

Interwoven

NECESSITY: PART TWO

80th Day of the Verdant Growths, 27 AoE

The training yard was more of an arena than anywhere else in Sanwell, and that day it had done the job admirably. Cordoned off from the citizenry of the city, a mixed force of the army, the Guardians of Ratholarin, and even a spattering of kingsblades stood in silence as they observed the warriors in the heart of the yard.

One of them was William. His eyes were fixed on the other, a frankly massive watch captain whom he knew only as Lewis. He flexed his fingers around his training sword's hilt as he watched Lewis circle him. He wasn't the first opponent that William had been asked to fight that day, but he was certainly the last.

And though he wouldn't admit it, William was glad of that fact. His eyes unerringly traced the motion of the horse as he strode around him. The training sword in his paw, so much lighter than the weapons he was used to wielding, lifted to point toward his opponent as he shifted his footing to better protect himself. Countless eyes were on him. He couldn't afford a moment of weakness. He couldn't afford to fail.

No sooner had his feet shifted than Lewis charged. Despite the rush, his swing was tight and controlled. William deflected the blow up and away from his head with his own weapon, but the force of the blow was enough to knock him back. He tucked into a roll and rose from it into a dusty crouch, his weapon back up before Lewis had even rounded toward him again.

The horse seemed surprised that William was still upright, and much less happy at the smile on the hyena's muzzle. The strike reminded William much of himself, the day he'd arrived in that very training yard so many years ago. He'd grown. Lewis, clearly, had not. "Come on. You're better than that, aren't you?"

"Silence during the duel." The reprimand came from Prince Brett, standing roughly to William's back amidst a selection of his guardians. William rolled his eyes and rose into a combat stance. Lewis began to circle him once more, and the hyena sighed. Predictable. He shifted his stance.

Again, as if trying to take advantage of William's altered position, Lewis charged forward. The swing was much the same as before, sharp and vicious in its arc up toward William's face. Now that he knew what to expect though, William was able to adjust his block. His boots skidded back a couple dusty inches from where he stood, but Lewis' weapon was harmlessly deflected up and over William's head once more.

That time though, Lewis turned around much quicker. He brought his weapon around and thrust forward, only for William to parry the blow with superior speed. He took a step back as Lewis followed up with another sideways swing. William leaned away. Lewis' sword swung up and over his head, and he brought it down with a roar.

In the moment before it struck, William *tsk'd* to himself. Sloppy.

Little more than a sidestep was required to see Lewis' sword strike the ground. It splintered, shards going every which way as William backed away once more. He smirked and shook his head at Lewis, and the horse's nostrils flared. He tossed aside the broken handle of his sword and glowered as he made a low, menacing approach. William reversed his blade, holding it behind him with his free arm raised defensively. This would be quick.

The first punch was leaned back from. The second saw William swing his arm up to block it. The hyena stepped in, one leg deftly planted behind the horse's as he swung his other arm up to bring his sword to Lewis' throat. Instinct took hold and the horse stepped back. He tripped on the hyena's leg, yelping as he stumbled. He toppled to the ground, landing hard with a meaty *thud*. By the time his eyes were able to focus again, William's boot was on his chest and the tip of his sword was pressed to Lewis' throat. "Yield."

It almost seemed for a second as though the horse wouldn't, but after a moment he allowed his arms to flop out to either side of his body. He lay limp, chest heaving slowly as William watched him. Wary for any deceit, William lifted his foot off Lewis' chest. "Well fought, friend."

The words had barely left his muzzle before Lewis moved. One of his arms snapped up to bat aside William's sword, and he hooked a leg out to try and swipe the hyena's legs out from beneath him. William grunted as he jumped up and over that sweeping leg, glaring down at the fuming horse beneath him. It was without pleasure – but admittedly with a moderate sense of satisfaction – that he swung his training sword down and cracked it across the horse's muzzle.

Blood and a couple of teeth were scattered across the ground, and Lewis cried out in pain. He started to rise, only for William's boot to land on his throat instead. It pushed him back down, and the horse's grunt of pain and anger was turned into a vain gurgle. "The fight is over! Now yield, while you still have the ability to speak!"

"Enough."

Again the call came from Brett, but William warily kept himself in place for a moment. He watched as Lewis seethed beneath his boot, eyes full of anger and fire as he stared up at his vanquisher. William hissed to himself as he pulled his boot back, and that time he took more than a couple of steps back so as to avoid any further attempts by Lewis to strike him. He lowered his sword but didn't release his grip on it as he moved around the downed horse.

He didn't stop until both Lewis and Brett were in view. The horse was sitting up, rubbing at his jaw and glaring at William with absolute fury in his eyes. Brett, by contrast, stood tall in his guardian armour and looked almost bored with the fight he'd just witnessed. "William. What was that just now?"

The urge to glare at the prince was strong, but the hyena denied it. Instead he sank down to a knee, his blade flat across it as he bowed his head. "I don't take your meaning, my prince."

"That strike. While Lewis was on the ground." There was an irritated edge to Brett's words, and they only grew sharper as William lifted his head to fix the tiger with a quizzical stare. "Is that the sort of honourable behaviour we can expect out of you as a kingsblade?"

“Exactly so, my prince.” William couldn’t help but growl as Lewis rose. He didn’t turn back to attack William, but the look in his eyes betrayed his desire to do just that. “I showed my opponent mercy. He took advantage of that mercy to attack me. I extended mercy to him again.”

“And your opponent was not a threat to you.” Brett sighed and shook his head. “These trials are to determine who will become the newest kingsblade in King Fredrick’s service, and you treat this engagement like a real fight. Captain Lewis was clearly pulling his punches.”

Once more, William’s eyes flicked to the horse. He snorted back at William. Pulling his punches was the one thing Lewis hadn’t done. “I treat every engagement like a real fight, my prince. That is why I have defeated *every* opponent before me today.” He bowed his head so that no one could see the snarl that crept across his muzzle. The words he had to speak tasted like bile. “It is my honour to kneel here before you, champion of King Fredrick. It would be my honour to stand as his kingsblade.”

“That will not be necessary.”

William blinked. The words had barely left him, their foul taste lingering on his tongue when Brett had replied. He lifted his head, committing immediately the disservice of looking the prince square in the eye as one of the guardians at his side stepped forward to help Lewis up to his feet. “My prince? I don’t understand.”

“Many qualities have been weighed today to determine who will be the next kingsblade for King Fredrick.” Brett folded his arms. One of the other guardians near him had turned to regard the prince, and even though his armour and helmet gave away nothing of his species, his size and shape made it clear to William at least that it was Daniel. Clearly he was as surprised as William was. “And it is true, you have been undefeated in your efforts in combat. None match your skill with a blade. Yet your fighting style is not... conventional.”

The hyena’s fingers squeezed tight at the hilt of his sword as he watched Lewis’ expression change. Clearly he had realised that William’s victory meant nothing. “It is effective. My prince, I have demonstrated this quite clearly.”

Brett’s expression soured as William felt the blood in his veins start to boil. “And then there is the question of your parentage. Lewis, son of Lewis is of fine Ratholarin stock. You, William, fatherless, are of Carisi blood.”

“Born within Ratholarin. Raised in Ratholarin. Champion of Ratholarin’s forces against Carisi rebels and old magic time and again.” His voice was forceful and firm. He would not allow Brett or anyone else there to think for a moment he was pleading. Better that they think him fiercely interested in the position, not that he *needed* it. “I am William, son of *Zane*. Kingsblade of distinction, and one of the most honoured warriors Ratholarin has seen in generations.”

“Your service is *why* you have been allowed to remain within Ratholarin when so many of your fellows have been banished from these lands.” Brett shook his head and nodded toward the hyena. “And then, finally, there is the question of your proclivities. You were bonded to a *male*.”

William allowed his snarl to spread across his face. This, in particular, was something he had known was coming for years. Ever since Fredrick ascended the throne, he had merely waited to see Fredrick villainise him and many others in such a manner. “Annulled. In accordance with the laws of King Fredrick.” He raised his left paw. No rings adorned his fingers.

The guardian whom he believed to be Daniel looked down. His shoulders fell just a little more slack as Brett shook his head. “Am I to believe that your perversion disappeared the moment our king issued an edict? Has he that sort of godly power, Captain?”

“You are to believe what you have seen and know to be true. That I am the equal of every combatant you have placed before me.” As Brett scoffed, William felt a moment’s panic. Leena had been clear. There would not be a chance like this again, and too many people had been suffering. This challenge to join the kingsblades was one William *needed* to win. He had to take that position. “I am *beyond* the equal of every warrior you have selected. If you pit the half dozen next-best warriors against me all at once, I would still stand victorious above them!”

The quiet murmuring that had gone around the training yard’s observers vanished the instant William made his boast. The maybe-Daniel guardian’s head snapped toward William, and it gave the smallest shake. William ignored it as Brett began to smile. “A bold claim. Are you certain you truly want to make it?”

“Any time. Any place.” William tilted his head up and set his jaw. Brett looked absolutely thrilled by what he was hearing. “Only the best should be given the right and the privilege of protecting his majesty. Six of the best candidates today. All at once. You need but tell me when the fight is to take place.”

Brett fell silent, but he still stepped forward. Every pair of eyes around the training yard was fixed on him as he approached the hyena, and William tensed up just in case the prince was about to attack him personally for speaking out of turn. The smile on his face said otherwise; he looked absolutely pleased with everything that had happened. “Tomorrow morning. No training weapons. Proper armaments and armour. Iron, not wood. Realistic combat situation.” His eyes narrowed as his smile slipped. “Blood drawn, but no death.”

“I find the terms agreeable, my prince.” William didn’t bow his head, but held Brett’s stare evenly. He wouldn’t give the bastard the satisfaction of seeing him as something so little ever again. “By your leave, I will go to prepare.”

“Of course.” Brett turned away from him and raised his voice. “There will be one final trial! William, son of... *heh*, Zane, has triumphed over all challengers. He has issued a challenge of his own, and I have accepted it on behalf of His Majesty, King Fredrick the Second of Ratholarin. Six challengers, all at once, to determine his worthiness to stand as kingsblade!

“The fight will be here, tomorrow morning after breakfast.” Brett’s eyes fell on Lewis, and he nodded to the horse with a tight smile. Lewis nodded back. “Should William fail in his challenge, then it will be my honour to convey Lewis, son of Lewis, to the castle for a meeting with King Fredrick. His humility and skill shall see him otherwise become the newest kingsblade of the crown.”

More than a few cheers went up for Lewis, and William had to fight to hide the roll of his eyes. Of course they thought him unworthy. Everyone always did. He watched as Brett

turned back to him, and he nodded once to William. "I salute your confidence. May it not be misplaced, Captain... for your sake."

There was nothing for William to say to that. He simply nodded once as Brett turned away from him. All around him, the gathered crowd began to disperse and spread back out. They had other duties to attend to, after all. His eyes found the guardian he thought had to be Daniel. A slow shake of the figure's head was all that the bear would have been capable of, and that was exactly what he offered William. The hyena lowered his head again. Of course Daniel didn't approve. That was fine. He didn't have to.

The hyena rose from his kneeling position and glanced over at Lewis. The horse was lingering, still talking to a couple of other watch members. When he noticed William's stare, his eyes hardened noticeably. He glared back at the hyena and gave a disapproving shake of his head. It seemed that was all anyone wanted to offer him. "Yeah, shake all you like. Kicked *your* arse, didn't I?"

The words were too quiet for Lewis to have heard him, but it was clear the horse knew he'd said something. He started toward William, only for his fellows to hold him back. The hyena chuckled and turned his back on Lewis. He needed to get home. He needed to get rest. The fighting had been long and rough and while he'd escaped injury that day, there was no doubt in William's mind that the next would see that change dramatically.

Real weapons. Full armour. Terrible odds. He sighed. Leena had better know what she was doing, he thought to himself. Trusting her was always a gamble, and as enticing as this opportunity was? Well, it wouldn't do him any good if he was too dead to collect on the reward.

Nor, he reckoned, would lingering on it. The circumstances were not ideal. The situation had been stacked against him. There was only one option: win. Become a kingsblade. Sidle up next to Fredrick and stick a blade in his back. End the madness.

Maybe afterward, Daniel would even be able to look him in the eye.

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The silence of home had been maddening, and so William hadn't lingered there for long. He'd spent some time at the home of Geoffery, the fox having retired some years ago from the army. His old commander was as troubled by what William had agreed to as Daniel seemed to be. More than once over tea the old vulpine had told William to drop the whole thing, take the hit to his pride, and let it go. That living would be better than the alternative.

It had been a hard thing to hear. This once-great warrior, a commander whom William had respected and fought beside for years, telling him that he was doomed to failure was something close to physically painful. He'd not lingered too long after that, though Geoffery had at least offered him some tactical advice for the fight in the morning. He'd also vowed to attend, even if only to serve as witness to one of his favourite student's final moments. It had been a bittersweet declaration for William.

Bittersweet, however, had been better than arrival back home again. He'd been greeted by lit lamps in the living space, and an armoured but helm-less Daniel. The bear looked distinctly uncomfortable as William entered their home, and no sooner had William closed the door than he spread his arms wide. "What in the world are you *thinking*?"

William sighed. And off they went. “Clearly nothing. Not a single person seems interested in offering me an ounce of support in this endeavour.”

“Because what you’re doing is suicide, Will!” Daniel stepped forward, and his voice lowered again quickly as he grabbed the hyena by his shoulders. “Shit, jus’ listen to me, please. Please, this one time. You don’t know what you’re gettin’ into.”

The hyena frowned and prised Daniel’s gauntleted paws off his shoulders. “Of course I know what I’m getting into. They’re going to try and kill me.”

Daniel blinked as William started past him. He snapped out of it as the hyena passed him by and grabbed his wrist to turn him back around. “What d... how do you know?”

“Come on. You heard Brett out there. I’m everything they hate.” He nodded to Daniel as the bear scowled. “And so are you, for that matter. It’s good that they didn’t know that their great, strapping guardian was my husband.”

“And that too. It’s not *was* anything, is it?” His eyes were wide, almost pleading as William turned back to him. His heart sank at the sight of Daniel’s face. He looked so *hurt*.

“Of course it’s not.” The reassurance did nothing for the bear, so William reached up to pull him by the armour down to his level. He planted a quick, soft kiss on Daniel’s muzzle, and sighed as he touched his forehead to the bear’s. “I mean... it *is*, but that’s just royal decree. I didn’t wear the rings today for the same reason you’ve not worn them since becoming a guardian.”

Daniel nodded, and he nosed into the hyena’s cheek. “I was worried. I know I’m not around as much as I want to be. Barely see you as-is, and I just... I’m scared for you, Will. I’m damn terrified.” He took a deep breath and once more grasped at William’s shoulders as he leaned back. “It’s like y’said. They don’t know *you’re* my bonded. Overheard Brett talkin’ about their orders.”

“To kill me.” William nodded to himself. The knowledge that it wasn’t just a theory in his mind but a solid fact that Daniel could bring him lent him a certain, strange calm. Like it was something that he had under control. “What’s the plan?”

The bear’s eyes narrowed as he scanned William’s face, but whatever he was looking for he clearly didn’t find. “Just that. They won’t be holdin’ back. They get what they want two ways, really.” He held up a single finger. “First’s pretty simple. They gut you and toss you in a shallow grave.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.” He cocked his head as Daniel’s frown deepened. “What? Am I not allowed to be confident going into this?”

“Given what they’re throwin’ at you? Probably not. Can you take this seriously, please? You know how hard it is to scare me.” William couldn’t help but sigh. The bear had him there. He’d seen Daniel charge into battle against bad odds before with no fear in his eyes, but he always worried – these days more than ever before – about William. And about them as a pair.

It wasn’t right or fair to puff himself up before the bear. Daniel deserved as much honesty as William could spare him. As much as he could spare and not a single bit more. “I’m

sorry, love. I promise I *am* taking this seriously. So the gutting and shallow grave is the first way... what's the second?"

Daniel's scowl eased back, and he nodded as he raised another finger. "The second is if you're playin' the game their way. They're out to kill you, but if you maim or kill any of them... well, it'd be as good as gettin' yourself killed." He closed his eyes. "If you so much as lop off a *finger*, they'll say you're mad. Out to kill them in the duel. Charge you a murderer and it's off to the gallows."

"Even though they're trying to kill me." William sighed and shook his head. "Of course there's a double standard. Why would this be any different?" He stepped in closer to Daniel as the bear opened his eyes again, and William's paws traced up over his armour until they found purchase on the bear's shoulders. "What do you suggest?"

"Desertion."

The word came so matter-of-fact and so quickly that William wasn't certain that he'd heard it right at first. When he searched the bear's eyes for a hint of a joke and found nothing, he was forced to admit that maybe Daniel had said precisely what he meant. "Desertion."

"We leave. We just ruttin' *go*, you'n me." The bear brushed an armoured finger gently down William's cheek. "We pack everythin' we got and get out tonight. Make a run 'cross the river. March east, head for Ingsbren. Hunt what we gotta eat, and avoid the towns."

William's eyebrows lifted. The idea was madness. "You wanna leave Ratholarin? *You*? You love it here."

"Used to. Ain't my Ratholarin anymore, and it sure as shit ain't yours neither." He cupped William's cheek and his eyes bored into the hyena's. "I said it years ago. We could just go drop out of the army and become sellswords. Mercenaries. Only difference is now I'm sayin' we *should* leave Ratholarin to do it."

It was all William could do to blink in surprise. This was such a sudden turn from Daniel; an absolute reversal from all he'd ever known of the bear. He'd known that Daniel loved him, no matter what edicts that Fredrick could lay down, but this? "I can't do that to you. This is home. Our home."

The bear's face hardened as he leaned in and touched his forehead again to William's. "It *ain't*. That's what I'm saying, Will. My home's with you. Anywhere, as long as it's with you. You got me? And I want your home to be with me. We can have a home anywhere long as we're together, but what's happening in Ratholarin, what Fredrick's doing... we can't be here. We can't be *us* here."

It was almost exactly the sort of in that William had hoped for over the last few years. Every time he'd seen Daniel in every fleeting speck of time they were able to scrounge up together he'd hoped for just this conversation to happen. For Daniel to realise what was going on, and to want to stand against it. He leaned into the gauntleted paw on his cheek.

But this wasn't that conversation. Daniel wasn't talking about standing up to Fredrick. He was talking about fleeing. He wasn't a rebel. He definitely wasn't just a coward either, though he knew Leena would call him precisely that. "I've come so far now... I need to do this. I need to prove I can do this."

The paw dropped away. When he looked up at Daniel's face again, the bear looked stunned. "Even *if* you survive... if you beat 'em all without getting' killed or killin' them in the process, what does that leave you? You get to be one of *Fredrick's* kingsblades. Protect the son of a bitch who's done this to us?"

Just long enough to cut his throat myself. The words, so tantalisingly close on his lips, almost slipped out. He wondered what Daniel would make of it. Would he approve? Would he argue? Would he look at William as something worse than a deserter; would he see a traitor there instead? "You've been a guardian these last few years. You're serving *Fredrick* too."

"That ain't the same. I didn't have a choice in the matter; I didn't choose to become a guardian. It got forced on me, but you're *choosing* this and..." Daniel sank down to his knees. His armour clanked against the floor as he knelt before William, his head reaching roughly up to the bottom of the hyena's chest. "William. Please. I'll kill every single person 'tween us and a way out just as long as you come with me." He reached up to offer his paw. "I just need you to say you'll come with me. Come *with* me, Will. Please. *Please.*"

That was it.

That, right there, was it.

That was the precise moment William felt his heart break.

Everything in him screamed to take the bear's paw. To grab it and nod; to go with him and pack up everything they had; to snatch up his Carisi sword and wear it with more pride than the Ratholarin blade he was forced to use; to fight anyone who tried to stop them from fleeing the pain and oppression and hatred that had festered so long and now bubbled to the surface in great, foul geysers.

As the shards of his heart settled in the pit of William's stomach, he reached out to Daniel's paw to gently push it back. "If I do this... if I *run*? I won't be able to make anything better here."

"There's no makin' this better, Will." Tears ran down the bear's cheeks as he stared up at William. "What he's doin' and what he's gonna do? It's evil. It's just pure, pure evil. This whole kingdom's gonna collapse and he's not gonna care. He'll just sit on his throne and laugh as it burns down."

Not if I gut him before he can. "And what about all the people? All the poor Ratholarin people who'll suffer as the realm burns?" Daniel's paw dropped away as William gestured toward the door. "Sold to Sylarian slavers? Sacrificed by Marovani cultists begging the Apex to return to deliver them from their own collapsing empire? *Children*, Daniel. Children all over the realm in danger because of *Fredrick*."

"He won't hear you." Daniel gripped William's wrists tightly enough to almost hurt the hyena. "You gotta know that, Will. There's not a single damn person in that castle that'll see you as anything more than a tool and you *know* it."

That was true, but completely unnecessary in the face of William's goals. He steeled himself with everything that he had as he held Daniel's stare. The bear's tears flowed freely; the terror was plain in those wide, shining eyes. He shook; William could feel it in his grip. "I don't know what you want, Will. I don't know what you're tryin' to do. Tryin' to prove... I

don't know. I don't get it. I *can't* get it. Please." His fingers squeezed again. "Please just... just come away with me. Now, tonight. Forget everyone else... just let me save *you*."

William crouched down, then let himself kneel right in front of Daniel. It put the bear above him again, and he leaned in to wrap his arms tight around his lover. Part of it was because he wanted to just hold the bear close. Part of it was so that he wouldn't see William starting to cry as well. "And what about all those other people? People I could help... people we could save. I can't leave them, Daniel. I have to try."

"Even if that means dying? Even if that means *helping* Fredrick?" Daniel pulled William back in front of him and held him there, staring at him through his tears. "Never. You'd *never* help him. You're more as like to lop his head off."

There it was. There was the chance that William had waited and hoped for after so many years. "What if I did?" The words, long repressed, came out in a tense whisper.

Daniel's response, whatever it was going to be, choked off immediately. He scanned William's face closely, as if seeking any sign of a joke. As he did, the hyena shook his head. "Maybe one day it'll come to it. Maybe someone'll have to stop him. If I'm right at his side—"

"Then you're still dead. Damn it all, Will; that's... not even a little bit funny!" Daniel glanced around quickly, as if someone might have heard their hushed whispers. "You stick a blade in the king and you think you're gettin' out of that castle alive? The city; the realm? They'd hunt you halfway around the world if you did get out, and then? You'll still be dead!"

"And maybe something better would come after it all. Maybe the next king would be better, or at least learn from Fredrick's mistakes." William shook his head and sighed. Of course Daniel didn't like the idea. William didn't like it either; he'd brought up the same concerns to Leena years ago. On the other paw, he did know a little more than Daniel thought he did. "And if I did die for that... so what?"

"So... so what?" Daniel grit his teeth as he stood up, all but hauling William with him. "So what if you're *dead*? Don't you dare ask me to imagine that, after all we been through!"

"We've been soldiers together for years! Either one of us could have died anytime!" William's voice started to rise along with Daniel's, and he poked the bear right in his chestplate. "We discussed that before we wore those rings; before we were even together. We spoke about what it meant, being in our lines of work. We decided it, and promised it when we were bonded. Never one without the other, remember?"

"So that we could *stay* together!" Daniel desperately clutched William's shoulders. "And now they're makin' it so that's not just illegal, but impossible for us to stay together." He sighed. "I know you wanna help people Will, but you're just... you're gonna get yourself killed for the same people who'd gladly cut your head off jus' for bein' who you are. Who we are. You're not gonna be able to help them, and they'll kill you for trying."

William shook his head. "And if someone that they would do that to could stand up and show them a better way; that a filthy Carisi *tailraiser* could serve with distinction and honour, it undermines everything that the king is trying to do. A Carisi and a tailraiser, surpassing every Ratholarin warrior in the realm... it makes them confront it, Daniel. It forces them – it forces *everyone* – to see the truth."

“They don’t care about the truth and you know it!” Daniel squeezed him tighter. “Please, Will. I won’t keep begging. Please just... stop. Just stop, and come away with me before it’s too late.”

The hyena’s heart might have broken all over again, if it weren’t already shattered into a million pieces. He stared into Daniel’s eyes; the eyes of the male who had stood beside him every step of the way since he’d met him. Damn Leena. Damn Fredrick. Damn those rebels and kings and armies and guardians and insurrectionists and *all* of it. He wanted nothing more than to take the bear’s paw and do it. Just run. Just run so far, and so fast, that Ratholarin would be nothing but a distant memory.

Damn them all. “I can’t, Daniel. I just... I can’t. I’m sorry.”

He’d not thought that it would be possible to feel worse until Daniel’s face took on an expression of absolute, abject defeat. It was like the life had drained out of his eyes; that vibrant, joyful spark finally laid to rest. Not by an enemy blade, but by William’s words and deeds. He’d done that, the hyena realised. This was on him.

Daniel’s paws slid off William’s shoulders to hang limp at his sides. He remained silent a moment longer. It was almost like he was waiting for something; for some change of heart in William perhaps, or for the hyena to come to his senses. “I could do... almost *anything* for you.” There was no tone. No emotion. No trace of Daniel in the words.

William swallowed the lump in his throat. “Almost?”

“Almost. I can’t... what you’re doin’ here? Whatever it is? You’re just... gonna get yourself killed. This is suicide.” Daniel backed toward the door as William stared after him. “Are you really gonna do that? Make me choose between watchin’ you die and walkin’ away from you?”

The hyena’s eyes squeezed tightly shut. The words stabbed deep into his chest as his claws scratched the pads of his paws. “Maybe... if you’re here, it’s not suicide. Maybe with you, it’s... maybe there’s a chance.” He swallowed again and looked up to meet the deadened eyes of the bear he loved. “I need to do this, but I don’t know if I can do it without you. We’ve done everything else together. One last thing, Daniel. Please?”

He’d barely begun to ask when Daniel turned away from him. A sob boiled up in William’s throat, choked off before it could escape him. Daniel reached for the door. Paused, and hung his head.

Then it happened all at once. He gripped the door. Pulled it open. Stepped out into the night. Door slammed.

Gone.

He was gone.

He was just... gone.

Daniel was gone.

The echo of the door’s slam seemed to linger, bouncing off the walls of their home forever. It rattled within William’s skull as the tears he’d forcefully held back were allowed to

flow free, untempered, in hot streams down his cheeks and muzzle. Daniel was gone, and worst of all was the thought that followed immediately after it.

That this was exactly what Tobias had done to *him*.

William collapsed to the floor. He curled in on himself as everything broke free inside him. Pain and anger and sadness swirled into a maelstrom that erupted from his muzzle like the wail of a banshee. He screamed into his paws, unable to do anything beyond open his mouth and let everything he felt rush out at once.

Breathlessness arrived, and with it came a cap on what he could vent. William took a breath, shaky and ragged as he lifted his head to repeat the process, but nothing came out. Whatever dark hole of emotion had bloomed inside of him at the loss of the bear had snuffed it all out. That one sharp moment; that one abject cry of loss and pain and then he just... stopped. His throat was raw, his breaths raspy. William's eyes burned, but the tears had stalled. He hurt. Everything hurt. Tips of his ears to the tip of his tail. The emotional pain turned physical; it pulsed and pounded through his veins, and it did so silently. Burning, from the inside out. Leena had said that would happen, he remembered.

It took the work of a few moments for William to lift himself into a sitting position. Almost a minute, before he was able to rise to his knees. Longer still before he could stand. He thought as little as he could as he fought to reclaim control of his legs, but he couldn't help it. His thoughts dwelled not just on Daniel and what all had just happened, but Tobias.

The burning intensified inside as William remembered that day with crystal clarity. Tobias had known things that William had not. He'd had responsibilities that William hadn't been able to comprehend. His path had drawn him far away from the hyena. And then, at a critical moment, Tobias had hurt him. He had been wrong. William knew that to be true, each and every day that had followed. Tobias had been wrong to do that to him.

But as he stumbled toward the bedroom in order to find a way to steady himself, he knew he had just done the same to Daniel. What if he could have revealed everything? What if he could have come clean? What if he had simply trusted Daniel to understand what he was doing, and to be there with him as he did them? He loved the bear more than he had ever loved Tobias. Their life together had been a beautiful thing... a thing he may have destroyed, just as Tobias had destroyed what they had had. What they could have had.

William sighed as he slumped against the dresser, dragging it back from the wall with a grunt. Everything Tobias had done after that day had been an avoidance of responsibility. An inability to admit that he had been wrong. That was the advantage that William had over the tiger, he realised as he reached behind the dresser to the book he knew was there. There had not been a moment since he'd started on his journey with Leena where he hadn't known where it would lead.

He'd feared it. He'd fled it as best he could; delayed the time that he would have to face it. All of that had come to naught in the end, as the hyena braced himself against the dresser again. He set the heavy book down on top of the wooden surface and tugged an unlit oil lamp closer. It had always been leading to a point much like this. Today, tomorrow, the next day... eventually, there would have been a line Daniel wouldn't be able to cross. A line William already had.

He touched his forehead to the book and heaved a tired sigh. Maybe the bear would forgive him one day. Maybe they could meet on the road or in the marketplace. See each other in a crowd. Maybe he'd even smile. William couldn't see that happening any more than he could see the pages of the book he pulled open.

But that much, at least, he could fix. He reached out to the oil lamp as the burning in his blood raced up his veins. Down his arms and into his paw. Concentrated, like his mind. His spirit. His whole self. William's whole body ached.

The flame that sparked from his bare finger to light the lamp, however, did not.