

Interwoven

NECESSITY: PART FOUR

81st Day of the Verdant Growths, 27 AoE

Sleep had been hard for William, but getting out of bed had been harder still. His blood no longer boiled with overwhelming emotions. The book had clarified it all, of course; the process of energies that lay dormant exposed when control was severed in the face of strong feelings. The years and years that priests and shamans of various cultures would train themselves to control and shape not only those energies, but their emotions themselves.

The hyena was no shaman. He was no priest. He was just a lone male, a soldier, and completely out of his depth. Half the night had been spent ridding himself of the fire that burned almost literally inside him. The other half of the night had been spent collapsed in bed, too exhausted even to sleep. He had eventually succumbed to that temporary oblivion, and it had been a sweet respite that the hyena had not felt he deserved.

It had been unfortunately brief, as the rising sun and his own years of routine keeping him from sleeping too late in the day prevented William from remaining within sleep's embrace. Even so he had lingered in bed, staring at the ceiling as he turned everything that his life was over and over. Leena, and the rebels. Daniel, his love. The people he wanted to help. The people it would cost him. What he could do. What he could not.

He had been so deep in thought that it wasn't until a metallic clang could be heard elsewhere in the house that William snapped upright. He frowned, but the sound wasn't repeated. Instead, there was the distant sense that someone was moving about in the next room. The hyena rolled out of the bed and reached under it for the knife sheathed there. He crept silently forward, blade bared before him as he reached the door. Paused, until he heard footsteps again. Someone was definitely in his home. With grit teeth, the hyena pulled the door open and stepped forward.

It was Daniel.

He'd come back.

He froze immediately, blade in paw as the bear whirled on him. He looked as ragged as William himself felt, with dirty and mussed fur and deeply tired eyes. The faint smell of alcohol tickled William's nostrils; Daniel hadn't been there all night, for sure. And yet, despite the dishevelled appearance of the bear in front of him and the pungent mixture of smells that drowned out that familiar musk; despite the words and the hurt feelings of the night before; the struggles and the pain and the things that had ripped them apart... he was there. Stood by a chair, with William's leathers in his paw, and his sheathed sword resting against the wall.

William's knife was dropped to the ground all at once. By the time it had fallen still, he'd knocked the armour out of Daniel's paws and replaced it with himself, all but thrown into

the bear's embrace. He squeezed tightly at his lover, and he sighed with relief when Daniel's arms closed down around him again in turn. "I thought I lost you."

"I thought I lost *you*." Daniel kissed the top of William's head and gently pried the hyena back from him. William stared up into his eyes; the bear must have been up all night doing whatever it was he had been doing. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry. I never should have put you in this position." William shook his head as he lifted a paw to stroke down the bear's cheek. The fur was pointier than normal; it was clear he'd not been the only one crying last night. "It's wrong of me to expect you to stand beside me through something you don't understand. I shouldn't drag you into whatever it is I'm doing."

"And I shouldn't have to understand what you're doin' to support you doin' it." One of Daniel's arms slid around William's waist while the other tilted his chin up so that the bear could nuzzle down against his muzzle. "I'm scared of it. You doin' this thing. But whatever it is you think you need to do, you don't gotta do it alone. I don't want you to. I want to be there with you. Stand with you, no matter what anyone else says or does." He leaned back just far enough to kiss the tip of William's nose. "I love you."

William sighed as he leaned up to gently return the kiss. "I love you too, Daniel. And no matter what happens, that's never, *never* going to change. Won't matter what the king declares or what they put in place to stop me." He sighed as he lifted his head to look the bear in the eye again. "I wish I could make you understand."

"I wish I could talk you out of it." Daniel tugged William closer, and the hyena lay his head down against the bear's chest. He felt Daniel's chin sink to rest between his ears. "But I know I can't. I can't, and I had t'choose if I wanted to run away, or stay with you. I never wanna leave you. I want to help you, but I just wish it wasn't... *this*."

Another sigh escaped the hyena as he closed his eyes. He'd harboured a faint hope that maybe, with Daniel's return he would be open to the prospect of maybe joining in his plot. It seemed to still just be a step too far for the bear to handle, and that cast a dark pall over everything else that the morning had brought him.

Still, his bear was back. Daniel was still his, and he was still Daniel's. He reached his paw out to take one of the bear's, and their fingers laced together as William smiled. He could at least be glad of that much. "Thanks for coming back."

"Thanks for taking me back. I, uh..." Daniel squeezed William's paw before he let go and stepped back, waving toward the hyena's sword. "It's not much, but I figured you'd sleep about as much as I did. Wanted to take care of somethin' for you... got your sword all oiled, and I was about to start on your armour."

William smiled as he looked down at his sword. It was the Carisi sword he'd taken from Herovir, the first time he'd ever felt the sting of magic for real. If he'd known then what it would cost him... "I don't think they'll let me use the Carisi blade."

"I don't think you'll give 'em a choice." Daniel shook his head as his eyes sharpened, but his smile was back regardless. He still looked scruffy, but much more like himself. The sight of that grin warmed William's heart more than any magic could. "You wanna show 'em

what a Carisi warrior can do? You wanna make ‘em confront you? You’re gonna do it with the right sword.”

Daniel was right, of course. He was looking to make a statement as much as anything, and as he traced a finger down the hilt of the blade it was clear that the bear had given the situation serious thought overnight. His lover hadn’t just folded and given in to what William wanted. There had been no surrender, but an understanding. Maybe the gods had blessed him after all, when Daniel had been selected as his first ever sparring partner. Maybe there was some great design behind their influence. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Never stopped you before.” As William smirked back at him, Daniel leaned down. His head tilted to the side, and that kiss was much longer, slower and lingered so much more delightfully than the others. William wrapped an arm around Daniel’s shoulders, fingers sinking into the bear’s headfur to tug him tighter into their muzzles’s shared embrace. His breath...

Well, it stank. It *reeked*.

Maybe Daniel noticed or otherwise knew; he pulled back as William held his breath, and offered a sheepish little smile as the hyena began to breathe again. “Sorry. Bad night.”

“Completely and always forgiven.” William leaned up to lick gently at Daniel’s lips as the bear rose once more. “You go clean up. Put some food on? I’ll finish with the armour, we can eat... and then I guess we’ll have to go out.”

The bear nodded as he patted William’s shoulder. “Together.”

“Together. Always together.” He laid a paw on top of the bear’s and nodded back. “*Arevo ne.*”

“*Arevo ne, Will.*” His paw slid off the hyena’s shoulder as he started past William. He turned to watch his bear leave, the smile still stuck on his broad, ursine face. He was truly exceptional. Perhaps for all the horrors that Ratholarin had unleashed upon the region, there were still gifts it had yet to give. If Daniel were its greatest, William would not have been surprised.

The hyena reached down to pick up his leathers. William brushed them off with one paw as he sat down in the chair that Daniel had ostensibly been in to prepare his arms and armour. All the tears and all the sleeplessness suddenly didn’t matter. William had his second wind. He felt like he could do anything. With Daniel once more at his side, he probably could.

And in just a few short hours, he *would*.

#

Kingsblade trials were seldom public, but it seemed that William’s challenge had made the rounds of the whole city. Where the duels the day before had only attracted a small number of onlookers likely drawn by the unusual sight of so many guardians and kingsblades in a single place, William arrived instead to a veritable crowd. It would have been humbling if it weren’t also terrifying.

Daniel didn't arrive with him, of course. The guardian had left earlier than William to join with his fellows, all the better to maintain the image that there was no connection left between them. It had turned both of their stomachs equally, that idea that their very relationship of so many years had suddenly become the thing of illegality. William knew it was harder for Daniel, having never before been ashamed of who he was. Hiding such a thing came much more naturally to William, thanks to his time in the castle.

Musings on the past fell well away as he saw the other reason for the crowd. Fredrick himself had come down from on high to observe the duel, it seemed; a great wooden chair sat on a raised dais, overlooking the garrison training yard and the space set aside for the fight. It looked quite a bit larger than the day before, but then there would be more going on at once. His father stood beside the king's chair, his eyes more on the crowd than anything else. When he spotted William, he gave a tiny nod and the hint of a smile.

Fredrick saw William just as quickly of course, though his gaze was instead filled with derision and contempt. William wasted no more time on the king than he already had, and turned his gaze instead to the wider area. People sat atop the shoulders of others, the windows and balconies of nearby buildings were packed almost dangerously full. The whispers as he'd made his way through the crowd of the captain who'd challenged a whole squad of the best warriors in Ratholarin were awed.

It was, to be frank, embarrassing. Would they still cheer for him when he sliced Fredrick's neck open?

That too was a thought he was forced to put aside as he saw the lined up forces against him. At the sight of those six armed and armoured figures, training took over. William stepped into the open space before Fredrick, and allowed himself to remember what he could of them all.

The smallest was Rosha, daughter of Taniil. The mouse, as he recalled, was a former bandit who'd become a ward of the city when she'd been caught. She'd risen through the watch quickly once she'd served her time, and she was easily the fastest of William's six opponents. She couldn't take a hit, though; as long as he could get one good blow in, she would be down for the rest of the fight. That one good hit would be the hard part.

At her side stood Adren, son of Ashan. The jackal was the only other soldier present whose blood was not pure Ratholarin; his father had been Yarovenni. A lieutenant in the Ratholarin army, Adren was a known quantity. He had been one of William's last opponents, but also one of his easiest. Ratholarin soldiers were predictable opponents.

The watch weren't much better of course, but they made up the bulk of the other soldiers. Two foxes – Kimi, son of Raikon and Seb, son of Telvet – were warriors whose fights he had watched. They were skilled, but unnecessarily aggressive in their tactics. They wouldn't last more than a couple of blows apiece, if he was careful and waited for them to provide him an opening. By contrast, the horse Deanda, daughter of Kaleen, had been pathologically cautious. She would be no threat until such a time as he singled her out, unless he left her an opening to exploit.

The last of the arrayed soldiers however was the real problem. He had expected another horse in the form of Lewis, son of Lewis. Instead, the figure that stood glowering down at him

wore the traditional full-body plate of the Guardians of Ratholarin. Everything about who they were down to the smallest detail was hidden from William, and he frowned as he eyed the figure up. The proportions were wrong for Daniel, so that much was a relief. Not only did he not want to fight his lover, but he also wasn't certain that that was a fight he could win.

Even as William cast his gaze around the crowd to see if there was someone he could ask, Fredrick rose from his seat atop the dais. The king raised a single paw, and the commotion from the townspeople and gathered watch, soldiers and guardians began to die down. He waited a few more moments before he lowered his paw and looked down his muzzle at the hyena. "William."

He bristled. The tiger had deliberately denied him his patronage; to answer would be to name himself fatherless, but to remain silent would be to insult the king and effectively give Fredrick cause to cancel the duel. He could see Zane also looked just as irritated at the omission, but William didn't have a choice. He stepped forward until he was right in the middle of the training area and sank to his knees. "My king."

"Word has reached me of your bravery and your conviction. And clearly, it has reached the people of Ratholarin as well." William lifted his head as Fredrick waved a paw toward the gathered crowds. "Tell me, William. Are you prepared to face this trial today? Six of the finest warriors of Ratholarin stand arrayed against you."

"I am ready, my king." The hyena nodded once as Kimi and Rosha both rolled their eyes. The guardian said still and did nothing. Surely they hadn't given Lewis plated armour in an attempt to stack the odds against him, had they? "And I am prepared to accept the surrender of my opponents at their leisure."

That earned a reaction from all but the helmed guardian; any amusement at his presence faded entirely. The crowd however began to cheer again, such that Fredrick was forced to lift another paw for silence. Even then, it took them almost a whole minute to calm down. He could see why the gladiators of old Marovan had so enjoyed fighting for spectacle before their empress and the Apex.

Fredrick didn't look entirely pleased, and his smile was absolutely forced as the crowds quieted enough for him to speak once more. "Lewis, son of Lewis is recovering from wounds suffered at your paw yesterday. To that end, Prince Brett has assigned one of his guardians to stand in his place. Torin, son of Michael will face you in Lewis' stead."

"I will be honoured to face him on the field of battle." William rose from his kneeling position and drew his Carisi sword. A gasp went up from the crowd at the sight of the weapon; more than a few of them clearly hadn't known of his heritage. The oiled, engraved blade gleamed in the sunlight as William brought it up to salute. "And I extend to him the same offer to surrender."

Torin didn't respond in words, but instead simply drew his sword and held it to the side. Gauntleted fingers squeezed tight at the hilt, but he otherwise was silent. Some of his other opponents also looked with surprise at William's weapon, and Fredrick's glare was full of disgust. "Explain yourself. That is not a Ratholarin blade, William."

"It is not. This blade is Carisi, as is my blood." He lifted his head as some of the mutterings and murmurings in the crowd turned hostile. "I am William, son of Zane. Captain

of the Ratholarin army. I was born in this realm. I have sworn my life to this realm. And this!” He thrust the sword up into the air where all could see the foreign craftwork of the blade. “I took this blade from the paw of my enemy seven years ago! It has killed bandits. It has killed rebels. It has killed shamans. It fights for Ratholarin for as long as I hold it!”

Atop the dais, Zane nodded his approval. Even louder than the mutterings of the suddenly discontent members of the crowd came the cheer of a much larger cohort. That cheer drowned out the others and spread through what felt like the entirety of the city. William lowered the sword and smoothly slid into a defensive stance, blade pointed toward his opponents. “I am prepared to fight for Ratholarin once more. I am ready, my king. You need only give the order.”

Even before Fredrick had said anything, William’s other five opponents all drew their swords. Just as Brett had promised yesterday, it was real armour and real blades. Chainmail adorned five of the warriors, and plate bound the sixth. William’s leathers were meagre protection against them; laughably inadequate for this situation he found himself in.

And yet, as he stood there at the ready and waiting for Fredrick to speak the words that would begin the challenge, William thought of Daniel. His breathing slowed. His muscles relaxed. Peace. He was ready.

“The challenge is to the yield.” Fredrick’s voice rang out once more, raised so that all could hear. “Blood may be drawn, but mortal blows are not permitted. My champions, do you all understand what you are to do?”

The six challengers all spoke their assent to the king, and William couldn’t help but notice his choice of words. Daniel’s panicked warning the last night came back to the hyena in full. It was true. It was all true: they *did* intend to murder him and claim it as little more than an accident. They would be able to fight him with full, murderous intent, and he would have to hold back his full ferocity in turn. Somehow, he would have to force them to surrender before one of them struck him fatally. The challenge seemed insurmountable.

William smirked as he lowered himself closer to the ground. They didn’t even know what they were up against.

“Begin!”

Both Seb and Kimi did exactly what William had expected of them. The foxes charged him straight on, swords at the ready. The hyena held his ground watching them approach. Their swords, held in both paws, were pulled back for their swings. Kimi on the left, high. Seb, on the right, low. The other warriors began to spread out behind him, but William instead watched the foxes. Gauged their swings.

William turned his sword around and planted the tip in the ground. He twisted it, the flat of the blade faced toward the foxes as they loosed their swings at him. Two Ratholarin blades crashed in against the hyena’s Carisi blade, and there they were stopped. William’s arms buckled, muscles tensing under his fur as he held the blows at bay. As the vulpines stared at him in shock, he grinned and moved.

One booted foot kicked his blade forward, forcing Kimi’s blade away. The rotation of William’s sword saw Seb’s weapon knocked up and over his head, and William pivoted quickly

with his weapon to swing it down low. The fox on the right cried out in pain as William's sword bit shallowly into his side, and the hyena continued the stroke around as he raised his weapon to block Kimi's next swipe.

Once more the fox's blade impacted cleanly against William's, but that time he was alone. The stronger hyena shoved Kimi back, but he wasn't given the chance to follow it up with another attack. The guardian, his armour gleaming in the sunlight, stepped in from the side with a fierce series of his own slices.

William was forced to jump back, his own weapon swinging much more quickly up to parry each of Torin's blows. A flicker of motion in his periphery bade him duck low, and a vicious swing from Adren struck the air where he had just been. He growled as he rolled through the dirt and back up into a crouch. The jackal's murderous intent was blatant. Open.

The crowd continued to cheer however, no doubt ignorant of the assassination attempt going on right in front of them. William backed up toward the edge of the arena as his challengers spread out around him again. Seb clutched at his side and fell back behind the others. At least he wasn't moving in to be a major threat. He couldn't win, not if they all struck together.

William started to circle around again, sidestepping his way slowly around the arena and forcing the others to follow his motions. They were forced to fall back or forward relative to one another, almost lining them up for him. The hyena grinned to himself as he watched them shuffling about themselves while he sped up. Closer... closer...

And then they were lined up. One by one, all in front of him. Perfect! William charged forward at Rosha, the closest of the five. A feint to the left drew her blade, and allowed him to all but run right past her. His sword flicked out as he went, and its edge bit into her shoulder as she faded behind him. There was a brief cry of pain, but by then he was focused on Kimi.

The fox made another vicious swing of his sword, but William rolled across the ground beneath it. He slapped the fox across the back of the knees with the flat of his blade, and Kimi buckled as Adren fronted up before him. William turned to face the jackal, but received a punch to the jaw for his trouble. The world spun around William. William spun on the spot.

The taste of blood in his mouth, William tightened his spin and whirled right back on Adren. The extra momentum gave his own punch more weight, as he careened the fist holding the hilt of his Carisi sword into Adren's cheek. The jackal crumpled under the blow, and it left William's blade up and ready for a stroke from Torin. The blow from the guardian was almost hard enough to knock William's weapon from his paw.

Almost, but not quite. William stumbled backward, barely able to bring his blade back around to parry another two strokes from the armoured warrior. As he began to circle the arena again, William frowned. That armour might have left him well protected, but Torin was slow. His strikes were wider. *Strong* to be sure, but wide. He could use that.

Too late however, William remembered about his other challenger. Deandra had left the line as William charged down it, swinging around him just as he had around the others. The horse had him flanked, and his reminder came as a flash of pain in his side. Blood spilled across his leathers from the wound as a gasp went up from the crowd. The tip of her sword, reddened

with his blood, flashed at the edge of his vision as she stepped back. Either she expected him to yield, or she had done her damage.

The hyena resumed his slow circle of Torin, but one of his paws did dip to his side. The blood that came away across his fingers was not inconsiderable; she'd missed his vitals, but the wound would take its toll. He had to finish the fight, and quickly. He spared her a glance; that alone seemed to warn her off, as she took another couple of steps back from him.

That however was Kimi and Torin's cue. Even as Rosha stumbled and fell to the ground with a paw on her shoulder, the fox and guardian closed in on William. Kimi's strikes were faster and more refined than the wilder swings from Torin, but the latter's blows shook William's arms each time they came. He was forced to lift his bloody paw back to his hilt, grasping it in both to force back the blows from his assailants.

Deandra didn't get a second strike on him, despite her best efforts. Even as she closed in, William stepped in toward one of Kimi's strikes and turned to his side. He slid smoothly between the guardian and the fox as Deandra's sword stabbed through the space he'd previously occupied. William's blade cut shallowly across Kimi's stomach, slicing through his mail as he went. The fox cried out, but the sound faded to a dull ring as Torin's elbow swing up and into the side of William's head.

Vision blurred. Two hits to the head in relatively rapid succession wasn't a good thing at the best of times, and William was certainly not in the best of times. His dazed stumbling carried him not just away from Torin but fortunately from Adren, whose effort to sneak up on the hyena was spoiled by his unpredictable, random staggering. As his vision started to clear, he was left with enough presence of mind to bring his weapon up to block an irritated swipe from the jackal.

William shook his head to clear it. Kimi was on the ground, clutching his stomach. Rosha and Seb, similarly, seemed disabled by his strokes, though why such minor blows had taken them out of the fight he couldn't even begin to guess. That still left three more people that demanded his immediate focus however, and William growled as he settled back into a crouch.

If nothing else, the fact that half of their number had been taken down seemed to have put a bit of fear in the remaining challengers. Deandra was hanging back further than before. Torin was still approaching as implacably and inexorably as ever, but Adren seemed more wary. William started to slink around roughly in Deandra's direction, but the equine warrior just moved with him. If she wanted to keep him at distance, that was fine. He'd rather a two-on-one fight anyway.

Torin reached William first, and the guardian loosed another withering swipe at him. William parried the blow and lunged forward with a quick riposte. The warrior's plate took the full strength of his attack without a fuss, and the hyena growled again as he was forced to duck under a swing of the guardian's fist. All too quickly he had to raise his blade to block again, but that time he allowed himself to be shoved back by it.

His quick retreat brought him right up close to Adren, and the jackal blinked in surprise at William's quick arrival. His own sword came up, but William's was faster. All Adren was able to do was catch William's sword, and then find his own blade slammed into his chest as

William worked his weapon into the jackal's side. Fresh red splattered across the dirt as William pushed Adren back from him, sword raised warily toward the warrior.

He was forced to divert it back to block another blow from Torin instead, but Adren was done. The jackal grunted as he fell to a knee, dropping his weapon to hold his side closed where William had gashed him. The hyena had no more time to waste on him; Torin had clearly seen that his support was being cut down all around him and needed to do something. He advanced faster than he had before. Both gauntleted paws now gripped the hilt of his sword as he marched in quickly on William.

He paused before he struck though, and William remembered the patient and tactical Deandra. He dove to the side on instinct rather than sight, and was rewarded with the sight of the horse's bloodied blade swinging only through open air. He grinned as he glanced toward her; she'd opened up an opportunity for him. William was in closer to Torin as a result of his dodge, and the guardian was hurriedly trying to back up to hit him.

And so the hyena moved in closer still. He brought a leg up to kick at the guardian's knee, but the blow barely fazed him. It did force him into faster retreat, and so William reached up with one arm to grab the guardian by the elbow. Torin grunted within his helmet and tried to shake William off.

He let go, but not right away. Not until he had pushed forward, leaping in tight and close and using his grip on Torin's arm to swing himself around behind the guardian. William wrenched that arm along with him, prying it from the warrior's sword and spinning him about. The wild swing that came from it was wide, and it was targeting a hyena that was no longer there. William had leveraged that momentum to launch not just around Torin, but *toward* Deandra.

She hadn't retreated too far, perhaps hoping for another opportunity to debilitate him again. As it was, she was definitely able to bring her weapon up to block William's strike before he closed in, but that was less his concern. Instead, with both of their blades locked together, William's body crashed into hers with full force. She cried out, a shrill, whinnying sound as she toppled beneath William. The hyena kept a hold of his weapon even as Deandra lost grip of her own. Dazed as the back of her head hit the ground, it was the work of barely a second for William to slam his fist down into the side of her face. She fell limp all at once, and William grunted as he rolled forward and over her body before Torin could pin him down.

He was safe, though perhaps only for the moment. The heavily armoured figure was the only one of his challengers still standing; the others were either unconscious or groaning on the ground. William sighed as he blinked to clear his eyes. His lack of good sleep, the wound and blows he'd suffered and the exertion he'd already made were all working together to take a toll, and Torin didn't seem fatigued in the least. He may as well have been a glacier for all the efficacy William's sword strikes would have against his armour.

The hyena grit his teeth as he circled the guardian. There had to be a way. There was no way that *Brett* of all people had discovered and implemented, in such short a space of time, a perfectly impervious suit of armour. The cheering of the crowd around him was forced aside, as was the intensity of Fredrick's glare and the jubilation at what that glare signified. William had to solve the problem.

But first he needed more information. He started to ease forward, sword raised to ward off attacks. It served as bait when Torin came into range; the guardian swung immediately for his sword with incredible strength. It clearly was designed to disarm William, but the hyena dipped his weapon too low for the strike to hit just before the impact. It left Torin swinging through the empty air, but he recovered quickly enough and came about for another attempt. That one too caused William to shift his blade, not into but away from the blow.

A growl echoed under Torin's helmet as William danced back out of range again with a nod. Everything Torin had done was big. Every swing, every punch... it'd all been overpowering force without finesse. That still didn't help William take him down, but it meant that William could shift around him all morning long and Torin, with no one else to distract hyena, would never hit him.

But as Torin charged forward again, William watched the warrior hold his sword out to the side. It didn't tuck in close to his body like William did when he was advancing on a target. The hyena ducked low and slid in toward the guardian as Torin swing up toward his head. The air *whooshed* over William's face, and suddenly he was behind the guardian. A quick swing of his own sword saw sparks fly off the back of Torin's armour, but again there was no penetration.

Torin turned, but William sidestepped to keep himself at the warrior's back. An errant arm swung about to try and ward him off, but the hyena ducked back from it with a smile. That was it! Not just that Torin was slow and always swung wide, but the armour meant that he could *only* do that. It was immobile and the plates ground on themselves, giving him a vastly reduced range of motion.

Now that he was behind Torin, there was nothing the guardian could do. William grinned as he watched that helmeted head turn one way then another, trying to spot him as he swivelled as best he could. The *helmet*, he realised, was the weak point. Sure, his sword couldn't pierce it any easier than it could the rest of the guardian's armour. Not without scoring a killing blow, anyway.

But it was disconnected from the armour plates themselves. There was a gap there, and William knew what to do. He grunted as he sheathed his sword again and threw himself bodily onto the guardian's back. Arms wrapped around Torin's shoulders, and William pulled himself up as the warrior cried out in surprise.

One of William's paws shifted to drape over Torin's head, his palm right across the face of the guardian's helmet. He tugged it back, pulling Torin's head with it as his other arm slid under the helm to wrap around the guardian's throat. Torin's cries choked off suddenly as his airflow was severed. William leaned back, putting all of his weight on Torin's neck as the guardian dropped his sword and struggled to reach up to the hyena clutching at his back.

However, the very armour that had protected him from William's sword now kept him from reaching the offending, comparatively narrow arm that was at his neck. William's elbow bent around the guardian's throat, choking him out as he growled. "I have you! Yield now to me!"

Torin did not. Instead he flailed all the harder, but still he couldn't dislodge William from where he was. William pulled harder as he all but roared into the warrior's ear. "You are beaten, Torin! Yield now!"

It didn't seem to be an option for the guardian, and so he did the only thing that was left to him. He leaned back and, with the help of William's weight pulling him already in that direction, toppled toward the ground. The hyena had only a fraction of a second to react, and he disengaged his arms and kicked off the guardian's back. He rolled messily across the ground, and it took him longer than he would have liked to push himself back up to his feet again. He pulled his sword free once more, but as the dust cleared it was quickly clear that there was no trouble coming for him right away.

Torin was still flat on the ground, struggling desperately to right himself. The warrior was prone on his back, slowly trying to work himself up to rolling onto his front in an attempt to rise. There wasn't time to lose, and William already knew that the guardian wasn't interested in surrender. He charged.

There was no way Torin didn't hear him coming, but he needed all of his limbs to try and right himself. William's sword wasn't raised in any particular position to attack, and the hyena imagined how confused the guardian must have been. Of course, then William's boot came up to kick him square in the chin, and he was certain that Torin had it figured out by then.

The helmet lifted off with the kick, freed by the force of the blow and left to scatter across the arena. It revealed the face of a dazed if angry badger that slumped back down onto his back, his muzzle blooded by the kick. When his eyes cleared, it was to the tip of William's bloody sword pointed right between them. The hyena planted one booted foot on the badger's chest, panting quietly to himself. "Yield, Torin."

He hesitated, and William watched as the guardian turned his eyes back up toward the dais. William didn't do the same; he kept himself watching Torin closely to ensure that he was ready for any sudden or surprise moments from him. Lewis had taught William much about how much he could trust these kingsblade applicants to fight with anything even approaching honour.

When Torin looked back up at William again, it was with a mixture of troubling emotions on his face. His muzzle was twisted in a bloody sneer that spoke to his anger and frustration, but there was no mistaking the spark of fear in his eyes. William didn't blame him. He'd probably been picked out specifically to be the invincible warrior William couldn't defeat. The safeguard, in case he somehow took down all five other challengers. Whatever fate awaited him, William didn't envy him it one bit.

Nevertheless, the badger fell still. He let his paws hit the ground and closed his eyes, sighing as he let his head rest in the dirt. William watched him for another moment as the crowd all around him erupted in raucous, elated cries for his victory. Chants of his name broke out, but he didn't even regard them until a few more seconds passed. Finally, he lowered his sword and stepped off of Torin's chest. Gasped as he brushed his wounded side. That would need attention soon, he reasoned.

Still, it could have been much, much worse. Fredrick was livid but silent, and William stared straight up at the petulant king as he made his way to the centre of the arena. There he

sank back down to his knees once more – a slower affair given his wound – and stared up at his liege.

He watched as Fredrick took a single step forward before Zane reached out to grasp the king's shoulder. Fredrick's head snapped to the side all at once, full of fury no doubt for someone having the audacity to touch *him*, but Zane simply leaned in and whispered something to him that was utterly impossible for William to hear.

He could guess though, judging by the way Fredrick immediately looked all around himself. All the gathered people of Sanwell who had just witnessed his triumph was being cheered for. This little Carisi brat had completely won their affection, and outplayed every one of his best warriors in a single fight with the worst odds anyone could ever have asked for. Fredrick's paws were tied. If he did anything but follow through, it would turn the crowd on him in a heartbeat.

William almost wished that he did. He watched as Fredrick struggled with the urge to give that order, or to step down from the dais and do it for himself. But no; Zane's paw slid off Fredrick's shoulder and he stepped back into place, and the king nodded once and raised both of his paws. The din began to die down, as more and more people noticed their king's call for silence.

When at last that silence had fallen, Fredrick made his way to the edge of the dais and stared down at William. He nodded once to the hyena. "William. You have triumphed over the finest warriors that Ratholarin has to offer. Everyone here stands... in awe, of your accomplishment. I congratulate you."

Again the crowd erupted, but for a much shorter time as Fredrick raised his paws again. William swelled with pride as they quieted down, not for their adulation but for the absolute humiliation that he knew that Fredrick had to be feeling right there in that moment. How it must have been *eating* the king from the inside to be so thoroughly, utterly furious and unable to do a thing about it. "There is no mistaking it. You have, beyond a shadow of a doubt, confirmed for all of Sanwell that you are the champion of this trial. To whom do you dedicate your victory?"

William smiled tightly. Tradition, he knew, demanded a pledge of fealty to the king of the time. So it had been for all of Ratholarin's history. And yet such a thing would absolutely not do, and William looked Fredrick square in the eye as he lifted his head. Whatever happened next to him, he would have this moment for himself. "I dedicate my victory to the people of Ratholarin; to those whom I am pledged on my life to protect."

Again the cheering resumed, and Fredrick didn't even bother reigning them in. There, in that moment, was William's true victory. Not a rigged six versus one swordfight that he had somehow managed to overcome. Not in his ascent to the highest rank that any warrior of the land could ever be expected to take. His victory was the cries of elated people all around him. His victory was their chant of his name once again. His victory was the protection it afforded him, because even Fredrick could not yet defy the joy of his subjects. William had their favour. He could use it to his advantage, or do as he pleased and be castigated by his own paw.

Fredrick glowered at him furiously, yet impotently. William drank it in, staring the tyrant king square in the eye. He was powerless, and he knew it. He was powerless and *William*

knew it. He knew that William knew how badly he'd been outmanoeuvred. William would never, for the rest of his life, forget the moment he had defeated a king. Whatever else happened with Leena's plot and the rebels' plans and the efforts of anyone else, he had done that. He had brought a king low and beat him at his own game. The only thing greater would be the day Fredrick died by his paw.

Soon. *Soon.*