes took the hyena in as he smiled. "*Kamera, William. Epilous, eiste'ed. Boruum en kinoume.*"

The tiger looked up at William. "Y-you know this shaman?"

William grit his teeth. That made sense; he definitely *looked* like a shaman. "No. But I'm gonna kill him now all the same."

Maybe the goat understood what William had said, because he lifted his empty paw and chuckled as a spark of flame lit there. It floated in place, neither burning his paw nor going out, sustained apparently by nothing at all. Magic. *True* magic. "*Afto po prokaei tai na'kanet eina... aparatito. Thafereis ti ptoska.*"

"Yeah, you too, I guess." William narrowed his eyes and squeezed the Carisi sword all the tighter. He planted his feet firmly, raised the weapon, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. The shaman thrust his paw forward, and the spark of flame erupted into a surge of fire that burned through the air toward the hyena. William rolled to the side as it soared past him, scorching the wall. He shot back up to his feet and charged forward, blade raised to protect himself.

The shaman shifted around to bring his staff back to bear. It swung down to meet William's blade almost before the hyena had moved to strike. William half expected it to lodge there, stuck like Daniel's had been. At the contact however, the sparks that lifted up from it swirled together. They raced down the length of the Carisi blade. The sigils glowed bright, and the sword exploded once more to life.

The firelight glinted off the goat's eyes as he shoved William back. The hyena didn't go flying like Daniel had. If anything, he skidded back barely a foot as the shaman sent another burst of fire toward him. That time William barely shifted position. He crouched in place, driven once again by instinct as he thrust his sword up and into the gout of fire. Once more he felt the vibrations surge within the blade. It sang as the fire swept up and around it. Through it. Within it.

Those flames in turn didn't touch William's body. The sword itself took the brunt of the attack, almost as though it had absorbed the shaman's attack. The hyena straightened up again, but nothing on the goat's face suggested that he was surprised in the least. "*Alla mi spitha. Itana grafato na'kaeis poli po foteini.*" He slammed the end of his staff into the ground twice. William thought he felt the impact in his bones. "*Deix mou ti foteina su!*" His staff lowered to point at the downed Daniel.

William lunged forward. His Carisi blade flashed as he swung it up toward the underside of the staff. Unlike the pike minutes earlier, the wooden length didn't shatter under the force of the impact. William may as well have struck solid stone, but it was still enough for force the head of the staff to point up and away from Daniel again. The goat grinned down at him from beneath his hood. "*Sto'noma tou Miarvis... afeste te thysia mou na'anapsi to mella!*"

"*Chtyps me'kato. Foristi to mand yiamou!*" He pulled his staff back from the contact and thrust his paw forward. Flame swirled in his grasp, but William was faster than the shaman. Instead of withdrawing his sword, he let his blade ride down along the staff a ways. It turned into a fiery swing that sliced through the goat's robed arm; fur and flesh and fabric all were left singed in the wake of the Carisi blade.

Before the goat's paw had even hit the ground, William had reversed his blade. He drove it back with a roar, and the burning metal drove down deep into the goat's chest. He heard the shaman gasp. The flames sank into the sword. Energy raced along the blade and surged into the goat's body. His eyes glowed red.

When the glow faded, he toppled. The goat's arm reached out, and his paw caught a hold of William's. He found himself pulled down as well, grunting as he balanced himself out before he fell atop the shaman. Indeed, the sword buried in the goat's chest helped save William from hitting the ground as well. He gripped it as he watched blood drool from the goat's muzzle. It sizzled in the open air as he smiled up at William. "*Miarvis... na'eina... epaineas.*"

His muzzle fell slack. Eyes rolled back into the goat's head as his chest lay still. The quiet sizzling of the blood spilled from his wounds was drowned out by William's pants for

breath. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the fallen shaman. He'd done it. He'd actually done it. He could scarcely believe it.

When at last he glanced up, Tobias still seemed to be in shock. The tiger was watching the body of the shaman more closely than William had ever seen anyone watch anything before. Content that the prince was safe, he scrambled back up and over to where Daniel lay crumpled against the wall. He skidded down into a crouch and knelt down over the bear. A quick inspection showed that his shoulder was out of place, but Daniel just seemed to be unconscious otherwise. William sighed with relief and leaned down to touch his forehead to the bear's. "Thank goodness..."

"W-William?" The meek voice of the tiger prince caused William to lift his head again. Tobias's head was still pointed at the shaman, but his eyes started to dart around again. He was in shock. William couldn't blame him; he'd probably been moments away from being murdered.

And as loathe as he was to turn away from Daniel, the bear was unconscious. Tobias was technically the priority for any soldier in William's position. Still he hesitated, and the hyena reached down to gently pat the top of Daniel's head before he forced himself back up to his feet. "I'm here."

Tobias' head turned slowly as his eyes focused on William. The tiger's whiskers trembled as the hyena made his way over and knelt down in front of him. He didn't otherwise move, save for the lift of a shaky arm toward him. "William, he..."

"It's alright. You're safe now." William reached back out to take the tiger's paw, but Tobias moved faster than he was ready for. The prince all but launched himself forward. He fell against William's chest as hot tears stained the hyena's armour. Tobias' arms wrapped tight around him, and William gasped before he sighed and returned the tiger's embrace. "You're alright, Tobias. You're safe."

How much of that was truth, he honestly didn't know. There had to be more soldiers lingering in the keep, just waiting to finish what the shaman had started. William didn't have time to stop. He had to make sure Tobias and Daniel were able to be moved. "Can you stand? We can't stay h-mmph!"

The kiss wasn't something he'd been ready for.

It stunned William instantly. He could do nothing but kneel there, the tiger clutched tight to him, his muzzle parted by surprise just enough to allow the prince's tongue in. Something inside the hyena broke. Comprehension failed him. He'd died. That was it. He'd died; the shaman had killed him, and this was his last delirious moments of existence. Hallucinated kisses. He supposed if he had to go, it wasn't the worst thing.

But the kiss just kept going, and as the seconds wore by William became more and more aware of the fact that, no, he wasn't actually dead and, yes, that was his childhood friend with his tongue halfway down William's throat and, no, he still definitely had absolutely no idea what was going on. His teenaged self would have been pleased to learn, at least, that Tobias had turned out to be a pretty good kisser.

That thought proved to be the last thing needed to snap William out of his confused stupor. He released Tobias immediately and shifted his paws to all but pry the tiger off him. His heart pounded in his chest as a tearful Tobias stared into his eyes. Long-dormant thoughts and feelings surged forward. William cut them down where they stood. "What was-"

"Are you hurt?" Tobias was panting as he leaned back further to look William up and down. It was the last question the hyena had expected to hear. Nice, on some level; Tobias was worried about him. That too was unusual.

"N-no. I'm fine. Are you...?" The tiger shook his head as William nodded. He finished prying Tobias off him and hurried back up to his feet. The prince remained crouched for a moment, but his eyes widened as he looked past William. The hyena frowned, but turned back toward Daniel.

He sagged with relief as he heard the bear groan. His head was already up, having rolled into a sitting position. He blinked his eyes, uncrossing them and rubbing at the back of his head as William grinned. Daniel was alright! "Oh, thank goodness!" Tobias scrambled back up to his feet as well, and William hurried to the captain and quickly offered his paw. "Are you well? Can you stand?"

Daniel eyed off the paw for a second, but gave a slight smile a second later as he gently took it. "Not gonna like it, but... yeah. Sure. Help me up." Both he and William grunted as the hyena hauled Daniel upright once more. The bear all but fell forward, and William was forced to catch him. He steadied Daniel against his body and grunted with the weight. "Is, uhh... is the prince-"

"He's fine. Shaman's dead." William turned toward Tobias as he shuddered. Had Daniel been conscious for the kiss? Had he seen? What would he have thought about it? The surge of fear that rose inside William dissipated as quickly as it arrived. He trusted Daniel and he knew the bear trusted him. He wouldn't jump to conclusions, and he could explain it later when their lives weren't in danger. "My prince, please retrieve the sword I, ah... left in the shaman, if you would."

Tobias nodded, and he delicately set to work pulling the Carisi sword free. William turned back instead to Daniel. "I probably don't need to ask, but... your squad?"

The bear's jaw tightened as he shook his head. He fell a little more limp against William as Tobias offered the hyena the sword a few moments later. "We heard the bells goin' off...they died savin' him." He limply waved a paw toward Tobias.

"And you would have, too, if not for William's intervention. As would I." Tobias wiped across his eyes. "I won't forget this."

The only thing William wanted to forget was that kiss. It replayed over in his head as he snatched up the Carisi sword and helped ease Daniel toward the door. "It's an ambush. I'll explain on the way, but we need to get you two out of here right now. Alright?" The Carisi sword's hilt tingled in William's grip.

Daniel nodded, but Tobias frowned. "Captain, you are in no shape to fight."

The bear snorted. “Thanks for the confidence. Got one good arm still; I’ll be alright.” He looked down at William as they reached the door. “Don’t wanna ask, but... what about *your* squad? Are they...?”

William lowered his head. How should he answer? At least some of his charges were still alive, last he knew. At least Daniel *knew*. “Lost one at least. I... can’t think about that now. This attack’s city-wide. We need to focus on the task before us first.” He paused as he looked up and met Daniel’s eyes. “Are you sure you’re good to go? You took a nasty hit there.”

“Just gimme a minute. I’ll be good.” Daniel’s eyes fell on the Carisi sword in William’s paw, and then they dipped lower. The hyena’s sheathed blade. His sheathed *Ratholarin* blade. When Daniel lifted his gaze again, his face bore an unspoken question.

There was no answer William could give that would make sense in the moment. He almost leaned up to kiss the bear, but the memory of where his muzzle had just been changed his mind. To kiss Daniel after just having been kissed so desperately by Tobias... it felt wrong. It turned William’s stomach. Later. Later, when he’d explained, it would be alright.

But for the moment, they had to last until later. William shifted under the weight of Daniel’s body to free his other paw. With it, he pulled his Ratholarin sword free and passed it over to the paw of Daniel’s good arm. There was no hum within it. No seething, roaring flame. It felt right. It felt wrong. It felt better when Daniel took it from him. “I know you’re good. You’re better than. You’re amazing.”

The bear smiled back at him and leaned in to place a gentle kiss on William’s forehead. The hyena pressed back up against it as guilt struck him for a thing he didn’t even do. “You bring that out’f me.” He pulled back again and raised his voice. “You ready, my prince?”

“I... don’t think so?”

“Good.” William nodded and hefted Daniel a little higher against him. He couldn’t afford to think about the kiss. He couldn’t afford to think about anything else. Not his squad, not Commander Geoffery, and not what this assault would mean for the Carisi in the future. He had Daniel. Keeping him safe was all that mattered to William in that moment. Tobias was just lucky that he was along for the ride.

The hyena raised his Carisi sword and pointed it before him as he made for the door with his lover. “Let’s get out of here.”