

Interwoven

NEED: PART ONE

39th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

The tip of the sword *wooshed* past William's face. He felt the wind tickle his nose as it passed by. His eyes might have widened, but the hyena wasn't about to let anything on. He'd underestimated the stoat. It wouldn't happen again.

He straightened up, weapon in his paw as he leaned in to nudge the armoured stoat with his shoulder. As his enemy grunted and stumbled a step back, William brought his own blade around. He twisted, keeping the weapon tight and close to his body as the stoat made an off-balance, sloppy swing in turn.

It deflected harmlessly off of William's sword as he completed his spin. His momentum allowed him to slam his blade into his assailant's hard enough to wrench it out of the stoat's grasp. The hyena brought his weapon up for the killing blow. Smiled.

Nodded.

"Not bad." He allowed his training sword to drop back to his side, slapping firmly into his leg as the stoat rubbed at his wrist. "But you're still fighting like I'm just another member of the watch."

"That's all I've ever fought, though." The stoat rolled his shoulder as he brushed down his arm.

"And that's the problem." William tucked his sword under one arm and turned to the right. A short, stocky jackal stood there with his arms folded, and he nodded to William. The hyena glanced back at the stoat in turn. "You think someone not trained like a soldier is going to fight like a soldier?"

The stoat's muzzle twisted as he shook his head. "No. Of course not."

"So stop expecting *me* to fight you like a soldier." William turned his sword around and offered it to the side. The jackal accepted the hilt and rested the blade on his shoulder as William lowered back into a combat crouch. He rubbed his paws together, and brushed his fingers along the two silver rings he wore on his left paw. "Again. Hit me."

Confused, the stoat looked to the jackal for guidance. William didn't catch the jackal's shrug, but he definitely heard his chuckle. "You heard the captain. Hit him."

Again the stoat scowled, but he nevertheless raised his sword. William kept his eyes on the stoat, watching his face. His shoulders. Arms. Legs. Held his breath as his opponent's muscles grew taut. Waited for the attack.

When it came, it was a much tighter, shorter swipe from the stoat's training sword. It cut up from the ground toward William, and he smoothly sidestepped the swing. An elbow rose

to slam into the stoat's shoulder as William spun past him, and the hyena ducked low as the stoat sent a vicious swing of his weapon up toward where William's head had been. His eyes narrowed as he growled. The stoat was losing patience.

That swing could have done serious damage.

William rolled away from the stoat, just as the training sword slammed down against the cobblestone ground. He kicked out, knocking it to the side and causing the stoat to grunt as he fought to hold onto the weapon. Dimly he heard the jackal shout, "That's enough, Milos!"

Maybe the stoat didn't hear and maybe he didn't care. Regardless, he swung again at William with a snarl on his muzzle. The hyena pressed in closer to him, and his paws raised to catch the stoat's. Muscles flexed beneath fur as William stalled the weapon's descent, his arms pushing back against the stoat's. His opponent was strong. That was useful information.

And so he twisted and let go. The training sword slid past him and hit the ground hard enough to shatter, and the stoat pitched forward with the lack of resistance. His head turned toward William as he struggled to catch himself, but all he caught was William's fist as it crashed down into the side of his muzzle. Blood splattered the cobblestones. Bones broke. The stoat hit the ground with a pained whimper and lay still, save for a slow writhing.

William straightened up and rubbed at his knuckles as he sighed. He turned back to the jackal with a wince as he stepped back from the stoat. "Sorry about that."

"He can't say I didn't warn him." The jackal sighed and stepped forward. He crouched down beside the stoat and poked at his shoulder with a single finger. "And if he knows what's good for him, he'll *stay down*."

The stoat groaned.

With a shake of his head, William moved to the jackal's side. He turned along with the jackal as he faced the small crowd of city watch that had gathered to watch the fight. "So! What'd Milos do wrong?"

Several of the watch members exchanged glances, but it was a mouse girl who seemed out of place in her oversized armour that raised a paw. "He lost control."

The jackal turned to William, and the hyena nodded. "Wasn't his first mistake, but yes. He got angry. Sloppy." William flexed his fingers. "Everything you are taught, be it anything from a soldier to a member of the watch, revolves around fighting your peers. It makes sense as a soldier; we're meant to fight other soldiers. But not you. You're not fighting soldiers, and you're not fighting the watch."

"The people we fight don't fight like that. You've got to be ready for it; see what they do and know how to handle it." The jackal smirked as he looked the crowd over. "So this is what I want you all to practice. Break off into teams, four a piece. Half of your teams is gonna be bandits, and half is gonna be watch. Bandits side, you're gonna be armed. Practice knives." He smirked. "Watch side, you're gonna be unarmed."

The crowd immediately began to mutter amongst themselves, as though they couldn't believe what they'd heard. William looked at the jackal; his expression was patient, but it was

starting to slip the longer this went on. They weren't splitting. They weren't getting into their groups.

Finally, with a throaty growl that rose above the confused conversation, the jackal cleared his throat. "That was an order, you lazy shits! Get to it!"

Every one of the watch immediately snapped to attention at his shout. A chorus of, "Yes, Captain!" rang out, and the various figures started off to finally sort themselves into their groups. William watched with a little smirk behind folded arms. He'd not quite mastered that method of subordinate control. Maybe the jackal could teach him a little something as well.

The jackal turned to him and tucked William's training sword under one arm, extending the other to him. "Captain."

"Captain." William took his paw and clasped it tight. "Sorry about Milos' face. And Bren's arm. And... uh... Laren's everything."

The jackal just smirked and shrugged as he let go of William's paw. "They had it coming. Especially Milos; he can drink soup for a few weeks for all I care. You want anything added to the reprimand?"

William rolled his eyes. Tempting, but pointless. "I don't see a need."

"Then you're more gracious than I am." He turned and started back across the watch training yard. It rested on the other side of Sanwell to where William was usually stationed, and he cast his eyes around to the unfamiliar sights as they made their way back to the barracks. "You should reconsider. They expect Carisi to be mean, and we've gotta be if we wanna earn some respect here."

"I'm not really Carisi." William glanced back at the watch captain again, but he held his frown in check. The jackal's tone was jovial, but there was something else under it he couldn't quite place. "And before you ask, I just like the sword better. And it makes a nice trophy."

The jackal smirked. "I'm sure that's what you tell all the other Rathes, too. Don't have to give me any excuses." He paused as another armoured figure stepped in front of them. The horse's arms were folded and he looked at William with something that bordered on contempt. "Petras."

"Samael." The horse's eyes narrowed. "I see *he*'s still here."

"Mmhmm. Missed the part where that's my problem." The jackal's voice was smooth as silk. "What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me when we're gonna get back to actual work." His eyes rolled, but they never once left William's face. The hyena, for his part, rolled his right back. "We've got more important things to do than entertain this stupid little cross-training exercise, and the last thing we need is more... people like him."

Samael folded his arms and held his tongue. William could see that the horse bore the same insignia as Samael. This could get messy. "Say what you mean, Captain. What people like me?"

The horse drew a long, deep breath. Held it. Let it out in a slow hiss. “Carisi are a *problem*. Not a solution.”

“And I missed the part where that’s *your* problem, because the task was assigned to *me*.” Samael’s voice grew colder as he stepped forward and stared up at the larger male’s face. “Do *we* have a problem here, Petras? Or are you clearing off now?”

For a second, William wondered if it would come to blows. Such things had only grown more common amongst the Ratholarin ranks in the last couple of years. It was, for lack of a better word, worrying. It put William in an awkward position and, as much as Samael’s point of view on the matter wasn’t particularly enjoyable, William had to admit it worked. Some people just needed a mean face to snarl at them.

Petras seemed to be one such. As the jackal bared his teeth, the horse finally shook his head. “Yeah, I’m movin’. But I’ve lodged my protest all the same. I thought you deserved to know.”

“And I appreciate that. Now get out of our way.” Samael waved a paw toward Petras, and William smirked to himself as the horse begrudgingly stepped aside. Samael started off immediately, and William lingered a moment before he fell in behind.

It was impossible to miss Petras’ glare as William passed by, but he waited to comment on it until he was well and truly past. “Guess I see what you mean.”

“Don’t like it any more than you, but that’s the way of things with the Rath. Oh, here.” Samael diverted their path toward a nearby weapon rack. He plucked up the Carisi sword that was stowed there and passed it over to William, replacing the training sword where it had rested. “Don’t wanna leave this behind, right?”

“No, thanks.” The hilt of the weapon tingled in William’s paw. From the moment he’d picked it up, it had just felt right in his grip. The sigils had never lit up again after Herovir, but that sense of energy within the blade hadn’t ever really abated. “Been through a lot, this sword and I. But... what was that other captain talking about?”

“Yeah, that. Let’s talk inside about that sorta thing, huh? Away from prying ears.” The jackal nodded toward the barracks as he started forward again.

William followed, but a frown of suspicion furrowed his brow. “I thought I was just here to help demonstrate some different combat techniques. That’s what the commander said, anyway.”

Samael chuckled to himself as a couple of watch members saluted him on their way past and into the building. “And he wasn’t wrong. When I heard about your squads and the effectiveness of thinking and fighting that’s... heh, *unorthodox* for the Rath? Well, how could I refuse?”

William didn’t have an answer; he bit his tongue as he was led down a short hallway to a door right at the very end. Samael pushed it open unceremoniously and waved for William to join him inside. It was rather spare, with a cot against one wall and a tall dresser and small weapon and armour rack rested against the back. A desk covered in messy papers rested opposite the cot, facing into the room and the couple of chairs set up presumably for guests.

It was a far cry from the quarters most of the captains in the army enjoyed. Best, he thought, not to point that out. He stepped inside and, when indicated, sat himself in one of the chairs in front of the desk. “So. If I’m not just here for a demonstration, what’s the other reason?”

Samael closed the door, and the jackal held his tongue as he made his way around the desk. He dropped down heavily into it with a sigh, and folded his paws over each other on its surface. “We’ve got a problem. A Carisi problem, that might need a Carisi solution.”

William perked an eyebrow but said nothing. Samael sighed. “Alright, don’t give me that look. You know what I mean. Ever since the Herovir incident, there’s been a flood of Carisi on the southward march. Getting forced out by the Raths hasn’t improved their moods any.”

“I can’t imagine why.” William leaned back in his chair and shrugged. “I told you, I’m not really Carisi. That wasn’t just something I say in the open to keep people happy with me. It’s not like it’d work even if I tried. I was born here. Raised here.”

“Yeah, I know. I read a bit about you; it’s why I wanted *you* to come do the training today.” Samael leaned in and tapped at one of the sheets of paper on his desk. “Mother was a warbride of a kingsblade. Joined the army when you came of age. Been on a quick path up through the ranks.” He looked back up at William. “Lookin’ to make commander by thirty, are you? Or maybe you wanna follow your father’s footsteps?”

When William shrugged again, Samael continued. “Guess it doesn’t matter. Point is, you’ve got quite a history. Makes you an... interesting opportunity.” The jackal licked across his muzzle and leaned back, folding his arms. “I’ll say it plain. We’ve got a rebel problem, and it’s right here in Sanwell. They’re infiltrating whatever and wherever they can.”

That sure grabbed William’s attention. He sat up a little higher in his chair as he looked down at the desk. Was that what all was written on all that paper? “And what does that have to do with me?”

The jackal smiled. “More than you’d think. Most of what they’re doing right now, at least as much as we’ve been able to figure out, is smuggling. People, goods, weapons, both in and out. The watch can’t make sense of it, but we know enough to get the feeling that it’s gearing up for something... bigger.”

“That makes sense.” William shrugged. “Still waiting on what it has to do with me, though.”

“They’re recruiting, and not just Ratholarin sympathisers and your ordinary bandits.” Samael shook his head. “You’re a Carisi – like it or not – who’s in a prominent Ratholarin military position. Makes you an ideal mark for conversion to their cause. We want them to think they can get their hooks in.”

William blinked. They *what*? “If they need a high-profile Carisi, why not you?”

Samael laughed at that. “Yeah, sure. The watch captain with an unblemished record; they’re gonna just jump at the chance to tell me their whole plan.” He shook his head and sighed, though the smile lingered. “No. You come from the right background for them. Pressed

into service. Maligned by the royal family. Forced to become a soldier, and in a command position no less.”

The hyena swallowed as he glanced at the door. Part of him felt like bolting. How did Samael know so much about him? How long had he been watched? “I... don’t really lie a whole lot. I don’t know the first thing about... I really don’t think I’m the right person for this.”

“And that’s why you’re exactly the right person for this. Your commander agreed.” The jackal smiled even as William frowned. No wonder Geoffery was so insistent he go and help with that little training exercise. He’d have to have words with his commander later. “You’ll be officially listed as helping the watch learning our different combat techniques. Unofficially, you’ll be using your off-time to gather some information. Maybe make contact.”

The hyena’s frown deepened. Had this all been decided without him? “Do I even have a choice in the matter? Is this an order from my commander?”

At that, the jackal snorted and broke into a quiet laugh. “He couldn’t order you to do this if he wanted to. It’s not the army’s responsibility to investigate this sort of thing. Shit, it’s not even *my* responsibility to investigate. I just run the patrols.” He shrugged as he leaned back again. “But that’s why the magistrate wanted me. I’m not an investigator, so I won’t draw too much suspicion. And it’s not an army responsibility, so you shouldn’t either.”

“So I do have a choice.” William tilted his head and smirked.

Samael’s smile was broad. “Yeah, ‘course you do. I’m not gonna make you. And technically I guess since we’re same rank but you’re army and I’m just watch, you outrank me.” His smile faded as he spread his arms out; one paw dropped to the edge of his desk to squeeze it tight. “Look. These Carisi agitators? They’re waiting for something big to start enacting their plans. Probably holding off for Eric to kick it before they make a move. Whatever move they make’s probably gonna hurt a lot of people. I don’t wanna see innocent lives lost. Do you?”

The hyena sighed. Samael had a way with words. “When you put it that way, no. I don’t.” He shook his head as the jackal began to smile again. “But that’s not how I work. If it’s not an order, then it’s not just *my* decision. Got someone I need to discuss it with first before I decide.”

The smile lingered on Samael’s face, but it looked a little incredulous. “What, you want to tell someone else about this secret plan that literally only your commander, you and I know about?”

“The person I’d be telling is a person I’d trust with my life, your life, and the lives of every single person in this city.” William shook his head sharply. “He’s above reproach, and this is not negotiable. If you want me, this has to happen first.”

The jackal frowned and glanced back down at his desk. He shuffled papers about for a second before he seemed to find the one he was looking for, and remained silent as he scanned the sheet. For a moment, William wondered what exactly was on it.

He found out a moment later as the jackal tapped a part of the page. “Ah, here we go. Two people that could be. Your father, or your bonded. Which is it?”

“My husband, yes. Daniel is his name.” Again William shook his head. He rubbed the fingers bearing his rings together. “I get his say-so or I don’t do a damn thing. That’s the deal.”

“Actually, the deal was the *tidy* pile of crowns for the risk and the effort. Spreading the word of this little project wasn’t ever part of it.” The jackal sighed. He clearly didn’t look happy with William’s condition.

William, however, didn’t care. He and Daniel had a system and he was damned if he wasn’t going to stick to it. “Not negotiable, Samael. Take it or leave it.”

The jackal’s ears flattened, but they perked right back up a moment later. A quick glance back down at the sheet of paper later, and he gave a quick little nod. “Alright. Fine. Far be it from me to push away the best chance I think I’ve got.” His eyes narrowed. “But if he tells anyone, you need to know that he’d be in danger. The Carisi involved in this plot might be willing to do anything. I doubt murder’s beyond them. If you tell him, and if word gets out... I can’t exactly guarantee his safety.”

“He’s a soldier. He’s used to danger.” William stood from the desk. Samael remained seated, but he folded his arms as he looked up to hold William’s gaze. “I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll let you know my answer then.”

It looked for a moment like Samael was going to argue, but perhaps he’d already seen that it wasn’t likely he could talk the hyena down. Good; he’d learned enough about William to learn the important stuff in just a few hours. More credit to him.

“Alright.” The word was almost sighed, and Samael nodded. “Alright, fine. Tomorrow it is. Make it late in the afternoon, just before dinner. We’ll get you moving around then if you’re actually willing.” He paused and looked down at his desk again before he once more met William’s eyes. “And if you’re gonna do this, I need to know you *are* willing. If you’re not, this could be a disaster.”

William nodded, and he didn’t say anything more as he made for the door. Samael didn’t hold him up any more either, and he didn’t stop the hyena from pulling the door open and leaving the room. That was all so much the better. William wasn’t entirely sure he knew what else he could say. Or what he *should* say.

His paw drifted to the Carisi sword sheathed at his side. Fingers brushed along the hilt as he sighed. No, he told himself. He wouldn’t talk himself into or out of a decision just yet. He’d told Samael the truth; William wasn’t willing to make a decision until he’d had a chance to speak with Daniel. The hyena wasn’t going to let himself think too hard about the opportunity – if that indeed was what he should call it – until he’d had a chance to meet with the bear.

That didn’t change how reluctant he felt. Whatever Samael had in mind would take him away from the garrison. Away from Daniel. And if something happened and a deployment was required, what would happen to him? Would Geoffery pull him out? Would his clandestine snooping after Carisi smugglers be less important than joining his squad and his company?

He sighed again and forced the thoughts out of his mind. Later. He’d think about it later, when he could talk it over with Daniel. If he didn’t, he’d convince himself one way or another

before he could have his partner's opinion factor in. Daniel was the most important thing to William. Anything that affected one affected the other. Well, almost anything.

At least that was what William hoped.

#

Dinner had been prepared well before Daniel made it home from the training yard. William had been practicing some of the traditional Carisi dishes, and that he was able to acquire the right ingredients in the market did speak to the reality that Samael had told him about. There were definitely more Carisi in Sanwell than there had been before Herovir. For worse, and apparently also for the better.

When the bear had arrived at the little home they'd purchased together in the city – not too far from the garrison but not so close as to be stuck constantly by the noise – William had been struck with nervousness. It evaporated entirely when the bear had wrapped him up in one of his characteristically intense hugs. It was like there was no tension that could withstand his lover's arms.

William had warned Daniel that there was an important discussion that they needed to have, and Daniel had agreed on the proviso that it could wait until after dinner. And it had, though after dinner Daniel had a very particular idea of dessert in mind. The night was late by the time their panting, sticky bodies parted, albeit briefly. Neither was particularly interested in getting up.

And so, in the wake of good food and better pleasure, William had laid down beside Daniel and told the bear everything that Samael had said. He'd listened so intently and so silently that William had been worried every so often that he'd actually lulled Daniel to sleep. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd exhausted the bear in bed.

But when he finished, the hum of thoughtfulness that came from Daniel proved that he'd taken on the effort of staying awake to hear William out. William watched him stroke his chin as he lay on his back, eyes on the ceiling as he drank in everything the hyena had told him. Not for the first time, William wondered what was going on inside the bear's pretty head.

What he'd not expected was a sigh, and a nod, and for Daniel to turn his head toward his husband with a smile. "I reckon you absolutely gotta do it."

William tilted his head. "I... expected something different, to be honest. Why?"

"Why not?" Daniel chuckled as he rolled over further, more to face William as he nuzzled up along the hyena's cheek. "You been talkin' about how bored you're gettin' with bein' a soldier. This'd be somethin' new, wouldn't it?"

William shrugged and sighed. He wasn't wrong, but that hadn't been exactly what he'd meant either. "Yeah, but I thought I might do something *else* with my life. You know? I feel like I could do so much more, but I'm stuck just doing this thing I've always done, and it..." His leg twitched as he leaned in closer to Daniel, staring into the bear's eyes. "I've enjoyed teaching you your letters and numbers."

"Heh, and I've enjoyed learnin' them. Lot of soldiers think you're tryin' to make me sound like some noble, too." Daniel smirked.

The hyena smiled back. “You do speak a bit more... *eloquently* than you used to, it’s true.”

“Yeah, and that’s all your fault.” He leaned in to lick at William’s lips before he pressed into a gentle kiss. “So what *do* you wanna do? What’d make you happy?” He grinned and waggled his eyebrows. “Besides registerin’ not as my bonded, but my personal whore?”

“Well I can’t do that because you can’t afford me.” Daniel mock-pouted as William planted a light kiss back on his nose. “I don’t know. I wanted to be a scholar once. Maybe teaching would be something, but...” He sighed and slumped back down onto their bed. “But that doesn’t help right now. And we promised each other, didn’t we? Never one without the other.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like you haven’t been restless lately.” The happiness and playfulness on Daniel’s face began to melt away as he glanced aside, and William knew the signs well enough to know what was coming. He steeled himself for it. “I know it’s been tough since... you know...”

“Since mother died.” William felt that familiar twinge in his chest; that tightness that still hit him every time it came up. His muzzle twitched, lip trembling as he took a deep breath. “I just... don’t know if I care. I mean about being a soldier anymore, you know? It’s not like she wanted me to be one to begin with.”

“Think her issue was always you being a *Ratholarin* soldier.” Daniel shrugged.

That was fair, but still avoided the issue. William tried a little smile. “Feel like joining a pro-Caris rebel cell with me, then?”

The bear rolled his eyes, but he too began to smile once more. “Ha ha. But... that’s definitely an idea.”

William blinked. “What?”

“No, not... not becomin’ Carisi rebels.” Daniel shook his head and shrugged, pressing in tighter against William. “What if we left the army together? Did somethin’ else? I don’t know...” He frowned for a second, before he smiled brighter still. “Maybe become mercenaries?”

The hyena sat up. This was the first time Daniel had put forward that sort of idea. Was he getting tired of being a soldier too? “You’d want to do that? No more fighting for the crown, just fighting for crowns?”

He shrugged back. “I mean, I dunno, Will. Fightin’ for the crown’s always felt right. Like I’m doin’ it *for* somethin’; somethin’ that matters more than just a fistful of silver. But I’m not smart like you, you know? I don’t think I could do anythin’ other than knock heads together. Or I guess I could be the whore.”

“No one’s whoring themselves out on my watch.” Daniel pouted again, and William couldn’t help but smile. Some of that tightness in his chest began to unwind. “And you *are* smart.”

“Not like you. I couldn’t be a scholar.” He shook his head and then lay it down on his pillow. “But if we’re not leavin’ the army, then you need *somethin’* that’ll get you noticed by the Strategist and the Blade. Somethin’ that even that pissant Fredrick won’t be able to argue with.”

That was fair. Fredrick had proven to be an absolutely omnipresent inhibiting force in William’s advancement. “That I’ve made captain at all is a miracle, really.”

“Maybe those old gods *are* on your side.” Daniel chuckled to himself as William smiled. “But seriously, if we’re stayin’ in the army then... this job might be a real good one for you. Lets you capture or kill some dangerous people, stop ‘em from hurtin’ innocent folks... doesn’t sound like a bad thing to me.”

“Maybe. And maybe that mercenary idea has a bit of merit, too.” He couldn’t help but smile as Daniel pulled him close and cradled him in against the bear’s shoulder. “I dunno. Could be fun. I just can’t see you really wanting to leave Ratholarin.”

“No reason why we have to leave the kingdom completely, unless you really wanted to.” The bear nuzzled in against him, and William tilted his muzzle into the gesture. “Besides, you know what really matters to me. Don’t much care anymore about kings and princes and kingdoms and all that. I just fight ‘cause that’s what I’m best at. As a mercenary, I’d get to fight for *you*. For us.”

The rest of William’s heart relaxed, defrosting at the bear’s words. He sighed; Daniel always knew just what to say to remind him of all the reasons why he loved him. “Mmm. I like the sound of that, really. Can we do that?”

“Mmmhmm. If you want.” Daniel squeezed him tight as he sighed and lay back once more. He pulled William in closer, and William couldn’t help but close his eyes and snuggle into the bear’s larger body. “But that’s later. What about this... smuggling thing? You got an answer yet?”

He didn’t, but William was closer. That was something. “You said you liked the idea of me doing it. You thought I should.”

“Doesn’t mean you should just do what I say. You should do what you think’s right.” The bear paused for a moment; his paw even stopped rubbing at William’s back for a moment. “But if this Samael’s right, these Carisi might be dangerous.”

“Maybe.” William sighed. “I wonder sometimes if they are. If the Caris campaign had to happen. If Herovir had to happen. If this has to happen.” He opened his eyes to see Daniel staring intently at him. “What?”

“Nothing. I just sometimes forget just how different we look at this kingdom.” He nestled in to touch his forehead to William’s. “You know I trust you. Right?”

“Right.” William licked at Daniel’s chin. “And you know I’d never, ever do anything to hurt you. Right?”

“Right.” The bear smiled. “If you don’t wanna do this, don’t do this. I’ll support you. And if you do wanna do this, then do it. I’ll support you then, too. Promise.”

William smiled. The bear was too damn sweet. "I love you, you know."

He nodded back to the hyena and leaned down. Muzzles met for a long, gentle kiss. It wasn't forceful or deep or driven by lust or need, but the intensity behind it lingered all the same and set William's heart alight. When the bear finally drew back, William was panting. His sheath tingled. "Arevo ne."

"Mmm." Once again, William tucked his head under Daniel's chin and lay against his shoulder. What, he wondered, would he do without Daniel? "Then I'll talk to Samael tomorrow. Accept the job."

The bear nodded, and the motion turned into a nuzzle atop William's head. "You said you were meetin' him around sundown, right?" When William nodded back, Daniel gave him a little squeeze. "I don't have to be anywhere in the morning, you know. *We* don't have to hurry off anywhere."

"Oh?" William felt himself smile as the paw on his back began to trace slowly down his body, drifting over the base of his tail to cup and squeeze at his backside. "Not feeling particularly tired, are you?"

Daniel shook his head, and William felt him smile against one ear. "Nah. Maybe you could do somethin' about that?"

"You know," William said, smiling as he pressed in tighter against the bear's side, "I think I might." His paw slid out, stroking and rubbing over Daniel's stomach before it started to dip lower, running his fingers through that short, soft fur toward that warm, thickening sheath below. The night was just getting started, and if they didn't have anything to do come the morning it was sure to be a long one.

This new mission could take William away from his husband for goodness only knew how long. Even if it were only a matter of days, he wasn't about to take the chance. He'd have his fill of Daniel. He'd gorge himself on the bear, as much and as long as they could manage. The troubles of rebels and lies and secrets and deception could wait for morning.

The night was for them.