

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART SEVEN

72nd Day of the Pure Snow, 20 AoE

Dungeons were the same in any society. The particulars varied, of course, but in broad strokes they were dark, they were dismal, and they were hopeless. Caris had been a kingdom of beauty and culture at one time. It had prided itself on art; on endeavours of the heart and mind.

As he descended the narrow, dank stairs into the darkness beneath the great keep of Herovir, Tobias saw no hint of that beauty. There was no art in the stonework. No culture in the bars and chains. It was a dungeon, just the same as any other. As Daniel led him down, flaming torch in his paw, Tobias shook his head. Perhaps the beauty of old Caris has been an illusion. Perhaps the darkness that gave rise to such awful places was always there in everyone. In everything.

There was no time to philosophise about the nature of existence, unfortunately. His destination was relatively close to the entrance to the dungeon, and Daniel stopped right beside a set of half-rusted iron bars, driven both into the stone floor and ceiling. The bear's eyes fixed on the cell's occupant. Narrowed. "You got a visitor."

As Tobias stepped into the prisoner's line of sight, he caught a hint of a smile he'd grown quite accustomed to in the first days of their arrival in Herovir. Grimy robes, matted and knotted fur, and an awful, awful smell came from the inside of the cell but did nothing to diminish the smile on the occupant's muzzle. "My prince. How lovely to see you." <You are looking well.>

<I am sorry to say that you look rather the worse for wear.> Tobias frowned, his nose crinkled as Paulos stood. <I promise you, I did not order this treatment.>

"No, of course not. Your commander did, as it turns out." He stepped forward and wrapped his fingers around the bars. Tobias took a step back, partly to stay out of range of the jackal's claws and partly to stay further away from his soiled body. "As I have said before to him, and to you. I swear that I did not know what Thenas intended. I was an innocent party in his and his followers' assault on your forces."

"Yeah. 'Cause you did so much to help us." Daniel glared daggers as the former consul shrugged. "And what about Allain, huh?"

Paulos politely raised his eyebrows and perked his ears. "As I have *also* said before, I know not how that knife found its way into his throat. I shall not mourn him for he was a feckless cur without honour, but that in itself is no Ratholarin crime. And as Caris *is* Ratholarin, I suspect you must therefore be here to release me."

Tobias grit his teeth. It was true that they had no proof that the jackal had killed the magistrate during the attack, but... "You were sat over his body. The weapon--"

“Was not in my paw, nor was it mine by purchase.” He affected a shocked expression and dramatically brought a paw to cover his muzzle. “The gall. I hoped that you thought higher of me than this, my prince. I *found* the not-so-good magistrate in the state he was in. I was merely...” He appeared thoughtful for a second as his smile grew. “... enjoying the moment, as it were. You presume much of me.”

Daniel snorted. “You really think we’ll believe you had nothin’ to do with it?”

The jackal spread his arms out wide. “I care little for what you believe. I care for what you can prove.” His eyes fixed on Tobias. “That *is* the Ratholarin way, is it not? The way of this new age that you claim such reverence for. Evidence. Proof. Demonstrable facts, and you lack them.” He tilted his head as Tobias growled. “I take it, then, you intend to detain me here until it suits you.”

That was tempting, but Tobias shook his head. “We are leaving within the next three days. We have done what we came to do.” He leaned in a little closer and allowed himself a little smile as Paulos’ arms fell back to his sides. “Your high shaman is dead. The forces raised against us have been hunted down and put to the sword. Your little fermented rebellion has died stillborn.” Tobias lifted his head a little higher. “You will be coming with us back to Sanwell, where you will be judged for your role in these events.”

“And then hanged.” Daniel didn’t smile; his voice was dark and cold.

Tobias nodded, but Paulos only smiled all the wider. “I see. Then I hope that your kingdom’s judgement is fairer than you, my prince, and sees fit to release me from such bondage.” He clasped his paws behind his back and nodded back toward the stairs Tobias had arrived down. “I will await the arrival of my guards with great anticipation. I hear Sanwell is a lovely city.”

The tiger frowned. “You don’t seem bothered.”

“I am not.” Paulos slowly sat back down again, and the jackal’s tail flicked to the side as he crossed his legs. “What comes to pass next has been decided already. You have decided it.” His smile turned cooler as he folded his arms into his tattered sleeves. “Perhaps I will even have a chance to see those events with my own eyes. I am so very looking forward to the opportunity.” He paused. <I once told you that you may possess wisdom gifted by the gods. Perhaps in the days to come you may give thanks for it.>

As much as Tobias didn’t want to give Paulos the last word, he didn’t have an answer. He’d not expected the squalor of the dungeon to be so evident in the proud jackal, but equally he’d thought Paulos would be more reasonable. Broken, even, by his time there. He seemed just as self-assured as ever. Cocky, even. What did he know? What secrets lay in his head still?

Tobias was left to muse on that as he turned away. Daniel fell in behind him, torch in his paw. The trip back to Sanwell would be one of many weeks. There was more time to interrogate him. Perhaps, the tiger thought, he needed only to find the right questions to ask. Paulos had responded well to honesty in the past. Perhaps earnestness might loosen his tongue, especially if he thought Tobias incapable of perceiving whatever larger scope he thought he served.

The idea that there was in fact some grander scheme in play was a concern for more than just him, it seemed. As Daniel closed the dungeon doors behind them and followed him up the stairs, the bear grunted sharply. “You don’t reckon this is over, do you?”

“Of course not.” Tobias stroked his chin as he ascended the stairs. Daniel had been a fairly stimulating companion before the battle had broken out weeks earlier. Perhaps he had some insights to share about more than just William.

No sooner did the hyena cross his mind than Tobias found his muzzle clamping up. The kiss was still in his mind. He couldn’t wipe the memory of it however hard he tried. That it had been a weakness borne of an overwhelming moment meant nothing. It had happened. And, if only by the way it lingered in Tobias’ mind much as the taste of the hyena’s muzzle had on his tongue, it was a weakness set to remain far longer than the prince was comfortable with.

But that was a concern for another time. He had the benefit of the bear for the moment. It would be foolish not to consider his wisdom. “No. If one victory would assure peace, then we would not so often be dealing with these upstart rebels and the shamans that stoke them.” He clasped his paws before himself as he stepped out of the stairwell and back into the great keep’s mail hall. A smattering of Ratholarin soldiers noticed him and stood to attention.

“Yeah, well I mightn’t know all that much history, but the Lenkis weren’t much a warrin’ people.” Daniel shrugged as he handed off the torch to one of the nearby soldiers and hurried ahead of Tobias. He opened the main door, and Tobias nodded his thanks as he passed through and into the overcast day outside. “These shamans ain’t so peaceful.”

“Their entire way of life and all that they believe is being erased. It isn’t difficult to see why they would fight with all they have to preserve it.” Tobias folded his arms as he looked up into the sky. The clouds drifting in from the east would bring rain, if not soon then at least by nightfall. “I wonder if there may have been another way.”

Daniel didn’t respond immediately. For a moment Tobias thought the bear simply mulling over those words, but when he glanced to the side it was to a curiously furrowed brow. “They killed hundreds of the soldiers what came here. Invited us into the city’n then tried to kill us all in a surprise attack. Nearly killed *you*.” He shook his head. “Magic got involved here, my prince. There weren’t another way it could’ve ended.”

“I wish I was as sure.” The tiger cast his mind back to Iannus’ words before they’d left on the expedition north. The rat had been so hopeful that perhaps there was a way for mercy to win the day. Would he still have held that thought, Tobias wondered, if he’d been present for the gutting of the Ratholarin soldiers? For the innocents-turned-assassins at the behest of a shaman?

The bear gave a noncommittal grunt in turn, but that was about all Tobias could expect at that point. Daniel was a true believer in the cause. On some level, he expected that his brothers would like Daniel very much. On the other, he’d clearly caught William’s eye and that sure counted for a lot more.

Oh, dammit. He’d done it again.

Tobias pursed his lips and ran his tongue up along them. He needed to figure out a solution to *that* problem too. Again he glanced at Daniel, but the captain’s attention had turned

back to the streets before them. They'd be out of Herovir and back to the main Ratholarin camp – moved to relative safety *outside* the confines of the city – in a few minutes. He doubted he had all that much time to-

"You're starin' at me." The bear's words made Tobias jump. Had he been? He'd not meant to. He was just... "You got somethin' else you wanna ask, or are y'just 'mirin the view?"

He bit back a sigh. No wonder William liked him, indeed. He sure didn't lack for confidence. "No, I just was wondering if you'd seen, ah... William. Lately."

Daniel's expression didn't change, but the fur around his eyes twitched as they tightened. It was so slight that it might have just been the breeze, but the pause before he replied undermined that idea. "Yeah. Stayed with me when he could while I recovered. Not for a couple days, though. Different schedules." His head turned slowly. "He's good."

"Yes, he is." Tobias nodded slowly to himself.

"I meant he's well." Daniel frowned. There was no mistaking his disapproval *that* time.

It wasn't like the blush that spread on the tiger's cheeks did him any more favours. "Yes. Yes, well, of course that's what I meant. And took you to mean. Yes. I just... he doesn't like to see me much these days, and I was... worried."

"With respect, my prince, you are a *prince*. Royalty." Daniel turned away from him and shook his head. It sounded like the bear was forcing every word out between his teeth. "If you wanna go see him, you can go see him. Who's gonna stop you?"

"Well, William. He'd stop me." Tobias frowned. Daniel had been fine before. Was conversing about his partner really the line for him? "He doesn't want to see me. He wants to see you."

That time Daniel closed his eyes entirely. He even brought a paw up to rub across the top of his muzzle as he sighed. "Yeah. And oh, what a shame. We just can't seem to see each other lately, no matter what I do." He glanced aside for the briefest moment, but it was long enough for Tobias to instantly regret the choice of conversational topic. "Might be someone's got a plan in the works."

The tiger frowned. "Are we back to talking about the shaman again?" The growl that rumbled in Daniel's throat took that option right off the table. "What plan?"

"I dunno. Some plan that might involve me out've the way? Leavin' a certain prince with a chance to catch a certain lieutenant alone?" His voice was even, but there was no way to mask the growl. Daniel wasn't just irritated. He was *angry*.

Had he seen the kiss? Did he know what had happened? Tobias had been certain he was knocked out until after it was over, but if he'd seen... well, it would sure explain the sudden hostility. He'd said he'd kill Tobias if he hurt William, but he hadn't done that.

Right?

"Look. It's not unreasonable." The bear continued as Tobias was forced to sidestep another Ratholarin soldier on the march. How public they were while carrying on the conversation was increasingly raising the fur on the back of Tobias neck. Was that something

Daniel had done deliberately? “He’s a good lookin’ guy, and sweet as honey besides. Takes care of himself. Takes care of *me*. Stands to reason you’d be interested.”

Tobias gasped. To just out and out say it? Right there, in the open? “I never... I mean, I’m not...!”

“You’re a shit liar, you know that?” At that, Daniel cracked the smallest of smiles. It somehow didn’t put Tobias at any ease; his eyes darted about. Who was listening? Who could hear? “And ‘sides, I got one up on you ‘cause I know plenty both from him *and* from you. I reckon I got a better idea of what’s in y’heart than you do at this point.”

The fact that he was right didn’t change how presumptuous and inappropriate the bear’s words were. He was right: Tobias *was* a prince. He didn’t have to take this from him. “Now, see here-”

“It’s alright. I’m not too invested.” Tobias’ jaw dropped before he could finish his reprimand. He even fell behind Daniel, standing still in the road as he looked after the bear with his shock clear across his face. He remained there when Daniel also paused and turned back toward him. “I mean, what. How can I be?”

It took a moment for Tobias to pick his jaw back up. Did William know this? “I... thought you loved him.”

“Sure. Just with all my heart. Not somethin’ I ever thought I’d get around to sayin’ ‘bout anyone with any meaning.” He shrugged. “But no sense gettin’ too invested is it, now you’re in the picture. Not like I can compete with a damn *prince*, right? What’ve I got compared to that?”

The bear’s smile faded, but aggressiveness didn’t replace it. Instead, Daniel just looked sad. Guarded. He seemed small even as his eyes smouldered with anger. “And yeah. You’re gonna tell me you’re not in any picture. Not interested, which is a lie, because half of our chats have been about him. So...” He waved both paws toward Tobias. “Shit liar.”

Once upon a time, Tobias had thought the bear’s directness a noble quality. Right there and then however, he wasn’t quite so sure. “He doesn’t want me. Not anymore.”

Daniel actually rolled his eyes at that. “You think anyone what loves as hard as he does just... *stops*?” He paused and frowned. “Well, maybe y’would think that. It’s not like you’ve had the time with him I’ve had. You barely know ‘im at all anymore. No wonder you’re way off th’mark.”

On some level, there was a tingle in Tobias’ heart at the prospect. William had always been emotional and passionate, yes, but the idea that he could still feel something beyond contempt for the tiger after so long and after so much... it was almost too much to contemplate. That there might be a chance. That there might be a way.

But then he saw the sadness in Daniel’s eyes, and any warmth in Tobias’ breast melted into cold shame. “But he’s spent that time with you. Not with me. You know him better than I do, and he chose you. Clearly.”

“Yeah. But you keep bein’ interested. Keep tryin’ to wriggle your way back into his good graces.” Daniel shook his head again as he started forward once more, and Tobias hurried

to catch up again. “You got the power to force me outta the way. I’m not gonna be able to stop a prince.”

Tobias shrugged and tried a little smile of his own. “You did threaten me, if memory serves.”

“Yeah, an’ I’ll hold you t’that.” He dropped a paw to his sheathed sword. “But this isn’t about you hurtin’ him. It’s about you wantin’ him. I can’t stop you if you decide you want him.” He turned his head just barely far enough to bring Tobias into view. “And I *wouldn’t* stop him, if that’s what he wants. I’d just hafta learn t’let go.”

“Could you?” The words left Tobias’ muzzle before he realised how they sounded. They didn’t seem to earn him any sharp rebuke though, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “Could you really just... let him go like that?”

The bear’s shoulders slumped as he sighed. “Not like I’d have a choice now, is it? Could fight. Dishonour myself’n try to get him back. But if I did that I wouldn’t deserve him, would I?”

“I suppose not.” Tobias stroked at his chin again as Daniel shot him a brief, strange look. Was the bear surprised to see him agree? It wasn’t like it mattered, anyway. William didn’t want him. He wanted Daniel. He’d said as much himself, on several occasions. Even when he didn’t know Tobias was there, listening.

But as they continued on in silence, Tobias realised that Daniel was right. He was a prince. He could do whatever he wanted. If he wanted to see William, that was up to him. If he wanted to have the hyena hear him, he could make it happen. He had the power. He had the authority. He had all the control.

And... William wouldn’t care about that. He’d never cared about any of it. He’d always treated Tobias just as Tobias had always wanted to be treated: just like anyone else. If he exerted his princely will and forced the hyena more to his side, it was possible he could have what he wanted, in a way. William would hate him, but Tobias would have him.

That it was even a notion that the prince entertained was sickening to him, and he forced the idea out of his head almost immediately. No. No, he wouldn’t order William into anything. He wouldn’t force the hyena to say or do anything. Goodness knew he couldn’t force him to feel anything.

Daniel was certain that he was outclassed by the prince. Tobias wondered where that came from. He’d succeeded where the tiger had failed, hadn’t he? He’d won William’s heart. Earned his love in turn. All Tobias had was a stolen kiss and years of longing he thought he had suppressed. Daniel had William. William wanted Daniel.

And yet, that worm of an idea remained inside Tobias’ mind. That maybe, *maybe*, there was a chance. That perhaps, somehow, someway, William’s heart might still have burned for him. That there was more than disgust and hatred he bore for the prince. That idea just seemed to burrow deeper, taking root in the deepest recesses of Tobias’ mind.

It wasn’t something he could just pull out. It wasn’t something he really even *wanted* to pull out. It all left him in yet another uncomfortable situation. Did he act on it? Did he hold

himself back? What would Juni think? His family? Sarina? What would it mean for him to listen to that voice in his head, and let that idea bloom? What fruit would it bear?

Tobias had no answers; indeed, he had even less answers than usual. The path would become clear, he reasoned. It must. Twenty-one-and-a-half years of existence in the world had to be enough to figure out what he wanted. What he needed. *Who* he needed.

There would be an answer. He would find it.

#

Twenty-one-and-a-half years of existence in the world, it turned out, was *not* enough to figure out what he wanted and needed.

Not even three days more of careful consideration on top of that – at the expense of his duties, much as he was loathe to admit it – helped Tobias come to a better understanding of his options and the right course of action. If anything, the indecision was irritating. Angering, even, in its persistence.

As the bulk of various squads filtered out of the city of Herovir, Tobias stood with the gathered heads of those squads. They were, for the most part, in relatively good health. More than a few bore several different cuts and bruises. A couple carried more grievous wounds, bandaged and treated.

Geoffery was among the latter category. A reddened bandage was wrapped around both his midsection and his left leg, and the commander walked with a distinct limp in the wake of whatever had happened to him in the great keep. The fox hadn't been doing well in the days after the surprise attack. That he was up on his feet at all was a miracle. Or it would have been, if Tobias was given to believe in such nonsense.

Daniel was in attendance as more than just his protector, as was William. The two stood side by side as Tobias approached the middle of the group, talking among themselves in voices too low for him to register. He forced himself to bite his tongue before he asked them directly what they were talking about. It wasn't his place to intrude. He needed to focus on the task before him, not allow himself to be distracted. And yet, something tugged at the edge of his awareness. Something was off about William. Tobias just couldn't place it, and so the prince resolved to put it as far out of his mind as possible.

As he turned to face them all, Geoffery stomped his good foot against the ground. "Stand to!" Even his voice sounded more gravelly than before, and he gave a quick, throaty cough as soon as the order was issued. Nonetheless, all the gathered lieutenants and captains stopped what they were doing and turned to face forward at attention.

Tobias winced at the few more severely wounded leaders as they did their best to settle into proper military stance. "Please, be at ease. Now is not the time to stand on ceremony. Not after the last few weeks." He watched, and sighed in relief as the formation relaxed at once. The wounded individuals shifted into more comfortable stances. One wounded horse actually grunted and sat right back down on the ground. Poor thing.

The prince clasped his paws together before him as he looked the soldiers over. "You have, all of you and all those under you, served with distinction and honour during this

expedition. I wished to offer you all my most sincere thanks for what you have done for me, and for Ratholarin. Your service will not be disregarded, and it will be rewarded when we return.” He smiled as a few of the soldiers looked among themselves. “Yes. I intend to put you all forward for commendation for your efforts during this brief but important campaign.

“However, there are three I must single out as requiring more still than even that honour.” He cleared his throat as he looked about. “Geoffery, son of Landry. Daniel, son of Amos. William, son of Zane. Please, step forward. Uh...” He frowned as he looked at Geoffery’s wounded leg again. “If it... wouldn’t hurt.”

The commander smirked at him and took a single step forward, right on his bad leg. His wince was barely noticeable, but he bore it with grace and poise. Both Daniel and William were able to move much more easily, though the pair looked more confused than pleased at being singled out. Hopefully they’d be more comfortable in a moment. “The three of you warrant special consideration, as thanks for your exceptional service after the events of the surprise Carisi attack.

“Commander, I know that you have already been granted the Sigil of Rathin for valorous deeds in the field of battle, and I confess I do not know what further acclaim may be offered you. I will speak to my father and see what boon might be afforded to thank you for your service this campaign.” He smiled at Geoffery as the fox bowed his head. “I am honoured by your dedication to duty. It will not be forgotten.”

“It is my pleasure and my honour to serve, my prince.” His bow deepened, though he stumbled on his bad leg in the process. The commander caught himself before he could lose his balance, but he did straighten back up again immediately.

Tobias’ eyes lingered on him for a few more moments to make sure he was alright before he turned to Daniel and William. The confusion was gone. “Daniel, son of Amos. I will be informing my father that your deeds are worthy of the Star of Sanwell.” Some of the other assembled captains and lieutenants began to whisper among themselves as the bear’s eyes widened. “While your service to me is not yet ended, you placed your soldiers and yourself at mortal risk to protect my life. Such devotion to duty deserves reward.”

The bear’s chest swelled somewhat as Tobias nodded to him. “It is my honour to serve, my prince. Thank you.”

“No, thank *you* for your exceptional efforts. They are most appreciated.” Finally, Tobias turned his gaze on William. It took him a second to realise what had bugged him about the hyena’s appearance. The sheathed weapon on his side was not a standard-issue Ratholarin soldier’s blade. Instead, the thicker sheath and more elaborate hilt marked the weapon as one of the Carisi swords. A prize? Trophy?

He forced his eyes to lift. If he questioned William’s loyalties again, he had no doubt his childhood friend would actually turn on the spot and murder him. “Likewise. As far as I am aware, the Star of Sanwell has not been bestowed on a soldier ranked lower than a captain in over fifty years.” He began to smile. “William, son of Zane, I will recommend that you break that trend, and be awarded the Star in recognition of your efforts not only in slaying the high shaman, but in saving my life in the process.”

The hyena's eyes went wide, and he looked up at Daniel as if he couldn't believe what was happening. Daniel simply beamed back down at William as the hyena turned back to Tobias and bowed deeply. "Thank you, my prince. I am honoured."

As Tobias nodded and waved his paw toward them, all three stepped back into the formation. "While you all have accomplished great deeds in this campaign, the efforts of these three warriors in particular is of special note. You will all be awarded in relation to your efforts, but I wished to hold up these three as great and noble examples of what I hope you all aspire to be in the future." Tobias smiled as he let his eyes drift across Geoffery, then Daniel, and finally they came to rest on William. "You are the greatest gifts of Ratholarin. I am immensely grateful for you."

He watched William swallow. The hyena flicked his ears as he glanced aside. In the corner of his eye, Tobias watched Daniel's own smile fade. Tobias let his gaze shift once more to the greater whole of the formation. "Please attend to your duties and those under your charge. I understand we break camp within the hour and make for home." He spread his arms. "Look forward to what awaits us as we return to Sanwell, and thank you once more for your service. You are dismissed."

The gathered officers nodded and immediately began to disperse. William hurried off out of the way, and Tobias couldn't help but frown for a second. Normally he would have been thrilled to celebrate with Daniel... was something wrong between them? His frown deepened. Had *he* caused problems between them?

He almost wasn't ready when Daniel walked right up to him and folded his arms. Tobias almost jumped as the bear glowered down at him. "Y-yes?"

Daniel simply stared back at him for a long moment. It felt like an eternity. "My assignment to you ain't over and my squad's in pieces. Until y'dismiss me..." He shrugged slowly and folded his arms.

Tobias breathed a deep sigh of relief as he looked around. The rest of the soldiers in their immediate periphery had begun to attend to their own needs. Daniel was the closest who wasn't busy. "Yes, of course. Thank you. I will release you from this task as soon as we are back over the old Caris border."

Again there was a pause and a cool stare, and the relief Tobias had been so grateful for began to disintegrate. Daniel wasn't pleased, and he was the furthest thing from subtle about it. "Seems smart. What would y'have me do for the moment?"

What indeed? As the bear stared down at him, Tobias leaned around his bulky body. William was well out of sight. Probably also out of earshot. "Where did William go? I thought he would-"

"No."

Tobias blinked and shivered. It hadn't been a question or a suggestion. It had been an *order*. The authority in Daniel's tone; the depth to his voice; the hardness of his stare all came together to make it abundantly clear. "I... no?"

"No." The second time lost none of the impact that the first had possessed. "I am your servant. I am to ensure your protection." His eyes narrowed as he bared his teeth. "But no Star

of Sanwell's worth you constantly usin' me to get an idea what's in William's head." He leaned down ever so slightly and Tobias had to fight back the urge to pull away. "No more. I'm done with it, *my prince*. You got an issue with him, you sort it out with him."

Tobias allowed himself a frown of his own as he lifted his head with more confidence than he could honestly muster in himself. "You think it wise to take that tone with me, captain?"

"Already said nothin's worth this. No reward, no rank. And 'sides, you already told me you wanted me tellin' you the truth. Bein' honest and all that." His eyes lost none of their sharpness and his stare was almost painfully piercing. "So no. Prob'ly not wise. I'm just figurin' that you ain't gonna be as bad as y'brothers are."

The tiger grit his teeth. "I'm starting to regret offering you that freedom."

"Well, you got the power to take it away again." Daniel shrugged as he lowered his voice somewhat. "But so long as I've got it, there's somethin' I've been meanin' t'ask *you* about William. Figure if I'm not gonna get the chance to speak anymore, may as well see if I can getcha to indulge *me* for a change."

Tobias blinked and glanced around. There still wasn't anyone around in immediate earshot, but that didn't mean he wanted to be questioned by one of his own soldiers in plain sight. Still, as he looked up at Daniel, it was clear that the question would come whether he wanted it or not. And he *had* put a lot on the bear beyond just the protection of his life. He owed him something. "Very well."

It seemed his acquiescence was entirely unexpected. Daniel recoiled from him and frowned, his face full of suspicion as he regarded the prince. Curiosity evidently won out a few moments later; why wait and lose the chance, after all? "Uh, thanks. Simple question, won't take more'n a second. Goes like this." He straightened up to his full height – Tobias was reminded instantly how much smaller he was than the captain as he fought to hold the bear's stare – and frowned. "Why didn't you help his mum?"

The prince could only stare back at Daniel in response. That was it? That was the question? "What?"

"You heard me." Daniel leaned back down again. "He told me why he joined the army in th'first place. People got sick a few years back. Nasty disease. Took m'nephew from me, turned out." Daniel smoothly folded his arms as Tobias winced. "Will needed the crowns for medicine for his mum, and for the other servants. Did it against her wishes so he could protect her. Protect as many of 'em as he could."

A growl passed Tobias' lips, but it was so quiet he doubted Daniel could hear. That was what William said? "I see. Well, I can understand why you might be upset with me. Clearly William has chosen to omit a few details." When Daniel's frown deepened, he sighed. William had a much better grasp of vocabulary. "He left some things out."

Daniel worked his jaw side to side. He clearly didn't believe that. "By all means. Fill in the gaps, if y'like."

"With pleasure." Tobias clasped both paws behind his back as he stood his ground. Maybe he'd even take this information back to William. Maybe it would ease the hyena's mind somewhat. He could only hope. "When that illness came to Sanwell, father was already

wrapped up in what needed to be done for the good of the entire kingdom. Physicians were employed to travel far and wide to seek means by which they could treat it.”

Before he could continue, Daniel held up his paw. Tobias bristled. “Yeah, I heard all ‘bout that. What I wanna know is why nothin’ was done to help y’own servants.”

Tobias narrowed his eyes. He’d been getting to that! “Sanwell lies in some of the furthest southern reaches of Ratholarin, captain. The herbs and remedies that ultimately served to treat it were not native to our lands. When they had discovered solutions, they brought them back with them. As much as they could carry.

“However, as you ought to remember well, the first outbreaks came from Keyston. Then from Avregon.” He lifted his eyebrows as Daniel’s expression softened. “And then?”

“Sanwell.” He growled the word. “So that’s it? It was too early in the run of the illness? There weren’t no treatments available?” The bear shook his head; at the edge of his vision, Tobias could see that more than a few soldiers had paused their work to look at whatever confrontation was going down.

That was not a good sign. This couldn’t continue in the public eye for much longer. Tobias had to shut it down right then and there. “There were remedies that might have helped. Some that might have made it worse. Tevorapus, an old Lenkis concoction, proved the solution but none of the requisite herbs grew anywhere near Ratholarin.” He began to number off his fingers. “Chaava root brewed into a tea helped, but again, exceptionally rare in Ratholarin. The iceburn salves of Sylaria were completely ineffective. Koridoraan red helped the symptoms for a short time, only to poison the user to death.” He shrugged as his stare turned angry. “Do you need me to continue? Liska aggravated it. Sundrop had no effect. Voliktos cured it well enough if you didn’t mind being blinded in the process, and-”

“I’m startin’ to get it.” Daniel sighed.

He didn’t look like it, though. “No, you’re not getting it. Not yet.” That time, Tobias leaned up to put himself as far in Daniel’s face as his shorter stature would allow him. “You and William do not get to see what goes on behind closed doors. You do not get to see the efforts that are made. You do not get to see how much suffering was being borne while solutions were laboriously worked toward. That *I* worked toward!”

Claws pricked the pads of Tobias’ claws before he even realised he’d unsheathed them. He took a ragged breath and forced those muscles to relax again as he settled back flat on his feet. “I did what I could. Sought the resources and the knowledge to solve the problem whilst *hundreds* more travelled the world to seek a treatment. Do... do *not* look me in the eye and condemn me for my failure when you know not what I did to forestall it.”

Despite the way Tobias trembled, Daniel didn’t look moved. For a second, the tiger wondered if perhaps he wasn’t as sweet and kind as William may have been led to believe. That thought was dashed against the rocks of reality as Daniel gave a slow, long shake of his head. “A fine performance. I even believe it.”

Again Tobias let slip a growl. “A performance? How d-”

“Will mentioned chaava. That the royal physician had a stock of it.” The bear’s eyes narrowed as Tobias blinked. When had William spoken with the royal physician? That was

true; Ocher *had* maintained a small supply of chaava before the sickness ran amok in the castle, but... “Said he’d talk t’the king about lettin’ him use some of it. The cost’s what made William join the army. It’s what paid for the chaava that treated his mum. The others.”

Tobias swallowed as his eyes fell. Never had he felt more cornered. “Yes. And the royal physician’s supply was exhausted extremely quickly.” When he looked up again, the bear’s eyes were as hard as sapphire. “What do you wish to hear? That he used that supply to treat my family? He did, and was paid for it.”

“And it took the whole stockpile, did it?” Daniel’s smile was joyless and toothy. “See, Will leaned a lot from you. A couple brews of chaava was good enough for most, wasn’t it?” The smile vanished. “An’ how many’d your family have?”

The tiger ground his teeth. “I had none.”

“And y’were how sick, again?” Daniel shook his head. “Look. I don’t care if y’wanna lie to me. Toldya already how shit you were at it. ‘Sides, I can tell you don’t wanna talk about it. Written all over y’face, and even I can read well enough for that.” He sighed and stepped back. “Look. I’ll buy you tried to help. I’ll even buy that you tried *hard* to help. But you’re a damn prince, an’ crowns were the problem. Y’really tellin’ me that you weren’t able to spare some to get some chaava for Will’s mum? Nevermind the rest of the servants. Not just her? Not for him?”

Once more Tobias’ gaze descended. His mind raced as it searched for a satisfying answer or some other retort that would convince the bear, but as the words sank deeper into Tobias’ mind he knew that there was no such answer to come. The truth wouldn’t help, but it was all he had. “Father didn’t let me.”

He couldn’t see the bear’s indignant expression, but Tobias absolutely heard him scoff. “Oh yeah? An’ what if *William* had been the sick one?”

Tobias couldn’t help but snarl. “I would not have let that happen.” No sooner had the words left his muzzle than Tobias realised that he’d fallen into the bear’s trap. “No, wait. I didn’t mean-”

“Will did what he did not jus’ for his mum, but for a lotta people what needed help. He did somethin’ good, and it cost him a lot t’do it.” Daniel took another step back and shook his head. “Maybe you’d have helped him if he got sick. Maybe that’d be good, too. But if y’could find a way to help *him* if he was sick... why no one else?”

“That’s not... you’re twisting my words.” Again Tobias bared his teeth. He needed to stop underestimating Daniel. The bear was smarter than he looked. Maybe he’d learned from William as surely as the hyena had learned from Tobias. “I worked *hard* to help find a treatment, even though it was not something I was particularly suited toward. I did everything in my power.”

“But we both know that ain’t true, don’t we? Y’know that y’just said so.” Tobias hissed as he turned away from the bear. He hated that he was right. He hated that he had no choice but to see that, after all those years. Daniel was right; he could have done more. Should have done more.

That, however, was then. In the present, what was there to do? He couldn't change what happened. Couldn't help the mistakes that he'd made. He simply spread his arms out wide. "What do I do, then? Do you want me to admit that I'm wrong? That I *was* wrong?"

Daniel simply stared back at him. "Nope. Don't matter none to me. I made my peace with what happened years back. I'm not even th'one you wanna convince anyway."

"Like I could ever convince him." Tobias blew a quiet, very un-prince-like raspberry. "No. He's certain of my sins and isn't inclined to give me a chance to explain myself. To apologise. And besides which, it's not as though William understands the pressures and troubles of being forced to adhere to my family."

"You really think in all those years y'spent together that he didn't learn how hard it was f'you? That he didn't see it every day?" One of the bear's eyebrows raised. "Y'keep talkin' like he didn't know. Like he couldn't, even though y'kept tellin' him all the damn time."

"And yet he never understood what it would have meant if I..." Tobias' voice failed him as he glanced around. Most of those who had stopped to gawk at the animated prince and the stoic captain had already returned to breaking the camp, and the general noise was likely to have shielded them from being overheard. That didn't mean that Tobias wanted to broadcast openly anything that would get him in trouble. "What would have happened if we were... you know."

The bear snorted. "Yeah, I don't get that neither. Never made sense to me."

That was a thought. How in the... "What do you *mean* it doesn't make sense?"

"You're a prince." He shrugged.

Tobias' eyes almost bugged out of his head. Maybe Daniel wasn't that smart. Maybe he'd just gotten lucky. "Yes, and that is precisely the problem!"

"No, I mean... you're *just* a prince. A prince. Not the crown prince. Not the heir. Not even second in line." Daniel shrugged again. "So... what's the problem? Why's it matter?"

The tiger ran both paws up and over his face. "The *problem* as you so eloquently put it is that I would be disowned. I would be cast out. Stripped of title and wealth and position if I were to go against my father's wishes in such a matter." He waved up and down along his body. "I would have nothing. Not even the clothes on my back!"

For a long, long moment the bear simply studied Tobias' face. It was as though he was drinking in the argument, but there was no sign he was thinking up a response. Tobias found himself panting, worked up despite himself. This wasn't how he'd expected the conversation to go at all!

But then, Daniel said it. Three little words that completely changed everything. Three words that Tobias had never considered; that had never entered into his mind at all. Not on any of the long, lonely, cold nights after he'd sent William away; not on any of the early, lustful days with Juni where he'd imagined his friend in her place; not in the quiet, doubting moments where he was alone with his thoughts for just a fraction too long.

"You'd have him."

Silence.

Utter, contemplative, harrowing silence.

And as he stood there, digesting it, Daniel just kept going. “You’d not have had all the silver in the kingdom. Probably barely a crown to y’name. No castle, no fancy clothes, no ‘sensive meals and drinks.” The bear fixed him with a firm stare. “You’d have had him instead, but you didn’t choose him. You chose the silver. The crowns. The castle, the clothes, the food’n drink. You chose bein’ a prince.”

And... Tobias had.

The realisation hurt. That was the terrible truth of it that the tiger realised he’d never been able to see before. He *had* chosen. He’d cast William down, laid him low and all but cut him clean from his life because he’d chosen to do what his family had wanted. What his father and his mother and his brothers expected. What they would have done in a heartbeat without pain or remorse. When his muzzle finally worked, his voice was barely a squeak. “I chose wrong.”

“Yeah.” Tobias slowly lifted his head, and when he met Daniel’s gaze it was with a hint of sympathy in the bear’s eyes. “And the worst part f’you is that you don’t even know whatcha lost. I wouldn’t trade places with you for all th’ crowns in the world. I’m sorry. Really.”

Tobias nodded to himself. What else was there to say, after all of that? “Yeah... me too. Not that it matters anymore, anyway.” Again the tiger rubbed at his face. It brought no relief. “Soon as I’m back, I’ll be wed. It’s already been delayed all through the Pure Snow for this campaign.”

“So don’t do it if you don’t wanna.” Tobias frowned at the words, and Daniel rolled his eyes in response. “You’re not the heir to the damn throne. You think you matter even one little bit to y’father in the grand scheme of things? To Fredrick? Maybe y’dad likes you. Maybe he even loves you. But far as the kingdom’s concerned, what’s the point?”

“The point is alliance. Long-term thinking and planning. Greater influence and power in the region.” Tobias sighed. “So many games that noble houses and royalty must play.”

The sound that came out of Daniel was more groan than sigh. “So don’t play.”

Tobias glared back at him. “I have to.”

“No you bloody well don’t. What, you think ‘cause I’m not a king or a crown prince that I got no say what I do with my life? That only kings get to choose?” Daniel scoffed at him once more. “That’s a load of shit an’ you’re smart enough to know that.”

“It’s not that simple. It’s *not!*” He all but shouted that last as Daniel rolled his eyes again. “I have responsibilities! A duty to uphold!”

The bear fell silent again for a long moment, and then pursed his lips and shrugged. “Okay.”

Tobias found himself left blinking stupidly once more. “I’m sorry?”

“I said okay. If you’re sure.” Daniel stepped away again. “I got duties to attend to. If you’re safe enough in a camp full of our soldiers, I gotta go get to that.” He perked an eyebrow. “If you just wanna keep arguin’ in circles, I could waste the rest of my day. The choice is all yours... which is kinda what I’ve been tryin’ t’get you to see.”

“Yes. Of course. Go attend to your duties.” It was an out, and Tobias was all too happy to take it. He felt drained, both physically, mentally and emotionally in the wake of their discussion. The last thing he wanted was to lose what precious little was left of his cool before the entire company. “I will... consider what you’ve said.”

“Good Hopefully it’s the last time you gotta bend m’ear about this stuff.” He bowed his head to Tobias. “My prince.”

Tobias nodded back, and Daniel turned away. He hurried off, clearly as eager to be done with the conversation as the tiger was. Tobias couldn’t really blame him. He wondered how much of their discussion would make its way to William’s ears. He wondered how much had made its way to the ears of the various soldiers all around them. More than a few members had acute hearing.

There was no point in worrying about that, though. Not, after all, when Tobias had so many more things to worry about in their stead. Everything Daniel had said; all that the bear had opened Tobias’ mind to still swirled around, unfettered. All the shame that came with his mistakes was left there to mingle with the opportunities of what lay ahead of him. Choice. He *did* have a choice. He’d always had a choice.

In the past, he’d been wrong. He’d chosen thinking that the result was a foregone conclusion. That he wasn’t able to alter the outcome any more than he could choose the side of a die to be revealed when cast. All of his choices had come from a place of knowing for an absolute fact that his choices didn’t matter. There was duty, or there was... nothing.

No more. Possibilities danced before his eyes like glittering temptations. Some would take time. Most would take effort. Tobias didn’t doubt that some others would be beyond his reach, but that mattered little to the prince in that moment. He could try. *That* would be enough for him.

Maybe it wouldn’t be enough for William, but Tobias couldn’t help but smile. Maybe it would be. He had only to try, and find out.