

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART SIX

29th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

It had been entirely tempting to reveal the existence of the rebels to Tobias, but William knew that that would have been too dangerous a thing. Even if his blood-father were right and his own magical awakening would protect him from the effects of Fredrick's ring, Tobias lacked that protection. Deceiving the tiger after he'd finally opened up to him again wasn't something that William was comfortable with, but it was something he knew was necessary.

That Tobias wouldn't see it that way wasn't something he concerned himself with, as he made his way through the streets of Sanwell with his cloak drawn tight. They had discussed certain things, and Tobias had seemed to accept that there were things William knew – he'd insinuated that there may have been people he knew who could help them in their endeavour – that he wasn't ready to share just yet. That he had been a rebel sympathiser and active member in their ranks for several years had not come up.

Neither had his power to conjure flame from his paws, and so much the better.

The streets were all but empty so late at night, and so much darker in the shadow quarter. Even a candle lit in the dark of night in that part of town invited reprisal, or at the very least unwanted attention. William was forced to negotiate the streets and back-alleys by memory as much as his other senses; little sound cues invited him to turn one way or another; certain smells told him he was on the right path. If not for how late his discussion with Tobias had run, he might have thought it good timing.

Finally though, in the heart of the shadow quarter, a single lit window caught his eye and illuminated the space around it like a beckoning lantern. He started toward it immediately as he reached into a pocket in the inside of his cloak. No sooner had he than a pair of rats in tattered leathers emerged from the side of the building, knives gleaming in the light as they stalked toward him. They hissed wordlessly and brandished their blades until William's paw came free again. In between his fingers rested his Crest coin, lifted for both of them to see.

The hisses immediately fell away, and they bowed their heads apologetically in turn. William nodded back to them; there was no offense they needed to beg forgiveness for, after all. They were just doing their jobs. Still, he had to give his blood-father credit. The rats certainly looked like the bandits and cutpurses they were supposed to, as opposed to the rebel warriors that they actually were.

William pushed the door open, and there were swords at his throat within half a moment. He froze in place immediately, staring straight ahead into the lit room. It was a reasonably cleared and large living space, but for a single massive table that was set up in its heart. A dozen chairs sat around it, each one filled by a different robed figure. More than a few of them turned to look at William as he entered, but none of them were responsible for the swords.

One, however, was responsible for them being lowered again. Standing on the opposite side of the room was his blood-father, and the older male snapped his fingers and waved a paw. The blades dropped away, and the hyena glanced aside to see a couple of rebel warriors standing at the ready. “Thank you.”

A white-robed figure at the table scoffed, their hood drawn in such a way that William couldn’t see her face. <And he brings Rathin speech into this meeting. Disappointing.> He frowned; no one had told him that Carisi had been the only allowable language at the meeting. He couldn’t help but also notice the map on the table between all the seated figures, detailing the full layout of Sanwell.

<A consequence of what we have lost, not a stain on his soul.> William’s blood-father nodded to his son and waved him over as the door was closed behind him. <Besides, he was not to know better. His summons to this meeting was late due to circumstances beyond any of our control.>

Another figure with a robe so blue that it may as well have been black lifted their head as William rounded the table. He could see an elderly horse’s face under the hood, his long muzzle protruding from within. <The circumstances would not have mattered had he done the deed the day he was elevated to kingsblade.>

William’s frown deepened even as his blood-father sighed. <As the case may be. If he had acted on that day, he would have been slaughtered and we would still have other issues to deal with. Fredrick alone is not the point of this, even if he is the pressing, immediate threat.>

Another seated individual, a mouse in robes of red inlaid with golden threads pulled back her hood entirely as she stared up at William. <And are you here to offer us more excuses for why you have continued to fail to act?>

The hyena bit his tongue and turned instead to his blood-father. He waited until the older male met his gaze and nodded before he fixed his eyes once more on the mouse. <Because I do not do things in half measures. I do not act rashly and then fail. I plan, and I succeed.> He tilted his head up higher to stare down his muzzle at her. “And I do *not* appreciate your tone.”

Murmurs of discontent rose around the table as he spoke the Rathin words. As the elders muttered among themselves, William turned to his blood-father. He didn’t get far before the older hyena sighed. <Antagonising them will not win you favours, William.>

<I don’t do this to be treated with contempt and insult. If they wish my respect, they can earn it.> He turned back toward the table. <Have I missed anything important?>

More than a few of them shared quick looks. The only person at the table who was not hooded – a short ferret with her headfur bound up in a tight knot – shook her head. <We were almost finished, in fact. The groundwork is laid; all that is left is to alert out people to the time we will enact the assault.>

<One we are not certain requires your presence any longer.> It was the mouse to speak again, and she stared with utter derision at William. <After all, you have thus far proven to be utterly useless to our cause.>

That was new. William quirked an eyebrow at his blood-father and watched the other hyena sigh. <Many of the elders believe that it would be best to abandon the assassination of

Fredrick entirely. That striking at his leadership would be more doable, and would throw Ratholarin into such disarray that we would be better able to claim his life at a later time.>

The hyena grit his teeth. So they were back to chaos, then. Even if they were the best chance of toppling Fredrick, it was clear that none of them had any interest in preserving Ratholarin as an entity. Was revenge all that mattered to them? Was destruction and death the only thing that would satisfy them? <Then I look forward to seeing you all fail.>

A few growls rose from the table, but his blood-father was more calm. <You have learned something.>

<I am not certain it concerns you all anymore.> He shrugged, folding his arms as he stared straight down at the mouse. <After all, I am so utterly useless to the cause. I do not know that I can offer anything that these *esteemed* elders do not know, such does Lemeos bless them and their plots.> He bowed his head low. William didn't normally like to be so petty, but these elders clearly didn't care for him. He wasn't about to pretend to be nice for the respect of people who would always see him as less. Maybe they weren't so different to the Ratholarin after all.

Of course, that didn't mean that his blood-father was quite so aggressive toward him... not right then, at least. <Then would you tell me? I would hear what you have learned and give it all consideration.>

William hesitated as he rose again, and stared down at the mouse. She looked utterly offended by his display, and the sight of it gave him a brief flash of petulant glee. Once upon a time, he'd actually looked forward to meeting those elders. He could scarcely believe how disappointing they were. <You remember that I told you about his efforts to command magical artifacts? They are taking it further; attempting to infuse the power directly into Fredrick.>

The older hyena swallowed hard, and his eyes grew unfocused. The rest of the chatter around the table vanished instantly, cut off by the weight of William's words. Every face he could see had suddenly turned from hostile to scared. <From what I have learned tonight, he seeks to use the blood of descendants to empower himself. It is not yet to work, but such a thing may only be a matter of time.>

There was a shake of the head of another white-robed figure. <Impossible. Such a thing cannot be done.>

<Unless it can, and the method merely eludes us.> The respondent was a female in a black hood. <If the children of the gifted can wield the power, why can it not be stolen?>

The mouse in red scoffed. <The gods would not allow such a perversion of their power and their will to exist.>

<The gods have allowed *all* of this to exist, and they do not interfere to stop it.> William's words drew every pair of eyes in the room to him. Even the sentries by the door were paying attention to him then. <That Fredrick sits the throne of Ratholarin, that Caris is shattered, and that Lenkis lies in ruin is proof enough of this truth. Either the gods do not care, or they are powerless to intervene.>

<You speak blasphemy!>

<Heathen!>

<False lightbearer!>

<Rathin bastard!>

The recriminations came thick and fast, and William sighed to himself as they shouted him down. Had they lived so long unchallenged that they were unable to open themselves to the simple truth right before them? It wasn't like he'd told them that the gods weren't real, or that they weren't worthy of respect, or that they didn't deserve to be worshipped.

<Silence.> The single word came from his blood-father, and it cut off every single word against William. He turned toward the older male and couldn't help but nod his thanks. His blood-father didn't respond; his eyes were focused fully on the elders at the table. <Listen to yourselves. You are meant to be the bearers of the wisdom of our people. The beacons of knowledge and enlightenment on behalf of the gods. They must be ashamed of us to hear you now.>

While a couple of the elders bowed their heads in shame, still others turned their ire from one hyena to the other. The older male took it unflinchingly. <What the gods choose to allow is irrelevant. They are not here, and *we are*. Blind faith has never served them, and they have never expected it of us.>

The black robed figure nodded. <Vicaris forged in us wisdom. We should use it.>

<Certainly we would be unworthy if we lacked the wisdom to see the knowledge that William has provided us.> The older hyena smiled at his son, and William gave a solemn nod in turn. <This changes everything. Even if he has yet to achieve the full measure of the gift, we cannot give King Fredrick time to see his plans to completion. We have to enact our plot as soon as possible; there can be no more delay. > He nodded to William. <If we struck tomorrow, would that be manageable?>

That took the kingsblade aback. He looked down at the table and the map on it again; exactly how much planning had he missed by meeting with Tobias? <It's faster than... I was expecting.> He could be ready to move at any time, of course; it was the sort of thing he was trained for. But Tobias? If he wanted the tiger to be in any shape to assume control of Ratholarin at the end of this coup, he might need time to prepare. To put affairs in order and rally allies of his own, if he had any.

<It is slower than many at this table wished, and faster than others dared. Your information regarding Fredrick's use of magical artifacts hastened our plans, but this new threat simply cannot be ignored.> His blood-father placed a paw on William's shoulder and pulled him close, touching his forehead to his son's. <Tell me it can be done, and I will put this all in motion.>

The awareness that all the elders were watching him did nothing to ease William's mind and heart, but he nodded against his blood-father's forehead nonetheless. Tomorrow was likely too soon for Tobias, but they didn't have a choice. The rebels would act on his information regardless, and Fredrick *did* need to be stopped as soon as possible. <It... can be done. Yes.>

<Very good.> His blood-father nodded, nuzzling against him gently in the warmest paternal gesture he'd ever given William before he released him and stepped back. He turned back to the elders with a thin smile on his muzzle. <Go, and spread the word to your followers.

Let them know that the zenith of the sun will mark the end of Fredrick's reign, and a restoration of Caris. The peak of Miarvis' light will guide us in this task.>

Several of the robed figures touched a pair of fingers to their foreheads, each with their right paw. They stood, while others remained seated. One such was the red-robed mouse who looked sceptical. <Mine will need more than the assurance of a false lightbringer. We respect you, William, but your son...> She shook her head.

William growled under his breath, but the older hyena just shook his head. <Then I beg you invoke my name. All that we have been preparing for – all that I have built for our people – will be turned to bear on the Ratholarin crown. If you will not trust in the deeds of my son, then trust in the deeds that *I* have done for you. Have *I* not been true to the cause, Agara?>

She sighed back at him as William watched on. <You have. I just hope that you have not been led astray by your own blood.> She slowly rose from her seat even as other elders began to filter out. A glance at the door showed them being met by armed guards ready to escort them. The rebels really had fully infiltrated the shadow quarter. <We will spread the word, William. In the name of the gods and the people of Caris, it will be done.>

His blood-father smiled and bowed his head before the elder, but she offered no response. Instead, she started to make her way around the table and to the door. The other elders, presumably pleased as well by the older hyena's words, followed suit. When his head lifted, his eyes found William's. <Thank you, my son, for warning us. I had no idea that the Ratholarin were so close to subverting the gift.>

<I'm more surprised that you even think they can.> On some level William himself could scarcely believe it. Tobias had seemed sure it was possible though, and if nothing else he trusted the tiger's mind. <If Tobias hadn't told me, I wouldn't have believed it myself.>

The older male's expression soured as he sat down at the table. <If I had known the information came from a Ratholarin prince, I don't think I would have staked my reputation and our entire cause on it. You should have told me first.>

William frowned. The elders were almost all clear, but there were still a couple in the room. They didn't seem to have overheard. He wasn't certain he wanted to chance them turning right back around if they shared his blood-father's concerns. <He would know best. He was able to ingratiate himself with the scholars operating the experiments. All of the information is contained within the vault in the Institute.>

<That will continue to be your priority, then. Come. Look.> He waved William over as he tugged the map of the city closer. <All the better for you to see this before the dawn comes. Our plans for how to bring this city to its knees.>

The last of the elders finally cleared the door, and it closed with a quiet click behind them. Only the two Williams were left in the room, and it was the younger who scowled. <I thought the city was not the target.>

<It is not, but a critical aspect to the plan nonetheless.> His blood-father brushed his fingers across the map, touching a claw to a number of locations in particular. <You may be the one who has achieved the highest rank, but several other of our number are currently

engaged in the Ratholarin's service. The watch, the army, merchants and more all contain loyal members of our cause.>

"Even with Fredrick's purges?" With no one else around William didn't see a need to stick to Carisi. The Rathin words were just easier for him to communicate in.

If his blood-father was frustrated by the shift, he didn't show it. "We have forged papers for dozens of warriors embedded in the watch, and almost a hundred in the garrisons for the army here in Sanwell. Thousands more across the realm." He smiled up at his son. "Many of them are Carisi, or Lenkis, or Yaroveni. There are still some Ratholarin however who have been swayed to our cause. More and more with time, as Fredrick's evil shines through."

"Yes, but..." William shook his head. "The guardians are brutal. Thorough."

"And the people are on our side, my son. We have been aided every step of the way by those who would also see Fredrick's cruelty cut off at the neck." He brushed his paw across the map. "Midday tomorrow. Word will spread this night like wildfire through the loyal members of our cause, and at midday they will act as one. For you."

The younger hyena blinked. "For me? To do what?"

As he sat back, his blood-father shone a small, dark smile. "To strike. All as one, all together. As many commanders, captains, and leaders as we can manage. We should be able to eliminate the vast majority of the Ratholarin Magi, though a couple of them including the princes will be more elusive. That will be your task, of course, once Fredrick has been dispatched."

William's blood turned to ice. There were far too many things to worry about there, but he could pick out a couple to begin with. "You're going to assassinate all of those people."

"We are. The entirety of the Ratholarin leadership. Everyone who could command swords be raised against us. Every magistrate. Every guild leader paying service to the crown. They're all going to be cut down." He seemed so satisfied with himself as he looked down over the map of the city. "They will be thrown into absolute panic. No one will know what to do. Command structure will be severed, and when the king enacts his orders and deploys his forces to engage us, he will be left vulnerable for the knife at his back... your knife."

"But I'm not *at* Fredrick's back." William sighed. This was the part his blood-father never seemed to understand. "For me to reach him, I would need to abandon the idea of capturing the vault. And then I would have to fight through every other kingsblade and every guardian still within the castle to get to him, and then actually cut him down."

The older hyena nodded as he smiled up at William. "And this, my son, is why your magic needed to be brought forth. Why we needed to awaken the spark of it in Herovir so long ago."

William blinked. He'd not even thought about the Herovir campaign in *years*. "What do you mean?"

"I planned the Herovir uprising. Placed the shaman Thenas there... did you know he is your great uncle by blood?" The older hyena chuckled to himself as he leaned back in his chair,

gaze drifting off in the distance. “I never expected he and Paulos would have been able to come so close to killing Prince Tobias that day. I almost regret that he wasn’t the goal.”

“... *I* was. The whole threat of the shaman, everything... it was for me.” William frowned as he stared down at his blood-father. “You’d been planning this all for decades.”

He smiled. “As long as you have been alive. I’ve even been there over the years, watching you. Seeing you all those times, wishing that I could come up to you, speak to you, tell you who I was... knowing that if I did, it would unravel every one of my plans... I was still so tempted.” His smile turned more coy. “The day the prince came to inspect the troops after you had joined the army. The day you spent with the kingsblade after a skirmish in the northern villages, confessing to him how you felt about that bear. Buying your mother that house and presenting it to her. Your incursion into Herovir. Your bonding ceremony.” His smile faded as his voice hitched. “Cath... your mother’s funeral. That was... you gave her the final rites of our people, in spite of the danger it put you in. I was so... so proud of you.”

William felt his muzzle curl as a surge of anger ran through him. “All that time. You were here all that time and you never...”

“If I had seen you before the day of the kingsblade’s murder, I would have ruined everything.” He shook his head and sighed deeply. “Every oracle and every dreamseer confirmed it. You would not join us if I came to you sooner.”

“No, not me. *Her*.” William grit his teeth as surprise crossed his blood-father’s face. The fool hadn’t even considered that. “You never went to see *her*. All that time — and you had years before she passed — and you never, not once... even *thought* about it?”

“I thought about her, and you, every single day since our harriers pulled me half-dead from the snow in Jorkun.” The older hyena’s expression hardened as William looked away. “You were all that I wanted, but I had a greater duty. I had a duty to your futures. Always to your futures. I...” He squeezed his eyes shut and turned away. “I will never, ever regret anything more than that this has taken so long. That she passed before seeing it all come to be. Before seeing you burn so bright for us all.”

“You make it sound like I’ll be lighting my own funeral pyre.” The younger hyena sighed. “And if not mine, certainly that of others. Even if I succeed, you can’t expect all of the others to. You’re probably going to lose every single infiltrator you have.”

His blood-father gave a solemn nod in turn. “And their deaths are necessary. The gods shall welcome them with open arms for their sacrifice.”

William hung his head low. This was what he always knew was coming, he told himself. The lives of his blood-fathers’ own followers meant nothing to him before the completion of the task he’d set himself. “I’m not sure how I’m to feel comfortable being the cause of so much death.”

“The blame does not fall on you. The blame can be laid at Fredrick’s feet. At Eric’s feet. At Geron’s feet. At Darian’s feet. Back and back and back through the generations right to Vargor himself.” As he spoke, the older hyena’s muzzle twisted further and further into a snarl. “The pestilence that is the Rathin line must end.”

“And it will. With Tobias.” His blood-father looked up at those words, and William narrowed his eyes as he stared down at him. “Remember? The only way to prevent needless bloodshed is to ensure that the throne is sat by someone who will heed us. Tobias will do that for us.”

“Yes. Of course he will.” The elder male smiled up at William, but it didn’t reassure his son in the slightest. How could it? “I sincerely hope your trust in this prince is vindicated. I will, however, place my trust instead in the gods and the righteousness of our cause.” He paused as his smile softened. “You should rest. It is late, and you will want to head back into the castle as deep in the morning as you can. Do you need somewhere to sleep?”

William shook his head and hoped it hid his wince. He didn’t want to bunk down with the rebels. It had less to do with the idea that it would be dangerous to be caught with them if a random raid happened upon them, and more with the fact that he doubted he would be even remotely comfortable. “I haven’t been home much since... Daniel. I’ll spend the night there.”

He definitely caught the disapproval that flashed across the older hyena’s face, and he allowed his brow to furrow. His muzzle opened before his blood-father could even speak. “I don’t care what you think of him. He is a good person, and I love him, and even *mother* respected and appreciated him while she was still alive. When this is all done and you get what you want, I will go and find him and you will not stop me.”

“If there is anything to find. He is Ratholarin; he will not understand or respect you after what you have to do.” His blood-father shook his head and turned in his chair to more fully regard William. “And besides, you cannot. Not yet. There are rites to be performed. Balances that must be maintained; duties you must undertake.”

“Balances. Duties. Rites.” William growled as he folded his arms. There was *always* something else. “Speak plainly. Tell me what’s expected, and don’t just surprise me with it later.”

“You are a powerful nexus of divine energies now, my son. A nexus of divinity that cannot be allowed to perish when you do.” The older male stood from the table and placed his paws on William’s shoulders. “There will be priestesses who will... require your services.”

William ground his teeth together as he held his father’s stare. “They can service themselves.”

“This is not a joke, William.” Any warmth left in his blood-father’s face evaporated in an instant. “There has not been such a concentration of magic in a single person in hundreds of years. It’s only your lack of training that keeps you from surpassing any shaman that has lived since Lenkis’ height. You could be capable of overcoming even an Altheh for all we know. That power must be bred, so that successive generations know it as well.”

“That is *not* going to happen. I want you to understand that very clearly.” William took a step back and allowed the other hyena’s paws to fall from his shoulders. “I am not breeding stock for a magical line. I refuse to be treated like some prim, stud-gryphon to be let loose in a temple. I have no interest in female folk in that way.”

His blood-father just snorted as his smile returned. “That can be managed. Your refusal is amusing, but nothing more than that. If we are not only to topple the evil that sits atop

Ratholarin but also endure in the world that will follow, we will need the gift. You *will* give it.”

He was sure of it; William could tell. There was absolute certainty behind his blood-father’s eyes that left the younger male utterly shaken. What did he intend to do? What *could* he do? “We will discuss this again when we are finished.”

“There will be nothing to discuss.” Once more the rebel leader settled back into his chair and drew the map closer. “You ought to get to bed. You have a big day tomorrow, and a bigger future than you can possibly imagine that lies ahead. I pray Vicaris gives you peace and rest this night.”

William turned immediately away from his blood-father and headed for the door. He briefly thought to linger; to argue and fight what had been said. Such a thing would have been a waste of time and a waste of breath. There would be no changing the old fool’s mind. Maybe when all was said and done, he would be able to leverage his heroic status as the slayer of Mad King Fredrick or whatever as a means to escape whatever fate had been ordained for him.

It might have been a fleeting hope, but William held tight to it. He could do nothing else.

###

Sleep didn’t come.

He’d expected as much, but either Vicaris wasn’t powerful enough or interested in enough to heed his blood-father’s prayer. Laying there atop the sheets that had once shrouded his and Daniel’s bodies, a naked William stared at the ceiling. His paws stroked at his chest, claws scratching through his fur.

His mind was far too active to grant him the reprieve of sleep. It had become more and more common of late, as the rebels marched inexorably toward the war they so desperately needed to win. The long nights standing vigil over a prince who was in no danger, the days where he should have been asleep but instead was meeting with insurgents and saboteurs, and the never-ending abuse that issued from Fredrick’s muzzle whenever the king crossed his path.

The hardship, dishonour and ignobility of his position had been a slowly-mounting toxin, eating away at William just a little more each day. Where once he had at least a few precious moments with Daniel to keep him anchored and sane, that had been taken away from him right when he needed it most. William had been forced, once again, to find solace only in himself. That would have been hard if he at least knew Daniel was safe.

He couldn’t know that, not anymore. The viciousness of the beating he’d clearly received before William had found him, the distance he’d had to travel, and the fact that every guardian in the demesne was probably looking for him all made it seem all the more unlikely that Daniel would have been able to make it to Ingsbren. Even if he wasn’t caught, would he be able to make his way there? Would he survive the trip? Did he have enough supplies, and coin with which to trade for more? William just didn’t know. It was usually the first thought in his head when he woke up, and the last thought in his head when he fell asleep.

That night though it swirled about in a maelstrom of worries of far greater volume than normal. It was impossible to extract his concern for Daniel, dominant though it was, from the

reality of what the next morning would bring. There would be violence. Blood. He would do unspeakable things – *awful* things – in the name of a better life for hundreds, thousands, *more* people. He would kill people.

It had bothered him at first, all those years ago when he'd first fought for his life. William could remember clearly the face of the first person he'd killed. He'd already wounded two before the wolf, looking so much like his father, had pressed in against Daniel. The bear had been distracted, disarmed by a boar who took his full attention to fend off. He'd not seen William's approach, but he had felt the hyena's sword run through his back. The wolf had twisted as he fell, all but yanking a surprised William down with him.

At first, it had been a horror that had frozen the young hyena in place. He'd looked into the wolf's eyes as pain, then anger, then terror all filled them. Everything that the prospect of death bought had played out in that face, and William had been unable to look away from it. To avert his eyes from the life that he'd taken. The life he'd ended.

Instinct took over of course when the wolf made a last-ditch attempt to bring William with him past the mortal veil, by trying to pull a dagger from his belt and stab him in the gut with it. William had snapped out of his shock just in time to pry the blade from the wolf's paw and jam it instead into its owner's chest. It had all been surprisingly quick after that, as the life drained out of the wolf's face. The battle had ended shortly after, and William had cried inconsolably that night.

He never had learned the wolf's name. What had drawn him to a life of thieving and banditry in a nearby northern village. He'd never learned if the wolf had a bonded or any children. If his parents knew what had happened to him. If any siblings remained to carry on his line. He knew only that the wolf had been about to strike Daniel down, and William had stopped him.

In the years to come, William only reflected on the moment rarely. To remind himself of the value of life, and how little he knew of those whose lives he had taken, or would yet take. He'd regretted it immensely at the time, and had seen right then what his mother had tried to protect him from. The horror of war and battle. The stains it left on the soul to rip a life apart. That it had been his duty had been small comfort. That he had done it to save Daniel's life? That was what had helped him make it through the emotionally devastating reality. It had also been the moment that he realised that he truly considered the bear his friend. He'd had no idea how much further they would go together.

That, he realised as he stared up at the dark ceiling, was what bothered him about his blood-father. About Leena. Yves. All the rebels he'd ever met. William had always remembered the cost of taking a life. He'd always done it out of necessity or duty, but never with gladness. There was not a single person he had ever killed that he was pleased to see dead. Whether or not that trend continued with Fredrick was something yet to be seen but it was, for that moment at the least, something that set him apart from *them*. To William, the Ratholarin people deserved to live. *Tobias* deserved to live.

The others, clearly, disagreed. To them, the evil was manifest in each of them. Shades of darkness deeper than the coldest night lurked behind every single Ratholarin heart, so far as they were concerned. It wasn't Eric or Fredrick or Brett, and it wasn't the blood of Vargor. It was everything that the realm had been founded on. All would suffer, in the name of revenge

for a city and a kingdom sacked before William had even been born. Thirty-odd years of hatred had stewed in them. Would William feel the same if he had been steeped in that much desire for revenge for so long?

He supposed that if that were true, he would never have joined the rebel cause in the first place. He had only ever *been* Ratholarin. He'd learned bits and pieces of his heritage, but they merely informed where he came from and not the sum total of who he was. William could see it in all the rebel leaders that the most important thing about them was that they were Carisi. Victims of Ratholarin. Victims of cruelty. That pain couldn't be denied, nor should it have been denied. Equally though, he could see what it had done to them. They had turned their pain into all that they were. Twisted themselves by immersing themselves in it.

They had forgotten how to live, the hyena decided with a deep sigh. They had forgotten that joy could still be found in the world. All that was left for them was their pain. Their hate. Their need for revenge. The *point* behind their actions still made sense; the goal of the rebel forces was a noble one, as long as William hadn't looked too deeply into their motivations and deepest hopes.

But he had. It was a necessary thing that Fredrick be deposed; he agreed with them. Brett would be no better; William agreed with that, too. Tobias, though? Irene? Every magistrate or member of the small council who had been bullied by Fredrick into supporting his madness? Every commander or captain who had been forced, under pain of death, to commit an atrocity in the king's name? Every person, whomever they are and were, who just happened to be Ratholarin-born?

William knew that their deaths wouldn't bring back the Caris that had existed before he was born. He knew that even if every last person in Ratholarin were slaughtered, regardless of crime, it would do nothing to ease the minds and hearts of those who had been wronged. There was no peace that awaited the Carisi who had not accepted and moved on from the abominable actions of the past. Fighting to prevent those injustices from repeating was a noble cause. It was *William's* cause. Fighting for revenge against innocent people, though... that wasn't a price the hyena was comfortable paying.

Unfortunately for him, he knew that it wouldn't be that simple. Would that a show of force and a bladed threat would convince Fredrick to change his ways. William knew better, of course. The tiger would only surrender his throne in death, natural or otherwise. That he hadn't even bothered to take a new wife to birth him a legitimate heir couldn't be placed at the altar of the king's incompetence. It was arrogance that drove him. Why not preserve his line? Why not ensure, as all who had come before did, that their blood would continue to sit the throne long after him?

There was only one answer: he did not expect to ever be replaced. That one way or another, Fredrick the Second would be the last king of Ratholarin. William would have thought such a thing utterly impossible, but then again he would have thought Fredrick assuming a mantle of magic and drawing on the divine powers it afforded to be just as impossible. That William had learned so much more about the gods and the nature of magic since his own had been brought to bear only terrified him all the more. He knew, perhaps better than Tobias did, what was at stake if Fredrick were able to usurp such power.

And so he had to fight. Of course he had to fight; William had never doubted his need to join the conflict for the soul of Ratholarin. Everything hung in the balance. More than himself; more than Daniel or Tobias, more than the father who raised him or the father whose blood ran in his veins; more than Ratholarin, or Ingsbren, or Sylaria. The whole south sea was in the balance. The world beyond the Vast Blue would be next. Who knew? Maybe there were other worlds beyond their own, and those might yet catch Fredrick's eye as well.

William closed his eyes and squeezed tight at his paws. He didn't know what would come in the morning. He didn't know what the afternoon would bring. He didn't know if he would live to see it, or if Fredrick would have caught wind of the plot against him and prepared. He didn't know if he'd even make it back to the castle, or if he could even strike the king down. So much rode on him. Everything would be decided by what he did.

Tobias would bid him do what was right; end Fredrick for the sake of all Ratholarin. He would hate William for pushing him to the throne, but he would nevertheless assume it out of necessity. William knew that Tobias would do his best to broker peace; to work with the Carisi. Would his blood-father, though?

Zane, too, would have encouraged William. He thought he could hear his father's words in his ears, issuing inspirational quotes of honour and war waged in the name of those without the strength to stand. He had known that the Ratholarin crown he had served had fallen far under Fredrick... he would have wanted William to, if he could, restore it to what it could be. What it *should* be.

Geoffery, that rough but fair commander he had fought beside so many years, would call him a traitor. So would Victor, that warrior who had lauded William's valour to his father. Long retired from fighting, they would probably survive his blood-father's uprising. Would they condemn him, he wondered? Would they spit on him in the street for betraying the land to which he owed everything he had built? For putting their families at risk?

It had been so long that William could barely remember the sound of his mother's voice, but not so long that he couldn't imagine exactly what she would say if she saw him there. She would have counselled him not to involve himself in his blood-father's scheme. To not risk himself so needlessly for a cause lost decades past. She had only ever wanted to preserve all that she loved in the world, and that had not been Caris. That had been him... but what if she'd known her husband lived? What if she had known that she had not one William, but two? She'd always been fierce and scathing in her criticism of Ratholarin. If both of her males had lived, would she not join the fight herself right alongside them? He didn't know. None of them knew, either; none of them knew the whole of the situation like William did.

Except, of course, for one. Daniel understood. He was the only person William knew who both understood the pressure placed on the hyena, and the need to do what was right. He barely had to think to conjure Daniel's voice to his mind; to make his smiling face manifest before closed eyes. Daniel had always wanted him to run away with him. To leave it all behind and find their lives together elsewhere. The bear had always had more friends than William, but he had been so glad to leave it all behind and spend his life just with the hyena.

He'd trusted William. Even when he'd been betrayed by the secrets William had kept, he had trusted him right to the core. Daniel had never – *would* never – betray William. William wouldn't betray him. He *couldn't* betray the bear. Daniel had pleaded with him to do right by

Ratholarin; that the evil of the king was not the evil of the people. Daniel had told him to do what he had to do, and to do everything he could to make things right. To end Fredrick's cruelty. To let Ratholarin continue. To find him when it was all over, and get as far away from it all as they possibly could.

He'd promised. He'd promised Daniel that he would seek him out. That he would find the bear when it was done, and that he would not stop until they were together again. William had promised him to see Ratholarin saved, not sacrificed. Not destroyed. He had to see this all through. He had to.

And, William knew, he had to do it in a way that would make the bear proud. He couldn't let the worst impulses of the rebels destroy the lives of thousands upon thousands of innocent people. For every one that had a direct role in the fall of Caris, or Lenkis, or Yaroven? Many, many hundreds more were innocent. They had to be protected, even if it was from the wrath of the rebels.

William took a deep breath and let it back out slowly. He knew what he had to do. Not because of Daniel; not because he wanted and needed to be worthy in the bear's eyes. The hyena had to do it because it had to be done. Because no one else would be able to do it. Because when it was done, someone had to be there to stop it going any further. Blade against the Ratholarin. Shield against the rebels. The finest of lines to walk, but one that no one else could straddle.

At least until it was done. He felt his muzzle turn as he remembered what his blood-father saw in William's future after the coup. He had never had the interest in females that others he knew had; like Daniel, William could not recount a time when he had ever felt the urge to lay with one the way he had with the bear. He'd wrestled with what that had meant for the chances to raise a family one day a long time ago, and come to peace with it. Now, suddenly, to have the idea thrust back into the fore for him was discomfoting at the least.

It was clear that his blood-father wouldn't simply *allow* William to leave to find Daniel. He wouldn't respect the promise he'd made to his love, and do anything to force his son to stay at his side. How far would he go? Would he tie William down and force people on him? Would he use magic to compel the hyena to surrender? Would he simply do what Fredrick had tried with that ring, and twist William's mind until he got what he wanted? And if he did, would there be anything left of William in the end?

His blood-father was wrong. William knew that for sure. To do what he planned to do to his son was a cruelty on the level of anything that Fredrick had done. The only difference to the hyena's mind was the scale of it. If he succeeded against the odds and this revolution was successful, he could not linger. He would have to bid his farewells immediately, and then flee Sanwell. Sanwell, the Ratholarin demesne, and possibly the whole southern sea. If he returned, they would seek him out at all costs. He was, apparently, too important.

He didn't care. He was just as important to Daniel as the bear was to him. When this revolution was won, his role would end. His life *would* be his own again, and he *would* use it to reunite with the one person in the world who truly knew him. William wouldn't let anything stand in their way. Not ever. Nothing would keep him from Daniel.

Sleep didn't come quickly but, comforted by that thought, it did come.