

Interwoven

NEED: PART FIVE

47th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

Catherine's funeral had been a small affair. It had to be by design. Carisi funeral rites were not Ratholarin ones and, while there was no law to ban their practice, it was frowned upon purely for the old gods invoked during it. William had felt humbled and honoured to take part in such a thing. A couple of his mother's friends had joined for her final farewell, and for the celebration of her life. Zane had even attended, though he doubted she would have wanted him there. It had been beautiful. Painful. Intimate. Warm.

A king, however, apparently warranted more.

The hyena stood apart from most of the crowd that had gathered for Eric the Fourth's funeral procession. While the vast majority of people gathered on the street to watch the gryphon-drawn carriage and glass coffin make its way down the central road that ran from the castle right through the city, William had opted for a higher vantage. Several of the inns that were dotted across the city had offered open access for the event, if only so that the balconies that overlooked the main road could allow more people to see the procession. He didn't doubt that their owners hoped that the visitors and mourners would come by their food and drink afterward. The service itself, after all, was a closed affair open only to the royal family and other high-born or high-stationed nobles.

It was, compared to what he had arranged according to his mother's wishes, a disgusting display. A marching band played music in low, mournful tones; a dirge that William had been learned was a traditional Ratholarin funeral song only used for the death of a monarch. The streets themselves had been painstakingly cleaned, and a great carpet of blue and silver all but ran the length of Sanwell to mark the processional path. He scowled as he looked down from his balcony amid a half dozen much more emotional onlookers. It was all so... *much*. Too much.

Thankfully, from his perch near the city centre, the funeral procession didn't have far to go before it was out of sight and once more out of mind. William watched as the marching band and a formation of Ratholarin soldiers preceded the mourners. He felt a twinge of regret for Daniel; his bear was down there somewhere, out by one of the lower-class districts of the city with many other soldiers to help the watch serve as protection amidst the crowds. He'd been surprised when he'd not been assigned a similar duty, but Geoffery and Samael had wanted to keep his contact with either the watch or the army minimal. After all, he'd not been approached by the rebels yet, and they didn't want to risk the chance of them being scared off.

Behind the band were a small number of attendants. From baskets on their arms they scattered shed petals to either side of the carpet and into the crowd. A cool breeze didn't leave them there, but instead kicked them up and set them fluttering about. There was some deep, cultural reason why the Ratholarin royal funerary procession had those attendants there, but

William had never cared enough to learn about them. It was just another wasteful element of a wasteful, pointless ceremony.

But behind the attendants, finally, came the procession in earnest. Chief among them was Queen Veronica, the widow completely covered from the tips of her ears to the claws of her feet in draped black fabric. The veil concealed her head, the gloves hid her paws and arms, and the dress did the rest. William wondered dimly if she could even see in that veil, but she was clearly able to see well enough to make her way down the middle of the carpet.

The carriage was next, flanked by kingsblades. Two gryphons, wings clipped and with the bright azure plumage that signified them as a Ratholarin breed cultivated carefully for the royal family, drew the redwood carriage at a slow pace. William's muzzle twisted briefly as he looked down upon the glass coffin of King Eric the Fourth. While a copy of his crown rested upon his head within the glass, the real thing instead sat on top of the coffin and almost obscured William's view of the late monarch. He was draped in finery, arms crossed over his chest to grip the hilt of a grand sword. It ran practically down the length of his body. Another waste. The king was dead and he didn't believe in the gods' power to grant him any life beyond the physical. What did he need the sword for? The clothes; the crown?

What did he need the procession for, for that matter? William almost rolled his eyes as he watched Fredrick and his wife, Magriolla, follow on after the carriage. The latter's cheeks were matted with tears, but Fredrick was the true star. His usual military uniforms and dress were nowhere to be seen. Instead he bore an elaborate and frilled tunic, a positively *immense* cape attached to broad pauldrons of gleaming silver, and a pair of eyes that were locked unerringly on the crown atop the coffin. William might have scoffed.

"Not the prince's biggest fan?"

The quiet, accented tones came from William's left. He glanced aside to spot their source in the form of a tall rat girl, probably a good decade his senior. Her dress was as casual as his, though her skirt cut off at the knees and her belt bore a long-bladed dagger that William didn't doubt she knew how to use. "Little rude, don't you think? Huffing and growling at a young male who's just lost his father?"

"If you knew him you might think otherwise." William folded his arms as he looked back down again to the street. "You don't sound like you're from around here."

"Because I am not. You don't *look* like you're from around here either." Her eyes dipped to his chest for a moment before they turned back to the crowd. "Nice pin."

William frowned as he brushed down his front. The twin-coin pin he'd been given by Samael was neatly affixed to his shirt. He couldn't even remember that he'd put it on. "Thanks. It's, uh... a memento, from my father. I mostly wear it for decoration more than anything else."

"I'm sure. Just like that sword." The hyena's paw instinctively shifted to rest on the hilt of the Carisi blade as the rat looked back down at the procession. "Leena."

"William." He nodded back to her and offered his other paw, but she didn't take it. Instead she leaned forward against the balcony railing to observe the procession, but not before turning briefly to flash him a strange little smile. "And what of you? An admirer of our fair king-to-be, are you?"

“We’re all about to be, I should think, what with his ascent. I look forward to seeing what his coronation brings.” The rat shook her head, tilting it to rest her chin in a paw. “The whole city whispers their expectations of his rule.”

The hyena’s muzzle curled in a brief-lived snarl of frustration. “Damn. I forgot that was after the funeral.” *King Fredrick*. What a horrific thought.

From the quiet chuckle, it didn’t seem Leena disagreed. “How very Ratholarin. A great, showy funeral, the king’s interment into the royal crypt behind closed doors, and a new king coronated out of the eye of his own people.”

Her words seemed to have drawn the ire of some of the others on the balcony. They shot absolutely disgusted looks her way, but Leena didn’t seem to notice or care. William might have admired her if his attention hadn’t been caught by the procession again. Fredrick and Magriolla had continued on their way, and been followed by another section of the band. William had all but put them out of his mind.

Behind them though were three more figures. The frontmost one was Brett, wearing the martial-style uniform that had become the one he was most commonly seen in. It cut his figure well, emphasizing the strength honed into the tiger’s musculature. It did nothing for the sadness in his eyes, what few times they were lifted to gaze forward toward the carriage. If William didn’t know him better, he might have felt some measure of sympathy.

But after him came two more figures. One was a female tiger he’d never met before. Unlike the others, she wasn’t dressed for the occasion. She wore ragged and battered armour over worn travel leathers. Her headfur was bound in a tight knot that kept it from her face. It let William see her steely expression completely uncovered. There wasn’t pain or loss there to be seen, but focus. Almost every free space on her belt was adorned by sheathed daggers, and the hilt of a reasonably long sword stuck out over her shoulder from the sheath on her back.

She walked alongside Tobias.

A pang of sympathetic pain stabbed William at the sight of him. One of the armoured tigress’ paws rested on his shoulder, as if to guide him onward. His eyes were down, and his tail dragged along behind him. He looked utterly, utterly miserable, and it stood as stark a contrast to the tigress’ resolved stare as his pristine white robes did to her ragged armour. William knew that Tobias had resented his father for his domineering ways and preference for the elder princes when he was a cub. Had they reconciled in recent years? It hardly seemed likely, but Tobias nonetheless looked devastated.

Beside him, Leena whistled to herself. “They got the whole family together. Colour me impressed.”

At those words, William fixed his gaze on the tigress once again. Recognition struck him. “Of course. That’s... it has to be Princess Irene. Wow, she actually came.”

“I last heard she’d travelled to Lenkis. Visiting some of the old temples.” Leena shook her head as she chuckled again. “How she made it back for the funeral and coronation I can’t even begin to imagine.”

“Maybe she was already on the way back when she heard the news.” The words sounded as absentminded as they were. William’s attention was on Tobias as the prince

continued to make his way onward. He'd not been ready for how affecting it had been to see the tiger so devastated. At least his sister was there. That he'd never run into her in the castle was a miracle, but she seemed to have grown well and, most importantly, *unlike* Fredrick and Brett. If nothing else, from the damage her armour had taken, she'd been in some scrapes. More than he could say for the princes.

Leena nodded as she turned her back on the procession. "Well, I've done my duty as a citizen. I came. I saw. I'm out of here."

"Procession's not done, lass." The gruff voice of one of the other balcony-goers was only barely raised to the point where it reached them over the marching band. Both Leena and William turned to the side to see an old fox, one shaky paw on a cane as he glared at the rat. "That's not the way we do things here. You show respect."

She snorted in response. "King Eric oversaw some of the most bloody and violent expansion of this kingdom since the Rathin line was established. Where was *his* sense of respect then, hmm?"

William winced as he glanced over, about to warn her to perhaps not be so provocative. But then he saw it at last; something that had been just turned slightly too far away from him that whole time for him to notice. A small, golden pin. Two coins crossed in the middle of it. Identical to his own.

Leena was a rebel.

She caught his stare and smiled wider, but William's mind clicked over to focus immediately. He couldn't afford to be caught out. "Hey, you've got the same sort of pin."

"They do look quite fetching, don't they?" She glanced past him to the fox. "You really want me to stick around, old-timer? Let you know what I think about the brat who's about to become your king?"

The fox's eyes blazed with rage, but William quickly interposed himself between them. If a fight broke out it'd draw insane amounts of attention. Moreso, it would probably ruin his attempt to get in good with the rebels. "Now that's enough of that. No need for a scene." He turned toward the fox and nodded. "We don't want her here, fouling up the funeral. I'll take her elsewhere."

Leena lifted an eyebrow and chattered something under her breath, but his words seemed to please the fox. He nodded and flashed a near-toothless smile. "Give her a good one for me, lad."

The jibe drew a groan from Leena even as William pushed gently but firmly at her back. She flicked up both paws in a dismissive manner as she rolled her eyes, but she didn't fight back as William ushered her off the balcony and through the inn room beyond. Indeed, she simply walked along with him in silence along the inn's hall, down the stairs, past the tavern beneath, and out into the street.

Once there, the rat smiled back at William and turned to walk away. He frowned at her and started to follow, only for her to duck down a side alley. The hyena's eyes went wide, and he jogged forward to catch up to her. When he skidded to a halt in front of the alley, she was

already partway down it. Leena walked backward, arms folded before her. “Are you following me?”

“Uh... yeah?” William frowned as he started after her. “Are you trying to get yourself killed? You don’t think the one day Ratholarin might not be willing to let you mouth off about the royal family is the day they celebrate one’s death?”

“Pretty sure they celebrate the life.” She smirked as William rolled his eyes. “And I thought you’d be celebrating his death. You’re Carisi, after all.” She nodded to his sword. “You get that from your father too?”

“Prised it from a cold, dead paw, actually.” William narrowed his eyes again as the rat laughed to herself. “Alright then, Leena. Nice meeting you. Now maybe you should go somewhere else, where you’re not gonna rile up a bunch of Ratholarin citizens to ring in Fredrick’s reign with a hanging.”

“Yeah. Maybe. And maybe you should come with me.” She smirked as she eyed his pin. “You don’t see too many of those anymore, William. If your father gave it to you, then maybe you’ve got more in common with me than those Ratholarin.”

And there it was. An open invitation, but that didn’t mean he should take it. If the pin was just an heirloom then he didn’t know about the rebels, right? He frowned as he glanced back over his shoulder. Ignorant but anti-Ratholarin. That was how he needed to seem. “Look, miss. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just... didn’t want to see you gutted by a bunch of Ratholarin pissants because you picked the wrong day to insult them all.”

The rat just continued to smile as William spoke. She shook her head and giggled quietly as he folded his arms. “And you still say *them* and don’t seem to have any interest in helping them hang me. You’re an interesting one, *William*.”

She started to make her way back toward him, and the hyena took a half step back to brace himself. A paw drifted closer to his sword as his eyes fixed on the rat’s dagger. She didn’t draw it though, and instead leaned in close to him. “I’ll tell you what. If you’re happy leaving things here, then be my guest. Let the Ratholarin bandy you about like a toy or a tool, if you’re lucky. But if not...?”

Her eyes glittered as her voice dropped. “If not, come by the Curse of the Night. I know you know where it is.” She winked and stepped back from him again. “I’ll be waiting.”

With that, William watched as the rat girl turned and started back down the alleyway again. Her tail swished with every step, writhing like a snake until she, and it, disappeared down another street. The hyena was left alone in the alley. Maybe he’d made a mistake; maybe he should have listened to Samael and kept the pin off until after Fredrick took his throne.

He reached down to adjust it, but his fingers brushed only fabric. A glance down confirmed it: the pin was *gone*. William blinked, jaw dropped as he looked around himself. It couldn’t have just unclasped. It couldn’t have fallen off! It...

He froze, and then brought a paw up to his face. Leena. She’d stolen it right off him.

“That damned thief!” The words left his muzzle before his mind caught up to the situation. If she *had* taken the pin, so much the better. He knew where she’d be. No doubt she’d

taken it deliberately, in order to provoke his visit. Clearly she'd trusted him to put it together, instead of simply assuming that he'd lost it... assuming of course that he *hadn't* just lost it on the way out of the inn and she *had* wanted him to put it together.

"Damn it all." William sighed and shook his head. In any event, he only had the one course of action available to him. He doubted Samael had another one of those pins. He'd have to go after it. There was no choice.

Yet he hesitated for a moment as he looked back again. The other end of the alley was full of people, backs to him as they jostled to watch the procession make its way by. Perhaps it hadn't so much been the funeral that had left Tobias upset. Maybe it'd been the coronation that would follow. The thought of Fredrick finally sitting the throne for real twisted a knife in William's guts as he snorted to himself. If anything would make him want to turn into a rebel himself, that's about the sort of thing that would do it. And hey, maybe he could use that sentiment with Leena.

Finally, he turned away and started off after the rat. Tobias had his sister. He wasn't alone, and William didn't even know what drove the concern he felt for the prince. He closed his eyes. Tobias would be fine. The tiger was always fine, and he certainly didn't deserve pity.

That didn't ease the sympathy in him any, but William could at least pretend it did. He'd worry about it later. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

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He didn't go straight to the tavern. The procession would take much of the day after all, with most all of Sanwell united in their paying respects for their fallen monarch. Instead, William wandered about for a little while. Leena would have time to prepare whatever she intended to show him, and he could feign ignorance when he got there.

His mind had run somewhat wild in the interim as William tried to figure out exactly what it was he should or should not say. He'd been honest, ironically enough, with Samael when he'd said he wasn't good at lying. The only person he'd consistently lied to throughout the years was his mother, when he'd been sneaking off in the castle to spend time with Tobias. Even then he suspected that she knew, but just didn't want to fight about. How he was meant to deceive a den of smugglers and insurgents he just didn't know.

William still didn't have an answer by the time he strolled up on the Curse. He frowned at the sign on the door that said that the venue was closed. A glance up and down the street showed a little bit of movement there; the merchant quarter didn't truly sleep, and he didn't expect that they'd all abandon their business or wares for the funeral procession. William figured that it'd be a thief's field day if they had done so.

But he couldn't leave without the pin, and so he knocked. The hyena frowned as he heard footsteps approaching him, and he took a deep breath to try and steady himself. It didn't work.

The figure that opened the door was the bat, Yves. He looked irritated until he recognised William and then produce a broad grin. "Ah, it's you! I knew you'd be back, eh? Couldn't pick a time when we're open, though?"

“Sorry about that... Yves, right?” He tried a little smile as the bat grinned and nodded to him. “I was asked to come here, by a rat... Leena? I think she has something of mine.”

His eyes lit up at the mention of the rat name, and by the time William had finished speaking the barkeep was already nodding along. “Yes, she’s a slippery little one, no? Come in, come in. I’ll see if I can’t find her for you.” He stepped back from the door and waved William in.

The tavern looked different in the light of day. Certainly it was early and everyone who was anyone was out at the funeral procession, but the quietness that filled the open space was alienating. Discomforting. This was a place meant for revels, but to see it empty disturbed William on some level he couldn’t quite place.

There was no sign of Leena as Yves locked the door again behind him. He swept deftly around William and started to look around the room, under tables and chairs and such. William frowned. If the rat had wanted him to meet her there, where was she? Why wasn’t she there? “What are you looking for?”

“I look for the rat, of course.” Yves grunted as he bent over to check under another table. “Little sneakthief. A terror, she is! Did she take a coinpurse? A blade? Oh!” He turned and groaned as he straightened up to point at William. “You’re not wearing it! That nice little Carisi pin when we met. Oh, you shouldn’t wear gold out like that, William. Tsk tsk.”

“Not unless you’re looking to draw an eye.” William whirled at the voice behind him. His paw went to his sword and pulled it free as his eyes locked on Leena. The rat leaned against the tavern door, one arm across her middle and the other with William’s pin twisting between her fingers. “You’re here sooner than I expected.”

“That’s because you took something that’s mine.” William flexed his fingers around the hilt of his sword. “I’d like that back, please.”

Leena rolled her eyes again. “Yes, that *priceless* family heirloom of yours. I just wanted a closer look at it to make sure it was for real. Like you.” She rubbed a thumb across the pin’s coins before she flicked it up and through the air. William hesitated before he reached out one paw from his sword to catch it, and winced as he pricked himself on the pin’s point in the process. “And wouldn’t you know it, it’s real.”

William narrowed his eyes, but Yves grunted behind him. “Ah, leave him be, Leena. He’s got nothing for you. Going around, filching gold... you need to get a better hobby, eh?”

“Maybe. We’ll see.” As William tucked the pin into his belt, Leena frowned at him. “You know, it’s the strangest thing. You said it was your father’s, but it looks to *me* like it belonged to a friend of mine. A friend who was caught up in a watch raid a few weeks past.” She lifted her head. “What say you to that?”

The hyena stared her down even as he took a slow breath. His sword didn’t waver, and he tried to focus on keeping himself ready to move and fight. William steadied his breaths as Leena ran a fingertip along the woodgrain of the door. “I say that maybe you’re wrong.”

“Mmm. Maybe I am.” She reached down to her belt to pull the blade there free. It was much shorter than a sword but longer than many daggers William had seen. Its blade even curved slightly; where was it from? “But maybe you’re a traitor sent by the watch to find me.”

She rolled her eyes as William recoiled. “Gods, you’re easy. Look at that; just gave yourself away completely. Sad.” With a shake of her head, the rat flipped the blade into a reverse grip. “We’re gonna need to work on that. Don’t worry. You can put the sword down.”

“While you’re armed and a hair from threatening me?” William squeezed his own hilt tighter as he settled into a more defensive stance. “I don’t think so.”

She smirked. “It was more helpful advice than an order, wasn’t it Yves?”

Before William could move, another blade shot across his shoulder and entered his view from behind. This was a full-length sword, but its blade curved the same way as the rat’s. It came to rest on William’s shoulder and a quiet chuckle from the bat behind him betrayed the owner clearly. “Not to worry, friend! No blood needs to spill here, eh? Such a pain in the tail to clean up, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Unless you try to take us in, of course.” Leena took a couple steps forward as William’s eyes darted between her and the blade resting on his shoulder. All it would take is a flick from Yves and the bat could cut deep into his neck. He doubted he could move fast enough to avoid that, even if he took Leena out of the situation entirely. “Trust me, William. Your father wouldn’t like it if you died this way.”

The hyena bared his teeth. “My father would trust me to make it out of this situation alive.”

The rat sighed, but Yves hissed something in his native language under his breath as the blade edged closed to his neck. “I mean your blood-father, not the kingsblade who stole you and your mother from your home. Many of us knew your namesake, William.”

A growl rumbled in William’s throat as he lifted his head higher. It flew in the face of his instincts to expose his throat more fully for Yves’ blade, but the defiance came automatically. “You’re a bit young to have known my blood-father.”

<I’m older than I look, but you are not far wrong. I knew him more by reputation.> The Carisi words took a second to reach William’s ears; Leena’s accent jumped the unfamiliar sounds somewhat. <Yves knew him much better, and much more personally. And we can explain that – and much more – if you put the sword down.>

In response, William snapped his jaws at her. His heart began to pound as his mind turned over the problem. There had to be something he could do. Something to remove the bat’s blade from his neck and put him in a safer situation. Maybe talking long enough would buy him time to see them make a mistake. <Prove it and we will see.>

The rat smiled, but Yves was the one who replied. “Your father was born in Isgraal. It was a sizable town near the Sylarian border, razed by the Sylarians only a few years after he was born.” The blade on William’s shoulder twitched again. “He met your mother, Catherine, in Riatur as he travelled through.” The bat snorted. “Did she tell you he was a sellsword when they met?”

William could only frown and listen in, even as he kept his eyes on Leena. Nearly everything Yves had said matched what his mother had told him. A sellsword, though? “She told me he was a commander in the Carisi army.”

“That came much later. I was the one to recruit him to our band.” There was a note of pride in Yves’ voice. “Just in case you thought my weapon was for show. I’ve been a mercenary much longer than I’ve been a barkeep, eh? I’ve been fighting and killing since before you were born. Don’t push your luck, now.”

“He won’t.” Leena’s voice came with a note of confidence as William glared at her. “He’s curious too.”

He hated to admit it, but she was right. This was all new information to William, and he needed to make sure it was right. And if he could get Yves off-balance emotionally, maybe he’d get his moment to break free. “So how’d he become a commander for Caris, then?”

“Blame your mother. He met her and everything changed.” He heard Yves *tsk* quietly behind him as he frowned. “Left the band. I was happy for him, of course. Missed him terribly; he was a good friend, eh?” There was a sigh at his back. “The Carisi recognised his skill. He was a great commander of warriors... until that kingsblade put a sword in his stomach.”

Despite himself, William felt his muzzle curl into a snarl. “As father tells it, he-”

“That wolf is *not* your father!” Yves’ voice was full of sudden rage and bile, and the edge of his sword slid in to graze against William’s bare neck. The hyena leaned his head away from it as his eyes darted from Leena to the blade. “That kingsblade who took you in? Who stole you from your home? Whatever you think of him, he is a *monster*. A monster in service of monsters.” There was a spitting sound, and a wet slap on the tavern floor. “And your mother? A *warbride*. What a disgusting... *Ratholarin* term. She was a fine, brilliant female! A person whole and true, reduced to a slave!”

A shiver ran through William, but he bit it back for the moment. “Then as *Zane* tells it, my blood-father attacked him.”

“Trying to protect your mother. Truly the work of a force of great evil. Bah!” He tapped the blade against William’s shoulder twice. “It broke my heart when word reached me of your father’s death, and then it broke again to learn of you! A slave, just like your mother. You deserved so much better. So much more than this, eh?”

The hyena ground his teeth together. He’d wrestled with the same thoughts for much of his life. Yves, however, wasn’t letting up. The blade wasn’t faltering and, despite how emotional he had become, he wasn’t making mistakes. Instead, William turned back to Leena. “What do you want from me? Exactly.”

She smiled back at him, though her eyes did flick briefly to what he presumed was Yves behind him. “Everything you were already going to do, except for the part where you turn us in.”

William’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You can’t be serious.” And yet, the idea had merit. If he could string them along for a while...

“I can be very, very serious, but Yves actually plays that role much better than I.” The rat tapped her own blade against her arm as she shrugged. “We have much information you lack. That you’ve *always* lacked, and the willingness to share it with you. So... I think you’ll play a game with us. Feed enough information back to the watch to keep you in place, but not so much that you’ll get us all caught.”

The hyena frowned and shook his head. The way she so casually put the idea out there, even as he'd begun to formulate just such a balance in his own mind? Irritating was certainly a word for it. "How do you know I'll not just identify you right now? Leave here and go straight to the watch?"

"Because you don't have enough yet on us. Because you only have my name, and you don't even know if it's my real one. Because all you have is a barkeep who can protest, and plenty of people to back his story" She nodded past him, and the blade at William's neck lifted smoothly up and away. "But mostly, because you *do* want to know. And because for as long as you've been content to fight for the Ratholarin cause, you've never had a choice. I know you hate them for what they did to you. To your mother. Your blood-father."

Again, William growled. He glanced over his shoulder at Yves to see an impressively long sword in the bat's paw. It did indeed look like a much longer version than the dagger Leena carried, slender and elegant. It was a surprise to see Yves so far back from him. "And then what? I learn all I can about him while you let me have only little pieces of information? Crumb after crumb so I come back for more?"

Yves shook his head. "The hope is for you to join us. Fight, like your father once did."

"Yeah, because that worked out so well for him." Yves' ears swivelled to point right at William as the bat flashed his fangs. "The Ratholarin won. They took Caris and Yaroven, and helped the Marovanni and Sylarians take Lenkis. They hurt people, but what's done is done and can't be changed." He turned back to Leena and shook his head. "And if you're looking to hurt people, you're my enemy. Doesn't matter where you're from."

She tapped her chin with her dagger point for a few moments before she started to make her way toward him. William held his sword steady, but it dipped slightly as she sheathed her blade back at her side. "Did you feel an overabundance of kindness bubbling out from King Eric? Do you foresee a flood of goodness as Fredrick takes the throne? Her stare turned cold as William's muzzle twisted. "You've fought for Ratholarin. Did those towns seeking to live their lives deserve what was visited upon them? Did the warrior whose cold, dead paw you took that sword from deserve to die?"

William grit his teeth. "The warrior I took this sword from cackled as he set one of my squadmates – a person in *my* care – alight. He took *glee* from murdering my fellows and would have been glad to do the same to me." He shook his head as he turned halfway to the side, so that he could clearly look between both Yves and Leena.

Leena nodded back. "And where was this? Was it within Ratholarin territory? Or was it within Caris?"

"Caris *is* Ratholarin territory now." For all of his protests, there was a root truth at the bottom of what she and Yves were saying that William had to admit. "And yes. My charge would be alive right now if we hadn't marched to Herovir. But similarly, if a shaman hadn't been preparing to march south and wage war with magic..."

"And if Ratholarin hadn't first invaded and gutted Caris, like it had done with Yaroven, such an engagement wouldn't have been necessary, eh?" Yves' eyes were narrow slits. "If you want guilt, look at the first blood spilled."

“Don’t you try to tell me one side is more just than the other. Don’t you *dare*.” William snapped his jaws at the bat, who hissed back at him. “You decide that violence is the only way, then you decide that you’re alright with innocent people dying. What’s the number? How many’s comfortable for you to reach whatever your goals are?”

The bat hissed at him again. “And how many times have *you* chosen violence, cub?”

William caught the lift of Leena’s eyebrow as the hyena stared Yves down. “Never.”

He scoffed back at William. “Never.”

“That’s right. Never.” William sheathed his sword and turned fully to face the bat. Yves lifted his sword slightly, but he didn’t move to impale the hyena on it as William stepped in closer to him. His sword was too bulky. If things came to blows, he needed to be in close. Tight. “Whenever I’ve fought, it was because I was attacked. And never *once*, not even as a soldier of Ratholarin, have I compromised that.”

“Then you stand as the exception more than the rule, William. And you are all the more exceptional for it.” Leena closed in again, this time to slowly, warily, place a paw on his shoulder. “And this is why we know you will see it our way. Your fellows are not so restrained, are they? We have watched you long enough to know this.”

The hyena’s brow furrowed. If they’d been watching him for so long and knew so much about him, then they had to know about Samael. The watch captain was in danger. “Some are a bit more... *proactive* than I am.”

She just shook her head. “You don’t fight for the crown, William. You never have, have you? It’s always just been for the coin in your pocket.” An eyebrow perked up again. “What if we can offer you more than that?”

“He’s not the one we need.” Yves shook his head as he stepped away again. His own sword was swiftly sheathed, and the bat looked more sad than angry. “Look what they’ve done to him. They took his father, they took his mother, they took his heritage and they took his future. There’s nothing left.”

“I’m not so sure.” Leena stepped around William to stand before him. Her paw slid off his shoulder. “What do you value most, William? What is the most important thing in your world?” When he held his tongue, the rat began to smile. “You need not answer. His name is Daniel, is it not?”

“If he comes to harm, I swear by all the gods that I will visit a fury upon you that you have never experienced before.” William bared his teeth, but Leena didn’t seem to be bothered by the threat or display in the least.

If anything, she seemed *pleased*. “Good. Very good. Your father’s fire lives in your blood after all.” She stepped back from William and touched a paw to her chest. “I am a devotee of Agaraphos, the divine expression of love, family, and home... or at least I’m as close as they come these days. To threaten him would be to betray the god to whom I am devoted.”

Still the hyena remained silent. It wasn’t as though he’d memorised the names of the old gods, anyway. “Do you not want something more from life? Something absent the death and the blood and the war? What about a chance to simply be with him?” Her smile faded as

her paw fell away. “And do you believe that King Fredrick will give you a place where you can do that? Or do you think that he will only bring more death for you to deal out?”

“And what do you want me to do? Fight for you? Deal out death for *your* cause instead?” William sighed. “What makes you any different? What makes you better than Fredrick?”

Her eyes flashed for a moment, but the anger that burned there didn’t last long. “I can prove to you nothing. Not right now. But, perhaps, if given enough time such evidence will produce itself.” She waved a paw toward the door. “You may go.”

William blinked with surprise. Even Yves gasped. “Excuse me? I can... go?”

“You may. Yes.” The rat took another step back and folded her arms across her chest. “The coronation will be later today. All of the watch are tied up in the procession, and then keeping the peace for what will surely come next. There is no one to run off and betray us to just yet.”

“There’s always tomorrow, no?” Yves grumble betrayed his displeasure.

But still, Leena seemed untroubled. “I don’t think he will. Will you?” She began to smile again. “You can still learn from us. And even if you turned the two of us in, we are but two. His efforts would be wasted if he truly intends to root us all out. And in the meantime... well, let’s just see what our dear King Fredrick has to say on the matter. Yes?”

William wasn’t certain he liked his situation all that much. She was right that most of the watch was busy, and that turning them in wouldn’t be likely to stop the greater whole of the rebels from operating. If they were the ones in charge, however, it could set back their efforts considerably. It could be worthwhile.

On the other paw... she was right. Fredrick was a known quantity. That he was ascending to the throne and what all that could mean for William? It didn’t even bear thinking about. The prince’s pettiness had been legendary, and the lengths he’d gone to in order to humiliate William or make his life harder were just the barest tip of a very long spear. With the crown’s full authority behind Fredrick, William would be better suited to keeping a very, very low profile.

Or opposition.

“No.” He sighed as he glanced at Yves. The bat still stared warily at him, ears twitching every which way. “I’ll not turn you in just yet. But not because of the reasons you’ve given. Because of *you*.”

The bat recoiled a little and pointed at himself. “Because of me?”

“Because of you. Experienced fighter. Former sellsword. Someone who knows about me, and about Daniel.” He growled under his breath as he backed toward the door. “Leena might see it a betrayal of her god to go after him. Doubt you’d have a problem with it though, right Yves?”

A toothy smile came as the bat's answer, and William nodded. So that was that. Bite his tongue. Bide his time. Chart a course, if could, that would lead him out of the situation he found himself in. "I guess you find that agreeable, then?"

"We do." Leena sat down in one of the tavern chairs, but she still watched the hyena closely. He supposed he couldn't blame her. "We're not your enemy, William. No matter what you might think, we are not. I look forward to proving that."

"Yeah, I guess I do too." He paused as he reached the door again, paw lingering on the handle. "I suppose you know where to find me?"

"And you know now where to find us." Leena nodded to him, and Yves started over with a key in his grip. "Give it some time. Perhaps the events to come will give you the clarity of purpose you need."

William flicked his gaze to Yves, but the bat's expression had turned utterly impassive. The anger and the indignation and the hurt that had been there was gone. In its place was a completely controlled... *nothing*. It was disconcerting.

It was also clearly a dismissal. William pulled the door open, and was gratified to see no sword-wielding rebel outside waiting to cut him down. He paused for a moment and turned back to Leena. She was so confident. So sure. "Why are you doing this? Are you really so sure I will not simply turn on you?"

"I am not." Yves' words were flat, and it was clear the bat wasn't happy with what Leena had decided.

The rat just continued to smile softly back at him. "I am. Just give it some thought; that is all I ask. When you come back, see if you can tell me why I would do this." She turned away from him and nodded, and Yves stepped into the doorway. William had to jump back and out onto the street again as the bat slammed the door in his face. A lock clicked into place.

Much as he was curious to see if he could overhear any conversation between the two after such a contentious meeting, William didn't see any real point in trying. The bat's sensitive ears would detect him there without a doubt, and he wasn't sure there was anything more to learn from the situation anyway. Not without more time with them. More information divulged. A better grasp of where, and what, they sought to do.

The hyena's paw wrapped around the hilt of his sword as he made his way back toward home. Leena had been right that there was no point turning them in right away. Even if he was still willing to do that, he needed more than an old barkeep and a well-spoken rebel.

Even if he was willing. He'd never made a secret of his contempt for the Ratholarin crown. Or the brutish ways of the people. He knew enough to know that his mother's stories of Caris were coloured by her wish to preserve her home and view it in the fairest light. There was truth to them, but distorted. Caris was not innocent. Nor was Ratholarin.

But Caris had never made him an outsider. Caris had never condemned him. Caris had never had a prince use him and toss him aside because of the cruelty of other royalty. Caris hadn't marched to war to wipe out his family. William sighed. Would Caris begrudge him Daniel? His bear, his love, the Ratholarin soldier? Fredrick's feelings on William were well

known. The rebels' were not. Rock. Hard place. One thing alone was clear, as much as he hated it. If he was going to think that way... to even *consider* the rebels' point of view?

Daniel couldn't know.

The thought turned William's stomach, but it was the truth. Daniel had always been a good soldier. He enjoyed his job. It gave him purpose and satisfaction, and it was something that they could do together. For William to turn his back on it, and worse to actively undermine it-

That was it. That was the moment, for William, when he forced the idea back out of his head again. He couldn't consider it. He couldn't let the rebels get into his head like that. Yves was rough and cooler than his friendly disposition implied, but Leena's words were like honey. Sticky and sweet and seductive. She knew just what to say. Just when to say it.

William's back straightened as he kept walking. Daniel was the key point. He would not – *could* not – betray the bear. Not if he ever had a single ounce of choice in the matter. He didn't need gods, he didn't need rebels, he didn't need princes or kings. He needed Daniel. The bear was everything to him, and he liked to think he was everything to Daniel too. That was too special. It was far too important to give up. Not for anything.

His mind was made up, but that didn't stop those creeping thoughts from worming into him. Daniel would come home after the funeral procession. They'd be together. William would be reminded of what was so important, and he would not succumb. He told himself, over and over again.

But doubt began to fester somewhere deep in William's heart, and in it he felt something almost akin to fear.