

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART FOUR

27th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

“I’m very sorry, sir, but the mistress isn’t available right now.”

The slinky ferret girl who sat behind the greeting desk at the Crimson Crest’s entrance looked equally apologetic as she did worried. William had been counting on that when he’d barged in, teeth on full display and an edge in his voice. He’d hoped that and his arms and armour would do the trick. Anyone who’d seen him with Leena would have known that he was to be granted access.

The ferret, however, was young and new and he’d never seen her before. His bluster and aggression had been met with fear, yes, but not enough to acquiesce to his demand. “Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear.” The hyena reached into his pocket as the ferret leaned back in her chair, sliding it just further from the desk in the event that she needed to beat a hasty retreat. How many guardian raids had she been present for already? “I’ve a coin. *Her* coin. I need to speak to her *now*. Yesterday, if it’s possible.”

As he pulled the coin free and flashed the blank side to her, the ferret eyed it for little more than a second before she shook her head. “I appreciate that sir, but I’m afraid I still cannot help you. The mistress simply isn’t available.”

“I don’t care. I’m not here for her; she’s just the go-between for the one I need.” William’s eyes narrowed. “I have no ire for you, I assure you. Please let me in. You will not be reprimanded.”

She was clearly out of her depth, but it was admirable to some degree that the silken mustelid was still able to deny him. Her muzzle worked silently at the air, as if seeking words of dissent that would not come. When she shook her head though, William sighed. Very well. He would have to do things the hard way. “Don’t worry. I’ll find her myself.”

He rounded the desk as the ferret shot up and out of her chair, backing against a more distant wall. William tested the door’s handle, but it was well and truly locked. Through the bars, he couldn’t even see the sentry that he knew was there. “Last chance, friend. Open up or I’ll open it for you.”

“You heard the lass, Will. She ain’t here.” The voice was guttural and utterly bored.

“Very well. Knock knock.” William took a step back, stared down hard at the lock and took a deep breath. Then, with a lift of one leg and a mighty kick, he slammed his boot square into the door’s lock. There was a *snap* as whatever mechanism used to secure the door broke under the pressure, and then a cry of pain as the door swung sharply open and slammed into the sentry.

William was through it before the sentry could react, though he did catch sight of the male – a deer who was clutching his bloody muzzle with both paws – staring up at him through teary eyes. The hyena grabbed the sentry by the shoulders and quickly slammed him against the wall, and the his eyes rolled up into his head as it struck the stone. He slumped to the ground with a groan, and William began to make his way down the stairs.

By the time he opened the door to the Crest proper, word must have already filtered down about an aggressive client or whatnot. It seemed the workers of the Crest were gathered together for meals and drinks and some quiet time when he'd arrived; normally William was much earlier, when most of the workers were farewelling their clients after a long night. A glance at the bar didn't show Leena, but the semi-familiar features of the doe, Julia. He nodded to the workers, all raised from the seats and watching him warily. "Apologies for the interruption, all. This won't take long."

"I fear it'll take longer than you'd like." It was Julia who replied as William made his way over to her. "You've come for Leena? She's not here."

"She's almost always here. And she always comes back here." William placed both paws on top of the bar as Julia took a step back from him. Clearly his mood was showing through still. "Where is she? I need to speak with her most urgently, and this is the *second* day she's ducked me. It cannot wait."

Julia glanced to the side briefly and sighed. "She is under a great deal of pressure. A lot of things are underway and they demand a great deal of her focus and attention. I cannot guarantee she will be available at your every summons and whim."

William growled as he shook his head. And yet he was meant to be at *her* every summons and whim. "Given her willingness to sacrifice those allied to her cause and her unwillingness to view their losses as anything but transactional, you'll forgive me if I don't play along today." He didn't have time for this.

He turned from the bar and started off toward her private office. Julia mumbled something under her breath but didn't otherwise try to stop William. It was so much the better. He didn't want to hurt any of the Crest's workers. Well, except for Leena some days. Most days. That day, certainly.

Her door was locked, of course, but that hadn't stopped William before. Instead of resorting to that right away however, William instead knocked firmly on the door. If she was there, so much the better. If she wasn't, he'd buy her a new door in a moment. He owed her one already; a second wasn't too far out of his way.

Someone was definitely inside; muffled voices fell silent quickly after his knocking. William gave it a few more moments before he knocked again, but he was once more ignored. His brows knit together as he growled and began to beat on the door more vigorously, not letting up for a moment. If he couldn't see Leena, then he was going to make her meeting a nightmare.

Thankfully, it only took five seconds or so of that treatment for the locks on the door to begin to disengage from the inside. He lowered his arm again and stepped back, right before the door itself swung just slightly open. Leena's head poked out, all but infuriated as she fixed her eyes on William's. "I am *busy*."

Her voice was dripping with acid enough to melt a castle, but William met her stare with equal venom. “I need to see him. You’re the intermediary. It’s urgent.”

“And I’m busy. I don’t care what you *need*.” She sighed and began to close the door, only for William to slide his booted foot into the gap between it and the wall. He didn’t even feel the door stall out. “Hey!”

William grabbed the edge of the door and forced it back open again enough to reveal the rat’s face. There was a flicker of fear there, concealed by years of practice a moment later but visible long enough for him to notice. She knew what he could do, after all. “You don’t care because you don’t *understand*. Fredrick has magic.”

That time the fear on her face stuck. “*Prosta mas felaxi olarous...*”

The hyena narrowed his eyes again. Finally. “I need to see him.”

“Yes... yes you do.” Leena blinked and shook her head, and her eyes once more focused on William. “It will take some time. Can you wait out the gallery? I will... have him summoned.” The rat shook her head again. “Had I known-”

“Maybe you should get on that now.” William nodded to her. It was good that she understood at last the dire importance of his presence there, but he needed her to *act*.

Thankfully, it seemed as though she understood. The rat frowned and appeared thoughtful for a second before she looked up to William again. “As I said. Go to the gallery. Tell Julia to get you anything you like... I will be out in a few minutes, and then I will summon him.”

It wasn’t perfect, but it was clearly the best William was going to get. He nodded again and released the door, allowing his boot to clear the frame. Leena didn’t slam the door in his face, but instead lingered for a moment as if she still had something to say. When nothing came out after a few moments, she just shook her head and closed the door again. The locks didn’t slide back into place. He guessed she really was only going to be a few more minutes.

It was minutes longer than William was comfortable waiting, but he didn’t have a choice in the situation. Leena did have other matters to attend to, as a leader and coordinator among the rebels. She knew why he was being so belligerent now at least, and that was something. Maybe it’d even improve her disposition toward him.

William wouldn’t hold his breath. He turned back from her door and began to make his way back to the gallery. Hopefully he’d be well and truly done in the Crest before food and drink were necessary... but the hyena didn’t think it a good idea to hold his breath on *that* either.

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It didn’t wind up taking long enough for William to warrant food or drink. He’d simply sat at the bar, overseeing the entire gallery as the workers of the Crest took their lunch and laughed and joked. It was nice, in its own way. A reminder that whores or not, they were people. They had lives and hopes and dreams and joys and sorrows like everyone else. Perhaps more than everyone else, they too bore the brunt of Fredrick’s cruelty.

It was a fine reminder, but it was also one that William hadn't specifically wanted or needed. He knew well the stakes; he knew well the cost of everything that was happening in Ratholarin. He had the opportunity to see it every single day through his duties both to the rebels and to the crown. He wondered just how many people in all the realm had the perspective that he could bring to bear on the problem. He also wondered just how many people would care to hear it.

Leena had left her office relatively quickly after William had accosted her. It was clear that he'd managed to get through to the rat the severity of the situation, and she had rushed out all too quickly after that. Julia had eyed him warily for a little while but, once it was clear that he was simply going to quietly sit down and wait for her to return, she paid him no more mind. William himself was grateful for the general lack of questions. He wasn't sure how far the knowledge that he held ought to be spread.

When Leena did return, she was not alone. William's blood-father was at her heels, and even as Leena hurried back toward the secret passage that led to her office, the older hyena instead strode right past his son. He barely looked down at William as he nodded once. "Come with me."

William rose silently and fell into step behind his blood-father. He did turn briefly toward Leena; the rat had lingered briefly at the edge of the passage. She nodded to him in turn, and as she did so William could see the terror that still clung to her features. She was draped in the stuff, soaked from tip to tail in the same dread that William himself kept crushed down. Good. Very good indeed.

His blood-father led him past the suites for the workers of the Crest, and into a room at the very back of that corridor. It looked much like what William had seen of other suites, but not nearly as prettied up. The silk was gone and there were no rugs. The bed was much more ordinary and the dressers seemed a little more rough and damaged even. Only the washbasin was the same, but William didn't think that was going to be necessary. There was a large lounge however and a couple of smaller chairs of relatively sturdy make, all built much more to function than to form. It was all such a different feel to the usual flair that the Crimson Crest tried to put forward, as though William was seeing behind painted claws and tinted fur to what was real.

Once inside, the older hyena slid a frankly massive bolt across the doorway and turned back to William. "Please. Sit." He waved toward the lounge and the chairs as he made his way over and lowered himself into one of the smaller seats.

William briefly eyed the other smaller chair, but they faced the lounge and he didn't want to crane his head to speak with the rebel leader. Instead he dropped onto the lounge and leaned forward. The seat was firmer than he'd thought, but comfortable enough. "Leena explained why I'm here."

"She did, but I'm just glad to see you." His blood-father smiled softly at him as he lay his paws down in his lap. "I know there are troubles, and we'll get to that. Can I simply say that it is very good to see you well."

The kingsblade's eyes narrowed. Was he serious? This had to be a joke. "It wasn't very good a few days ago when you tried to murder the person I love."

He watched as his blood-father's smile flickered. "You don't like me very much, do you William?"

It was a loaded question. It was also entirely *not* the reason that William had come so urgently. Still, if the older hyena really wanted to go down that route... "Should I? You appear more than two decades since you apparently died, reveal yourself to me on the day the male who *did* raise me is murdered in front of me..." He growled as his blood-father's smile fell away. "On the day Fredrick made me *kneel in his rutting blood* and pledge myself to him."

"I couldn't help the timing. And if I had revealed myself to you much sooner, then you would have been in incredible danger. I wasn't going to do that to you, not before I was absolutely sure you could stand against everything that my presence would bring to bear." He sat forward in his chair as William rolled his eyes. "I am not making excuses. I don't intend for them to be taken as such."

"And what about Daniel?" William shook his head. Fredrick's magic could wait a few more minutes, he supposed. It'd already been a whole day after all. "I love him. I love him and you'd have killed him right in front of me. If you intended to win my trust and affection, you lost your chance right then and there." He snarled again. "So tell me. Why should I *like* you, William?"

The older male took the verbal beating in stride as he leaned back once more. He held his tongue, as if to make sure that William was done speaking before he answered. "You know, you were never meant to have my name."

The sudden pivot took some of the fire out of William's chest, and he blinked as his blood-father's smile returned. "I wished for you to bear the name of my divine forebear, but Catherine wouldn't have any of it. Told me she'd tan my hide herself if she had to wrap her muzzle around a Lenkis name. I didn't doubt it for a second."

A smile had to be carefully suppressed; that certainly sounded like William's mother. He wasn't about to give his blood-father a chance to worm his way out of William's ire, however. "So?"

"So, she had just the one in case you were a boy. Somryn, from a much older Carisi tongue. It means 'heart of fire' if one takes it literally." He closed his eyes as he let his head roll back. "I wish she'd had a chance to give it to you. There truly is such a fire in your heart. That you bear my name is, as sweet as the thought of her keeping my memory alive is, a shame. My shame."

And this was the part that William hated the most.

Because while the older male was perfectly ruthless and even cruel when circumstances called for it, these were the moments that made him... real. That reminded William that he had a heart. That he cared, and felt, and had lost as much – more, really – than William ever had. If he had fire in his heart, that fire was dimmed. "What happened to you wasn't a shame."

"It was the greatest shame. I failed to protect the love of my life. I failed to protect my son." When he brought his head back up to look at William again, he sighed. "I understand why you do not love me. You do not know me. Our circumstances and duties do not give us the time, usually, to simply... talk. To know one another." The older hyena rubbed at his face.

“I understand why you do not even like me. You have not seen me at my best. Only... what I must be. What I have to be. What I will continue to be until this is finished.”

“And what does your best look like?” The question was genuine as William shrugged.

“My best is this. Speaking with you. Trying to understand you. Wanting to learn all I can about you, so that I can be the father that you deserve.” He shook his head again. “What you never had.”

William almost opened his muzzle to again extoll Zane’s virtues, but there was no sense in kicking the older male while he was down. He didn’t deserve that, not from William. “It’s hard to balance *this* version of you to the you of a few days ago. You, trying to be a kindly father. You, willing and even *eager* to slaughter people for a cause.”

His sire lifted his eyebrows. “I imagine that the you who visited his mother between missions was very different to the you who fought on the battlefield. That the you joining with our cause was very different to the you who lay in bed with your husband.”

The growl in William’s throat was so deep as to almost be inaudible. “Yes. My husband. The husband who you dragged me under the city to so that I could watch one of your rebels almost kill him.” His fur bristled as he glared right back at the older male. “You think it’s a shame you failed to protect the love of your life? Imagine being expected to be *fine* with watching someone else kill the love of your life in front of you!”

“The love of my life was a kind and gentle soul whose only crime was bringing the warmth of Vicaris’ teachings to the people. The love of *your* life is a soldier who would have gladly marched on Herovir had he been more than a swaddled babe at the time.” The softness completely dropped from both his blood-father’s voice and face. “The love of your life was a soldier by *choice*. A believer in Ratholarin’s cause. The love of your life never tried to be more than a killer in a king’s colours. The two are beyond comparison. Catherine was more than he could ever be.”

The kingblade’s nostrils flared as he bit back his anger. “My *father* respected him as a male of integrity. He knew Daniel better than you ever will, and you’re right. The Daniel I first met would have gladly marched on Herovir. But I taught him better. *I* made him better, just as he has made me better.” There was a twitch to the older hyena’s ears even as his eyes narrowed. “And I know you wouldn’t have let him leave the city without following him. Did he make it out?”

His blood-father laid his paws down to grip the arms of his chair. “He did. Until we caught up to him and killed him, anyway.”

William’s blood ran cold the instant those words hit his ears, but they rapidly heated right back up again as he glared back at his blood-father. No. Impossible. No empty disbelief; there was no way such a methodical, logical creature as his blood-father would do such a thing. “If that were true, you would *never* admit it to me, because you know I would rip your head off with my own two paws and burn what was left to ashes. Which means that you’re playing a game with me, as though that’s all that this – that *we* – are.”

The older male smirked; it at least seemed like William had the right of it. “Don’t misunderstand me, William. I will forever lament that you were taken from me. That you were

not allowed to achieve the destiny that was ordained for you so long again. That I could never be the father to you that I should have been, and that we could not stand now, shoulder to shoulder as equals.” The elder hyena shook his head, but his eyes remained fixed on his son. “But this cause is larger than me. It is larger than your bonded. And it is larger than *you*, too.”

“If it weren’t, I would not endure all that I have these last few years. I certainly wouldn’t have turned down Daniel’s invitation to leave this all behind and go somewhere the two of us could simply live a happy, quiet life together.” William folded his arms. He’d had enough of these games; the soft and friendly side of his blood-father was just an act. His commitment, as he had just said, was to the task before him and not to what little family he had left. William couldn’t help but think that the right male had raised him after all; Zane was twice the person his blood-father was. “Now. Instead of trying to make me like you and failing miserably, can we *finally* get to why I came here?”

It almost looked like the elder hyena wasn’t quite done with the argument, but perhaps he sensed that William wasn’t going to have any of it. He sighed eventually and gave William the nod as he slumped back in his chair. “Yes, of course. Better we discuss our mutual enemy than turn you into a new one.”

Relief flowed through William as he too allowed himself to relax slightly. Finally. “Fredrick’s Ratholarin Institute is designed to gather magical items to himself. He’s using them so that he can wield their power.” When his blood-father simply nodded slowly to himself, William frowned. “You knew.”

“I suspected. The official cause of the Institute is to indoctrinate the people of the realm, and in that at least it is succeeding to a dangerous degree.” He stroked his chin as he looked up at William briefly before dipping his gaze away again. “We’ve certainly seen the guardians rounding up any scholars with knowledge of the old ways. Strange shipments that are being brought in from northern villages, and old Carisi holdings.”

“You *knew* this threat was there, and you didn’t step in to prevent it?” William scoffed and folded his arms tight across his chest. “You’ve given him the time he needs to bring his understanding of them to a usable point. He almost tortured the information out of me with a ring bearing Guavi’s power barely a day ago!”

The older hyena’s jaw tightened. “No mere ring, no matter the power, would be able to overcome your mind. Not yours, now that Miarvis’ power has awakened within you. It would burn out any intrusive magic drawn from Guavi’s source.” He paused and closed his eyes. “But others would not be so fortunate. I wish now that we’d had sufficient people in place to intercept these shipments. We might have been discovered, but these weapons could have been better used in our paws than his.”

William’s eyes widened. Why had he expected anything different from the rebels at this point? Was everything a weapon to be wielded? Was everyone a tool? “His Institute has to burn. I’ve overheard Tobias talking with certain people in the castle; there’s a vault inside it that he can access. I have to assume they keep all of their magical items there.”

“And Prince Tobias is the one with access. We can use this.” He leaned forward again and nodded to William. “Your efforts in ingratiating yourself with him bear fruit.”

The younger hyena shook his head and bared his teeth at his blood-father. "I have not been *ingratiating* anything."

His blood-father shrugged. "He trusts you. Appreciates you. Likes you, even lusts after you from what you have told me." He nodded again. "You can use that."

Another growl rolled out of William. "We have discussed this. I am not using Tobias."

"This is no time for you to lose your stomach in a matter of war. The prince is a piece on the game board and I expect you to exploit him to the fullest." The elder hyena stroked at his chin as he watched William balk at him. "You *need* to learn as much as you can about this vault. Enough to get our forces access to it."

The younger male recoiled as he searched his blood-father's face for any sign of jest. "You don't want to destroy it, do you? You want to clean it out."

The elder shrugged. "Better that it be in the paws of those who are born to it, than those who would usurp the power of the gods themselves for cruelty and destruction. Doubly better than burning it, as that would be a tremendous waste. This prince who is so infatuated with you is your way in. Your only way in."

"Absolutely not." William pushed himself to his feet with a growl. This whole thing had been a mistake. "Putting aside the idea that absuving his trust would be sickeningly cruel, I am *not* putting him in danger like that."

"He is our enemy. He is *already* in danger, son." His blood-father also rose from where he sat and reached out toward William. William just shrugged the paw away. "He is the blood of Vargor, just like his brothers. I know you wish for him to sit the throne after all is said and done, and that you are certain that he will do our people a service, but I am well and truly past *wishing* for service. If he cannot be bent to our cause gently, he will be bent to our cause more forcefully." The older hyena bared his teeth. "And if he cannot be made to bend, he will be made to break... and I will not shed a tear."

As if William needed any further proof that this male was not really his father. "If you expect any sort of peaceful outcome to this where innocents on all sides aren't utterly trampled by the consequences of your actions, you'd do well to have Tobias as an ally at all costs. If you remain too blind to see this after all that I've tried to tell you, then you aren't as wise as you claim."

There was silence for a couple of moments. William was almost surprised by it; he'd expected an immediate lecture on the necessity of sacrifice in war, or that Tobias was just another link in a corrupt chain, or any of the myriad other different lessons that he'd had to endure in his blood-father's desperate attempts to shift his perspective more in line with that of the rebels. It almost pleased William that thus far he'd retained his sense of self and his own notion of what was right and what was wrong. It didn't always made the wrong things he did feel right, but at least he still knew the difference. He wasn't certain that William Senior was quite so capable.

When finally his blood-father spoke though, it was with a surprisingly gentle tone. "I do see your point, even if you don't believe I do. You show such respect and care for someone

who, by your own admission, ripped your heart out. Where does this sympathy come from, I wonder?"

William ground his teeth together. Maybe that was the difference. He'd had Daniel to pull him out of the darkness in his heart after what Tobias had done... and then he'd not spent decades stewing in that hatred. "I learned to forgive. Not forget — *never* forget — but to forgive."

That earned a nod from the rebel leader, but when his head stilled his eyes had turned cold. "To forgive is a great gift, my son. I merely hope that you do not give it too freely." William growled again as his blood-father continued. "My view is unchanged, and so is yours. There is no point in arguing further. Not when everything that we have worked so hard to achieve is almost at our door."

"What do you mean?" William frowned as he allowed himself to more fully face the older hyena again. Everything he'd always heard was that the time was coming when they would be able to make their move... never that it was so imminent.

"I mean that, in light of the knowledge that Fredrick is now using magical artifacts, the time to strike *must* be now. We cannot afford to wait any longer." His expression hardened as he looked William up and down. "If the diagrams and charts you have drawn for us regarding the Rathin Castle's secret passages are all correct, then we will be able to infiltrate it and attack from many points. We could isolate the royalty and gut them before any further bloodshed is required."

All except Tobias. The older male hadn't said it, and William started to doubt just how committed the other hyena was to preserving some sort of leadership for the Ratholarin demesne. The rebel leader said only ever what he specifically intended to say, not a word more or less. The idea that this omission too was specifically chosen was less than comforting. "I'll need time to prepare if you actually expect me to open a path to this vault."

"You will not have much." His blood-father nodded toward the door. "The meeting that you interrupted with Leena was with representatives of other cells. We were already preparing for what's to come. Now they'll have to hurry home all the faster, if they are to arrive and prepare before news of Fredrick's death reaches them."

"And *you* are making an awful lot of assumptions. How can you stand there so confident that Fredrick's death is before us when I've only just told you that I need time to prepare?" William sighed. Why wouldn't the older male just listen? "If you want to get into the castle, it's going to take more than just knowledge of the secret passages."

"Like kingsblade rotations? Guardian postings? Servant rosters? You've already provided us a lot of the information that we're going to need to make this a success." William pinched the bridge of his muzzle as his blood-father spoke the words. "Don't make faces, son. The only thing left is access to this magical vault. If we can do that, success in Sanwell is guaranteed."

A little growl slipped out between William's teeth. "You'll *have* vault access once Fredrick and Brett are dead. If Tobias doesn't *give* you access, there should still be enough chaos that follows the assassination to slip in and either steal or destroy what's in there. You don't need to do them at the same time."

The older hyena's features hardened as he moved forward to stand right in front of William. "And what if we are discovered as the trap is about to be sprung? What if we are not able to kill Fredrick quickly, and instead he is able to retreat to the vault and arm himself? We cannot take that chance, William."

"You can, because I was meant to be the one cutting him down." Eyes narrowed as William glared at his blood-father. This whole thing – this whole *day* – had grown utterly infuriating. Why would no one just *listen* to him? "That was the whole point of ruining my life and forcing me to endure becoming a kingsblade."

"A position that has still advanced our cause, and will still ensure our victory." The older male placed both paws on William's shoulders. "We would not even know of this vault if not for your posting. And since Fredrick keeps you far, far from him at every turn, your ability to cut him down is minimal at best. The information you've provided is worth more than your discomfort."

"Fine words for someone who does not suffer it." William glared as he shrugged his blood-father's paws from his shoulders.

Clearly those words struck a nerve, because new fire blazed in the other male's eyes. <You think I have not suffered for this cause, *boy*? I lost my home. I lost my *people*. I lost my wife and I lost my son, and I have lost scores of friends and allies in the name of this cause. *I* haven't suffered?> His head darted forward to snap his teeth right in front of William's face, and the younger hyena recoiled as his blood-father bit out each Carisi word. <I have suffered for *thirty years*! And I have not surrendered everything that I am and was and would be for this cause to be looked at like some fat and privileged king in his high tower!>

William backed away, but his blood-father stepped in to keep himself right in his son's face, growling through every word. <I gave *everything* to this cause! To the people who might be spared the wrath of what Ratholarin has become, and how much worse it is yet to be! I have lost more than you have ever *had*, and I have done deeds in the name of all that is right that have left my spirit so damned that even the gods would decry me, and my heart so blackened that my *son* looks upon me with fear and hate.> His chest heaved, nostrils flaring as he glared into his son's eyes. <Do not speak to me of suffering. Do not *dare*.>

He tried to take another step back, but was unable to. William's back touched the wall, and there he pressed into it as he watched his blood-father snarl wordlessly in his face. He did back off a moment later, but William remained against the wall as the elder hyena brushed down his fur and composed himself. It was like he was just a cub all over again. "The only solace I take, William, is that you were not lost to me completely. That I have a chance to see you again, and that together we might avenge what was taken from us. That we might destroy those who stole a peaceful, happy life from us, before they steal it from yet more."

When William still had nothing to say, his blood-father backed further away and sighed. "You haven't had to live as I have. I'm grateful for that. You've not had to darken yourself with the horrors that I have just to survive. All that I have done is for the rights of others to cast judgement down on me. You are not the first and will not be the last to condemn me, William. I merely hope that, one day, you will be *grateful* for the evils done to shield you from even greater horrors."

William's head lifted in recognition. Not of the words his blood-father had spoken, but of their implication. Until right then, he had been about to nod along in understanding. Acceptance. After all, his blood-father was right. He'd done all that he had in the name of freeing people from the evil committed by the Ratholarin crown. The countless lives lost in pursuit of nothing more than Ratholarin domination; a cause started long before either of them had been born. William had been ready to apologise.

But then the elder hyena had said those words, and William shook his head. <And in the darkness do we see nothing but shadow until we ourselves become as the shadow, and thus does the darkness grow within and without until darkness be all that there is.> His blood-father frowned and cocked his head as William stared back at him. "I'm surprised you don't know it. It's the words of Sorumen of Herovir, a Carisi poet who lived late in the Age of Light."

The older hyena started to smile. "I didn't know you were so dedicated in learning our people's history."

"I'm not." The smile left his blood-father's face as William lifted his head higher and pushed off the wall. "Zane, son of Jakob, taught me the words. He taught me to perceive the wisdom of them and to heed their warning well. A Ratholarin kingsblade who respected the *wisdom* of the Carisi taught me that evil, whoever does it and in the name of whatever cause, is wrong."

William watched as the older male brought his claws down to his front. They swiped through his tunic, rending the fabric as his son recoiled in surprise. His other paw reached up to help rip the hole wider, until the hyena's greying stomach was exposed for William to see. The ugly scar several inches long in his gut was just as exposed. "I was standing to defend my home. I was standing to defend my wife, pregnant with my son, when Zane, son of Jakob, sought out where we were hiding and ran me through. He didn't have to come for us. He didn't have to follow a cruel king and murder innocent people who wished Ratholarin's people no ill."

That was not the story that Zane had told, and that his mother had backed up. He allowed himself a quiet smile as he looked down at that scar. "He called for your peaceful surrender. You attacked him."

"And he should not have been there in the first place to accost us." His blood-father's eyes narrowed. "Or do you think the Ratholarin were right to invade Caris?"

It was an obvious trap, and one William wasn't going to fall for. He just rolled his eyes and swept up a paw to brush the older male back. "Zane knew... *I* know what I do, and why I do it. We didn't pretend otherwise. And *I*," he added as his blood-father opened his muzzle to reply, "am still here. Still standing with you, to try and stop Fredrick. Despite everything."

As the older hyena's muzzle closed, his eyes drifted over William's face. What he was looking for William wasn't sure, but he doubted that the other male would find it. And that was fine, as far as he was concerned; all that he seemed to want was a soldier. A weapon he could use against Ratholarin. Part of him probably wanted to see William as his son, but he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that until the war he wanted was fought and won, all he would ever be to his blood-father was a weapon. A magical artifact like the ring Fredrick had worn.

A tool.

“You have chosen the right side of this conflict, William. I just wish you had chosen it for the right reasons.” The elder sighed and turned his head to the door. “Go. Do what you need to do. I will have someone check the usual place for any note you might leave. Do whatever it is that you must.” William nodded, glad for the dismissal as he started toward the door. He paused as his blood-father cleared his throat. “But William?”

He turned slowly back toward him. “Yes?”

“You have days. Four, maybe five at most.” The older male straightened up and, despite the torn tunic and bared scars of the past, he was no longer William’s sire. He was the rebel leader in full, all business and all focus. “The information you’ve brought is valuable, but it demands action. We *will* take it. The cause must advance.”

What to say? In the end, William settled on nothing at all. He simply nodded and pulled the door open. It took all he had not to simply run out into the corridor, exhausted as he was. He didn’t want to be seen to be eager to get away. He didn’t want to make his blood-father think that he was desperate to escape the conversation.

He was, of course. William didn’t have the time, the energy, or even the mental or emotional strength to continue a debate on the righteousness of war and dark deeds in the name of positive outcomes. He didn’t have the luxury of such an indulgence, not as the rebels prepared to launch their war. Not as they prepared to do anything and everything necessary to topple an unjust king.

Fredrick deserved it, of that William was absolutely sure. But that didn’t change the innocent lives that would be ruined in the process. The gods alone knew just how many of them there would be. William would have to answer, one day, for his role in it all.

He just hoped that when that day came, he had more of an answer than right then.