

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART EIGHT

8th Day of the Verdant Growths, 20 AoE

Temperatures had warmed slightly around the Ratholarin army as they made their march homeward. Or at least they had for a while; as they travelled to the south, the days quickly cooled back down again. Even marking the turn of the season had done little to curb the climate. Where the snow in Herovir had begun to melt, the roads between it and Sanwell were still laden with the stuff.

It was no real bother to William except at night. The evenings on the march northward that he'd spent with Daniel had been a delight, not only for the pleasure they'd shared but also for the sheer warmth that the bear's thick body had afforded. He wasn't just enjoyable to bed, but just enjoyable in a more generalised sense. He was comfort personified.

That was what made the march homeward so much less tolerable. As the chosen defender of their dear prince and with his whole squad wiped out, the bear had been forced to sleep near to Tobias. More than once, William had to wrestle with the thought of the tiger prince hearing or – goodness forbid – *seeing* them in their passions. It would have been an acceptable embarrassment in exchange for being able to be close to Daniel again. He missed the bear's touch.

But as the days wore on and he forced himself again and again to resist the urge, all he had to make do with was occasional glances or short questions when their paths crossed on their respective duties. It had been absolutely devastating to William. Never had he spent so long away from the bear before. He knew for certain his decision to stay with the army in order to remain close to Daniel had been the correct one. William didn't know if he could stand to stay at home, alone, away from him for weeks and seasons at a time.

The day finally came however where they officially crossed out of what had been old Carisi territory and back into the heart of Ratholarin's holdings. It was the day William had been waiting for with baited breath. The day Daniel's attachment to Tobias' hip would end. The day he'd get his lover back.

It was the longest day of the march but at the end of it all, when camp had been set and food eaten; when the bright blue of the sky faded to violet and then to darkness; when everyone was settled and resting save for those unlucky souls on watch, he came. A shadow across the camp at first, he drew closer and closer. From the outline alone William knew it was him. He stood by his tent, watching the figure close in. It resolved from shadow to fur. Nothingness to a face.

Daniel.

No sooner than he stood before William than the hyena all but threw himself into Daniel's arms. They closed around him, enveloping William once more in that familiar warmth and scent, and he sighed long and low and deep. Home. He was home again. "Hi."

The word was muffled, but Daniel clearly heard him. The bear chuckled as he lay his muzzle down atop the hyena's head and planted a kiss at the base of an ear. He whispered back a soft, "Hi," of his own as he gave William a tight squeeze. No matter what else happened, the moment was perfect. William could have died right then and died happy. "Sorry it took so long."

"You're here now." The words were still softened, muddled by the chest William had all but buried his face in, but he doubted Daniel cared any more than he did. "That's the important thing. I... *mrrrrf*..." He breathed in deep, reacquainting himself with that familiar, earthy scent that he'd come to associate with the bear. "I've missed you."

"Me too. You got no idea." Again came the kiss, but that time Daniel didn't stop at William's ear. He drew back and reached around to tilt the hyena's muzzle up. When he leaned in, William didn't fight him in the least. Their tongues met as their muzzles did, weeks of eagerness and longing spilling out all at once. They kissed like they had gone a lifetime without seeing one another. Like it would be a lifetime before they would again. Like it would never end.

When they parted again, both were left panting quietly against the other's face. William groaned and arched his back, pressing tighter in against Daniel's body. "We should get inside the tent. And then I should get inside *you*."

Daniel shuddered and nodded, and he smiled as he licked across William's lips. "Love to. Oh, I'd love nothin' at all more, but I can't." When William leaned back a little and frowned in confusion, Daniel reached up to touch a fingertip to the hyena's muzzle. "Gotta meet with the captains in a bit. Important officer stuff. Gonna be hours at least." He smiled even as William felt himself deflate. "But you really thought I wouldn't take the first chance I'd get t'come see you?"

"Mmm." William sighed as he pressed back into the bear's hug again. "Tomorrow night. Definitely tomorrow night. You promise me right now that we'll have tomorrow night."

"I promise you tomorrow night I'm yours to rut 'til you're dry." Daniel chuckled softly as he nuzzled down against the top of William's head. "But this... jus' holdin' you? Missed this even more than getting' you under m'tail, if y'believe it. Not that I'd turn down a kiss."

Shades of old guilt tingled at the edge of William's mind as he forced a smile to his muzzle. "Me too. But I need to talk to you about something first. It's important." He watched as Daniel nodded slowly, and William stepped out of the bear's arms to draw open the flap of his tent. "Got a minute?"

"For you? Always." Daniel smiled as he stepped forward, only to wrap William up again in a tight hug and all but carry the hyena down into the tent. William couldn't help the quiet giggle that boiled up and out of him, and he smiled up at Daniel as the bear lay him down on the ground. "Just wish I had more'n a couple right now."

“Me too.” William could still see the bear’s face in the dim light of the lanterns outside. On some level he wished he couldn’t, just in case what he was about to say went badly. “Okay. Don’t know how to bring it up, so I’m just gonna say it and... hope for the best.” He took a deep breath. Held it.

Kept holding it.

Daniel lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “How’s that goin’ for you?”

“Good, real good. Getting there.” The smile on William’s muzzle loosened his tongue just enough for him to sigh and let the words flow. “It’s... Tobias. He kissed me.”

“Yeah. Just after you saved him.” Daniel nodded, and William frowned. He *knew*? “I came to just in time to catch it. Little guy really went for it. How was he?”

William could do little more than just lay there under Daniel, frozen in place. “I... don’t remember, really- wait, how come you never said anything? Why didn’t you tell me?”

The bear shrugged as he leaned back and off William to sit with his back to the tent flap. “‘Cause it weren’t my place to tell. And ‘sides, it’s not like we’ve had a quiet moment lately to ourselves to get into it.” His smile returned as he folded his arms. “That why you weren’t interested in kissin’ me when we I was recoverin’ after everything?”

“I... yeah. I felt like...” William sighed. He’d felt a *lot* of things those days. “I felt dirty. Wrong. Like my muzzle’d been somewhere it wasn’t supposed to be.” He sighed again and slumped backward. Being honest was a relief, but he still couldn’t read Daniel’s reaction. He *seemed* fine, but what if he wasn’t?

Regardless, Daniel chuckled to himself at that. “Will, I’ve put my muzzle *plenty* of places it probably weren’t meant to be. You should know.”

“That’s different and you know it.” There was still a brief surge of heat in William’s ears as he glanced aside. “I felt like it was... a betrayal of you. Like I’d done the wrong thing. That I wasn’t... that you deserved better than that.”

“Ah. That ol’ thing.” Daniel grunted as he lay himself down beside William and rolled in to face the hyena. William shifted as well to his side, staring across into the bear’s eyes. “Couple things, first off. Number one: I love you, but you don’t get to say what I do and don’t deserve.” He smiled a little wider as he leaned in to touch his nose to William’s. “That’s my call, and I reckon I deserve you plenty.

“Number two: I love you, and a little thing like some prince lockin’ his muzz to yours ain’t the sorta thing to change that.” The blush in William’s ears burned all the brighter as warmth bloomed and spread in his chest with each of the bear’s words. “And I was there. You weren’t exactly kissin’ him back.

“And number three: I love you, and even if you *were* kissin’ him back or started it... how could I be mad about it?” He shook his head and shuffled closer, draping an arm over William’s middle and pulling him close. “He’s been a part of your heart for so long. I know he hurts t’think about. I know y’keep wonderin’ what could’ve been. And I know a part of you wishes you knew.”

“I want you.” William shook his head as he reached up, cupping the bear’s cheek. “Just you.”

“An’ I believe that’s the full truth. Whole and complete.” Daniel smiled as he leaned up to plant a soft kiss on William’s forehead. “Look. I’ve had my fun. Got to have some... heh, some *real* fun times, with some real fun males. I’ve enjoyed that freedom, and I’m more’n happy to settle now with you. But if you still need t’explore a bit, you just gotta let me know. Alright?”

William blinked. That... wasn’t an offer he’d expected. “What do you mean?”

“Jus’ mean if you wanna bed another guy, let me know. Just wanna make sure I get a good look at ‘em, make sure they’re not about to hurt the most important person in the world.” He smirked as he nuzzled in against William’s cheek. “An’ shit, how many servant boys-turned-soldiers get to say they’ve bedded a *prince*, to boot? Might be worth takin’ him for a tumble just for the stories!”

“I don’t... think I’d spread any stories about him, if that happened.” William swallowed. On some level he still couldn’t believe what he was hearing. On another, he still couldn’t believe how absolutely, impossibly lucky he must have gotten to have met Daniel in the first place. Maybe some of the old gods had blessed him after all. “But I really don’t... I want you.”

Daniel’s smile slipped a little as he drew his head back. His expression turned more sober, if still warm and soft. “I know. Really, I do. But he’s always gonna be this... big question you’re always askin’ yourself. Y’never gonna know, and it’s not like you’n he ever got to talkin’ about where you are now.”

“No, but...” William shook his head slowly. Why would he even consider this? “I don’t need to know the answer, do I? I’ve already made my choice.”

“What if I said you’re all he wants?” The question made William’s eyes all but bug out of his head. Daniel said those words so matter-of-factly, so absolutely ordinarily, that it took a moment for them to sink in.

When they finally did, William was left even more confused than he had been before. Was this something Daniel wanted? Did he want William to go after Tobias? “Wh... why would that change anything?”

“Why? ‘Cause all y’life, you jus’ thought he didn’t want you. That he rejected you.” Daniel shook his head. “He thinks he was wrong. So... what? Does that change anything for you?”

“You can’t just drop something like that on me and get an answer right away.” William brought his paw up to rub down his face. Fingers caught on his chin as he closed his eyes. “Why are you telling me this? What do *you* want from this?”

“Same thing I’ve always wanted. You, happy.” Daniel’s paw brushed William’s from his chin and gently tilted the hyena’s face up and closer. He opened his eyes again to the bear’s soft face. “I trust you, Will. And I believe you love me, and that no matter what that prince says or does... I believe you’ll still love me.”

“And what if I don’t?” The words sounded awful, and they felt worse to say. They didn’t impact Daniel’s smile in the least, however. “What if I do it? Bed him, and fall in love with him instead? Leave you for him?”

“Then I’d hurt. I’d grieve.” His fingers stroked along the hyena’s chin as he nosed in along William’s cheek again. “And damn it all, I’d fight for you. I’d do anythin’ and everythin’ to earn y’back. And then, at the end, if I wasn’t enough? I’d know you were happy.” He closed his eyes and gave a single, firm nod. “An’ that *would* be enough for me, if that’s how it had to be.”

No words came to mind. Nothing could have encapsulated the whirlwind of emotions in William’s head. So he didn’t speak; he placed a paw on the bear’s chest. Felt through his uniform, rumped by the way they lay together, for his heartbeat. Waited for the beats of it to line up with his own, and leaned in to touch his muzzle once again to the bear’s.

It wasn’t their most passionate, or sloppy, or eager, or energetic kiss, but the soft, gentle, brief touch carried with it all of those emotions caught up in William’s heart. There were no words that could offer a promise the same way that the kiss would. Words could lie. He wanted the bear to *feel* him.

If only from the way that Daniel pulled William close as the kiss faded, he had made the right call. He nuzzled in under the bear’s chin. “You really think I should do this, huh?”

“I do.”

“And you’re not worried?”

“Not even a little.”

“Then... maybe I could speak to him.” William looked up as Daniel began to smile wider. “*Just* speak to him. No promise for more, not without your blessing.”

The bear cocked an eyebrow as he smirked. “Oh? You want me t’bless you? And what god’m I a priest of now, hmm?”

William chuckled, his eyes misting over as he squeezed his bear tightly. “God of my heart, if you keep this up. Careful, or you’re not making it to your meeting.”

“Oh no.” He squeezed William tighter, and the hyena melted once more into Daniel’s embrace. “Well, damn. If I’m a god now, then those officers gonna have t’accept I’m gonna be late. I’ve got somethin’ more important t’worry about right now... namely, keepin’ my best disciple feelin’ blessed.”

The hyena smiled back. He sighed as he relaxed into Daniel’s familiar warmth. The bear had always been there for him. He’d never hurt William. Never pushed him away. Only ever wanted to be there to help him grow. He’d learned more about himself than he ever could have imagined, and it was all thanks to Daniel. The bear was everything to him.

But he was also right. After everything with Tobias, there were... questions. Unanswered questions that did, despite his best efforts, continued to eat away at him. If they didn’t, it wouldn’t hurt to think about the tiger. It wouldn’t upset him to remember. Those

questions needed to be answered, and what they had been – what they were and could ever be – needed to be put to bed for good.

He had absolute faith that Daniel would stand by his side no matter what. William just hoped that at the end of it all, he still felt himself worthy of the bear's love and trust.

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Daniel had given him as much time as he wanted to make sure he wanted to speak to Tobias. Whenever he'd thought about it after their conversation in the tent, William had been much less certain. The more he thought about it, the less confident he felt that it was a good idea. More than once he confessed to Daniel that he wasn't sure he could even go through with it.

But the bear had given him strength and security and a promise of his own; enough for William to let him set up a private meeting off the road home. When he'd agreed and Daniel had gone to speak with Tobias, William felt as though a weight had left his shoulders. Of course, anxiety became a new concern with an equally disheartening downward force on the hyena's heart.

As he paced back and forth, well beyond the edge of the camp erected for the army's rest that night, all the myriad ways that what was to come could go horribly, terribly wrong filled his mind. Moonlight filtered through thin clouds, sending cascading silver light across the skies and the treetops nearby. The snow shone brightly, but not so bright as to completely conceal him. They would be far enough from the camp that they ought not be heard, if they were careful.

And if anyone or anything else tried to make a move... well, that's what the still-warm sword sheathed at his side was for.

Heat seemed to radiate off the Carisi weapon, even long after whatever magical fire had empowered it had faded. It had made the cold nights away from Daniel a little more bearable, especially as they marched deeper and deeper into the chilly Ratholarin territories. The questions as to why he carried it instead of his standard Ratholarin weapon had been dismissed when he'd proved himself an adept paw with the blade.

One of William's paws lingered on the hilt of the sword as he looked up to the moon. Was there some logic in all of it? In his heritage and history? In his relationship with Daniel; with Tobias? *Were* the gods, capricious and tumultuous as the legends always said, a power greater than any mortal? Certainly the magic they imbued in their followers was real enough. Maybe it all had a point. Some grand plan. Something for him to play a role in.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do." He all but whispered the words to the breeze and the moon and the sky. He didn't expect a reply. He was Ratholarin. Why would the gods answer someone who wasn't even one of their followers? Why answer someone who fought to stop their followers from gaining prestige?

"William?"

Well. Maybe they *were* listening.

He sighed, ears perked as he heard Tobias' voice. A glance around a nearby tree showed the prince picking through the undergrowth in his general direction. Too late to back out now. "Over here."

Tobias looked up at him and froze in place. He stayed perfectly still, even several seconds later. Just... stared. "Uh... Tobias? You alright?"

"No, I... y-yeah. Fine. Just... wow." The tiger cleared his throat as he stepped over a fallen log and steadily made his way up toward William. "Just wasn't ready for the moonlight. You look... really good."

William blinked and glanced up again. Clearly the gods were real. Clearly they also had a sense of humour. "I don't know what you mean."

"Uh, nevermind." Tobias clasped his paws before him, his own eyes lifted toward the moon. "I was... surprised, when Daniel told me that you wished to speak with me."

"I was surprised to ask him to." William looked around for a moment before he noticed another, larger log. The hyena walked over to it and brushed it down before he sat atop it. "Please?"

The tiger eyed the log for a second, but finally he did move to join William. He sat down, paws folded in his lap and fidgeting as he looked anywhere but at William. "So, then. What matters do you... wish to speak of? I have some thoughts myself, but..."

"Well, maybe let's start there, then. I don't even really know how to put it into words." William shook his head. Maybe something the prince said would give him an opening. Let him order his thoughts. Goodness knew that simply standing there in the cold and thinking hadn't done him any favours.

Tobias nodded. He wrung his paws for a moment before he pulled them apart and forced them to instead rub at his legs. "I... have made mistakes. A lot of mistakes, with you. More than I will ever be able to make up for, I fear, and you deserve to know that I... know that. I'm sorry for the pain I have caused you." He looked up and his eyes met William's. "The fault was never yours. It was mine."

William sat, transfixed. It was less the soft play of the moonlight across Tobias' earnest features or even his words, but the depth behind them. There was no trace of anything other than sincerity in the tiger's voice. Those words that he had hoped to hear for so many years and there he was, just... offering them. "I... I mean-"

"I was trapped. Stuck in my role as a prince. And no." He shook his head vigorously as William cocked his to the side. "It's not an excuse. I could have... I *should* have done more for you. When your mother was ill. When you left. When I..." He cleared his throat again and glanced back to the ground. "When I pushed you away all those years ago. You deserved... better. I failed you."

Sympathy unfelt for years began to rise through William. He almost pinched himself in case he'd fallen asleep waiting for Tobias and was locked in an unreal dream. "You don't owe me anything, Tobias."

“I owe you more than any words could ever convey.” His muzzle twisted inward as his paws balled up over his knees. “You were always there for me. Even when I was pushing you away, you were there for me. I was so sure that I had to do everything my family wanted me to do, and I couldn’t let myself have or do or *be* anything I wanted.” His head bowed. Tears shimmered in the moonlight.

A paw lifted and reached out, almost on instinct, toward the tiger. When Tobias saw it, he lifted one of his own to gently take it into his grasp. He squeezed. “I let them warp me. Twist me. I thought I had no choice, but I *always* had a choice. I should have chosen you. I should always have chosen you. I’m so, so sorry I didn’t choose you, William.”

“You did what you thought you had to do.” The words were little more than a mumble. More than that, William wasn’t entirely certain he was capable of. He didn’t even know what emotions were being stirred. Sympathy? Absolutely. Concern? Definitely. The old love he’d felt – the part of his heart Daniel had said still belonged to Tobias – was absolutely present and clear in the hyena’s mind.

But still Tobias wasn’t done. He squeezed William’s paw all the tighter as he shook his head. “In speaking with Daniel, I have come to a... deeper understanding of what you must think of me. How you must rightly hate me, for all that I’ve done to you.”

“I never hated you.” The words felt like truth, but William’s tongue was on autopilot. His brain had no means by which to process what was happening; instinct was in control. “I was angry, and I was hurt... but I couldn’t hate you.” He paused as he sighed. “Came close a few times. But even then, you were just doing what you had to do. It was never going to include me.”

“It could.”

William sat bolt upright at those words. He turned, but Tobias was still staring at the ground. “What?”

The tiger swallowed hard and slowly brought his head back up to meet William’s stunned stare. “I’m... not gonna be Ratholarin’s king. Fredrick will, one day. Soon, if father’s health continues to deteriorate.” He shook his head as he turned on the log and brought his other paw up to hold William’s. “I’m not so important to them. There’s no reason they need to stop me. There’s no reason they *should* stop me. And they have more to lose in trying, I’ve realised, than I do.” He smiled, but it was a sad little thing. “I already lost you. Nothing else would come close, and anything else would be preferable if it meant instead that we could...”

Trembling, William let his other paw join Tobias’. “We could... what? What do you want, Tobias?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” The admission seemed downright painful for the tiger to make, but he took a deep breath and powered onward. “I really don’t. I’ve never known, and I’ve always just... done whatever it is that felt like it was what I was supposed to do. I don’t know what I want. I just know that I... I want you to be part of it.”

Again he squeezed at William’s paws, and the hyena squeezed them gently back. A younger version of him would have melted. Absolutely given in. Thrown himself on the tiger and been glad of it. A part of him still very, very much wanted to do exactly that.

But that wasn't who he was anymore. William had grown up. Grown apart from Tobias. Even as he looked into the tiger's pleading, hopeful, remorseful eyes, William's thoughts drifted to Daniel. The bear who'd never hurt him. Never abandoned him. Who'd been there through good and bad, who he'd fought alongside, whose life he'd saved and had his own saved by. What Tobias was offering couldn't compare to that.

And yet. Tobias leaned in closer to him. William knew in his mind and in his heart what he was going for. The tiger's eyes were lidded. Muzzle parting. He knew what Tobias was going for, and that he couldn't. He shouldn't.

Their muzzles met, and what could or should be was washed away. It was a tiny thing, barely a peck, but the moment that contact was achieved Tobias obviously didn't want to hold anything back. Paws untangled as he leaned closer still. William, frozen in place by indecision, began to warm to the kiss. Tobias prised him open, tongue questing once more for his. Unlike in the great keep though, this time William didn't stop him.

Instead, his paws found purchase on Tobias' hips. There they stayed, squeezing the prince through the warm layers of his clothing. Tobias' arms reached up, and they slid across William's shoulders as he moaned softly into the kiss. His head tilted as William leaned back up and into him. Daniel's kisses were, for lack of a better word, *bigger*.

But even as Tobias' desire ran hotter and the kiss grew deeper, the two were much closer matched. Tobias was almost delicate by comparison, his kiss sweeter by far. It was new and different and alluring and almost exactly what William would have expected from a prince. It captured him in the moment, and left him unable to escape even if he'd wanted to. He might as well have been the tiger's captive.

At least until Tobias drew back. Even that only lasted for a moment; the tiger leaned right back in to assault not the hyena's lips but William's neck. He gasped, fur standing on end with the prince's efforts. He felt himself shudder, paws clutching tighter at Tobias' hips. He felt the tiger's muzzle split in a smile as he sighed. "Tobias..."

"Wanted this for so long..." The words were husky and low, nearer to a growl and much, *much* more seductive than William had ever heard from his friend. Each word punctuated another kiss to William's throat and neck. Fresh shivers wound through him. "Never thought I'd be able to feel this before my wedding..."

William froze. "Before... what?"

Again the tiger moaned, leaning all the harder into William's neck even as the hyena started to pull away. "I never..." He lifted his head as William pushed him gently back, a cold deeper than the Pure Snow rolling outward from the hyena's heart. "William? What's wrong?"

"Your wedding." William took a long, deep breath to try and steady himself. Of course Tobias was getting married. It was on the tip of everyone's tongue in Sanwell before they'd left. "What... what about your wedding?"

At that, the tiger brightened considerably. "Sarina. Quite an impressive and open-minded young lady. She would have no problems at all if you and I--"

“No, I mean...” William’s paws dropped from Tobias’ hips. He’d made a mistake. He’d made a horrible, terrible mistake, and his stomach churned in response. “You’re... still going to marry her.”

“That’s a question of station, not of love.” Tobias’ smile had begun to slip as well. Did he have maybe an inkling of what was going on? Could he sense the new pain mounting inside William’s chest? “She would let us be. I’d still have to produce an heir, of course, for the sake of my family and hers, but...” He frowned. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? I...” William swallowed down hard as bile tried to rise in his throat. He brought the back of his paw up to brush across his muzzle, but the scent of the tiger’s body came with it. Somehow that just made it worse. “What *exactly* is your plan, Tobias?”

Now the tiger just looked confused. And, William noticed with a hint of irony, worried. “Ingsbren. Far from father, and Fredrick, and anyone who would hate us. William, I’d be king *there* one day, alongside Sarina. I’d be allowed a consort if I asked for it, and we wouldn’t even have to hi-”

“A *consort*?” William all but spat the word, eyes wide as Tobias recoiled. “And Ingsbren? What about home? My mother? What...” Again he swallowed. The sickness in his guts twisted harder. “What about Daniel?”

Tobias could only blink in confusion. “You’d have me. And I’d have you.”

William thought he might retch, or pass out, or perhaps even spontaneously explode on the spot. Tobias reached out a paw to him, but he slapped it out of the air before it could even come close. “You don’t... you don’t even see a problem with any of this, do you? It’s not even crossed your mind.”

“And it won’t, unless you explain it to me.” A twinge of irritation had wormed its way into Tobias’ voice. As if William could feel worse.

On the bright side, it sharpened some of the feelings in his heart into diamond blades. Blades he could direct. “You want me to give up everything. Absolutely everything I love and hold dear, but you’d lose... nothing. Nothing at all! You’d get to be a king, and be wealthy and powerful and have your wife and your castles and even get *me*, but I’d...”

“I... thought you wanted me.” Tobias’ arm dropped to his side. He sounded so hurt. So genuinely, actually, properly hurt.

That was the truly galling part. The fact that Tobias, for how far he’d come and how much he’d learned and the gestures he’d just made, could be so, so utterly lost in his own designs to see the damage he’d done. *Again!* “Could Daniel come with us?”

The tiger’s expression soured, and William didn’t even have to wait for his reply. Of course he couldn’t have Daniel there too. Tobias wouldn’t allow any competition for William’s affections. Daniel had put his heart in the hyena’s paws, but Tobias could only hoard it for himself like some fiendish dragon.

This had been a mistake. William had been right from the start.

He shot up off the log, right back to his feet as he sadly shook his head. He'd been a fool. "That, right there. You'd get *everything*, but you'd expect me to just... just accept being your consort? No life of my own? No choice? Just be... be *kept*? Bound to your will like a pet?"

"No more war. No more marching and fighting and killing. No more putting yourself at risk." He reached out again, only for William to bat his paw aside that time too. "What... why aren't you happy? Why are you being like this?"

"You don't even know. You don't get it, do you?" William sighed; he clutched at his stomach with one paw while the other rubbed through his headfur. "You don't get to just... to just waltz up to me like this, claim to be this new, improved version of yourself looking to make amends and bring me back into your life and just..." His arms spread out wide. "Make me lose everything I know and care about! Just to run away and play at being your consort! Your *plaything*!"

"It's a noble position to take!" Tobias shook his head as he too stood. "It would grant you status beyond anything you could rise to as a servant, or even as a mere soldier!"

William's anger crystalised in that instant. His eyes narrowed. "A... *mere* soldier?"

Tobias glared back at him. "Do not insinuate insult where none is intended."

"I am not a *mere* anything, Tobias." The name came out barely legible through William's snarl, and Tobias actually jumped back from the viciousness of the sound. "I am not a mere servant. I am not a mere soldier, and I am most definitely not a mere *consort*." He thrust a paw back toward camp. "I have a male back there who adores me with all his heart and would do whatever it took to make me happy. Who loves me truly, and would give anything for me, even if that was to give me up. Why would I ever trade all of that to be with someone who sees me as so much less than *he* is?"

His paw dropped to his side as Tobias' shoulders slumped. "I loved you once. I would have given you everything once. I would have jumped at the chance to go with you to Ingsbren. But for all your words of sacrifice..." He barked a bitter laugh as Tobias folded his arms. "You wouldn't sacrifice a damn thing for me, would you?"

The nod from Tobias came as a complete surprise. "No. I wouldn't. Not when I don't *have* to." The tiger tilted his head up, his eyebrows knit angrily together as his tail lashed behind him. "And I didn't think I had to. I thought that there was a way to preserve my station and elevate you above yours. Bring us to more equal footing; bring you out of this mud and squalor!"

Again William snarled, but he reigned his anger in. This had indeed been a colossal mistake, but something good had come of it. Tobias wasn't the male William had thought him to be. He was so, so much less than that. As much as that vindication hurt him, it brought with it a certain clarity. A sharpness to the hyena's mind, and one that he'd lacked whenever he'd considered Tobias over the years.

Now though, bathed in pale moonlight in the middle of nowhere and with no one else around, Tobias stood effectively naked before him. William saw the tiger for all that he was

and, more importantly, for all that he was not. For all that he could have been, but never would be. Potential unrealised. Tragedy gratefully avoided.

And so he marched right up to stand in front of Tobias. Unafraid. Unencumbered. Unashamed. The tiger's own anger and bravado had long since faded to desperation, and he stared up at the taller hyena with silent, unheard pleading in his shimmering eyes. William held his stare. "I would spend every single day of my life in the mud and squalor if it was the only way to spend it with him, Tobias. And I would be *grateful* for those days."

He turned his back on the tiger. On their history. On any feelings that might have been left lingering, rekindled by Tobias' earlier contrition. He turned his back on all of it and, with head held high, started back toward the camp.

"You could be so much more than this, William!" The call after him was frantic. Tobias' voice wavered. "Please don't throw this away!"

"*You* threw it away years ago, when you threw me away." William's own voice was quiet, more for himself than anyone else. "I'm not throwing anything away now. He deserves so much more than that from me, and I..." William squared his shoulders as he looked up to the moon again. "I deserve more than you're willing to offer me."

Tobias wouldn't; he *couldn't* understand, but that wasn't William's problem and it wasn't William's fault. Sympathy tugged once more at his heart as he heard the tiger break down behind him, his sobs echoing between the trees around William. His realisations had been real. His confession heartfelt and true. The hyena hadn't doubted that.

But there was no price to pay with Daniel. The bear loved freely. Openly. That he had so trusted William to meet with Tobias said as much. Tobias came with demands. With acquiescence. With sacrifices that the tiger just wasn't able to contemplate, let alone make.

So William kept walking. The sobs faded from his hearing as he drew nearer to the camp. He wouldn't stop until he'd picked his way through the tents, located the one he truly knew loved him just for who he was, and awakened him. He'd be grumpy at the intrusion, understanding as William explained, and consoling as the hyena mourned one last time for what was never to be. And then, at the end of it, he'd be alright. They both would be, together.

Maybe, hopefully, one day Tobias would be as well. That, unfortunately, was well out of William's paws.