

Interwoven

NEED: PART NINE

53rd Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

The letter had changed everything. It had been congratulatory; glowing even, when it was delivered the morning after their fight and reconciliation. It had spoken of exemplary service. It had spoken of adherence to duty. It had spoken of the dedication required of the soldiers of Ratholarin for the years to come, and it had spoken of the will of King Fredrick the Second in singling out such a promising warrior. The words were big and complex and Daniel didn't know them.

William had had to read to his love the bear's recruitment to the Guardians of Ratholarin.

The mood in their home turned cold overnight. Dread suffused a place that had once been full of warmth and light. All that they had shared in their duties was shattered as, by royal decree – and, as the missive had noted, by royal *order* – Daniel was snatched from the army. From William. Daniel had cried. William had thrown up, and then cried. They'd held each other. Promised each other that it would all be okay. Neither had believed it.

The hyena had wondered at first if it was Fredrick once more playing with him. It wouldn't have been unlike him, but Daniel had suggested that the king could just come by and stab him in the throat. It wasn't until William pointed out that this could hurt him so much more – and that he couldn't hurt if he was dead – that the bear had fallen silent.

Waking up in their shakily-repaired bed, surrounded by the bear's scent and all the familiarity that came with it, had been hard in his absence. It had only grown harder with each day that passed with no word of where Daniel was. What he was doing. If he was alright. After four days, their bedroom smelled less like their shared scents. William's had begun to dominate; Daniel's weakened considerably. He hated it.

He'd torn the letter up after the second lonely night, set it on fire, and tossed the ashes out of the window. It hadn't helped. Neither had roaming the city late at night, trying to organise his thoughts. The thief that had attempt to nab the hyena's coinpurse had been beaten to a bloody pulp and, on some level, that *had* helped. That it had only sickened William all over again, and he'd resolved to drag the thief to the nearest watch station himself in response.

Then though, as he walked through the streets and noticed the occasional patrolling figures of the fully-plated and silvered armour of the guardians, the anger he felt only continued to bubble up. They marched about until they saw someone who they thought looked like they might not be true Ratholarin. Barely questioned them before they dragged them away. More terrifying than the brutality was the speed with which it had become the norm. It hadn't been a week since the order had been created.

The sword on his hip wasn't even his Carisi blade. That he kept at home, in an alcove he'd carved out of the wall and covered with a dresser. The pin as well was left there; despite his investigation it was too dangerous to be caught in the open wearing it anymore. The irony that the organisation tasked with destroying all foreign influence would be, by its existence *impeding* that investigation, did give the hyena some small measure of dark joy.

That was part of it. The reality was funnier by far.

The Curse of the Night was a familiar enough place to William by then that he didn't even bother knocking on the door before he stepped inside. A pair of wolves, both wearing those small gold pins, looked up in surprise from their table as he entered. A slightly older lion reached out to pat both of their paws, pulling their attention back to him. William didn't hear what was said, but it was probably designed to set the lupines at ease.

His focus was on Yves as he stood tall behind the bar, polishing his glasses. One of the bat's ears had turned to him as he entered, but he didn't look up from his work. "William."

"Yves." The hyena sat himself on one of the bat's stools and turned to face him. "Where is she?"

"Off taking care of more important matters. More is going on than relates to you, no?" The bat finally lifted his head, though barely enough to look William in the eye. "Not that I'm sure what we're doing relates to you anymore, eh? Already cast your lot."

"My *lot* isn't cast in with anyone." He narrowed his eyes as Yves' ears twitched. The bat had become much more irritable with him since his refusal to offer a full-throated endorsement their little rebel plot. William couldn't blame him. The hyena represented a potential threat, given what he knew. "I need to speak to her. It's about... everything."

Yves rolled his eyes. "She is busy. We all are busy, you know. Now if you don't mind, *peche de patit romveux essuyeux*, I have matters to prepare for."

William grit his teeth. He didn't have time for this. "I'm joining you."

"This I doubt." The bat didn't even look up. "We told you what was coming and you resisted it. Questioned us and disparaged us and dishonoured your father in the process. Or have they come for you now, and you think it time to defend yourself with our help?" He smirked as he set his glass down.

"They didn't take me. They took my husband." He let his eyes narrow as the mockery went out of Yves' face. It turned serious in a heartbeat as William shook his head. "He is not exiled. He's been taken as one of the king's new guardians. Without choice."

Yves held William's stare for a moment before he sighed and looked down. "I am sorry to hear it, boy. Truly. Be grateful that he yet lives, eh? If he is as upset as you, then his morals will not get him far."

Both of the hyena's paws lifted slowly to rest on the bar. His claws scratched against the wood as he began to growl. "I will not be *grateful* that he is forced into a duty he did not choose for a monster who would destroy the lives of good, innocent people. Everything I have done has been in the name of protection. Everything he has, too."

“Ah, but protection isn’t the purpose of a soldier, William. War is, and war is indiscriminate in its carnage.” He reached down under the bar and withdrew a long, slender sabre. Its hilt was basketed and bejewelled with a selection of small rubies, and it glinted in the light as Yves began to stroke down along the flat of the blade. “And what do you want to do then, eh? Get him out? Flee Ratholarin?”

That was the question, and William had thought he’d come to an answer. Confronted once again by Yves’ hostility – and more importantly the *reason* behind it – he was less sure. Yes. If given even half a chance, yes he would want to extract Daniel from the guardians and then flee the realm with him. Maybe follow the bear’s earlier plan. Become mercenaries, and travel the world together. Be together. Be anywhere. Be anywhere *else*.

But Daniel loved the kingdom that he called home, and he didn’t want to fight them. William didn’t doubt that if it came down to it, the bear would choose him over Ratholarin. Would they ever be the same after that, though? If the issue was forced and Daniel had to choose, would he not resent the hyena for putting him in that place? Maybe not. Maybe he was made of better stuff than that. William thought that he was, but the fear remained.

And that assumed that they would even make it out of the kingdom. The borders were weeks away at a march. Caris wouldn’t be a safe place to retreat to; it was little more than an extension of Ratholarin anyway. Ingsbren was an ally, thanks to Tobias’ marriage to its princess. Sylaria, even further north, was bound to Prince Brett. The king’s own wife was Marovani. Almost every realm of the southern sea was arrayed against them. Maybe a smuggling ship in old Lenkis could get them north. They’d still have to get there. They’d never make it.

“Not flee Ratholarin, no.” The words came out at last as William closed his eyes. He couldn’t run. There was no running from the truth anymore. No running from what was happening, and no running from his responsibility to it. Even if no one mattered save for himself and Daniel, there was no way he could leave... and William knew of many who mattered as well. “Free. *Free* Ratholarin.”

When his eyes opened, it was to the first smile he’d seen from Yves in far too long. “You think this place can be saved?”

“I think Ratholarin itself is not the enemy. The enemy is the force that drives it.” He grit his teeth. “The Rathin line. It has to end with Fredrick. Ratholarin needs to be put in paws that will steer it right. Wise paws. Even paws.”

Yves sniffed and shook his head, but the smile remained. “You are not your father.”

“I’m not either of them.” He caught the glare before it could start and shook his head. “I don’t care. You knew my blood-father, but you don’t know the male who raised me. Taught me right from wrong alongside my mother. *Cared* for my mother. And *no*,” he added as Yves opened his muzzle, “I know my blood-father could have done that if he had lived.

“But if you have any respect for me for what I believe, then you can thank Zane, son of Jakob, for that as much as my mother. My blood-father taught me nothing.” He growled as Yves began to glare back at him in earnest. “I carry him with me. I am thankful to him for what I am, but his contribution is *past*. He is dead, Yves. I have accepted that. You should start trying that, yourself.”

“I have no need to do anything. There is nothing more for me to learn in this life.” He worked his jaw in time with the swivelling of his ears before he nodded. “I disrespected you. I disrespected your father. I beg your pardon.”

“Of course.” William nodded back, but he frowned. “What did you mean, though? Nothing left to learn?”

Yves looked past him to the lion and the wolves at the table. William followed his gaze; the trio were still speaking softly to themselves, far too quietly to hear. “Because there is little time left for us. These guardians are a formidable threat. Our usual methods of remaining concealed are failing us. These guardians are too vigilant to hide from, too principled to bribe, and too dedicated to blackmail. You chose a poor time to choose to make a stand, eh?” He smirked. “At least Leena was right about you in the end. I should have listened. You are more than I thought you to be.”

The hyena frowned as Yves began to polish the blade of the sabre. “Right about wh... You aren’t pulling out of the fight. You’re planning to die.”

The bat chuckled. “Planning to die. I like that! Even in defeat we will succeed, eh?” His smile returned, but it was cooler than it otherwise could be. “They know we are here. They know we are active in Sanwell. We know from our leadership that most of our operations are still concealed, but this most visible one... it is a liability.” He tossed his washcloth over one shoulder and reached down under the bar again. “Leena told me to give you this, if I saw you before it all kicks off.”

A flick of the bat’s thumb saw something metal and red arc through the air, turning rapidly end over end. William snatched it out of the air as it arced downward to him again. His paw uncurled around it to reveal something that he had heard of but never seen. The broad-crested bird on one side was as unmistakable as the coin’s hue. “Leena wants me to... sleep with a whore?”

“She *wants* you to go there. And if you are as serious as she thinks you’ll be, she’ll be waiting.” The bat stepped back from the bar and snatched up the sabre. It vanished a moment later, smoothly slid into a sheath on Yves’ belt that the bar had concealed from William’s view. “The guardians know there are rebels in Sanwell. We are going to *give* them the rebels in Sanwell.”

“To get them off the tail of the others.” William frowned. “You’re sacrificing yourselves.”

“Just so. In the name of the thing you seek.” The bat shrugged and smirked. “I am still a more deft paw than you might think. The guardians wear heavy armour, but the joints are vulnerable. I will cull their number with ease before I am struck down.”

The hyena’s eyes widened. “One of those guardians could be my bonded.”

Yves’ expression hardened in response. “Then I pray to the gods that he is the one to strike me down. If he is not, then I will kill him. It is the way of things, eh? Unless you can see through solid plate and find a way to tell me which he is. And even then, if he should take a swing at me...”

William shivered. This was all insane. The sacrifice play, the risk to Daniel... "You can't do this. You don't need to do this."

"And you are wrong twice over. I can, and I must. The order has been given." He smirked and shrugged as he patted the hilt of his sabre. "And now here is yours, because you have a role yet to play here. *You* must report us."

In the slack-jawed silence that followed, William noticed that the conversation behind him had stopped. He glanced at the table, and neither the lion nor the wolves were speaking. They stared at him and each one offered him a nod. They knew. They knew, and they were *comfortable* with this? "Is this some... strange Ghavaan joke I just don't get?"

"You have yet to be compromised, and you *have* been investigating us." William frowned as the bat smiled. "Take the knowledge back to your watch captain, Samael. He will alert the magistrate, who will alert the guardians. They will storm in, and they will try to kill or capture us." He shook his head as he patted the sabre hilt again. "I will not give them the choice to capture us."

That wasn't something that William doubted. It also wasn't something he was quite alright with, if he was honest. "You shouldn't have to die for this. Maybe there's another way."

Again came that little chuckle from the bat. "Those in charge have been working at this a very, very long time, eh? Longer than me. Longer than Leena. Much, much longer than you. If this is the way, this is the way." His smile turned sad. "Ratholarin has become a great problem, and very many kingdoms and lands even beyond the southern sea are troubled. A few lives here and there are a small price to pay to avert catastrophe."

The hyena ground his teeth back and forth as he shook his head. "The value of even one life is incalculable. Value assigned comes from those who would barter them like coin. The words of the great Lenkis scholar Antolli. Perhaps our leaders could stand to hear those words and consider them for a while."

"And perhaps they will. Perhaps you will be the one to share those words with them. But that is not to be my fate." He nodded to the coin. "Do not let the watch catch you with it. The engraving on the other face will instruct them to take you to Leena. She will be grateful to see you."

William looked down at the coin again as Yves laughed. "Ah, but he fears for me; for us! You do have your father's heart, William. I wish so very much he could have seen the male you have grown to be. He would be proud to see you stand with us, so worried for our lives."

"He'd probably be fighting to the death alongside you." The words were little more than a whisper as William sighed and tucked the coin into his pocket. There would be no talking Yves out of it. The old bat was stubborn as anything, and it wasn't as though the plan wasn't strategically sound. As long as the magistrate was certain that the cell had been eliminated, it would be enough. Samael needed to be convinced, but if William could do that it wouldn't all be in vain.

That he needed to play a role in the whole disaster wasn't something that sat well with him. He growled under his breath as Yves shot him a curious look. "I... hate this."

“And that is good. War is not something you should want to enter into with joy in your heart.” Yves smiled and reached out to offer the hyena his paw. “I should have listened to Leena from the start. I thought you were to be a fiend, twisted to Ratholarin against us. I wish only I could see what you are yet to do for our cause.”

William’s muzzle ran dry, and he shook his head again. What did he say to that? “Do you... any of you have any message? That I can take back to Leena for you?”

He looked back at the table, but both the wolves and the lion shook their heads. Yves did much the same as the hyena looked back at him. “Only that we do what we do for the cause. We will be remembered for our sacrifice, William, son of William.” He bowed his head, though his eyes remained fixed on William as he smiled. “*Lais etre che qui seree*. Let be what will be. Go.”

With one last nod, William turned away and headed for the door. He didn’t stop or look back; if he tried to do either, he might not have been able to leave. He might have tried to stay, to talk Yves and his fellows out of what they were about to do. He might have tried to talk himself out of his role in what was about to happen. What he was about to cause.

William was to kill them. That was clear and true; he would report them, and then the word would travel up the chain, and then the guardians would come and kill them and it would be his fault. The blood would not be on his paws, but that didn’t mean that they were clean. He closed the door behind him as he growled again, though he kept the sound quiet as he stalked down the street in the vague direction of Samael’s guardhouse.

He tried to remind himself that the blood was on Leena’s paws. On the rebel leadership’s paws. On the guardians’ and Fredrick’s paws, if not more than his own then at least as much as. It wouldn’t help him feel better, as he fingered the crimson coin in his pocket.

It was, however, the best he could do.

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The rumours of the Crimson Crest were legendary. It was the worst-kept secret in all Ratholarin; the subterranean brothel that hosted a thousand pleasures and the finest whores in all the southern reaches. It was said that anyone’s appetite could be satiated at the Crest, though exactly how far they were willing to go was always a subject of consternation. Some had suggested that they truly did offer *every* pleasure, however vile or macabre. Others implied that even the Crest had its limits; that abuse was not tolerated in the least. Still more said that what lines the Crest had could be blurred with the proper application of coin.

A door in a dingy alley was not the sort of thing that William had expected from such an illustrious and storied establishment.

It had opened easily enough once he’d plucked up the courage to actually step inside. Leena, apparently, would be within somewhere. Why she insisted on meeting in such a place was beyond the hyena, but that was just another question he’d toss on the pile she owed him answers for. He followed the corridor around a bend to a small reception area; a barely-clothed otter reclined in a chair behind a desk right before the only door in the room. His legs were up, bare feet on the desk as he studied William with bright, warm eyes. A webbed paw traced down a taut chest and stomach to tease at the see-through silken sash that... well, to say it protected

the otter's modesty would be to do it too much and too little credit. "Afternoon there, sir. You're starin' awful hard now, aren't you?"

William hadn't even realised that his eyes were resting on the silk – though that wasn't *strictly* true – until those words reached him. He swallowed, blinking and lifting his stare to the otter's face in turn. It didn't seem like he'd upset the smaller male; if anything, his smile seemed warmer than when the hyena had entered. "Yeah. Sorry. Wow, that's a first impression if I'd ever seen one."

"Wait 'til you see what's goin' on when you turn me over." The otter flashed a wink, lurid and slow as his smile broadened. William felt a sympathetic tingle in his nethers that he quickly shunted aside. Apparently the reputation *was* well-earned. "Now. What can I do for you, handsome? Somethin' to make those bands feel awful tight, I wager."

"Oh. Uh..." William frowned and lifted a paw, glancing at the rings adorning his fingers. The symbol of his bond to Daniel. "I mean, I don't... I'm not trying to--"

"Please." The otter smiled and shook his head. "We don't kiss and tell here, sweetness. What's going on with you and your bonded isn't our concern... not unless you wanna bring them along." An eyebrow perked for a moment as the otter's smile turned sly. "I'm told I'm quite good at, ah... balancing the needs of *multiple* people."

The hyena coughed as heat rushed into his ears. He didn't doubt that at all, but he wasn't here to do what a few inches of him were starting to hope he was. Instead he reached for his pockets, fumbling with them while the otter chuckled away. His fingers brushed the coin, and William sighed as he plucked it free and offered it. "I, uh..."

Again the otter laughed, a quiet, cool sound as his legs splayed out wide. It gave William an eyeful of his *everything* before those legs curled back under the desk again and the otter leaned up to delicately pluck it from William's outstretched paw. "Aww, you're too cute. And far too innocent to already have one of *these*, and I..." His voice trailed off as he turned the coin over, exposing the crested avian face to William again. His eyes were on the other side.

It wasn't quite fear that seeped into the otter's features, but it was definitely a sort of... cold recognition. The male's eyes flicked up and over the coin to look William over for a brief moment. It looked almost like he was about to say something, but he swallowed the words down and backed toward the door. He turned too briefly for William to properly assess if his back side was as alluring as his front, but the hyena's attention was fixed on the coin as it was passed through the door's bars.

Whatever figure stood on the other side passed it back almost instantly, and the hyena's ears perked as he heard booted footsteps running down what sounded like stone. A moment's panic set his fur on end as he considered the possibility that Yves had set him up. That the rebels hadn't been enamoured with him after all, and wanted to tie up a loose end.

Yet the way the otter looked him over again didn't imply that. William's coin was twisted end over end between the otter's webbed fingers, until at last he flicked it up and back over to the hyena. He caught it and tucked it hurriedly back into his pocket as the otter reached side to open the door. "Shame. I thought you'd be a fun new client." He nodded to the stairwell in the dark behind the door. "She'll be downstairs at the bar."

William frowned, but he nodded. Was the otter more than a whore; another rebel? His accent was Ratholarin... but then again, so was William's. "Thank you." He paused as he passed the otter by, and tried a little smile. "But... hey, my birthday's coming up. Maybe you'll get a chance at that new client after all."

That did seem to brighten him a little, and he shrugged as he leaned against the wall. "Tempting, but I think it's best to keep work and play separate, don't you?" He nodded to the stairs. "Go on now, sweetness. She doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Well, that betrayed a little more than the otter probably meant to. William smiled and nodded to him as he started down the stairs. The otter closed the door quietly behind him as he put one foot slowly in front of the other, careful not to miss the steps in the dark. Whether or not the otter was a rebel or just a whore had become much more interesting. 'She' was clearly Leena, and *he* clearly knew her. As a leader? As mistress? Or as something else?

He'd find out soon. As he emerged into the Crest proper at the bottom of those cramped stairs, he found himself struck immediately. Everything was elegantly appointed to a degree that he'd not seen since his time in the castle. The bar might as well have been the royal dining hall, with much smaller but no less well-appointed tables and chairs set up around the immediate area. A few patrons sat and talked over meals, with a couple of them sitting alongside – or in one case in the lap of – some very attractive individuals wearing the same skimpy, silken garb as the otter upstairs.

The rest were focused on the show up on a positively massive stage, and William's eyes bugged out at the display. His sexual experience could be confined safely to Daniel and he'd not really felt all that much of an urge to sneak a peek at anyone else, but the sheer size of the male horse upon the stage was positively stunning. That would have been enough, but the swiftness and the depth with which he slammed his cock into the writhing, drooling, yowling vixen beneath him utterly enraptured the hyena for a moment. He was almost stunned, unable to look away. "That... can't be good for her back. Or hips. Or... *damn*. Anything."

He shook his head and tore himself from the display at the same time as an exasperated cry rose up from the bar. So taken had William been with the décor and the show that he'd almost completely forgotten what he was there for in the first place. "... don't *care* about excuses, Leena. I've no time for them now!"

The words belonged to a hooded figure, female and dressed in a very fine black and silver cloak. The tip of a tail angrily swaying between the cloak and the carpet was enough to give her away as a feline, but nothing more than that. The rat behind the bar, however, was exceedingly familiar. Also exceedingly bored. Leena. "No, I completely understand your concerns. I understand your fears. And you will have to wait your turn like everyone else, princess." The rat leaned in to tap a fingertip at what William could only guess was the feline's nose as she turned to look right at him. "Now hush. I've another matter to attend to."

William started forward as the feline turned to follow Leena's stare. He caught the face of an angular and lean lioness, though one eye looked a little more swollen than the other. William couldn't help but frown. Someone had struck her; a jealous husband, perhaps? "You are not done with *me* yet. Not after all I have done to help you." She narrowed her eyes before they turned back on Leena. "I have given you much, and I am calling in a favour. I need to speak to him."

“Yeah. That’s *absolutely* going to happen.” Leena rolled her eyes as she looked up at William. “Glad you made it down okay. Kalama let you keep your pants, I see.”

“I guess I should have known they were optional here.” He glanced back at the stage as a growl rumbled beneath the lioness’ hood. “If you’re busy, I can wait.”

“See? He can wait.” The lioness folded her arms.

Leena just sighed. “Unfortunately, he cannot. And neither can I.” Her eyes flicked back to William for a moment. “I need just a few minutes. Can I get you a drink while you sit?”

William chanced a glance back at the lioness, but her focused was entirely fixed on Leena. The feline seemed to know what was going on. Perhaps... “Yeah, thanks. Whatever she’d like.” He nodded to the lioness.

Both the lioness and Leena looked surprised by the request, but Leena recovered first. She smirked and quickly reached under the bar for a glass. “Gracious. It’s alright; I know what she enjoys.” The rat turned her back to them for a moment as the lioness continued to stare at William, half surprised and half irritated.

As Leena tapped a cask on the other side of the bar, the lioness shook her head at him. “I am neither client nor staff. Your efforts are wasted on me.”

“Good. I’m not interested in either, and you’re not my type.” William smirked at her as the lioness actually smiled a little at his response. Something about her was tickling his mind, just shy of familiarity. “Just thought I’d offer you something for your trouble. If you don’t *want* it...”

The liquid that filled the glass set down in front of the lioness was a little lighter than that which William had been given at the Curse of the Night, but his nostrils flared as he detected a similar scent. Clearly the lioness had good taste. “I’ll be right back, William; make yourself comfortable.” Leena tapped the bar twice and vanished through a door behind it.

Meanwhile, the lioness had plucked up the glass and twisted it around in her paw. “She’s a pain in the tail, but she *does* know what I like.” She took a sip and sighed, and William perked an eyebrow. She’d handled it better than he had, if the two drinks were at all similar. “But then, that’s what she does. Sees the need in people.”

And then there it was; it clicked into place as he looked at her. It was no wonder that she looked familiar. Her headfur was different and her cloak did a good job shadowing her face, but there was no mistaking it now that he knew what to look for. This was Sarina, princess of Ingsbren.

Tobias’ wife.

What in the world she was doing in a place like this was beyond him, and he chuckled as he shook his head. “And if you’re not client and not staff, then what are your needs, my princess?”

The flash in her eyes at being recognised wasn’t fear like William had expected. It was anger more than anything else, and the glass was set down on the bar again a moment later as

she turned to face him. “Be very careful now... William, was it?” The hyena nodded and Sarina frowned sharply. “William. Loosen your tongue at your own peril.”

He smirked back at her. She was young but formidable. Tobias was probably very fond of her, but whether or not he should be was in question. After all, why else would she be in the Crimson Crest? “You needn’t fear. I’ve no interest in disgracing you or your husband.”

“My husband is none of your...” Her frown deepened, until a look of recognition crossed her face and wiped it away. “Wait. I don’t believe it... you’re William. *The* William. Tobias’ William.”

William rolled his eyes. What exactly had Tobias told her about him? “I’m not Tobias’ *anything*. Never was, never would have been.”

If anything though, the recognition seemed to have piqued her attention. She leaned back in toward him again and began to smile. “No, of course not. Forgive me; I meant no offense. I am merely... surprised, not least of all to see you here.” She nodded down to his paws as William moved to fold one over the other. “Especially given the rings. If you’d not said you were not a client, I’d be inclined to wonder.”

Whatever reply William would have offered was forestalled by Leena’s reappearance. She didn’t look happy as she glanced between the pair of them. “Oh, did I miss something? We all friends now?”

William met Sarina’s eyes as the lioness favoured him with a small smile. “We were merely bonding over... shared experiences.”

“Or a lack thereof.” William looked up at the rat. “We *need* to speak, Leena.”

“Yes, yes. We all do. Come.” She stepped back from the bar and motioned toward the end of it. “The both of you, this way. There’s no sense in dragging this out for either of you.”

Both William and Sarina exchanged a quick glance before they stood. By the time they were on their feet, Leena had opened a small hatch in the bar to leave her post. From the door behind the bar she’d first left through came a painted dog, his fur striking and his eyes focused on Sarina. He nodded to the princess, who smiled back at him in turn. William frowned. Maybe she was a customer after all.

The rat led them down to the other end of the tavern, and to a small passage almost invisibly carved out of the rock wall. A short distance down it rested a thick wooden door with two separate locks. Leena pulled a couple of keys from her pocket and swiftly unlocked the door, stepping inside and waving them in. William looked up and around, but the room was mostly empty. A couple of chests lay flush against the back wall, but the room otherwise only contained a desk, a couple of chairs, and a wide, broad couch.

Sarina immediately dropped onto the much more plush-looking couch, while William stood behind one of the chairs at the desk. He watched as Leena stepped around him and the desk both to take a seat behind it. She brushed a paw across a thick, leather-bound book of some description and began to flick through its pages. William leaned over; from what he could catch, it seemed to be a ledger of sorts. He couldn’t make out the text within, though; it wasn’t in the letters of the Rathin language. Lenkis, perhaps? Marovan?

“Here we go.” The rat tapped at the page and quickly closed the book again before William could see what was written there. “Your original agreement was with Mattan. The coin was already paid, in event of the need for your safe passage out of Ratholarin.” She looked up at Sarina as the princess leaned forward. “It stipulates uncertainty in the death of King Eric. I would say the current circumstances qualify as that, wouldn’t you?”

Again the princess growled. “If coin is the problem-”

“The *problem* is Fredrick’s guardian forces and their disregard for Ratholarin law.” Leena patted the book as she nodded to William. “Speaking of which, I understand your husband was conscripted. My condolences.”

The hyena ground his teeth together. She was very well informed, but that was probably for the best. “He’s not dead yet. Which is more than I can say for Yves and his friends.”

“And we’ll get to that when I’m done with this.” She held up a paw, palm toward William as her attention shifted to Sarina. “I am confident we can extract you from Ratholarin. The eastern settlements are considered much more secure than the north; Ingsbren’s given the Ratholarin no reason to mistrust them lately. Forces are more concentrated where the Carisi settle.” She ran her tongue across her lower lip. “However, there is still risk.”

“The greater risk is remaining. Fredrick will kill me if I leave by normal channels.” She nodded once. “If you are certain it can be done, then I will do whatever I must.”

William rested an arm on the chair as he looked down at Sarina. “Fredrick is killing off the wives of the royal family?”

The lioness didn’t answer, but Leena nodded. “So we suspect. Magriolla delivers only the stillborn, and Eustace may be as barren as her mother. With Fredrick’s new motivation to ensure only Ratholarin blood and Ratholarin values in his kingdom, the fear is not unfounded.”

That explained the princess’ reaction. Especially if Tobias’ wife was the only one capable of birthing an heir to the Rathin line. Removing the wives and establishing some new arrangement in their place could be something the brat would do to consolidate his power. William nodded to himself as the rat continued. “But it is too dire a time right now to consider moving you in such a manner, as I said. The Guardians of Ratholarin must be given absolutely no reason to suspect we operate here.”

“They already do that. That’s why I’m here.” William folded his arms; he’d not intended his voice to darken, but perhaps the memory of what he’d done earlier that day had leaked into his words. Certainly he sounded as grim as he felt, recalling his report. “But are you sure we should be speaking of such things in front of her, though?” He waved toward Sarina.

The lioness scoffed. “‘She’ has a name, William. Please.”

“The esteemed princess is already well aware of our activities, albeit not in the fullest sense for everyone’s protection.” Leena nodded to Sarina who rolled her eyes in turn. “Nothing you say to me is something that I would be displeased also to know was whispered in her ear.”

William nodded slowly. That made a little more sense. “Of course. Your father funds the rebels, doesn’t he?”

That he'd made the connection certainly seemed to upset the lioness. As Leena chuckled to herself, Sarina sat up a little more stiffly on the couch. "I may be above reproach, but you are most certainly not. Breathe a word of it into *anyone*'s ear and you'll find breath difficult in future."

"Threat noted, and I will give it all due weight, my princess." William bowed his head and closed his eyes so that they wouldn't roll hard enough to pop from his sockets. When he rose, it was with a deep breath as he prepared himself. A spark of anger was lit as the words echoed within William's head before they reached his muzzle. "Yves gave me your message."

"And the coin, or you'd not be here. I take it that it's done?" She nodded slowly and looked away as William glared back at her. "I don't like it any more than you do, but it is necessary. Sacrifices always are in war."

The growl in William's throat came before Sarina's eyes found him. "Well, well. Little William grew up from being a servant and a soldier and turned into a rebel. How interesting."

He didn't even look back at her. "I don't have to explain anything to a princess. I'm done explaining myself to royalty." He nodded to Leena. "I've got to live with what I did. I hope you're comfortable with the blood that'll be spilled today, because if this all gets Daniel killed-

"Your bonded is not my concern. Conscript or not, he is fighting on the wrong side of a shadow war and I will not show my enemy any mercy." She narrowed her eyes as William's growl deepened. "Do you condone the things he will be ordered to do? That he will do them to spare himself from a traitor's fate in the noose?"

"His actions can be laid at the feet of those who issued the orders. Anything else is between him and his own sense of righteousness." William shook his head. "Those giving the orders must eventually face the consequences of the deeds done in their name."

"I couldn't agree more. And you will find that none of us here disagree." The rat sighed as she brought both paws to rest atop the ledger. "William, we are rebels seeking to topple a corrupt and monstrous king. Did you think when you went to the Curse to join us that this would be a bloodless thing? The Fredrick would allow us such leniency?"

William was silent. He honestly didn't know what to expect, but everything that had happened that day had been the last thing he would have predicted. "Yves wanted you to know that they were doing their duty to the cause. I hope those words give you some comfort."

"You speak as though I ordered this action. I did not." Leena's ears twitched. "On the day our leaders arrive in Sanwell to oversee our final plans, perhaps you can confront them about their methods. Until such a time you, like everyone else who serves as a link in this chain, needs to hold in each of us a certain degree of trust."

The hyena bit back the immediate retort, though all the few seconds he held back did was to soften the words he used to express himself. "Trust is difficult when you would sacrifice true believers in the cause."

"And a cause can't survive when it is pulled up by the root." She lifted her eyebrows and waved around herself. "A branch pruned can be regrown, but if they pull us up from the root it is all for naught. Yves was willing; Yves *volunteered* to serve in this capacity. As did

those who will stage the last stand of the glorious rebel cell in Sanwell.” She turned to Sarina and nodded again. “And it is this act that will purchase your window of opportunity to leave. In the days to come, once the guardians are picking apart the ‘operation’ that Yves was ‘running’ you will have the ability to leave. Until then, you will remain as an honoured guest.”

“So long as it is as a guest and not as one of your artisans.” The lioness stood and bowed her head ever so slightly. “I shall visit the backrooms, then. Settle myself, if it pleases you.”

“It does. By your will, princess.” Leena bowed her head in turn as she watched the lioness briefly look William over again. Then she turned and left, though the door slammed shut just a little louder than it needed to. William looked after her as Leena chuckled. “Tobias sure had his paws full with that one.”

William smirked as he turned back to Leena, but he couldn’t muster much of a smile to go with it. “She seems sharp enough. He would appreciate that, and doubtless he’s been doing his best to put an heir in her.”

“And do I detect a note of jealousy in your voice?” She smiled a little wider, but that smile vanished as William bared his teeth. “Alright, alright. Point taken. Sore spot. Won’t happen again.” She shook her head and let her paws drift off the desk and back into her lap. “Still, she’s as sharp as they come. Even picked out the right one of my boys here to service Tobias’ needs. Wouldn’t have pegged her for-”

“Servicing Tobias? She picked a whore for him?” William lifted an eyebrow as he turned back to the door again.

His surprise didn’t fade as Leena laughed. “Soren doesn’t look much like you, but he’s closer than most of my boys. Fits Tobias’ disposition better than you, too.” As the hyena turned back, Leena had relaxed further into her chair. “What we do here is serve our customers their greatest pleasures. So, how can I help you get yours?”

William just snorted as he braced against the chair’s back. “Trust me. I don’t think there’s a single thing down here for me.”

“No?” The rat pushed her chair back from the desk and stood once more. “Pleasures of the flesh aren’t all the Crest offers. Through operating it, I gain information. Influence. It is one of the few places in the whole of Ratholarin, not just Sanwell, where the lines of legality blur just enough. Nobles come here, William. Royalty. Half of the members of the king’s small council visit regularly, and some of the secrets the Magi have whispered to my courtesans are beyond belief.”

“Useful things to you. Not to me.” William sighed. “Why are we playing a game here, Leena? You know why I’m helping you.”

“Ah, you *think* you know, but I wonder if you truly do.” She tilted her head to the side and gave him a thin smile. “There is more at work around you than you know, but I will certainly look forward to seeing what fate makes of it.”

That wasn’t an answer that satisfied William, but with every passing second he spent alone in the rat’s company he found himself wanting to be there less and less. “I’m not comfortable sacrificing people’s lives.”

She held his stare. “You are a soldier. Is that not what you have done for your entire adult life?”

“Like I said. I am not comfortable with it. That doesn’t mean I won’t do it if I have to.” He felt himself start to snarl again, muzzle curling in on itself as the rat smiled back at him. “I need to know what your goal is. If it’s the same as the one I’m thinking.”

Leena smiled and stepped before him. Both of her paws extended to rest on William’s hips as he began to growl again. “What do you want me to tell you? That I wish a bloodless coup? That I would be satisfied with Caris and Yaroven and Lenkis restored? The borders reset to their places fifty years ago? A hundred?”

“Is it? Would you?” William reached down to pry her paws off him, but they squeezed in tighter.

And as those fingers tightened, her gaze sharpened. “The truth, William, is that *it doesn’t matter*. You’re already in deep, here in the muck with us. You’ve sided with we rebels, and no matter what happens now, you’re branded as far as Ratholarin’s concerned. Do you understand?” She tilted her head up slowly as he scowled down at her. “If you turn yourself in to the watch, they might take what you have seen and heard. They might act on it. But first they would know that you are a traitor for spoiling their attempt at rooting out the entire operation. You would be in a cell right next to mine. Swinging on the end of a rope, just the same as me.”

She allowed William to pull her paws off a moment later, though his efforts simply pressed her closer to him. He leaned his head back as she smiled. “I will not apologise. I will beg, bribe, threaten and kill anyone and everyone I must to preserve the cause to which I have dedicated myself. That includes Yves. That includes you. Be grateful that your future is intimately necessary to our goals.” She reached up and, just as she had with Sarina, flicked a finger out to delicately tap the tip of William’s nose. “My goal does not need to be the same as yours. You have no more choice in the matter than we do, and *that* is the truth.”

As much as every single word stabbed at William like a knife, he could do little more than stare back down at her with mounting fury. That was a false feeling since of course he could do more; he could reach out and, with the barest hint of effort, snap the little rat’s neck where she stood. He could fight his way free. Make himself as absolutely loyal to the Ratholarin forces as could be. Demonstrate it unequivocally.

But that wouldn’t solve the Fredrick problem. It wouldn’t help those people he’d hoped he could save from Fredrick’s oppression. For all that he was doing and all that he was presumably yet to do, uprooting the rebel cell – if indeed he even had the root in Sanwell in his grasp – would simply remove one more obstacle to Fredrick’s power grab. She was right that William had little choice in the matter, but that could change. That *had* to change. But for the moment? “So. What goal do you see for me, then?”

“The finest goal. Sweet revenge.” She leaned up toward his ear, and William shivered as she whispered to him. “If you stay with us and help us, your part in the story to come will be a pleasure you will savour. Stay with us and you will do more than merely help save this kingdom.

“Stay with us, William, and you will become a *kingslayer*.”