

Interwoven

NEED: PART THREE

40th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

William had been warned that Samael would be late, but that didn't make the hyena feel any better. He was also not happy to have been forced to leave his sword at home. The missive had come for him while he and Daniel had enjoyed a quiet morning in bed with his instructions. That the watch captain presumed William's cooperation before he'd actually agreed to the assignment also didn't help his mood.

His leathers were gone in place of a loose-fitting tunic and much less loose-fitting trousers. The hyena's belt was adorned with little more than a small dagger; the note had said that any armament beyond that might draw unwanted attention. It presumably neglected that William often walked around town with a Carisi sword on his hip, but he wasn't the one in charge. If Samael and the magistrate he reported to wanted things done a certain way, William would do things a certain way.

He *would* grumble, however.

When finally Samael arrived – around the time the grumbling in William's belly had grown to the point where one could credibly assume a dragon slumbered in the watch captain's quarters – William's patience had reached its limits. He scowled as the stocky jackal offered him a smile. "You're actually here."

"I've been here. I've been here for a few *hours* now." He allowed his eyes to narrow as the watch captain adopted a chagrined expression. "Next time, consider perhaps warning me to eat before I arrive. Or just arrange a meeting to take place *not* at mealtimes."

Samael sighed as he made his way over to his desk and unceremoniously dropped into the chair. As he did so, William noticed a splash of red by the side of the jackal's neck. "You get to spend your days training, and only really have something to do if you're helping us do *our* jobs. I don't get days where nothing's going on, Captain. There's always a crisis that needs my attention."

"So I can see." William nodded toward him and pointed at the jackal's neck. "You missed a spot."

The watch captain looked confused for a second, before he brought his paw up to swipe at his neck. His paw pads came back red, and he sighed. "Of course I did. Apologies. A standoff in the merchant quarter turned violent just when I was hoping to meet you. I have three injured watchers and a mountain of new obligations to the Merchants Guild." He slumped back in his chair. "So, again. I appreciate your patience."

William grit his teeth, but nodded anyway. As excuses went, that was a fairly good one. Not for the first time he was glad that he'd become a soldier straight out of the castle rather than a member of the watch. "If you need time, I can come back tomorrow."

“Unfortunately, time is never something I have.” Samael reached down under his desk to pull open a drawer. His paw rose a moment later, shutting the drawer again before he pressed his palm down on the desk. Something metallic clacked against the wood. “So, given that you’re here and you waited so long, I’m trusting that you’re actually taking this job?”

The hyena nodded. He worked his jaw for a moment but stared down at the desk in an attempt to hide it. The last thing he wanted was for Samael to take his general lack of interest in the assignment as disloyalty to the crown. “Yeah. And what’s that?”

The jackal lifted his paw away. What was left on the desk was a pin, round and golden with two overlaid gold circles in its centre. William frowned at it as Samael tapped it with a clawtip. “You know what this is?”

When William could only shrug, Samael started to smile. “This is the sigil of the old Caris Trade Outfit. They served as the equivalent of the Merchants Guild back in Caris before the Ratholarin invasion. As I understand, they were one of the few guilds that traded across all realms during the Age of Chaos.” He shook his head and chuckled to himself. “Can’t imagine negotiating trade between the Marovan Imperium and Lenkis, but hey, the stories say they did. Crazy, but effective.”

“And you think these traders are smuggling now?” William reached out slowly and, when Samael didn’t stop him, plucked up the pin between two fingers. He turned it this way and that with a raised eyebrow. The gold shone so bright in the light that it might have been real.

“I mean it’s possible, but that’s not what I’m looking into.” Samael leaned over the desk and held out his paw. William placed the pin back into his grasp, and the jackal shifted closer to affix the pin on William’s tunic just above his right breast. “Pins like this are how some of their leaders seem to find the ones their scouts have singled out to make contact. You walk around certain parts of the city with this, and they’ll find you.”

William’s eyes narrowed as Samael leaned back. Was he joking? “Small problem with that. One of their people *didn’t* give me the pin. Am I meant to tell these rebels and smugglers that a captain of the watch gave it to me?”

Samael smirked. “Sure, see what that gets you. You’d be lucky if they didn’t gut you where you stood.” He leaned back again after adjusting the pin to sit just right. “Way I see it, you’ve got two options. The first is that you say a fellah by the name Rion gave it to you. Picked him up and shook him down a few days ago. Was his pin, actually.” Samael gave a thin smile. “Rion won’t be around to tell ‘em he didn’t give you a thing.”

Jaw tight, William nodded slowly. “Then I’m glad there’s a second option. How am I meant to know what kind of recruitment speech I was given? How am I to know what to expect?”

“Because of what we got out of Rion before he died.” Samael shrugged as he folded his arms. “Option two means you’ve gotta be a bit more creative. You say it’s a family heirloom; something your mother or father left to you. They pick you up *thinking* you were recruited, only to realise their mistake. You express sympathy to their cause, and they take you in anyway. They thank the gods for their good fortune, and you get your in.”

“But that just relies on chance, doesn’t it?” William frowned. Suddenly, this assignment wasn’t looking very palatable at all. “What if they don’t believe me? What if they don’t see it as a great coincidence?”

Samael sighed and rolled his eyes. “That’s why you sell it. Tell stories of your Carisi family. Wear that Carisi sword you’re so fond of. Mouth off about the king; I don’t know. You’re not an idiot. Don’t pretend to me that you are.”

William sighed and reached up to rub his face with both paws. He liked the Samael yesterday better than the Samael today. He could tell the jackal’s patience was completely expended and he was exhausted by his job. A little sympathy wouldn’t go amiss. “I’d have to go home for the sword. Your note said not to bring it.”

“The note was written by an aide, not me.” The jackal growled as he glanced over at the door to his quarters. “I’ll remind him next time to use my exact words. Sorry about that.”

William frowned as he reached down to his chest to finger the pin. It was neatly secured at least, though he figured he’d take it off once he left the captain’s quarters. “Well, I’ve got to be honest. I don’t think I like either option.”

“I’ve gotta be honest: *I* don’t like the whole damn situation.” Samael hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “You know what a trade caravan from Herovir brought in today? Damn keela oil. Burns twice as hot for half the oil, and it’ll melt right through stone.” The jackal growled as he looked William square in the eye. “Crown’s got keela banned, and they *still* brought it in. If we’d not stopped the caravan and searched the damn thing, we wouldn’t have found the canister. Found it right next to copies of the scriptures of Miarvis.”

That was a name William remembered. His sword paw grew warm just at the memory of the magical flames that had coursed along and through the blade. “If they lack the goddess’ magic, maybe they’re trying to compensate with more mundane materials.”

“And maybe they’re gearing up to melt shops. Homes. *People*.” Samael lay his paws back down on his desk. “So I’m sorry. I’m real sorry, but I don’t give a damn if you don’t like the options. I don’t have any others, and these rebels are putting people’s lives in danger. I can’t let that happen, Captain. I need your help to make sure it doesn’t.”

William closed his eyes as he nodded to himself That was what it all came back down to, wasn’t it? Hurting people before they hurt other people. If the gods had really created life, why had they imbued it with such a capacity to feel and inflict suffering? “I already agreed to the task, Samael. I’m not backing out. I’m just trying to tell you that these aren’t necessarily good ideas. There’s so much risk involved.”

“We don’t have a choice in the matter.” The jackal perked an ear as he clasped his paws together. “If we aren’t bold, we won’t get our in with the rebels. If we don’t get our in, we can’t learn what they’re planning. And if we don’t learn what they’re planning, we won’t get a chance to stop them from hurting people.”

“I get it.” William sighed again. How many times was that since he’d stepped into Samael’s quarters? It’d been a few hours, so no doubt a lot. “And I appreciate your lack of choice, really. I sympathise.” He reached up to his tunic and unclasped the pin.

Samael’s eyes went wide. “You’re backing out.”

“I am not.” William stood and tucked the pin back into a pocket as he stretched his legs. “I just don’t want to get picked up with it before I have a chance to get my sword. I told you I was here to help, and I’m going to help.” He watched as Samael sagged with relief. What was the watch captain going to do if William had turned him down, he wondered?

The odds were good that he wouldn’t ever find out. Samael positively beamed as he too stood from his desk; if William didn’t know better he thought that the jackal might have hugged him. “See? You’re already thinking this through. Working the different angles. You keep thinking like that, and you’re gonna do fine.” He reached to his desk to snatch up a sheet of paper he then offered to the hyena. “Here; I heard you knew your letters. A list of locations where they’re known to make contact. Might narrow down your search.

William glanced at the sheet. A few of the names stood out, and he nodded to himself as he folded it up and slid it too into a pocket. “Narrows things down a lot, I imagine; thanks. How am I to make contact with you?”

“Ideally you don’t, but if you have to you can use your bonded. You *did* tell him all about this, didn’t you?” William glared as Samael took a step back and lifted his paws to ward the hyena off. “The rebels will watch you closely. So far, the only people who know about this plan are you and I, your commander, and your bonded.” His smile slowly returned as he lowered his paws. “You won’t want to be seen near me, but if you need to pass on a message, tell your bonded. He can pass it to your commander, who passes it to me. If I need to get a message to you, we do the same in reverse. Everyone is kept in the loop. Everyone is kept informed.”

“You didn’t even like the idea of Daniel knowing about this yesterday.” William frowned. “What changed?”

“Nothing. The more people know about this, the less likely that it’ll work. You forced my paw.” Samael shrugged as he started toward the door. William followed him with his eyes, and watched as he waited with a paw on the handle. “But as long as he knows, we can make use of him.”

A growl tickled at the back of William’s throat. “Daniel is not involved.”

“You involved him. You did that.” Samael met William’s stare with equal force. “I had other methods I would have employed, but they all carried a risk of discovery. You’ve already increased the risk to this mission, so I need to compensate somewhere.” The jackal’s smile turned cold. “If you trust him as much as you say, and if that trust is not misplaced, there should be no problem. You will not expose him to danger. Your commander will not. I will not.”

“You had best not. You will not like working with me if you do.” William lifted a paw to point a warning finger at the jackal. No matter what he’d discussed with Daniel the night before, this task seemed a worse idea than he could have possibly imagined. He doubted Daniel would have encouraged him if it would rope him into the scheme, too.

“Then I think we’re going to work just fine together.” The coldness in the watch captain’s smile faded. It seemed to become more genuine as he nodded to William and pulled the door open for him. “I don’t care if you hate me. Really. I’ll be kind if I can and cruel if I have to; whatever it takes to do my duty, and nothing less will do.”

That was admirable enough, William thought, but it didn't make up for the jackal's deception. Still, this was good information. If he found himself in a more adversarial situation with Samael in the future, it could be useful to know just how dedicated he was. After all, just because he was trying to think his way through the rebel problem didn't mean he had to exclude Samael. Rebels were one thing. Putting Daniel in danger was something else entirely.

He didn't say a word as he stepped back out into the hall. The door closed behind him again as William made his way back toward the barracks' exit. First, his sword. Second, he would swing by the training yard and let Daniel – possibly Geoffery as well, if he was feeling particularly indignant – know how Samael had changed the plan. He doubted either would be happy. Then, though?

Then it was time to begin.

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As the capital of the entire Ratholarin demesne, Sanwell contained a multitude of various taverns and inns and whatnot for residents and travellers to make use of. Thankfully, Samael's list of confirmed haunts for the smugglers were located within a short distance of one another in the merchant quarter. The first two hadn't even been open as William had made his way past them.

He knew he'd been spotted in short order, though. The pin may have done its job, but it was far more likely that William's Carisi sword was what earned the most stares. He forced himself to ignore them as he made his way down the streets. If they were sympathetic, they were either his contacts or unlikely to bar his way. If they were the traditional Ratholarin stares he enjoyed outside the training yard, he wasn't interested in them anyway. If they tried anything, they'd see that his sword wasn't just for show.

His third stop wound up being the Curse of the Night, as announced by the sign over its door. William smirked at it and shook his head as he cast a quick look around him. The night seemed relatively busy, but he'd not seen anyone else making their way inside as he drew closer. Whether that was because it had a reputation or because it was a slow night for tavern-goers he didn't know. William didn't spend a lot of time in the merchant quarter, and even less in taverns.

Pushing the door open and stepping inside showed it a little bit more lively than he'd expected. At least a dozen patrons sat and chatted away, food and drink served up at their tables and lit by gentle candlelight. A small band of minstrels played away in the corner, the music reserved but pleasant enough to William's ear, at least. A tall, elderly bat stood vigil at the bar, more elegantly dressed than many of the city's common folk with a frilly, sheer white shirt under a long-sleeved black jacket. A good first bet.

The hyena made his way over, and the bat turned toward him with a broad, friendly smile and a thick, smooth accent from somewhere much further afield than the Southern Sea. "Ah, and look at this! It's *you*, eh?"

William blinked in confusion, but the sheer size of the bat's grin was infectious. He couldn't help but smile back as he pulled up one of the small chairs at the bar and took a seat. He couldn't remember meeting a bat like him before, and definitely not with that accent. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

“We have now!” The bat’s grin, impossible as it might have seemed, widened as he reached out with a paw toward William. “New patrons are *always* welcome, eh? And you are certainly new to me. Never been in here so long as I’ve been here, no?”

“You got me. First time.” William chuckled to himself as he lay his arms atop the bar and nodded to the bat. “William.”

“William, eh?” The bat’s eyes sparkled as he bowed with an exaggerated flourish. “Yves, and the pleasure’s all mine, my friend.” His ears wiggled, and when he rose again it was with a tall glass in his paw. “What can I get for you, eh? We have fine food; finer drink!”

Whether it was all part of the sales technique or not, William couldn’t deny the bat’s presence. He laughed again as he shrugged. “Tell you what. Give me one of *your* favourites. We’ll see how we go from there.”

It was the barkeep’s turn to laugh; he tilted back, head raised to the ceiling as the raucous sound left his muzzle. One of Yves’ ears continued to swivel about, listening intently while the other stayed pointed at William. “My friend, I know we’ve just met, but I assure you with the *greatest* of respect... you cannot afford my favourite!” He reached up to brush down the frills of his shirt. “You do not often see Ghavaan wine this far south. A glass alone would cost a king’s ransom!”

Ghavaa. That explained the accent, and the form. Bats weren’t exactly common in the southern reaches of the world; this one had travelled a very long way from his homeland. “Ah, now I recognise the accent, of course. Apologies.” William smiled as the bat once more flourished and bowed. “You have spirits? Marovani, Lenkis?”

Yves curled a finger over his muzzle and stroked it slowly. “Ah, then you are a male of exceptional taste! Yes... yes! Yes, I have just the thing for you, I think.” He stepped to the side and pulled a fresh, if smaller, glass from beneath the bar. He uncorked a bottle snatched up with his other paw and twisted it about to pour it deftly from above his head. Not a drop of the dark amber spilled as he tilted the glass into the flow, swirling it about and grinning all the while at William.

When he flicked the bottle back up again, the bat set the glass down and tapped it toward William. He twirled the bottle about his paw with incredible dexterity, only to twist his body about and bring the bottle all the way around himself before setting it down on the bar as well. “Take it slow there, eh? Go a bit too quick and we’ll be carrying you out of here!”

The hyena whistled, smiling despite himself at the theatrical barkeep. This bat certainly had some skills, if nothing else. He picked up the glass, swirling it as he gave the brew an experimental sniff. The scent of alcohol was overwhelmingly strong, to the point that he almost gagged just from the drink’s fumes. Yves’ warning was a fair one. Bracing himself, William brought the glass to his muzzle. The bat watched him take a tentative sip.

The strength of the drink hadn’t been understated; if he lifted it to one of the candles nearby William had no doubt that it would catch alight. He still fought the urge to cough, though the smoky flavour of the drink lingered even after the burn when he swallowed. “Oh wow. That’s definitely... interesting.”

Yves laughed again and shook his head. “Ah, it’s not for everyone. Carisi spirits tend to favour the strong constitution. I thought you able to handle it, eh?”

Ah, so he’d served up a drink from Caris. William ran his tongue around the inside of his muzzle; in the wake of the initial shock and burn, the flavour left on his tongue wasn’t completely objectionable. “I didn’t say it was bad.”

“No, but you Carisi are such a polite people, eh? So patient!” Yves shook his head as he gestured down at the hyena’s sword. “Long way from home, no? Not as far as me, but far enough! You don’t find the Ratholarin too inhospitable, I hope.”

William shook his head and shrugged again. To buy time, he lifted the glass for another sip before he replied. The barkeep could just have adopted a friendly, chatty persona to earn himself a regular, but he’d served a Carisi drink to a Carisi guest wearing a Carisi sword and Carisi pin... and the Curse was on Samael’s list.

And so, as he swallowed again, William decided to see where this might lead. He cleared his throat and tried a little smile. “I’ll be honest, I mostly like the crowns more than I like the people.”

The sound that came from Yves might have most aptly been called a cackle. It was loud enough to briefly draw the attention of a couple of patrons as he shook his head. “Ah! Then we share this opinion in common! They can be a brutish people, yes, but their coin is good and so then am I!”

William lifted his drink again in agreement and took another sip as Yves continued. “Ah, and what a pity it is, the pain they have caused. To your people as much as any. My sympathies, my friend; deepest sympathies. Caris did not deserve its fate.”

William cleared his throat in the wake of that sip as he glanced surreptitiously around. He might have been looking for a way to get into a rebel cell full of anti-Ratholarin sympathisers, but drawing Ratholarin attention wasn’t part of his plan. Who knew if Samael would bail him out if he drew the wrong attention! “Yeah, well that sorta talk doesn’t make many friends in this city. Or too many crowns.” He shrugged and swirled the glass’ contents once more. “Besides, not much can be done now, right? It was a long time ago.”

“True, true. It’s almost been as long between now and the sacking of Herovir as between Herovir and the sacking of Taleyarya.” William started as he frowned. He wracked his brain for the dates in question, and found himself suddenly struck by the weight of so many years. Yves was right, and William felt *old*. “Good of you maybe to move on so well. Most Carisi who come here, they complain so! Oh, my ears!” Yves reached up to clutch both pronounced appendages for exaggerated emphasis.

That much William knew, not only from Samael’s reports of unrest but from his own experiences meeting with Carisi since he became a soldier. It was another reminder though that Carisi frequented the establishment. More hints, perhaps. “What can I say? Carisi have every reason to be angry with the Ratholarin. There’s not a lot of opportunities for us.”

The bat nodded in agreement, but he eyed William with a surprising intensity. “Yes, but you! So little accent, such eloquent Rathin speech. You hold yourself and speak like they do. You pass easily, no?”

It was a test of his patience if nothing else, and William sighed as he set the half-empty glass back down on the bar. “Yeah, but I was raised as a servant. Learned how to speak from the nobles and royals always parading through. Became a soldier for Caris’ conquerors because there wasn’t any other way to get by after what King Eric did to Caris.” He narrowed his eyes as his voice shifted entirely to Carisi speech, thankful once more for his mother’s lessons while she was alive. <But not all of us forget the blood that flows in our veins, or the old ways we hold to.>

That seemed to work. The bat nodded to himself, a satisfied smile on Yves’ muzzle as he listened to William’s words. “I beg forgiveness, my friend! I speak many tongues, but Carisi is not one of them. I take your meaning.” He waved a paw toward the glass. “Please. If you would promise to return again, consider your drink paid for by my rudeness.”

William glanced down at the glass again, and allowed himself a few moments to let the bat stew. He affected as close to a thoughtful expression as he could manage – in reality it came across more irritated than anything else – before he nodded and took another sip. “Free drinks? From the name of the place, I thought you’d curse me if I didn’t promise to come back.”

“No, the curses are reserved only for those who leave *without* paying!” Yves’ smile returned as his ears swivelled again. He started down the bar and tapped a cask to fill a new mug. “I joke, of course. The name comes from a time before me, if you would know! Something of a tradition in this part of town.”

“Oh?” William cocked his head as he watched the mug fill and be offered to a wolf just as he arrived at the bar. The wolf flicked a couple of coins toward Yves, who snatched them out of the air with a grateful nod. “Bit of a history?”

“As much as all Sanwell!” Yves began to chuckle, though he watched the wolf return to his table before he turned back to William. “Many owners, this place. Many, many owners. The stories go that they all die at night, in this very tavern, under mysterious circumstances.” He winked. “The last one? Throat slit right to the ears, but it happened in a fully locked tavern. Another? Heart gave out on a cold Pure Snow night but with fear-shocked white fur. Why, the one before *her* was killed when a gryphon carriage crashed through the front door and ran her down!”

William blinked. “That’s not too mysterious.”

But Yves grinned back at him, undaunted. “Ah, but the gryphon and carriage both were new in town. Not registered to anyone, and they lacked a passenger! It was as if they arrived out of nowhere simply to kill the previous owner!” He cackled again. “I cannot *wait* to see what strange end awaits me here!”

“Sounds like as good a time as any to leave.” William took another sip as Yves continued to laugh. “If you believe in that sort of thing, anyway. I wouldn’t say it too loudly for the Ratholarin to hear. They might think it some form of god-worship and flog you.”

The bat rolled his eyes. “Feh! The Ratholarin wouldn’t do that to me. No gods to worship here, no! Just stories and strange coincidence, eh, and all in good fun!” His smile faded slightly as his ears began to twitch and swivel madly. “Besides, they do not see. They’re ignorant of how things and people, unconnected by anything that can be seen or felt, are

interwoven all the same. We have a saying among my people, my new friend. *Nons sommeles des fils dens uv sapisterie*. We are all part of the same weave.”

“Nice thought. Probably a lot of Carisi would disagree, though.” William drained the last of his glass, filling his muzzle with that smoky taste before he swallowed. The burn traced its way down his throat and into his chest as he sighed. “Not many’d want to be part of any weave with the Ratholarin.”

“And that is the beauty of it, for the want does not matter to the weave. All are bound together, whether they like it or not. One thread pulls on all, yes? Yes.” Yves offered his paw, and nodded to William’s empty glass. The hyena passed it over, just as the dull ring of a bell tolled through the night. Yves’ eyes lit up as his ears stilled. “And perhaps you will see.”

“What’s to see?” William shrugged as the bell repeated its ring, and as that one faded he caught the sound of another, more distant tolling. “Probably just the announcement of some other royal wedding. Maybe Princess Irene’s finally come back to settle down.”

There was no more smile on Yves’ face though. William frowned as he looked over those unfamiliar features. Suddenly he wished he’d met more bats; Yves was almost unreadable. “What? What is it?”

As William glanced around at the other patrons, the bells continued to ring out throughout the city. Everyone else in the tavern was looking around, as confused as William was. His paw itched for the feel of his sword in it as unease began to mount, and he whirled back on the bat again. He had a faraway look in his eyes. “Yves? What is it?”

The barkeep blinked and focused in on William again. “Ah. You’re too young to have heard them before, eh? They’ve not rung in Sanwell for nearly fifty years. I was so young then, visiting for the first time. Strange, to be back now and to hear them again. The weave tugs a thread most insistently, no?”

“Fifty y... oh.” William’s ears drooped as he looked around again. The other patrons must have been listening, because they started to whisper among themselves almost immediately. “They’re not celebration bells.”

“For you, eh? Maybe they are. But for the Ratholarin...” Yves shrugged as he folded his arms. His ears began to twitch again, turning about as if he could hear the people outside reacting to the news. With those big ears, maybe he could. “They are the funerary bells. They ring but for one reason.”

William’s blood froze over. He’d known, of course. Everyone in the city had known. For the last few months, it’d been impossible not to. Crown Prince Fredrick had been omnipresent in conversation as he said or did something new, exercising the power of his position as regent. A position that, it seemed, he wouldn’t be holding for much longer. “They said it was temporary. He was only sitting the throne for a short time.”

“His regency, perhaps, was only temporary. And so it is, eh? No need for it now.” Yves shook his head. As unreadable as his smileless expression was, his tone gave away the bat’s dread. William couldn’t help but share it as he looked down the bar. He might need another drink. “It’s finally happened, eh?”

“King Eric is dead.”

