

Interwoven

NECESSITY: PART SIX

82nd Day of the Verdant Growths, 27 AoE

It felt for all the world like William was being escorted to his execution.

He wasn't, at least so far as he knew, but it would have been ever so easy to look at the soldiers, guardians and kingsblades that strode alongside him and imagine otherwise. There were no bonds on his paws or feet or neck, but his expression might have helped sell the image of a male on his way to the gallows. Fredrick awaited at the end of his march. William was in no hurry.

He wasn't alone, at least, and for that much he found himself grateful. Zane had been allowed to escort him, his father silent at his side as they walked together up the main road toward the castle. Daniel was somewhat further ahead, with the guardian contingent that practically ringed the hyena. The other kingsblades were scattered amongst them, and a veritable wall of soldiers – many of whom William had known from his time with the Ratholarin army – brought up the fore and the rear.

His father had told William when he'd been collected from the garrison that Fredrick had wanted to parade William about the city first before he was officially bestowed his new title and honours. Zane had stopped short of suggesting it was because the people had become so enamoured with William that to deny them the chance to see the Carisi-Ratholarin champion would have been a mistake, but he'd implied that the king had felt trapped all the same. The trip around the city, cheered by the people, had been uplifting and overwhelming in equal measure.

As the gates to the castle opened and the procession made their way inside, William kept his eyes forward. The whole way in, through the cheers of the crowd and the chants of his name, he had been stuck on that idea. Fredrick. Trapped. At first blush it sounded like a glorious thing; a wonderful circumstance that would put the king off-balance and more vulnerable to William's knife in his back.

But it wasn't that. It was an awful thing, because Fredrick was impulsive, cruel, and hateful of the hyena at the best of times. Backing Fredrick into a corner could come back to bite William in the tail, and he knew it. If it entered into his head that his cruelty had upset the people and that the Carisi bastard who'd offended him once and blackmailed him later held more of their affection than he did... well. William already knew Fredrick would kill on a whim. He'd seen it for himself.

Setting foot back within the castle proper after so long was unnerving. The shapes of the grand hall and the throne room were doubtless the same as he remembered, but everything was... *darker*. Colder, as though the life had left the place. Servants bustled about, heads lower than he recalled. Tails drooped and dragged across the floor where once they'd bounced with purpose. Guards stood so stiffly at attention that they might have been statues. Curtains were

drawn against the morning light, with braziers lit instead to illuminate the room. There were no smiles. No joy. Even the flames seemed absent any warmth.

This was Fredrick's Ratholarin. This was the way he wished to see the world around him. Bent to his will and full of warriors whose only allegiance was to him and him alone. He swallowed a snarl as he made his way up the carpet of the throne room toward the tiger he knew was waiting for him. The person he was sworn to destroy. The king whose head he'd promised to lop off. Fredrick the Second.

As the soldiers parted ahead of him and the silvery armour of the guardians moved likewise, William could see the royalty arrayed before him. Tobias and Brett were present of course, each standing to either side of the king's silver throne. It sat alone; Fredrick had never remarried after all, and it wouldn't do to simply leave it there. Brett seemed bored. Tobias looked uncomfortable, but it didn't seem to be William that was the cause of it.

The cause seemed to be a hyena female, perhaps roughly around William's age. She lay sprawled suggestively against the side of Fredrick's throne, a collar not of Ratholarin silver but of gold wrapped tight around her neck. It was bound to the throne she lay beside, her body otherwise stark naked. From the way Tobias looked at her, he had to wonder if the prince was just distracted by the hyena's bare form. He seemed too distressed for that to be it, though. The collar perhaps, and its implication?

It mattered far less to William than the male seated upon the throne itself. Fredrick stared imperiously down at William from atop it, one leg casually folded over the other. His formal dress had been forgone for the ceremony, replaced with a rather striking shirt of chainmail akin to that worn by the kingsblades. His broad pauldrons remained, as did the tacky and oversized cape that he seemed to favour so much of the time. It didn't help that William could see how one paw rested on the hilt of a sword sheathed within the arm of the throne while the other patted the point where the hyena female's collar was chained to his throne. Perhaps he expected violence.

Or perhaps he intended to cause it. In the corner of his eye, he watched his father similarly tense up at the display. This, clearly, was new to him as well. Still, there was nothing that could be done. He stepped forward as he had been instructed to do, and knelt down. His head lowered, though his eyes remained open. "My king."

Around William, the flanking soldiers all arrayed themselves as they were meant to. Zane returned to the throne, and stood between Tobias and Fredrick. Two more kingsblades as well, both female, stood beside Brett and between him and Fredrick respectively. The others took up positions around the throne, while the guardians stood tall and shining on either side of the long carpet. They provided effectively a wall between William and the side passages of the castle. If he needed to escape, it would be through a barricade of plated armour.

The regular soldiers snapped to attention and saluted their king, before they turned and began their march back toward the entrance. William listened to them go; he was not permitted to lift his head again until instructed to by his liege. His *master*, he corrected himself as he fought back a grimace. Every order Fredrick gave until he had the chance to strike would be an order he had to follow unquestioningly. The thought was revolting.

“William. Fatherless.” That time the hyena had to growl; his head twitched as he struggled to keep it down. “You have proven yourself a most worthy warrior in combat. You have proven yourself a soldier of peerless distinction. The call was put out for the finest of Ratholarin to announce themselves for the kingsblade trials, and you have surpassed each and every one of them to kneel before me.” He paused as William bristled. He knew what was coming. “How does it feel, William? Kneeling before me?”

“Like I am fulfilling my destiny, my king. Like my efforts throughout my life of service to the kingdom are recognised.” His voice was even. He couldn’t betray a hint of disgust, lest Fredrick be given a reason to turn him away. He was so close to ending the tyrant king before he could hurt anyone else.

The answer seemed to please Fredrick. ‘Rise, William. *Fatherless*.’ Prepared that time for the insult, William lifted his head. He slowly brought his legs up beneath him and clasped his paws behind his back. Fredrick was smiling. He was smiling *broadly*. More, William thought, than was warranted even by William’s own recognition of his lack of patronage. Something was wrong. Something was *very* wrong. “Speak for us of your family.”

William worked his jaw. It was bait. Something was definitely wrong; Fredrick was fishing for a reaction from him. “My mother was a Carisi farmer turned servant in this very castle. My father is the wolf that stands beside you even now. My blood-father perished opposing yours.” Zane nodded once in affirmation, and William allowed his eyes to drift to him. “I owe them all my life, but it is Zane, son of Jakob, who has had the greatest impact on me, and I swear to uphold his values in this new role.”

Zane beamed with pride, but Fredrick sighed and rolled his eyes. “And what values are those, William, that would stand in contrast to the weakness and evil in your blood?”

At that, the hyena actually had to fall silent a moment. He trembled; his tail stiffened and there was no way Fredrick could mistake the glare that William levelled at him. He needed the moment. He needed to breathe before he responded and, impulsively, ruined everything in a moment of pride. “Honour, my king. Integrity. Commitment to duty.” He relaxed slightly as he looked once more to Zane. “Mercy. Mercy in all things.”

“And would you show mercy to an enemy that tried to strike me down, William? Would you show mercy to a shaman who tried to overthrow these lands and enslave the people of Ratholarin?” Fredrick scoffed at even the idea.

“I would.” Gasps went up from Brett, several kingsblades and many guardians. Fredrick’s eyes went wide, but Zane nodded once more. That was all the approval William needed. “The enemies of Ratholarin offer no mercy or quarter in their battle to destroy all that we stand for. To engage them on their own terms is not to be stronger than them.” He puffed his chest out. “We are Ratholarin, my king. We *are* stronger than them. To offer them mercy in their inevitable defeat is a sign of our realm’s greatness. Our invincibility. Our righteousness, just as you have spoken of.”

It was a dangerous play, he knew, to tie Fredrick to William’s argument using the king’s own words. He could see that Fredrick indeed didn’t like it, but he also wasn’t exactly drawing his sword or ordering William’s head be cut off. The hyena forced himself to steady his

breathing, taking in long, slow breaths and relaxing himself as best he could. He couldn't afford to be tense if Fredrick lost his mind, or if he lost the king's favour.

He still didn't look happy, though... but that might not be a problem. Not yet. "And what of chosen family? You have no rings. No wife? No children?"

"No wife. No children." Again William had to swallow a growl. Equally, he made certain to keep his eyes fixed on Fredrick. He dared not look at Daniel; if Fredrick knew that the male he loved wore guardian armour not more than five feet from the throne, then Daniel's life would be in grave danger. The tiger would absolutely murder him just to hurt William.

But he seemed far more interested in messing with William directly instead. Fredrick's smile returned, though in a more pitying sense as he shook his head. "No wife... most disappointing. Especially since I had heard that you were bonded to a male. Is this true, William?"

"It *was* true, my king." William squared his shoulders. "The bonding is annulled by your order. We are now separated, as accorded by your will." He bowed his head, as much out of affected respect as it was to hide his sneer. "I am, as of this time, unbonded."

"And no children, and apparently no interest in finding a wife to sire them." Fredrick shook his head again. "This is not behaviour that will inspire the Ratholarin people to bring forth the next generation of warriors to stand in the crown's defense."

William's jaw tightened. He worked it from side to side as he lifted his head once more. "I merely follow your own example, my king. You are yet unbonded. You have no children." He spread his arms as Fredrick's stare turned incendiary. "You understand that matters of the crown demand your full attention. You sacrifice and toil every day with the fullness of your very self to bring Ratholarin to glory. It is this selfsame dedication and loyalty to Ratholarin that I wish to embrace."

It was a pinning argument again, and once more Fredrick had no answer for it. He glanced aside at Tobias, who met his stare with a strange expression. William carefully hid his smile. Fredrick had always had power, but his mind had never been nearly as quick as Tobias' and, consequently, William's. It was the one real strength he had over the king.

And Fredrick clearly knew it. His expression was sour as he turned back to William. "Very good. Very good indeed. It is important that the dedication of a kingsblade be absolute." He nodded, as if to himself with how his response would have been received. William didn't know who he was looking to prove it to; his brothers were sycophants, as were the guardians all around him. "You know why you are here, do you not?"

The hyena lifted his head with affected pride. "I am here because my skill and strength of arms secured me the right to serve his majesty to the best of my ability."

"No." The word marked the slipping of Fredrick's smile. It was spoken sharply enough to cut through the whole throne room, silencing everything else. Silence, almost unnatural in its suddenness, pervaded the room until he spoke again. "No, you are not here because of skill and strength of arms, William. You are here because you have *deceived* us."

That didn't make sense. William allowed himself a frown as he stood up a little taller. The guardians had stiffened as well. "I do not take your meaning, my king. I fought fairly, and with honour."

"Incorrect. You fought with duplicity and dishonour. Had you a family, you would bring them shame." Fredrick stood from his throne, though he didn't descend toward William. Instead, he waved a paw down at him. "I see you carry your Carisi sword with you, even here. In the heart of Ratholarin, to its king. Did you prepare the blade yourself the day of your trial?"

Daniel. William grit his teeth as he focused his eyes firmly on Fredrick. He didn't want to look for the bear amongst the guardians, but it could only have been him. He'd oiled William's sword. What if he'd done something to it? Treated the blade; poisoned it? He'd fought enough bandits to know that more than a few dipped arrowheads in poison, and his opponents had – for the most part – fallen too easily. Had Daniel done something? "I have no one else to do such tasks for me, my king."

"Then you did not fight with the honour that you have claimed." Fredrick glared back down at him, all the rage and anger that William's needling little responses had stoked finally given a chance to be set free. The guardians reached for their weapons but did not draw them. "Do you know what I spent my time doing last night, William? I spent it with an apothecary and alchemist, and Rosha; one of the challengers you dispatched. And do you know what we discovered?"

William closed his eyes for a moment to keep from looking for Daniel. He couldn't out the bear. He could *not* out the bear. If Fredrick even suspected... "We found traces of a *paralytic*, William. A toxin in her wound, and in the wounds of the others you faced. In each sword stroke you delivered, you also poisoned your enemies." Fredrick scoffed anew as he shook his head, staring down at the hyena. "Do you still claim innocence?"

"I do, my liege." William opened his eyes again and took a deep breath. He met the king's wrathful stare and squeezed his paws tighter. If it came to a fight, maybe he could reach Fredrick in time. If he was to die, he could at least end Fredrick's reign in the process... "As I said. I have no one to tend my weapons and armour for me. My bonded is gone. And yet, I did not apply any such poison. I swear it upon my life."

"Good. Because that life is now forfeit." As he spoke those words, the guardians all arounds William drew their weapons as one. They didn't move; they would wait obediently for either Fredrick or Brett to give the order, but when it came... "You come into *my* home and you lie to my face. The *gall* of you."

"I am not lying to you." William slowly spread his arms out wide, keeping his paws far from his sword as he glanced up at Zane. The wolf's expression had gone from proud to pained as he looked back and forth between his master and his son. Beside him, Tobias looked similarly panicked. "I did not poison my blade. I don't know how such a thing could have happened."

"And still you *lie! To me!*" Fredrick's claws extended as he pointed down at William. The guardians shifted into their combat stances, but the hyena didn't move a muscle. His mind was already calculating the best way to reach the throne, past all the guardians and the kingsblades. "I will not hear the words of a traitor; a Carisi assassin who uses subterfuge and

deceit to sidle up next to me! You will explain this now, or your blood will spill across the floor!”

All eyes were on William, and so it was only William who caught the brief flicker of movement from Tobias. The younger prince’s muzzle had opened, and he’d started to take a single step forward. Time slowed down in that moment as William finally put the pieces together. Daniel might have applied the poison, but he would have had no idea what to use. Tobias, however... he had access and knowledge to the sorts of places and things that would let him brew it. They’d worked together for him, and now Tobias was going to die for him.

But he never made it that far, because Zane pushed him back and stepped forward in his place.

William’s eyes went wide as the kingsblade moved, casually striding down from his place beside Fredrick’s throne. The king was next to notice, after a Tobias frozen by surprise and a William stunned by the knowledge of what had happened. “William is innocent, my king. Ignorant of the poison.”

The hyena could do nothing but watch as Zane stopped right in front of him. He stared into his son’s eyes and began to smile even as Fredrick snarled from his throne. “You will explain yourself this instant, Zane.”

“The poison was my work. A debilitating concoction applied to his sword oils.” He continued to smile as he spoke, even while William returned the stare with an expression of horror etched over his face. The heat within him drained away; frozen solid. “I used knowledge stolen from Prince Tobias to access places I should not have been, and secured a sufficient volume for my purposes.”

“No...” William shook his head, the word nothing more than a whisper.

The wolf, however, simply held his son’s stare with that same, soft smile. “I knew your intention, Fredrick.” Gasps once more went up from the gathered crowd. To refer to the king by name was unthinkable for a kingsblade, and yet William couldn’t bring himself to care. He hung on every word, still shaking his head. These were lies. Zane hadn’t done anything. What was he doing? “We all did. You intended to stage the trial. You intended to place William in a position where he could do nothing but die for your amusement.” The wolf’s smile widened. “I am pleased to have spoiled this for you. A spoiled day for a spoiled little monster.”

All around, the guardians began to look amongst themselves as if trying to figure out what to do. The kingsblade outranked them, but certainly not the king or Brett. Fredrick stood seething, Tobias was terrified, and Brett himself was simply taken aback. Zane shook his head as he raised his voice. “The blood of Vargor has fallen far, if we are to stand on ceremony and laud the petty, cruel whims of Fredrick Rathin as honourable. Honour! His father believed in it, and how far we have fallen from him!

“And so I do this. I do it gladly, and I would do it again. A hundred times over.” He lifted his head as his body twitched, eyes still fixed on William’s shocked stare. “For you *are* my son. You have *ever* been my son. Never of my blood... a-always of my heart.” He swallowed hard as he lifted a paw, trembling, to touch it to William’s cheek. The hyena reached up, clasping it tightly as his eyes widened.

A trickle of blood wound down the corner of Zane's muzzle. William looked down briefly to the tip of Fredrick's sword. Reddened.

It poked through Zane's chest from behind.

The wolf didn't even seem bothered by the wound. Tears spilled from William's eyes as still more blood ran from the wolf's muzzle. He twitched again as Fredrick yanked his sword back free again, and stumbled. William caught him, never once breaking eye contact with Zane as they sank together to their knees. "You *are* my son."

"I love you, father." William leaned forward. His forehead touched to Zane's as the paw on his cheek shook. "I'm so sorry..."

"I am not." He lifted his head as his eyelids fluttered and sighed. "My son. So proud." He leaned forward more heavily against William as his voice faded to a whisper. "I love you. Always."

His paw fell slack.

William gripped it tighter. He bore the brunt of the kingsblade's weight as it went limp against him. His knees slipped as the pool of red beneath them grew wider. His head slipped off Zane's and buried instead against his neck. He breathed in deep, ragged breaths as his tears soaked into his father's fur. That old wolf's scent was so familiar to him. It had been there since he was a cub. William burned it into his memory. Held him tight as he went. "*Arevo ne, apanna. Neva tuala ni embris.*"

"Get up."

Fredrick's voice was as commanding as it was cold, and in that moment there was nothing that William wished to do more than to follow the order and run the king through just as he had stabbed Zane. He lifted his head, his fur matted and streaked with salty tears as reddened eyes locked on Fredrick. The king looked disappointed as he stood there, sword extended toward William and still covered in the blood of the hyena's father. "Get. *Up.*"

He didn't move until another of the kingsblades arrived before Fredrick. She gripped Zane's body and gently prised it from William's embrace and, to her credit, she laid the fallen wolf down gently on the floor with perhaps as much respect as she could. The badger looked shocked and deeply disturbed herself, but that paled to the storm that raged within William's heart. Once he was freed from Zane's weight, he shakily pushed himself up from his knees. One foot, then the other.

When he rose, Fredrick's sword was pointed right at William's chest. "Do you think this is a game to me?"

"I think that it..." William fought back the growl. Swallowed his feelings as they surged. His pride, as it howled. Everything that he was, as his every muscle yearned for vengeance. He forced them all down deep. To erupt would kill him... and render his father's sacrifice meaningless. William trembled. He owed Zane far, far more than that. He couldn't act right there. He couldn't act right then.

And so he bit his tongue. This wouldn't be for nothing. He could not let this be for nothing. Damn the rebels. Damn Leena and Yves and all the rest of their mysterious benefactors

and leaders and allies and the whole rutting thing. Damn them all. He didn't need them anymore. He had a crystalline view, pristine and clear and focused. He would kill Fredrick for *himself*. For his father. Not for them.

All of the hardship; all of the ignobility; all of the dishonour that he had suffered, was suffering, and would yet suffer? He would make it worth something. Each and every one of the feelings on the verge of erupting out of William hardened under his will. He dammed them up and turned them to liquid iron; cooled it; hefted it *deep*. Tested the weight. Yes.

Yes, he *would* make this work.

His eyes closed for a moment. When they opened again, they were as hard as diamond. "I think that it is most certainly not a game to you, my liege. Betrayal of the crown must be handled with the seriousness that is warranted."

"Indeed. The dog has long been unworthy to stand at my side; putting him down has done the kingsblade ranks a service, I think." The surge of anger at those words met the cool iron of William's resolve and melted into it. He gave no reaction to the words, and Fredrick looked all the more irritated for the lack of a rise out of him. "I am not sure I can have you in those ranks, William. Your father betrayed me. Brought you through your challenge by poison and lies."

"I have no father. I am fatherless." He let his eyes dip to Zane's body. *All the hardship*. "The one who betrayed you lies dead at your feet. I have not betrayed you, and I have won the right in your own challenges." *All the ignobility*. "And I would have won the right before the challenge too, had the rules not changed at the last minute. Your former kingsblade's actions played no role in that." His eyes left his father's lifeless body to fix on the king once more. *All the dishonour*. "I am at your command."

Fredrick looked interested then for a moment, before he chuckled and shook his head. "Oh, but I must be going soft. You are right, of course; and more besides, the people of Sanwell are with you. The champion of Ratholarin. The half-blood gladiator." He sneered at William. "If they knew you as I do, they would not cheer so. They would know your blood is *wholly* Carisi, and weaker than water."

William bit his tongue but stared the king down. He had won already, and he knew it. Fredrick was merely throwing his tantrum then, lashing out as best he could before he had to go ahead and do what he always had to do. After all, the people of Sanwell *were* with him. "William, fatherless. Do you swear to obey the orders of the crown of Ratholarin in any and all matters pursuant to the protection of its wearer?"

The liquid iron of his feelings seeped into William's stomach as he nodded. "I swear it."

"Are you prepared to forgo your life beyond your duties to the crown of Ratholarin?"

"I am."

"Are you willing to be the axe blade of the king of Ratholarin for as long as you draw breath?"

"I am."

Once more Fredrick's sword lifted. It pointed at William's throat for a moment before it continued its ascent. The tiger nodded to him as he flashed a cruel smile. "Then you will kneel before your king." His eyes flicked downward to the soaked floor. "Right. There."

William slowly sank back down again. His knees slid slightly as they dipped into the pool of his father's blood. He could feel the fading warmth of it through his leathers and closed his eyes. Pain touched his heart, but it too sank into that liquid iron. He steadied himself. Bowed his head.

Fredrick's sword came down, the flat of the blade resting on William's left shoulder. "I am Fredrick the Second, son of Eric." He lifted the blade, leaving a red smear on William's shoulder. It came to rest on his other shoulder. "King of Ratholarin and master of the southern realms." The sword was raised again, and came down a little harder than it had to atop William's head. "I am the blood of Vargor, and by his memory I name you a blade of the king."

The hyena's pulse quickened as he felt Fredrick slide the blade slowly across the top of his head. Headfur was sheered; individual hairs cut by the blade's travel falling around his head as the king rubbed Zane's blood from his sword on his son's headfur. William trembled with rage. Not yet. *Not yet.* "Rise, William. *Fatherless.* Rise as a kingsblade."

He moved slowly, unable to do anything faster for fear of slipping in Zane's blood. He could see Tobias beside the throne, one paw clasped tightly over his muzzle in horror. His cheeks were streaked with tears, and he looked about ready to heave. Sympathy broke through the rage for a moment as William saw him. His father had been good to Tobias. The younger tiger's trembling, silent sobbing at the execution he'd just witnessed was a testament to that. William wondered if Tobias would be as devastated when he cut Fredrick's heart out and burned it to ashes.

Even Brett on the other side seemed to be utterly disgusted by what he'd seen, and that for sure would have taken some doing. The throne-bound hyena's eyes were fully averted. The guardians looked impassively on from behind their helmets, but every kingsblade in the room had bowed their heads as Fredrick growled and glowered at him. "You will be here at dawn tomorrow. You will be granted your axe and your armour. Mandatory training will begin to familiarise you with the weapon of the kingsblades." He tilted his head up as he backed away from William. "And your first charge will be my brother. Tobias."

William blinked in confusion. Behind the king, Tobias' eyes went wide. His choked gasp came as he quickly wiped the back of his paw across his muzzle, but William forced himself to military precision. Calm. Focus. "My liege?"

"You may have the favour of the public, William, but my favour you do *not* have." He squeezed his sword tighter, as if to dare William to approach him. "Zane's meddling casts doubt on your capabilities. I will require you to demonstrate your truth of spirit and best endeavours by showing my brother all the effort that you wish me to believe you would show me. Besides, he needs a new protector since the old one's blood is... oh, it's *all* over you, isn't it?" He smiled wide enough to bare every tooth in his cruel little head. "Do you object?"

"No, my liege. I serve at your pleasure." William bowed his head. "It would be my honour to serve your command and act as protector of your brother."

Fredrick scoffed, but William kept his head low so as to keep his snarl from view. “And see to it that Tobias does not lead you astray, as he had your predecessor.” William had to clamp his jaw tightly shut to bite back the growl that threatened to slip free. “Your new kingsblade might wear the blood better than you, brother, but if you slip up again and allow Institute materials to be taken into the wider world, the blood I spill next will be the blood of Vargor.”

“I understand.” Tobias’ voice was little more than a whisper, but it wavered with his own devastation. Whereas William’s hate and rage had turned to liquid iron, it was clear that Tobias still wore his feelings openly. That he was broken to pieces by what had happened was not surprising.

Yet William didn’t have that luxury. He had to keep his eyes focused firmly on Fredrick as he lifted his head at last. The king’s sneer had faded as he looked around the room. It was almost as though he dared any of the gathered warriors to contest what he had done. What few kingsblades in William’s field of view did not. Their heads were bowed in respect, though he suspected more for Zane than Fredrick. The guardians were utterly unreadable as Fredrick waved a paw for William to lift his head. That he even had to wait for invitation to *look* at Fredrick... “What would you have me do in the meantime, my liege?”

“I honestly do not care. Whatever pleases you. We are done here” He turned his back on William, and for the briefest of seconds the hyena thought that it might have been his moment. The guardians had sheathed their weapons again. The kingsblades were focused on Zane. No one was expecting him to act. It would be quick. Easy. Nothing would please him so much as driving his sword through Fredrick’s chest just as the monstrous king had driven his through Zane’s.

But not satisfying for long, since it would get William himself killed. *Not yet*. And so he kept himself still as possible, unable to halt the eager tremble of his legs. They burned to run; to leap; to launch at the tiger and drive the Carisi blade into the king’s back. *No. Not yet*. “I will go home, then. Pack and prepare for my return tomorrow.”

Fredrick waved a paw again to dismiss him. William bowed his head, and took the chance to look one last time upon his father’s face. Zane looked peaceful. At rest. For a wolf who’d just been run through by a sword, he looked remarkably calm. A blade in the back from his own charge was not an honourable way for him to have died, but he’d died protecting William. For his son. Both of his fathers now had sacrificed everything for him. One had been left on a burning street in the snow. One had been abandoned before the throne he’d served. Ignoble. Undeserved. Ratholarin’s kings had taken from him twice over. Never again. *Never* again.

The loss wrapped around William’s heart as he lifted his head and turned away from his father’s still features. Each step took him back down the main carpet of the throne room, further from Zane’s body. The pain and the rage filled him from toe claw to eartip. It threatened to buckle his legs out from beneath him; to uncap his eyes and force a fresh flood of tears; to rip the screams from his heart through his throat and muzzle and into the air.

The liquid iron of his resolve held, for the moment. It would crack and break, though. It would shattered and burst, and then everything would tumble out. He would go home, await the breaking... and then he had no doubt that he would howl until his throat was raw. Until his

eyes ran dry. Until all of that pain vanished into the void. Hate and rage would remain, though, and hate and rage could be *aimed*.

Never in all his life had he been more sure of its target.

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William had made it home well before Daniel. This was expected, of course; the bear had still been on-duty, and neither of them had been certain that he would even get to spend any of that evening with his partner. He'd told William very early on that he'd made his commander well aware that his evening was his own and he would not be on-duty during that time. Given what all had happened, William was doubly certain that almost nothing would keep Daniel away. Even in the best of circumstances — which they definitely were not — he'd known how important it was that they have one night to themselves.

It was, given William's victory in the trial, the last time they'd be there together in quite some time.

It had been a muted and joyless affair. William had prepared a Carisi dish for them to enjoy after swinging by the markets for some fresh fish; it had quickly become one of Daniel's favourites after he introduced the bear to it years back. William, for his part, had barely touched his meal by the time Daniel was done. He didn't have much of an appetite after the events of the morning, of course. Blood pounded in his ears, loud and burning hot.

Still, Daniel had all but forced him to eat. They'd talked about the trials, and the knighting. They'd talked about Fredrick and Brett. They'd studiously avoided talking about Zane for as long as possible; Daniel refused to bring him up, and William wasn't quite certain just how much his heart could stand before it broke. His veins surged with flame and wrath. His chest thrummed and burned with hate as much as love.

But as they sat together with the hyena relaxed in Daniel's much larger arms at the bear's insistence, he finally sighed. Relented. Forced himself to cool. "You want to ask about him, don't you?"

"No." Daniel squeezed him tighter. "I wanna ask about *you*. He's... gone, and you're not. I know jus' how much he meant to you. How're you... I mean, are you...?"

"I'm hurting. I feel like my heart's been ripped out of my chest and a... a wildfire left in its place. I'm..." William grit his teeth as his blood quickened. At least he could always be honest about how he felt with Daniel. The bear never let him down in that regard. "I'm mad. I'm *furious*. I was a *hair* from gutting Fredrick right then and there. No one could have stopped me. One good leap and..."

Daniel nodded again as he rested his head against William's. "Dunno how you held back. Not sure I could've. That was a brave thing he did for you."

With those words, William's anger found a new target much closer to home. He choked it down before he could use it; this could have been their last night together, and William didn't want to spend it angry at the one he loved. The only one left in the world who could say they had his heart. "It wasn't just for me. It was for Tobias, too. Tobias looked ready to step forward and take the blade himself." He paused as Daniel's arms tightened slightly. "He gave you that poison, didn't he? To mix into my sword oil."

The bear's arms relaxed again to the point that they were almost slack. "You're angry at me."

There was a spark of it if William was honest, but a spark was not a flame. "I'm... not happy, but not angry. Not really. Not at you... or Tobias." A tired sigh slipped from him. "I understand why you did it, and from the way they fought I'm... kinda glad you did. I probably couldn't have taken them down without the help." He snorted as he felt Daniel nod. "What about Tobias though? Why'd he help? Damn, *how'd* he even find you?"

"All part of spendin' all my time in the castle." The bear shrugged and sighed. "And what's it matter? He didn't want you to die any more'n I did. Difference was he had a plan, and I didn't." He slid a paw down to take one of William's into a tight grip. "I would've let you down. I would've let you die. I don't even know how to apologise for somethin' like that, Will. I don't know if I can."

"You don't owe me any apologies, Daniel. You never do." William tilted his head to the side so that he could lean up and plant a soft kiss on the bear's chin. "I just wish you'd not kept it a secret. If you told me what you guys were planning, at least I could've been prepared."

Daniel nodded, but before he could open his muzzle there came a knock on their door. The two exchanged a quick glance before they rose. Daniel reached for his sword, while William snatched up a small dagger. If it was someone Fredrick had sent, angry at the events of the day, they would be ready. He paused by the door until Daniel was ready, and received the bear's nod. William held his dagger at the ready as he pulled the door slightly open.

It was no assassin, nor guardian or soldier or kingsblade or member of the watch. Leena stood outside the door, paws clasped behind her back as the rat smiled up at him. "Good evening, William."

"Leena." He frowned but turned back toward Daniel. The bear cocked an eyebrow, but William shook his head. His partner lowered his sword as he turned back to the rat. Speaking of secrets... "This really isn't a good time. What do you need?"

"To borrow you for a couple of hours, if it wouldn't be too much trouble." Her voice was smooth and friendly and a little louder than it needed to be, no doubt for Daniel's benefit. "I'm sorry if it's a bad time, but I *really* need you. A friend's furnace was having trouble and you were able to make mine work so much better, so..."

William's eyes narrowed. "A furnace, in this weather?" What an absurd excuse to get him away. The rat was slipping.

She didn't look perturbed in the least. Or, at the least, her smile didn't flag. "Poor dear's quite *old*, Will. She was like a sister to my mother before she passed. I can see in your face that it's a bad time, but I couldn't call on anyone else. Not so late, and..."

The hyena sighed as he glanced back at Daniel. The bear winced, but he gave a clearly reluctant nod. He didn't want William to be gone for any stretch of time, let alone *hours* into the last night they might otherwise have undisturbed for goodness knew how long. But he equally wasn't going to let William ignore an impassioned plea for help. The bear had a sweet, soft heart. William didn't deserve him.

“I... damn it all. Sure. I’ll be out in a moment.” Leena nodded and stepped back from the door, and William closed it again. When he turned to Daniel, the bear was shaking his head. “I’m not going to let her keep me for long. Depending on where in the city her friend is-”

“You’re helpin’ someone who needs it. That’s jus’ who you are, love. Who’m I to tell you not to?” The bear leaned forward, sword dropping the rest of the way to plant a gentle kiss on William’s muzzle. The hyena leaned up into it with a sigh. “I’ll be here. Maybe even get a wash in before you get home?”

“I think we could both use one.” William smiled, nosing along Daniel’s cheek before the bear straightened up again. “Wait for me?”

“Forever, if I gotta.” Daniel kissed him again, and that time they lingered for a few more moments. In the wake of the day, William didn’t want to move. He could just stay there. Just stay in Daniel’s arms, muzzles together, paws together, and bodies together. They might only have one last night. One night, before everything had to go on. Before the world marched toward a new dawn, where they weren’t together in the eyes of the king or kingdom, and where they were each bound to a different system of control. One night where they could be themselves, before the façade had to be established anew. One night before their lives were on the line.

One night before William had to come to terms with the reality that his father was dead.

The kiss broke and their muzzles parted; the moment was over. Duty called, as it always would. “I’ll see you later.” The words were a promise. There was nothing and no one in the world that would keep him from the bear. They’d stolen one night, and he wasn’t about to give it up. Definitely not for Leena.

“You better.” Daniel smiled at him, but it was a sadder thing than William was used to. It didn’t suit the bear’s big, friendly face. Sadness did not become him. Maybe, when everything was done and Fredrick was dead and Ratholarin was back on track, he could make sure Daniel was never sad again. He’d like that.

William sighed as he turned, pulled the door open, and stepped through it. He closed it after him and waved Leena forward, and the rat wasted no time in moving. She didn’t speak a word. Why would she? She had what she wanted; he was following. That was all that ever seemed to matter to her, but at least William had grown used to that.

He did wait until they were somewhat further from his home before he growled at her. “This had better be *damn* important, Leena. I’m not in the mood for games today.”

“I know. I heard what happened in the castle.” She shook her head slowly as she led him further down the road. “You didn’t need another reminder of what we’re fighting for.”

That time William let himself growl. She wasn’t actually offering sympathies or condolences, and she didn’t understand a damn thing. “If you’d have met Zane, son of Jakob, you would have fought him like any other Ratholarin warrior.” His voice dropped considerably in volume. Better not to let his anger have too noisy an outlet.

She did the same. “You are correct, of course. He would have served his king right until the end if we attacked him. At least now you will not be forced to cut him down yourself.” She

glanced back at William with a thin smile. “Or did you delude yourself into thinking that attacking Fredrick would have not forced you to face him in battle?”

William bared his teeth at her before she turned back forward again. Zane had just sacrificed himself, duty and honour be damned, for his son. If the wolf had been forced to choose, William *knew* what he would have chosen. “I won’t dignify that with a response. I would not kill my father.”

“Words sure to please if I’ve ever heard them.” Leena leaned to the side and stared up the road. “We are almost there.”

The hyena frowned. The Crimson Crest was still a fairly long walk away. “You’re not taking me to the Crest?”

She shook her head, but didn’t look back. “Of course not. Presently the Crest is being raided by guardians and my fair friends and workers are being beaten to within an inch of their lives. It’s certainly not a suitable place for the meeting that we need to have.” She turned fully, walking backwards as she drank in the shock on William’s face. “You’re surprised?”

He certainly was. Perhaps, he thought as he glared back at her, not in the way that she had expected. “That it had taken this long? Somewhat. More that you seem not to care.”

That stopped Leena in her tracks. William almost ran into her, and she pressed her palm to his chest as she glared up at him. “Do not mistake acceptance of things I have no power over for apathy. I was tipped off to the raid, as I have been several times before, but tonight was always going to be a busy night with the Dawning Festival starting in a couple of days. It was difficult enough shifting sensitive materials and people from the Crest so they wouldn’t be there when the raid was conducted, and I couldn’t spare the people there without looking more suspicious.”

“And appearances are everything, aren’t they?” William stepped back from her and folded his arms. He had less patience than usual for Leena’s willingness to sacrifice the pieces on her board. He’d already sacrificed more than he’d ever wanted, and that was long before Zane’s death.

“Appearances are everything when they’re all you have to protect yourself with. Perhaps one day you’ll even understand that.” She shook her head and sighed as she turned back from him again. The paw on his chest drifted away with her and she started forward again. “Maybe after today you’ll grow up a little. Stop seeing the world like a cub and actually commit.”

That time he all but snarled at her. “If what I have done so far is not commitment enough to you, then perhaps I’ll take Daniel up on his offer. Leave the city, leave Ratholarin, and let you fight your little war all by yourself.”

Leena’s head turned quickly, ears perked and twisting to listen for any sign that anyone had heard them. Her voice dropped to a hiss as she looked back over her shoulder. “You’re fixing to get a blade in your gut if you keep running your mouth like that, you know.”

William offered her no response. He just snarled back silently again and let her lead him on. It was, he realised, all she ever did. Promises of saving the kingdom from Fredrick, restoring Ratholarin to what it should have been, justice for Caris, and so on and so forth. She

led him on with her words and made him do things he ordinarily would never wish to do. After today, he told himself, there would be limits. No more would he allow her to twist him into little more than a weapon for her cause. He was no game piece to be moved and sacrificed on her whims.

The road she finally stopped in was one of the seedier parts of Sanwell. William had spent more than a few dirty weeks working in vain with the watch to eliminate nests of bandits and brigands that had called the aptly-named shadow quarter their home. The watch dared not come alone into the stuffy, slum-like district by the river's northern side; all knew that the Riverrun Inn marked the start of the shadow quarter and entry was at one's own risk. What possible reason she could have had to lead him there William couldn't even begin to fathom. He couldn't help the question. "Why here?"

"Because even the *guardians* don't come past the Riverrun. Not after the last time they tried." She flashed a cool smile as she folded her arms. "Sure, they could come in force, but do you know what those fancy suits of armour are not good at keeping out? *Boiling oil*." She nodded upwards, and William turned his gaze toward the higher buildings. They lined the streets and, sure enough, he could see more than a few flickering flames that kept iron vessels hot and ready.

William shivered at the thought of being trapped in a suit of guardian armour, soaked in boiling oil that seeped in to scald the flesh, or to heat the armour and roast the occupant alive. "Fredrick can't possibly let this stand."

"Fredrick has no choice. Why do you think the shadow quarter even exists, William?" Leena perked an eyebrow as her smile broadened. "When people fall through the cracks in any city, there is always someone, and somewhere, to pick them up. Fredrick is happy to carve the shadow quarter right out of Sanwell if it keeps all the malcontents isolated and out of his view."

The hyena shuddered. Certainly a lot of people had been falling through the cracks in the last few years. And it was true that the pushback toward the crown and soldiers or watch members encroaching on the shadow quarter had been on the rise. It was still hard to believe that Fredrick wouldn't want to take control back of a whole district of his realm's capital. "It's a dangerous place to live, even if the people within it have no choice. One day he'll decide to send the army in to clear it out, and he won't leave survivors."

Leena smirked. "On the day he wants to lose the patronage of the Fangs of the South, sure. Until then, he won't dare."

William winced. "I don't know which I like less. That there's a den of assassins operating just down the road from my home, or that Fredrick employs their services." He sighed. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. If he wants the region, he'll have to topple even allies like Ingsbren."

"They're not much of an ally after Sarina made it home and assumed her place on the throne." Leena unfolded her arms and shook her head as she hooked a thumb toward a nearby alley. "But you're not here because I wanted to talk politics. You're here for a meeting you really need to have. You were specifically asked for, and that is a rare thing indeed."

With another sigh, William glanced at the alley. He might have taken the guardian raid over a dingy alley in the shadow quarter. "And why do I care? Why am I risking getting shanked in the dark?"

The rat rolled her eyes. "If I thought for a second you were in danger, I'd have had you put on your armour and better arm yourself first. The people here are friends to our cause." She turned toward the alley and nodded. "He's waiting for you."

"He." William frowned as he glanced down the alley. It was darker than the street; full of shadows that concealed almost everything deep within it. How Leena could see a thing in there was a miracle. "He who?"

"The one who's been pulling the strings for all of Sanwell. Much of the cause owes him everything; he's been there from the start." She grinned. "And he doesn't show himself to just everyone. Just me, and a few others outside our primary leadership even know his name. But you... you're a special case, and I guess he thought now was the right time for him to elevate you. To give you the rest of the plan, and show you why we're doing this."

None of that set William any more at ease. He glanced at the alley again, and the inky darkness within it. "No lantern?"

"Like you need one." She waved her paw again. "Go on. He's patient, but not *that* patient."

Once again, the hyena found himself lacking in choices. He sighed as he looked up and down the road one last time. No one seemed to be out; the night was growing late, and even if they were all friends in the shadow quarter, he didn't doubt that a thief might be willing to prey on anyone there if they were hungry enough. William took a breath and stepped forward.

He could only really hear his own footsteps, as though the noise and bustle of the Sanwell evening was insulated not only by the buildings around him but by the shadows themselves. William lifted his paw, but hesitated. It was still Sanwell. Leena might be watching the entrance to the alley, but an open display of magic was something he still wasn't certain he wanted to make. The paw fell to his side again to grip the hilt of his sword.

The sound of footsteps out of time with his own caught the hyena's ears as they perked up. He froze in place as two pinpricks of light glinted through the darkness, perhaps lit from what little illumination filtered in from behind William. He could tell nothing of the figure save those eyes, and even they were little more than yellow points in the shadow.

William frowned and let his fingers close around his sword. There was no guarantee that this was who he was here to meet. "Good evening."

"It is. It is a very good evening indeed." The voice was deep and male and flush with Carisi accent, a little husky and with a thready growl that ran through each word. If William had to guess, he'd think some sort of canid about Zane's age. The thought added new heaviness to his heart as the figure continued to approach. William's paw tensed on the hilt of his sword. "It's so wonderful to finally look upon the face of one who has achieved so much. You have no idea how long I have been following your progress, William."

The hyena's eyes narrowed. "Impressive that you can even see me here, but I'm sure there's members of your little crew who've been around longer. I doubt I'm that important."

A soft laugh, surprisingly warm in tone rolled out of the figure as his eyes closed. “You underestimate yourself, but that is a mistake for kings and princes and not one for me. Kingsblade of Ratholarin... I am very impressed. You are the keystone to all that we are working toward here, but you are far more important even than that.”

William’s eyes narrowed. The figure was closer now, and he could almost see the outline of them. Species and any other identifiers were still too far away from what he could tell, but the slender frame implied someone wiry. Fast. A coyote, perhaps, or an especially tall fox. “I try not to overestimate myself. I also tend to be suspicious of effluent compliments.”

<And you are also far too fluent in the Rathin tongue for my taste.> The Carisi words carried a hint of disappointment, and they rolled out thick enough with accent that William almost had a hard time following them. <What have they *done* to you? You were always meant to be so much more than this. I am sorry that they have stolen your future from you. Our people’s future. You were always supposed to be so much more than this.>

Finally, William could take the suspense no more. The familiarity of the figure’s speech, his language, his interest in William... impatience won out. He lifted his free paw before his face and rubbed two of his fingers against his thumb. Sparks issued forth, igniting the air for a moment before flame flickered to life. They illuminated the space just as the figure came to a halt in front of William.

Their armour was leather, of an older make than William’s own. A Carisi sword rested on his belt, along with a small collection of daggers and pouches. The most striking element of the thick hide was the great flowing purple lines painted across the broad shoulders. It took William a moment to recognise them as the mark of a Carisi commander. The hyena’s eyes were fixed not on that though, but on the hole that had been left unrepaired in the armour just over the figure’s stomach. A stab wound.

William began to shake as his eyes lifted to the figure’s face for the first time. They were a hyena, just like him. His face was aged, muzzle flecked with grey as he smiled both with his teeth and his eyes. He looked exhausted, but fierce and *relieved* to stand in the light. His eyes sparkled in the flames flickering uncertainly in William’s fingers. <Impossible...>

<Few things in this world are impossible, but I had thought the idea of your recognition of me to be just one.> The hyena’s eyes welled up with tears as William could do little more than stare. <I hoped. I hoped that she would raise you strong and well, and that the gods would protect you even in this cursed place... and They have. She bound you to me by name, and now They have brought you back to me. I am truly blessed.>

<Name yourself.> William all but snapped the words as the flames at his fingers burned brighter. It couldn’t be. It had to be a trick. It wasn’t possible. <Tell me who you are. Right now.>

If the other hyena was bothered, he didn’t show it. Instead he smiled all the wider and spread his arms out as if to invite a hug as he turned William’s life upside down. <I am the blood of your blood. Blood of old Caris. Son of Cyrus, son of Darmina. I am honoured to greet you, William.

<My name is William, my son. And I am so *very* excited to meet you at last.>