

Interwoven

NEED: PART ELEVEN

8th Day of the Pure Snow, 24 AoE

Hearing the criers lauding the guardians that had killed Yves was the second hardest thing that William had to face in the days that followed. It narrowly beat out the interrogation a pair of guardians had inflicted upon him in the wake of the attack on the Curse of the Night. He wasn't certain if it was because of his reporting or because they suspected him, but they had attempted to catch him out in any lie that would reveal the existence of more rebels. They'd mentioned that they were aware of his Carisi heritage, and tried to manipulate him into giving away information. He'd kept his answers short, simple, and consistent. Ultimately they'd gone wanting and released him.

But no. The hardest thing had been how Geoffery and Samael had congratulated him for his efforts. They had treated William like a hero; like a harbinger of destruction and defeat for the wicked insurrectionists who had visited upon them the righteous justice of the Ratholarin crown. Samael had even written to the magistrate on Geoffery's behalf to secure additional honours for William as thanks for his exemplary service to Sanwell and the Ratholarin crown.

William could have shrugged it all off, if not for Daniel's continued absence. The lack of the bear in his life – and with no word as to his well-being either – created this low-level sort of pressure that was, no matter what the hyena did, ever present. As he went through his day, be it in the watchhouse or in the training yard, it was always there. Even when he spent time conversing or wandering the city with the other friends he'd made in the army, that pressure hadn't broken. He'd become dependant on Daniel as a critical part of his life, and that critical part was gone. William was lost.

Alone.

Geoffery had noticed more than anyone else. He'd granted William more leave in the wake of his operation with the watch, in the hopes that it would help the hyena get his head on straight. William hadn't told the fox that he'd spent most of his time those days wandering Sanwell, feeling positively awful for what had happened to Yves. For what he'd become embroiled in. And, perhaps more than anything, that he had decided to stay embroiled so.

More than a few nights had been spent at the Crest, but not for the purpose of spending time with their courtesans. Despite the hyena's physical needs mounting and the ever present promise of relief if he so much as asked the workers of the Crest, he'd kept to his own paw. It had lost much of its allure after years and years of exceptional pleasure shared with a male he loved dearly, but it had been better than nothing.

He'd spent much of that time at the bar. There he would sip slowly on whatever Leena put in front of him, just enough to be polite and not so much as to intoxicate himself fully. His focus more often than not had been on the rat herself, as she explained in as plain terms as she

was able the nature of their efforts. For all the hours of sitting and drinking and listening he'd done, Leena had been painfully short of details.

As he sat there that night, his headfur grown well out into a mess of black chaos and the burn of alcohol strong in his throat, he glanced up the bar at the doe who had taken up Leena's duties. It was the first time William had arrived that saw the rebel leader not actually working her job, and he'd resolved himself to waiting to see what she had been up to... or at least whatever excuse she'd concocted to give away no information whatsoever. Again.

He was a solid half a dozen glasses in before Leena arrived at last. The rat had a broad, gray sash across one shoulder connected to a satchel. Paws clutched it protectively tight as she scanned the room. She paused at the end of the bar closest to the Crest's entrance and called out to the deer, though her eyes fixed immediately on William. "Julia, would you be a dear and stay for perhaps a half hour more? I have another meeting I need to take."

"I'll be a deer no matter what, so sure." The doe smirked and patted the bar in front of William. It drew his attention up to her as she smiled wider. "Can I getcha somethin' to take in with you? Never seen her like this before."

William frowned and glanced up at Leena as she made her way over. The rat looked determined, sure, but that was all. "Like what?"

"Worried." Julia turned away as Leena passed by him. She tapped William on the shoulder and whistled, motioning for him to follow her. He frowned and rose, but not before Julia turned back to him and slid a small mug of mead toward him. "Here."

He frowned at it. "I'm not really a fan of mead."

"It's not for you." Julia tilted her head toward Leena and smirked. "I'll sling somethin' over for to your tastes shortly. Gotta keep that buzz going, right?"

"Sure. Thanks." William picked up the mug and swirled the contents as he followed Leena to the other end of the bar. The rat had already sat down around the bar's corner, in a much quieter alcove that allowed her to overlook the entire gallery. It was a pretty good spot, and William could see right then why she'd never let anyone take those seats. They were for her to conduct business from. Clearly she was waiting for someone or something to arrive.

When he settled into the chair beside her, she unhooked the sash from her shoulder and set the satchel on the bartop. While he still couldn't read her expression, her eyes were a little more bleary than usual. The rat was tired. "Long day?"

"Long Crimson Leaf. The days just blur together after a while." She smiled as William offered her the mug, and nodded once as she brought it to her muzzle. "You been here long today?"

"Not that long. Doubted I'd see you." He shrugged and gestured toward the satchel. "I'm not even going to ask. You wouldn't tell me if I did."

She smirked and knocked back the rest of the mug in a long swig and a few quick gulps. The mug was set aside as she cleared her throat with an unladylike if *quiet* burp. "You know, William, assumptions lead a person to a great many disappointments." Her eyes continued to

drift past him. Whomever was coming was likely imminent. Maybe Julia had been right and Leena was worried.

Still, William fought the urge to turn himself around. “Alright then, I’ll take a nibble. What’s in there?”

“A copy of an interesting Lenkis tome, translated from Old Lenkis to Carisi.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “It’s useless to the buyer, but he’s paying me with something considerably more useful than even he knows.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief as William frowned. “He thinks he’s getting a book of magic spells. Fool.”

William nodded slowly as he looked down at the satchel. “That is pretty stupid. Who’d want to trade in even *alleged* magical artifacts right now, with the guardians prowling about?” He frowned harder as Leena smirked at him. “What is he paying you for it?”

“He’s going to give me a book of magic spells.” William’s expression soured, and Leena began to laugh. “Oh, to see your face. Wonderful; thank you. I really needed that today.”

“Happy to oblige.” The hyena shook his head. What had happened out there? Had Leena lost her mind?

“It’s not *actually* a book of spells, if you must know. Such things are always fake; magic is more than how to gesture and speak and such. Technique, however... that’s a different story.” The rat’s teeth glinted in the light as she grinned.

There was something behind that smile that shone in almost predatory fashion. It set the fur on the back of William’s neck standing up. “All sorcery’s the same in the end.”

“More right than you even know.” Her grin twitched. “Sorcerers and magi and whatnot like to pretend there’s a great secret and a deep process to learn. Shamans and priests know that it’s far simpler than that. Different approach. Same result. Magic.”

William snorted. “Even if you *were* getting a book of magic, you’d never tell me. You’d never tell anyone. Too much risk.” Leena shrugged, and the hyena frowned at her. Surely she wasn’t seriously trading in magical goods? “Alright. Say it’s true and everything’s on the level. Your seller has a book he thinks is full of spells and is looking to buy another by trading his for yours. Why make that trade?”

Leena’s eyes sharpened as they took the hyena in. “Well, let’s see. Why do you think?”

If the roll of William’s eyes didn’t put her off, he figured nothing would. Indeed, she continued to stare at him all the harder. He sighed. “He’d *not* trade like for like, I guess. He’s got to think he’s getting the better deal.”

“Right so far.”

“I’m glad you approve.” William glanced aside at the doe behind the bar, busy with a couple of patrons. “But he believes in what you’ve got. For whatever reason, he believes that without believing in what *he*’s got.” Leena’s eyes twinkled as William glanced back at her. “You put something in his ear, didn’t you?”

She chuckled as her lips curled into an innocent smile. “I would *never* be so dishonest in my dealings with a client. The nerve of you!” When William simply held her stare for a few

more silent seconds, Leena began to laugh. “Oh, alright. You got me. Yes, thanks to some careful hinting by some well-placed voices in his inner circle, yes. He’s convinced that what he has is useless, and that *he* is getting the better of *me*. It’s what they all think, every time.” Her smile turned a little cooler. “Males always think they have the upper paw with me. That little Leena can’t smell a swindle a mile off. I just let them dig themselves into their nice little holes, and take what I will from them.”

“Well, we males are a dumb breed. Goodness forbid that we see a person for whoever they really are.” He rolled his eyes.

Leena, for her part, chuckled and patted at William’s knee. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, dear. You’ve already shown yourself to be an exceptional individual in so many different ways. The male I am expecting is a representative for a minor noble who thinks to leverage his position to ingratiate himself with your old princely friend. Or the noble himself, if he’s twice as stupid as I think.”

The sigh that came out of William was long practiced by that point. “I don’t have any princely friends, old or otherwise. Stop bringing it up.”

Again Leena’s gaze flicked behind William, but that time they lingered there. “Well, if you’d like to turn around, you’ll have a chance to fix that. Dear Prince Tobias deigns to visit us again.”

William frowned, but he fought the urge to turn. Instead he lowered his head a little, hopeful that his shaggy headfur would help conceal him from the prince. If Tobias was truly there, he didn’t want the tiger to see him. “I still can’t believe he comes here.”

“All the more regular of late, and voluminously as I am told. His preferred companion has his hooks in deep, from what I hear.” William found himself growling quietly at the rat’s words, but she shook her head and turned back to him. “You disapprove?”

“Of using people? Ingratiating yourselves to ensure their return? Invoking feelings that may then be abused?” He snorted quietly. “What’s to disapprove of?”

“For a warrior of Ratholarin you sure seem to like to think your paws are clean, don’t you?” Leena glanced past William and smiled, nodding to someone. It had to be Tobias, and he found himself silently begging that he didn’t come over to speak to her.

But there were no footsteps on approach. He heard them starting toward the stairs that William had been told led to the suites. While the tail that emerged from behind the cloaked figure was definitely a tiger’s, there was no reason to suspect it was specifically Tobias save Leena’s assertion. William wasn’t sure he trusted a word the rat said, even after everything. *Especially* after everything. “There’s killing, and there’s manipulating people.”

“War’s a sewer, William. Swim as shallow as you like and you’re still gonna get shit *all* through your fur.” Her muzzle curled at the crudeness of her words, and doubly so as William blanched. “The esteemed prince isn’t a mark that my dear Soren is working. We are not manipulating your sweet, former infatuation. In fact, from what Soren tells me, Tobias is simultaneously tight-lipped about his duties in the castle and painfully open about the nature of his existence. Soren feels bad for the poor boy, and- ah. One moment.”

He frowned as Leena lifted her head and waved toward the door. William didn't turn around, but doubtless it was her buyer. Without a word he rose from his barstool and stepped toward the wall. His back remained to whomever it was, but he caught a black, leather glove extend to shake Leena's paw. "Radiant as ever, Leena. Some things never change, don't they?"

"You look like shit Verne, so I guess they don't." Whoever that Verne person was chuckled quietly, the sound as deep as his voice. "Lord Erolli didn't feel like gracing me with his presence, I suppose? Unsurprising. Ought I feel hurt?"

"Absolutely not; weren't the Guardians concernin' him. His lordship's wife is startin' to suspect he might have a piece on the side, so he'd rather not be seen prowlin' near the Crest right now's all." Verne laughed again as William frowned. Lord Erolli Geringer was one of the most respected members of upper-crust Sanwell society. The ram had a fortune and political leverage for days. Why risk it all for magic? "You got it?"

The hyena tilted his head to the side so that he could see Leena reach over to her satchel. She pulled it open and gently opened it to a random page. William couldn't make out the writing or the diagrams from what he could see, but then wasn't it all useless anyway? "Satisfied?"

"Satisfied? Not even a little. Maybe a couple of your girls could help me with that once I'm done with this." The gloved paw reached toward the book.

Leena's paw slapped it down before it even got close. "Ah-ah. My turn. Show me."

Verne grunted at the slap, but he nonetheless reached down to hoist his own satchel onto the bar. It was swiftly unbuttoned and a much older-looking book was slid free. He peeled back the cover to a random page just like Leena had done, and it was barely a second later before the rat nodded to herself. "Very good. His lordship's still good on the straight swap?"

Again Verne chuckled. "His lordship *did* ask me to stick on an additional price. A hundred crowns."

Leena scowled as she glanced at William for a moment. He held her stare; that was a damn large amount of coin to be sure, but then he didn't know how to appreciate the value of old books full of goodness alone knew what. "I do hope you told Erolli where he could stick that."

"Sure did. He insisted I ask, but I warned him it wouldn't go his way. That it's a straight trade or nothin' with you, an' if he wanted to burn that bridge with my favourite fence he'd have a hard time tradin' in such things in future." Leena's scowl melted into a much more jovial smirk, and she nodded back to Verne. "Hey, I promised I'd make the *effort*, 'course. Didn't promise him how hard I'd try. I know who my friends are."

"Good to know." She did reach into her pocket and withdrew a small pouch that she set down on the bar just in front of her satchel. A paw delicately pushed the satchel and the pouch toward Verne. "For you, and certainly *not* for Erolli. Consider it a gift, in appreciation of your wisdom and foresight, and your continued friendship."

Verne's laugh in response was deep, and he plucked up the pouch before he hefted it in his paw. His other paw slid his satchel over to Leena, who lay an arm protectively atop it. "You really think I'm gonna take this?" He tossed the pouch down on top of the satchel he'd offered

her, and the coins within clinked noisily together. “Please. I’m grateful, but you know what I’d like.”

William caught a little flicker in the rat’s eyes, but her smile remained unfazed. “There’s enough in there for one night. One, Verne... but *full* service. I trust your taste and desire haven’t changed?” When Verne shook his head, Leena nodded toward the stairs that led to the rooms. “Seventh door on the left. I’ll have her down in just a few minutes. Make yourself comfortable, then give her your best shot.”

“Tell her to wait an hour. Best I wash up first for a lady of her stature.” Verne nodded to the satchel he’d received from Leena. “You’ll hold onto that until morning?” Leena bowed her head in assent, and the courier was off his seat a moment later. It seemed he was all too eager to get to the baths, and to whatever it was he’d arranged with the rat. “Pleasure doing business, Leena.”

“Verne.” She smiled back up at him as he left, but no sooner had he vanished from her line of sight than the smile was gone. She tapped absently at the cover of the book she’d received from him as she lifted her head to stare down the bar. “Julia? Would you please let Katalin know that Verne has paid for a full service and to attend to him at his earliest convenience?”

The doe nodded back to Leena as William sat back down beside the rat again. “You don’t seem too happy.”

“Because I’m not. Verne is a male who takes his breeding urges very seriously. Values them more than a sizable fist’s worth of crowns.” The rat glanced toward the stairs again and sighed. “Some males can be paid off with coin. Some with a warm muzzle. Some others with just the right words of validation, or the application of drink.” When she turned her eyes on William again, it was with a somewhat colder smile than she normally favoured him with. “But Verne is an exceedingly useful go-between for myself and the upper crust of Ratholarin society. They know his reputation. He knows mine. Pleasing him and sating his base instincts is worth a couple seasons of discomfort for Katalin if his seed takes. He’s at least a courteous and polite lover, as I hear tell. She could do worse for her pay, and I for mine.”

William winced. Perhaps he shouldn’t have asked. Instead, he glanced down at the tome Verne had brought her. “Looks like you can be paid off with knowledge.”

“Power, William. The same thing in the end.” She stroked the book thoughtfully as she looked William up and down. “And what about you? What do you think is your price of choice? What do *you* want more than anything?”

The hyena scowled and shook his head. “Aren’t you meant to tell *me* that?”

She smirked back at him as she patted the book. The way she traced her fingers across its cover had begun to make William uncomfortable; the motion was almost hypnotic in how it drew his gaze down. “Would that I could. Oh, I have ideas, of course. Your beloved returned to you would certainly be high on the list. Fredrick’s head on a pike before your eyes might suffice.” William shuddered. “More recently, freedom for the Carisi so maligned by the king’s edicts. None of these, I think, are the full picture.

“No, I think the reality might be that you are a male without a price. Not because you cannot be paid off, but because you don’t know what you yourself really want.” She tilted her head to the side as her smile grew. “Getting close, am I?”

If the hyena had anything to say in response, his splayed ears said it all. He forced himself to sit up straighter as Leena laughed to herself and took a sip of her drink. “You don’t like me all that much, do you, William?”

He frowned. It was a blunt question, but that seemed to be her way. “In another life, maybe. Not so much this one. Not taking risks like this.”

“More gracious than I was expecting.” She smiled all the wider as she drained the rest of her drink. “And what am I risking so, that you find yourself so afraid?”

“You’re joking, aren’t you?” William’s eyes narrowed as he waved toward the satchels. “You think the guardians aren’t going to be all over that? If Lord Erolli is discovered with what you’re giving him, useless or not-”

“The Geringer patriarch didn’t know what he had prior to my asking Verne to broker this agreement. He still doesn’t, and so it will remain.” One of the rat’s fingertips lazily traced the rim of her empty mug. “But his interests are well known, and for whatever reason the crown has never seen fit to clamp down on him in the past. I had Verne paint me as incompetent; giving away something priceless for something worthless. He will gain nothing. We will gain much more.”

“With a book of spells. Of magic. And you still seem not to see the danger?” She rolled her eyes as William began to growl. “All it would take is one set of loose lips. If not on your side, then Erolli’s. Then the guardians come down here, and-”

“Please, William, this is not my first secret underground rebel base. The Crest is simply my most successful.” Her paw fell flat against the cover of the book she’d received as she shook her head. “There are enough skeletons in the good king’s closet that the Crest is aware of; skeletons that he would dearly like to keep there. He would not dare deploy the guardians to assault me or the Crest directly without knowing for a fact that we would not be able to destroy his rule.”

William frowned. His own efforts in blackmailing Fredrick had only gone so well because someone much smarter than him had filled in the holes in his plan. Leena was sharp, but... “And could you?”

“Of course not. He commands great respect among the Ratholarin commonfolk now that he is holding them up above all others. He has given them someone to fear and to hate and convinced them they have his ear and his heart; that their grievances have merit, and a target.” She rolled her eyes once more as she delicately shunted her mug aside. “But he *thinks* that we do, and that is enough to stay his paw for the time being. Certainly we have half of his small council by the short-hairs, and that is not nothing. Even for a king as active in his use of his power, his small council can be made to bend it. For now.”

The hyena closed his eyes and sighed. Deception within deception within deception. No wonder he never felt he was able to speak openly with Leena. She was a liar through and through. So much the better for her chosen profession and activities outside it, but William

knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would never, ever confide in her. Not one secret. “If you say so.”

She hummed back noncommittally at him as she began to stroke the book again. “And if you concern yourself with his dear younger brother, then know that Tobias is not the only member of the royal family to visit these halls. If word got out about the sort of things that Brett pleased himself with here, his own authority would be greatly diminished.” Her muzzle curled slightly. “I do not normally entertain his sort of depravity, but for the leverage it provided me...”

“That seems to be the key for you. What provides the most leverage. Katalin. Whomever Brett took a tumble with.” William shook his head. “Does it not bother you? Using all these people to further your ends?”

“No more I wager than it bothers you to use us for *your* own ends.” Her smile returned as she lifted her paws away from the book to trace down her front. It was an obvious tease that was equally obviously lost on William. “And I know you don’t see it that way. Adorable, but no matter. I know why you have come to me today.”

“And yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that.” William allowed a little more edge to creep into his tone. To imply that he was anything like her at all had sparked something in him; it quickened his blood and it ran all the hotter for a moment. “You claim to have this grand goal for me, but I have seen no plans and no action toward this end.”

“You do not see the entire picture, William. Nor is it your place to.” Leena folded her arms as she studied him. “Do you think the prospect of regicide is something easy to conceive and execute? Such things take time, my dear. For the moment, you are precisely where you need to be.”

William scoffed. “A soldier in an army under Fredrick’s command?”

“A leader within the structure of that army. A young captain on the rise.” She arched an eyebrow, ears and whiskers twitching. “Your future trajectory will be marked by the rise of others of our cause. A column within the Ratholarin army, as we build also within the watch. All of them ready for the moment to strike.”

So it was to be more vagueness. William had suspected as much, but to have it confirmed for him was at least something solid; something real. “And what do we do in the meantime?”

Leena smirked back at him. “We? *We* do little. *I* continue to advance the work behind the scenes. Gather and disseminate information as required to the people who require it. *You* will do what you do until such a time as you are required.” She paused, and her smile turned a little odd. “Though, to be fair, you will not be doing *nothing*. Especially now that your living space is regularly down a companion to discover you.”

“And what exactly does that mean?” William frowned. Leena was always cagey, but it almost looked as though she was enjoying keeping him in the dark right then.

It didn’t help a moment later as she licked at her lips and smiled all the wider. “It means you have a lot to learn about your role in what’s to come. The next few years are going to test you more than you can possibly imagine.

“And I, my dear, have just what you need to get started.”

#

Daniel.

It all came back to Daniel for the hyena.

As he walked back home through the darkness, pack slung over his shoulder and eyes warily tracking the guardians that seemed to be absolutely everywhere in Sanwell, it was all William could think about. Everything that had happened to him, everything that was yet to happen... Daniel was the part that William worried about.

What he'd become was a direct threat to what William had turned into. Neither one had a clear out. If Daniel became aware of what William was doing with Leena and the rebels – if he became aware of what he was to do sometime down the line – he'd be bound to report the hyena. To turn him in. To betray him.

And he'd become a direct threat to Daniel. If he confessed everything to his lover, the bear could choose not to turn him in. But that would put him at risk every single day, if he couldn't evade the service he'd been picked out for. If he was caught out, then the choices William had made would destroy the love of his life. He would have betrayed him.

Lies had never been something William was very good at. They were never something that he'd ever really felt that he'd needed. In the castle, he'd had his mother and Tobias. He'd been certain that his mother had known he was lying to her the whole time he was sneaking off to play with the prince. She'd certainly known, he realised in hindsight, the day the Tobias had rejected him. He'd not told her what had happened, but she had consoled him all the same.

Ever since meeting Daniel though, William had had no need to lie. The two told each other everything without fail and without censor. It led to arguments sometimes, but even they were mild affairs soothed by the application of truth. Some of the other friends William had made throughout his years with the army had certainly been less receptive to his truth-telling than others, and some friendships had been shorter as a result of such things. Daniel, however, had been a rock. Solid. Eternal.

But not unbreakable, and therein lay William's conundrum. If he said anything at all, it would place the burden of responsibility on Daniel's shoulders. It offloaded everything onto the bear, who was already a victim of circumstance. William had chosen his path. It'd been coerced by Leena to some degree, yes, but it was a thing that he had wanted. That he still chose to pursue. Daniel had never asked to be put in his position. He had never wanted to become a guardian. William could still clearly remember the tears in the bear's eyes when he'd read him the recruitment notice.

The conscription.

He couldn't do it, William realised as he stared at the door to their home. He had chosen, and Daniel had not. If there was a burden to bear to protect them, it couldn't be Daniel forced into it. It had to be William taking up that responsibility. He had to be the one to shoulder it. Alone, if necessary.

He reached up to brush a paw down across the door. It was what he was already doing, he told himself. It was just the same thing. Just not telling Daniel anything, not bothering him with the details, keeping him in the dark. It wasn't really lying. It was strategic omission; careful concealment. Not lying. He opened the door.

An oil lamp had been lit, so someone was clearly home. The whole place was silent however, and William let one paw drift to his sword as he stepped inside and quietly closed the door. His ears perked and twitched this way and that, keen to the slightest sound. It wasn't until he fell still and held his breath that he heard it from the bedroom and relaxed. Quiet snoring. Daniel.

Sighing to himself, William let his paw fall away from his sword. The joy that he'd thought he'd feel at the knowledge that his bear was home with him once more was muted. Dread instead came with the realisation of what it meant and the mistruths he would have to speak to him. He plucked up the lamp and made his way toward their bedroom, moving as quietly as he could so as not to wake him.

He paused in the doorway, the lamp in his paw as he saw the dimly-lit visage of his lover. He was sprawled out not on his side of the bed but on William's, all but face down in the hyena's pillow as he lay sprawled over the top of the quilt. William couldn't help but smile. Maybe the bed would smell like them together again, at least for a while.

William set the lamp down on top of their dresser and unslung his pack. He set it down beside the lamp as he unbuckled his belt and began to similarly strip himself down. Daniel shifted atop the bed, but didn't seem to wake. So much the better, William thought. If he stayed asleep, they wouldn't have to speak. He wouldn't have to deceive the bear.

No sooner had his boots left his feet than he heard a quiet snort from Daniel. He froze and glanced up at his pack as the bear rolled slowly over. A quick swipe brought the pack into William's arms, and he lowered it to the floor as quietly as he could. It thumped almost inaudibly there, and William winced as much for the sound as for the potential to damage the delicate object inside. As Daniel's head came free from the pillow, those concerns were forced to fade; the hyena flicked out his foot to shove the pack, sliding it down under the bed as Daniel began to smile at him. "*Mmm*hey. Look't that. Now my day's perfect."

For all of the pain and fear and dread that filled William's heart, the sight of that dopy, half-asleep smile on those familiar ursine features still filled him with warmth. "I could say much the same. Sorry I woke you."

"*Mmm*... it's fine. Glad you did." He rolled more fully onto his back, freeing up some of William's side of the bed as he splayed his arms out wide. William was collapsing atop him before he even knew he was moving, wrapping the bear up in a broad, tight, desperate hug while the pack went completely forgotten beneath the bed. Tears filled up William's eyes as the other male's familiar scent filled his nostrils again, half-forgotten in its absence. A rush of memories and feelings came back with them to help drown those darker thoughts and concerns out. "Oof! Guess y'missed me, too."

"You have no idea." The words, whispered against the bear's chest, were the most truthful he knew he would be able to be with him. Once they were out though, a little more truth slipped through before he could clamp his muzzle shut. "I'm sorry."

He stiffened, squeezing tighter at Daniel as the bear embraced him right back. “Don’t think you owe me a damn thing. Sure not a sorry.” Daniel nuzzled in against his cheek and prised William’s tearful face from him long enough to meet him in a soft kiss. The hyena tilted his head to meet it, tongues dancing together as though they’d been separated for years. Certainly the hyena’s malehood appreciated the sudden reunion.

And judging by the way that Daniel’s ground up against him, the bear felt much the same way. William pulled off from the kiss, panting against Daniel’s chin as he leaned up to stare into his love’s eyes. “What are you doing here? I didn’t even know you were coming; I could have tidied up, or I could have-”

“Got everything I need right here.” He leaned up to touch his forehead to Williams and nose along his cheek. “Don’t care about all the rest. When I was told I could go home for the night... Will, it was like the gods came back just to bless me.” He sighed as he brought a meaty paw up to the back of William’s head, coaxing him back down to lay atop his chest. “I got all night, and I got all morning.”

“Until... what?” William shivered against the bear. Even his prodigious warmth wasn’t enough to stop the icy chill that wound through the hyena’s heart. Was getting to come home such a rare blessing?

It clearly was, as Daniel began to rake his claws gently down the back of William’s neck. “Until I gotta get back to the castle. Shit, I *hate* it there. Can’t believe you lived it for years.” He sighed as his claws repeated their slow stroking through William’s fur. “They’re a bit doubled up. Tryin’ to sort out rooms for all the new guardians they’re bringin’ on.”

William swallowed hard. Leena had told him about the recruitment drive that seemed to be going on, but to have it confirmed... “You’re not coming back, are you?”

“Fredrick himself couldn’t keep me away.” He squeezed tighter at William as he hyena sighed with relief. All the fears and worries he’d had regarding keeping the truth from Daniel was gone in the face of the bear’s presence. William felt like he could do anything, now that he was back in Daniel’s arms. “But I sure won’t be around as much. Once things settle, maybe. But they don’t want me around a... uh...”

He trailed off, paw falling still as William closed his eyes. “Carisi?”

“No, no. They don’t even seem to care about that, which I thought was pretty weird.” The paw resumed its stroking as William leaned up into it. The bear knew exactly what spots to hit to relax him. “Lots of ‘em are just really missin’ home. Their bonded. Husbands, wives... word from up top’s that loyalty can’t be split. Crown’s gotta come first.”

“That sounds like Fredrick.” A spark of anger broke through the warm contentment that Daniel had spread through William.

“Mmmhmm. But they’re a bit late with me.” He smiled as he kissed the top of William’s head. “Long as you’re here and we’re breathing, I’ll always be comin’ back to you. No crown and no realm’s more important than you, far as I’m concerned.”

William smiled, but the guilt that crashed in on him in the wake of that all but flushed the fresh joy from his heart. The hyena felt the same way, but his actions and decisions sure didn’t back it up. “You’d really do anything for me, wouldn’t you?”

Daniel lifted his head so that William could see his smile clearly. “Of course I would. Anything, anytime. You still got that favour you won off me, after all. Can’t keep that from you, could I?”

Despite himself, the hyena chuckled. “I think I used that up a long time ago.”

“Mmm. Maybe. I don’t even remember. I jus’ remember you coming back to the barracks after y’dad came by, and...” He leaned his head back and yawned, and despite his smile William joined in a moment later. “That was a great night.”

“I can feel how great you think it was.” William smiled back at Daniel, talking halfway through his own yawn as he ground himself lightly down against the bear’s firming malehood. “But you look a little tired for us to go and replay the past.”

Daniel’s expression turned serious in an instant. “You don’t understand, Will. These guardians got some pretty damn strict rules. No fraternising. No word outside the guardians while serving. Even frown against a male tendin’ *himself*!” He leaned in closer to William and squeezed the hyena tight. “I ain’t buried my cock nowhere, nor had anything stuffed under my tail in *weeks*. I’m damn tired. Absolutely exhausted, and I don’t even care.”

William’s eyes widened. Daniel was always forward, but the poor thing had to be so pent up... “We could always wait for morning, you know.”

“Oh, I’m plannin’ on morning seein’ us still going at it.” He frowned a little as he eased off of the hyena somewhat; his shaft all but pounding against William’s thigh. His fur was matted down, soaked through by the bear’s drooling tip. “But look, if you’re not up for it, I understand. I’ll be sad, but I’ll understand. Don’t wanna make you, but I’ll definitely have to take care of this before I get back to sleep again now you’re here.”

The hyena shuddered as he pressed himself down tighter against Daniel. The stress and strain of the rebels and everything that had happened in the weeks since he’d last seen the bear seemed so far away from him right then. Now that he was there, all of the hyena’s own forgotten needs and desires surged back to the fore. It was so typical of Daniel to be able to draw it out of him; to make him want the bear as badly as he did.

The half-truths and omissions and lies could wait. He sat up a little higher, shifting himself so that his rump ground against that drooling, pre-spurting length between the bear’s legs. He caught a groan from Daniel, low and husky. “That would be an awful waste. All that pent up seed, soaking the bed.”

“Mrrrf, I agree. Couldn’t agree more. Yeah.” Daniel nodded vigorously as he squeezed at William’s hips. “Careful, talkin’ like that. You ain’t gonna be walkin’ right tomorrow you keep that up.”

He wasn’t wrong. William could feel the heat radiating out from between Daniel’s legs and from that fat, leaking shaft nestled against his tailring. A moment’s panic set in, not for the thought of taking that monster again but for the pack he’d slid under the bed. If they went at it half as hard as they had the last time, the ramshackle repairs they’d made to the bed wouldn’t hold. It’d collapse again, and...

“I don’t have anywhere to walk to tomorrow.” William smiled as he lifted himself up and settled himself back in, the bear’s tip oozing against his tailhole. He arched his back,

leaning away from Daniel as the bear groaned. He glanced down and could see the edge of the pack, just barely free of the edge of the bed. One of the hyena's feet shifted as he moved his leg, angling down and off the bed as best he could to try and catch the strap of the pack. "I've missed you. I've missed *us*. And home doesn't even smell like home anymore."

It took a couple of tries before his toes found purchase. He swept the leg back, using the motion to grind himself all the more firmly onto Daniel's tip as he did so. The bear's moan swallowed up the sound of fabric sliding across a wooden floor, and as he closed his eyes William chanced a quick look at the floor. Sure enough, he'd pulled the pack free again. It lay there, enticing and thrilling and dangerous all at once, but it could wait.

It would wait.

He brought his leg back around and lowered himself, wriggling his hips to stroke his entrance back and forth against the bear's slick tip as he licked Daniel's nose. "So you listen to me, and you listen well. You're gonna help me make this place smell like a whorehouse before you go back to those guardians, and if I'm not walking tomorrow then you better make sure you spill so much seed tonight that you're drained for *weeks*. First, you're gonna rut me. Then, I'm gonna rut you. And then we might just do it over and over again until that's all this place'll ever smell like, until both of us have no seed left to give. Got it?"

The bear shivered as William spoke, and his paws drifted to his lover's hips. "Damn, but you got a way with words..." Those paws squeezed the hyena's hips tightly but shakily as William wriggled them, smearing the bear's pre across his hole and against the base of his tail. "Y-you sure, Will? If you put it in you, I'm... I don't know if I'll be able to stop, and..."

And that, there, was Daniel to his core. In the middle of absolute, abject need, desperate and with all the power in the world to just take what he wanted, he still had to ask permission. Still had to warn him. Still had to make sure William was okay. The hyena smiled as he kissed between the bear's eyes. This was what he had to keep safe. This precious, loving, *rutting*, beautiful creature beneath him. At all costs. "You would never hurt me."

"Damn right I wouldn't." Daniel nodded as his paws tugged slightly. They pulled William down a little, and the hyena gasped as he felt his body start to open up for Daniel's entry.

"Good." The word was a breathy moan as he braced himself against Daniel's shoulders and grinned broadly down at him. His own malehood stood to attention, twitching and dripping onto the bear's stomach as his tailring continued to spread, closer and closer to the bear's penetration. "Then don't you *dare* stop."

He pushed down through a spike of short-lived pain. Their moans joined in unison, bodies catching up to their hearts once more. That pain melted away as Daniel's hips rose, steadily forcing more and more of that thick shaft into William's body. The hyena gasped, the wind all but knocked out of him as inch after girthy inch spread him wide. His legs shook, quaking as he held on for dear life. He'd asked for it. Daniel was giving it.

And maybe it was lust, maybe it was the absence they'd been forced to endure, and maybe it was the horribleness that they'd both had to endure, but not a single damn thing stopped Daniel from sinking himself all the way into William. It wasn't all at once in a single smooth thrust, but each surged inch that pushed into the hyena set him throbbing and shaking,

all but yowling on top of Daniel. He shook, writhing and squirming and crying out all the way down the bear's cock.

He sat up by the end, paws releasing Daniel's shoulders to clench into fists as he rolled his hips down hard. He sank in the rest of the way, that pre-soaked length settling deep in his guts as William's back arched. Toes curled as he settled down into Daniel's lap, panting and seeing stars. Never again. Never again was he going to let Daniel be away for so many weeks. Not ever again.

He didn't waste a second once he was down; no sooner had his backside come to rest on Daniel's lap than the hyena was pushing himself up on shaky legs again. Maybe Daniel was too eager or maybe he saw how those trembling limbs were having trouble; the reason didn't matter so much as the result. Daniel gripped William by the hips and then, with barely a nod to pass between them, began to tug his lover along his shaft.

All control was robbed from William in that moment, and the hyena could do little more than surrender to it. His legs came up as Daniel lifted him higher, letting them twitch in the air above the bear's chest as William was worked like a toy over his lover's malehood. His eyes crossed as existence faded to a combination of sensations centred on what was going on inside him. The pain lingered, of course; it'd been a while and much like the last time they'd been together, William's had usually preferred to allow Daniel to harden up inside him to help ease him into the size of the bear's length.

It was not the case there. He'd had the whole thing, every last glorious inch of it, pushed inside him. Iron wasn't nearly as hard as Daniel's need, and it had opened him up as surely as any sword thanks to the combination of lustful drive and effluent pre-seed. Every delicious push and pull of the bear's paws on William's hips shifted him along that shaft, and the pain swiftly faded as that spot inside him was ground against over and over again. Every pulse of Daniel's heartbeat sent a new splattering of slick fluid into William's body to help ease the stretch of his muscles, but it hardly mattered. The hyena was already putty, quite literally in Daniel's paws.

And so he grit his teeth and rode it out. It was all his clenched jaw could do to simply stay quiet, gasps and moans stifled by his best efforts to keep them from waking their neighbours. Daniel himself didn't seem to have any such compunction, though; every buck of his hips to sheath himself inside William came with a grunt or a hiss of the hyena's name. Already the room reeked of sex and sweat and *male*, so familiar and so welcome. William's nostrils flared, as if to drink it in. He gasped anew when Daniel rose to meet him, their muzzles brought together once more.

It was brief as kisses went, but the vigorousness with which Daniel pulled the hyena along his malehood was too disruptive for it to be anything more than that. That didn't mean that the bear didn't hold William close, head leaned in against William's as he continued to roughly work the hyena's body around his shaft. For his part William could do nothing more than moan, slack-jawed and utterly overwhelmed by the unbridled eagerness that Daniel showed him. Normally, he held back for William's sake. In that moment there was no holding back. There was pent up need, not only for the hyena's body but for his heart. It all but pounded in his chest; William could feel it as he braced with one shaky paw against it. The echo of those

beats throbbed under the hyena's tail as he cast concern for anyone else's ears aside and let out a long, guttural yowl of pleasure.

Daniel trembled against him at the sound, and he joined in with a moan of his own as William repeated the sound. His feet brushed the wall behind the bed, claws gouging into them with every toe-curling tug downward onto Daniel's shaft. His cries cut off in surprise as his eyes went wide; Daniel lifted him almost completely off his flesh and then pulled him all the way back down again. William had almost not been ready, tailhole flexing around Daniel's tip alone for a second before he sank around the full length once more.

That was when he felt the flood stirring inside him. William's eyes rolled back into his head as felt each hot, sticky jet shooting up into his body. Any of the aches he might have felt were banished as his inner walls were hosed down by the bear's backed-up load. Daniel's roar might have shaken the walls as he held William in place, surging up into him in thick waves.

William joined his moans as every pulse caused the bear's shaft to flex inside him, twitching against that special spot and teasing still more pre out of the hyena's own painfully-hard shaft. It throbbed angrily, desperately in search of its own release, but that was the last thing on William's mind at that moment. His thoughts lay deep inside himself as his muscles worked around Daniel's shaft with desperate abandon, milking him for every pent-up drop he had to offer.

Even as he continued to unload, Daniel was already panting in William's ear. The apologies came as thick and fast as his seed, the bear left to babble almost incoherently to him even as his seed began to leak out around his buried shaft. "Sssshit, s-sorry- *damn* I'm so-orry, I-"

"Don't stop." William don't know where the words came from, but they left his muzzle with absolute conviction and total confidence. He leaned back, grinding himself firmly into Daniel's gradually soaking lap. The smell of the bear's seed hit William's nose and he growled, pushing down even harder. "I want it... give me *all* of it..."

When he managed to focus his eyes again on Daniel, the bear seemed surprised and exhausted in equal measure. The flood of his seed seemed to slow down somewhat, even as his shaft flexed again inside the hyena. William groaned and shivered, eyes lidded. They didn't close so much that he couldn't see Daniel's expression sharpen; both the surprise and exhaustion melted as a lustful glint sparkled in his gaze. His paws squeezed tight. Pulled. *Lifted*.

Any argument William was going to make was stollen as the fat head of the bear's shaft caught on his tailring for a moment. His words turned into a whimper instead as Daniel popped free, leaving a quick gush of his spent seed to spill out between his legs and right into their bed. If he cared, William couldn't tell. The hyena sure didn't, as before he had a chance to ask Daniel what he was doing or thinking, the bear had already turned him over. William found himself pushed down onto paws and knees, chest just barely above the spilled mess from Daniel's pulling out. He couldn't help but dip his head somewhat, sniffing at the scent of spilled seed. The scent of rut and of Daniel's body mingled with it. It was right. It was *good*. His tongue lolled out as he let his head collapse just shy of the spillage.

He was rocked as Daniel shifted on the bed; it groaned and creaked with his motion, but William didn't care any about that, either. They were about to break it again, and that was

just fine with him. As Daniel settled in between the hyena's legs, William spread them wide and hiked his tail up. Spent seed dripped from it and trickled between his cheeks to tickle the back of his balls, and he shuddered. So much for taking turns.

William's head hit the pillow hard as Daniel pushed into him once again. For all the stickiness of the load he'd just pumped into the hyena, his shaft met almost no resistance from his lover that time. He was hilted in a single glorious second, sheathed once more inside William. His cries were muffled by the pillow, nostrils sucking in the scent of the bear through the fabric as Daniel's moan of pleasure cleanly entered his ears. He mashed his hips to William's rump with a wet *slap*, his spent fluids splattering between their bodies even as it dripped from the hyena's overstuffed rump onto the bed again.

He couldn't think about anything else. It all fell away as his entire existence narrowed to just Daniel. It was always how it had been; that in those carnal moments with their bodies joined, nothing else in all the world could matter. Not kings or gods, not rebels or armies. It was just William and Daniel, together. Doubts and deception and roles and pretending was for another day. Daniel had needs. William had needs. They needed one another.

And neither was going to get any sleep that night.