

FirstKeep, Part 1: Introductions and the Onset of Hostilities; of Joinings and Partings.  
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<http://www.tigerden.com/~malin/firstkeep/>

“Your Highness! Your Highness!” The young fox flew from the top of the tower, skipping narrow stairs on the circular staircase and finding his footing easily on the stone floor at the bottom. “Fire at ForestKeep!” he called, skidding around two corners and dodging a startled servant. He burst into the council chamber and dropped to one knee, his tail lashing behind him as he looked up wide-eyed at the grizzled fox on the throne before him. “Signal fire at ForestKeep, your highness,” he said, his muzzle parted slightly from his run.

Queen Firona looked down at the young frightened muzzle and nodded, sadness and resignation in her voice. “Thank you, Captain Fentern.” She sighed. “So it is war,” she continued, looking around at her advisors and gauging their reactions.

Farig, a portly fox who had fought his last battle twenty years ago, lifted his scarred muzzle defiantly and clenched a paw that was missing the smallest finger. He had commanded the Queen’s forces through ten years of skirmishes, and his skill was without peer. Many a neighboring army had rejoiced over the retirement of his distinctive blue leather armor from the borders, only to find their positions constantly undermined and overmatched as his strategies disseminated his presence throughout the Fox kingdoms. He was also the Clawmaster of the castle, in charge of weapons instruction to the young princes and officers, but despite this position of respect and security, he made no secret of how much he longed to fight again.

Next to him, Falant’s muzzle was bowed, his eyes shut as he slowly shook his head. He was the Queen’s closest and most trusted advisor, and he was privately of the opinion that this war was as inevitable as it was unwinnable. Only to the Queen had he said this, and now his tail curled up into his lap as he counted silent fears. The Queen’s eyes lingered on him longest of all, her gaze softening as she watched her friend’s distress.

The fifth fox in the room sat to the other side of the Queen, his traditional hood settled about his neck. Mage Finna’s paw was lifted to his muzzle, his cheek resting against it as he surveyed the room and the other foxes’ response to the news. He was the youngest of the council, his fur still thick and full-colored, though most of it was hidden beneath his expansive black robe. Where the other foxes wore short robes with modest decorations, Finna’s trailed on the ground when he stood, and was bare of everything save the mark of the Mage. He shrugged the sleeve of the robe back from his other paw, and gestured to the door with that paw as he spoke.

“Your highness,” he said slowly. “The stars have spoken. The events they foretold have come to pass. Yet the outcome is still unclear.”

Firona nodded. *None of them knows what to do any more than I do, she thought. Nobody knows. War between foxes?* She raised a paw, almost more grey than black. “Captain. Summon the remaining council members. Tell them they must come immediately.” Fentern bowed his head and walked quickly to the door. “And,” the Queen stopped him, as though it were an oversight. “Be sure to include the crown prince.”



Prince Firmane was a young fox, lean and trim. He was a bit taller than the average fox, but had the same russet fur on his back, shoulders, and thighs. Down the front of his body, his fur was a

creamy white, and the same white marked the tip of his bushy tail. His ears and the lowest part of each limb were furred in black, as if he were wearing gloves and socks. One thing set him apart from other foxes: the dark brown mane that ran down his neck and upper back, and across his shoulders. At the moment, he was occupied with a vixen by the name of Forra, a servant he had met just the previous day.

“Prince Firmane, sir, your presence --ulp!” A young fox threw the door open and stopped his speech cold at the sight of the pair on the bed, their position unmistakable even amidst the strewn blankets. Firmane turned to face him, his dark brown muzzle set in a snarl. The youngster’s jaw snapped shut immediately, and he rattled off, “Prince-Firmane-the-Queen-requests-your-presence-at-council-immediately!” He executed a quick bow of respect and then backed out as quickly as he could, slamming the door closed.

About half an hour later, Firmane stormed out into the main room of his living quarters. “Faladron!” he yelled, shrugging on his formal robe. “Where are you?”

“Right here,” a silver-limned black shape said from the corner of the room. His paw dropped the wooden puzzle it had been holding as he unfolded himself from the chair. Slightly shorter than the prince, his form was completely black with silver edging, except where it was hidden by his tight-fitting dark grey vest. It reached to mid-thigh, fastened at his waist, and the prince had rarely seen him wear anything else since he’d gotten it, whether at a formal dinner (which he hated anyway) or for a night out drinking at the local inn (which he liked not much more). He smiled at Firmane as he stretched his arms. “Finished with that vixen, are you?”

Firmane walked over and stood with his nose almost touching Faladron’s. “Why did you let that messenger into my quarters?”

“Messenger?”

“He had to have come through here,” Firmane said. “There isn’t another way into my private quarters.”

Faladron shifted on his feet, his tail beginning to swish against the floor. “Oh. Um ...”

Firmane glared at him. “You weren’t even standing guard like I asked, were you?”

The black fox shrugged. “You’re legendary around here, Mane. I figured everyone’d know what was going on if your door was closed.” He smirked. “If not necessarily with whom.”

“Very funny.” The prince grabbed his friend by the arm. “You can tell me where you were later. I’ve got to get to council.”

Faladron followed close behind him as they left the prince’s quarters and moved swiftly through the mazelike passages of the castle. He was silent for a while, then said, “What is it?”

“Fargentor, I think,” Firmane said tightly. “I haven’t really thought about it.”

“I don’t see what else it could be,” Faladron murmured. “They were waiting for a message about the armies.” He paused, and hurried a few steps to catch up to Firmane. “Wait a minute. I wasn’t gone the *whole* time – I’ve been back for a little while. You got the message and didn’t go right away?”

Firmane didn’t pause in his stride, but his tail drooped. “She was pretty insistent.”

Faladron snorted. “Ha. I’ll bet she was. What, you were worried you wouldn’t be able to get any later?”

The crown prince turned, his paw on the council door. “Shut up,” he grinned. “I’ll see you later.”



All muzzles in the Council turned to stare at Firmane as he walked in. He felt the fur rise up on the back of his neck in embarrassment, and walked stiffly to an empty seat between Finna and Faon. Faon, the Queen's Consort and People's Councilor, was standing and had stopped talking when Firmane entered. Finally, he looked at the Queen, and sat down himself, without finishing. Finna didn't even turn his head to look at the young prince.

"How nice that you are able to join us, my son," Firona said dryly. "To what pressing matter of state do we owe your late arrival?"

Firmane knew better than to argue with his mother in council. He lifted his muzzle and with a hint of a smirk, said, "I came as soon as I could," emphasizing the double entendre. The Queen's muzzle tightened, but he knew she didn't want to make a scene. Looking to his left, the prince could swear he caught the beginning of a smile on Mage Finna's muzzle, but it had vanished the next time he looked.

"For the sake of the council as well as your own, Crown Prince," the Queen said, emphasizing the title, "I will briefly restate the matter before us. We have had a signal from ForestKeep, which means that the war we have feared for months is upon us. Most likely it means that one or more of the Outermost Keeps is besieged by the Common Army. The council has decided not to wait for the return of our trusted comrade Fargentor from the failed negotiations, but to send messengers to the other Inner Keeps to suggest a council of war." Her tail lashed behind her, and her gaze darkened as she continued. "We believe that the Outermost Keeps will fall and that the real battles of the war will be fought on our soil and that of our neighbors. The matter before the council is twofold: first, what measures should be taken to prepare for war, and second, how much support we shall offer our neighbors should an alliance be reached." The Queen paused, meeting her son's eyes and holding them until Firmane blinked and lowered his muzzle. The older fox leaned back in her seat then, and continued in a softer tone. "Faon, you have our ears."

To Firmane's right, the slender fox rose again. "Thank you, highness," he said. "To continue the point I was making when we were interrupted," he glanced down at the prince as he said that, of course, just to drive home his point. Firmane seethed, wishing he could retort, wishing he could defend himself, but he forced himself to sit still. He kept his tail from betraying his anger, but he couldn't keep his ears straight up; they flattened out a bit. He knew he'd hear about that later, but right now he didn't care.

"It is not only our duty to protect the people of our land by offering them our castle," Faon was saying, "it's a smart move. This Common Army is a threat because it offers the illusion of power to the common people. One of their biggest threats is swelling their ranks by recruiting people as they move through the country. The more of our subjects we can protect from this filthy propaganda, the more we will have fighting for us instead of them, and the better chance we have of winning the war." He sat down, and Farig lifted a scarred paw to speak. The Queen nodded to him.

"Highness, Council," he began, "I feel sorry for our subjects, too, but there are unavoidable casualties of war. If they betray us, they will be beaten along with the army whose hopeless cause they join. I need no more than my soldiers to win this war, and our soldiers will not desert us. I don't see the necessity of wasting our stores on more people than we need to feed."

As he sat down, Faon stood again without waiting to be recognized. "What about the elderly?" he snapped. "What about the cubs, or the farmers whose land may be destroyed by the war?"

Farig shrugged mildly in response. "Their farms will be just as destroyed if they are safe in the castle. As for the others, yes, I concede that a very few of our subjects may be in need of some special protection. But not all of them. Not even most of them."

Firmane rested his muzzle further down in his paws, his eyes half-closed. He tried to follow the debate, but his mind kept wandering back to Forra and her soft fur and sweet breath; to the

tournament next week that he'd be expected to win, of course – if it were still held; to what he and Faladron would be doing tonight. They hadn't had a good game down in the town in a while – at least, he hadn't. He knew Faladron went into town on his own fairly often when Firmane was occupied with other things, but in the past couple weeks, Firmane had been utterly exhausted at the end of each day and had fallen asleep right after dinner, waking in the morning to find Faladron asleep in his quarters adjacent to the prince's. Faladron rarely woke before noon, and so the two friends had barely talked since the last messenger from the negotiations had arrived and delivered his discouraging news to the council, prompting the queen to schedule her son with Clawmaster Farig for two extra lessons a day on top of the regular lessons. It was all a waste of time, though. War? War was something the old foxes talked about, an exercise to motivate foxes for tournaments. He was convinced there wouldn't really be a war. And if there were, it wouldn't reach him.

Firmane rubbed his cheekfur and looked up at Falant, who was speaking. Faladron's father looked sad and tired, as he had for the past couple months. Faladron said his father had been hit hard by the news of the uprising and had barely spoken of late. He didn't know why. Falant was younger than the Queen, but looked older, his muzzle graying along the sides, his eyes listless.

"We cannot exclude anyone," he was saying. "We are a Fox kingdom, but we welcome almost all races into our towns."

Farig broke in, "That doesn't mean we have to protect them."

"Doesn't it?" Falant rubbed the top of his muzzle wearily. "We have accorded all protections equally in the past."

"Twenty foxes were killed in the Pack Wars fifty years ago when they were denied protection by King WhiteTail," the Clawmaster pointed out.

Falant sighed. "Yes. And the wolves apologized and sent restitution to the families, and sent some citizens to live here who are still under our care."

Firmane wondered why the council was debating not offering protection to non-foxes, but he didn't want to risk embarrassment again by asking. He didn't have a vote anyway; he was required to attend these meetings so he would learn about the inner workings of the Council. This topic interested him particularly because he had several non-fox friends in the town. There seemed to be a lull in the discussion, and he debated whether to get up and say something. He was always nervous in front of the Council, and it took him a while to muster the nerve to stand up. Before he could, his mother spoke up.

"Does anyone wish to join Farig's objection?" The room was silent, Farig looking around disgustedly at his lack of support and muttering under his breath. "Very well, then it is the decision of this council that until the war is resolved, all citizens of our kingdom shall be offered protection and residence in our castle for as long as they shall wish it, under the following terms: any citizen taking up residence in the castle must make his food storage available to the army and the castle; in return, the castle will provide his meals until he leaves our protection. Any citizen taking up residence in the castle may be called upon to perform duties according to the needs of the castle, with any recompense above and beyond room and sustenance to be determined by the Wartime Taskmaster. Any citizen choosing to decline the protection of the castle will be required to aid our soldiers in the field to the best of his abilities, should a battle be located near his property." She lifted her grizzled muzzle and surveyed the council. "Do any object to this decision?"

Only Farig said "Object," and after he spoke, the room was silent in assent.

Firona continued. "Hearing no more than one objection, I hereby proclaim this to be the lawful decision of Queen and Council. All citizens of FirstKeep are bound by oath of fealty to abide by this word." She sat back down and relaxed. The young scribe behind her dashed out through the

back entrance carrying his notes, his tail flying behind him. After only a moment, another scribe scurried out and seated himself behind the Queen.

Firmane had bedded a couple of the female scribes (though never, as Faladron kept urging him to, in the Council room or throne room). The young renard who was now busily taking notes behind the king's seat was also one Firmane remembered from his cubhood. They'd played together at something ... "wolves and moose," maybe. What was his name? Fos-something. Farig was talking again, going on at length about troop movements and army numbers and new recruits. The prince reflected that he'd seen quite enough of Farig in the past couple weeks. Today was supposed to be his day off, too, and he'd been trying to find time to get away with Forra since she'd bumped into him in the corridor a week or so ago.

For most of the rest of the meeting, Firmane daydreamed about Forra, listening with half an ear to the arguments about how many troops to commit. By the time the king read the council's decision (informally, this time, since it was a policy decision and not a governance decision), the prince was more than ready to get back to Forra, controlling his tail's impatient wagging with great difficulty. The council had agreed on a certain number of soldiers that could be spared to other kingdoms should the need arise, and when no other issues were brought before the council, the king dismissed the councilors. Firmane hopped to his feet and had only taken a step towards the door when his mother stopped him.

"Crown Prince, please remain behind."

Firmane couldn't stop his ears from flattening out immediately, but he raised them again, turning around to bow. "Yes, Majesty," he said, trying to ignore the smirks from the councilors as they filed out. He closed the door behind the last one and leaned against it, looking across the cold council room floor at his mother.

The Queen looked at him and then patted a seat beside her. "Please come over here, Mane," she said quietly.

Firmane hesitated, then slowly strode over to his mother and sat down as far away as he could manage, which was only a couple feet. Firona sighed, and looked down. "I don't make you attend these meetings to torture you," she said. "But you have to learn about the council."

"I know about the council," Firmane said belligerently.

"You think you do," Firona said, then amended when she saw her son's ears go down again and his jaw set, "and maybe you do. But they also have to learn about you. You know that someday you'll have to lead them."

Firmane looked away. "Not for a while," he muttered, his tail settling quietly behind him.

His mother put a paw on his arm, the fingers barely pressing down his fur. "Perhaps sooner than you think," she said. "Wars are terrible times."

The prince felt his anger dissolve away, and a cold chill prickled his fur. He looked up at his mother. "Mom ... there won't be a war. And you're not going to die. You can't."

"I can and will." Firona smiled softly. "I hope to put it off as long as possible, but the ancestors often don't give us a choice in these matters."

Firmane hung his head. "I don't want you to."

His mother squeezed his arm and chuckled softly. "You may be in the minority there, Mane," she said. At his alarmed look, she patted his arm again. "We are at war now, and there is a whole army who will be fighting to kill me and the other rulers. And you and your brothers. That is partly what I wanted to talk to you about.

"Mane, if the war should go badly, I want you to take your brothers and leave. If ForestKeep remains standing, go to Queen Fortestan. I don't think ForestKeep will stand if FirstKeep falls,

however. I fear that if you must flee, you will have to flee the Fox Kingdoms entirely, at least for a while.”

“I won’t have to flee, Mother.” Firmane’s tail was lashing in agitation, his eyes wide and worried.

“Listen, my son. It may be that you will never need these instructions. I hope so. But you must listen, because if you do need them, I won’t be there to give them to you again, and I don’t know who you can trust, apart from Faladron and Falant. Them I would trust with my life.” Firmane nodded, slowly, his ears alert and listening carefully. “If you must flee the Fox Kingdoms, go first to the Pack lands, to the Red Pack and King Winefur. He is a wise king, and he has helped us in the past. If he can’t help you, the only other specific instructions I can give you are to find Lord Windtail in the court of the Mountain Pack. He was a good friend of your father’s, and may give you a good shelter. Most of the Packs will be well disposed to you, if you can’t find either of those wolves. Stay out of the Catlands if you can. They have been supporting the Common Army for years, and may have even helped start it.” Firona looked down at her son. “Repeat that back to me.”

“Go first to the Red Pack and King Winefur, then to the Mountain Pack and Lord Windtail. Avoid the Catlands.” The young prince tried to impress those instructions on his mind as he repeated them.

“Good,” the Queen nodded. “And Mane, if you could, try to be on time to Council meetings in the future. And to pay attention.”

“I tried,” Firmane said, “I really did. But ...” He trailed off, smiling slightly in embarrassment.

Firona smiled and shook her head. “Who is she?”

“Just a chambermaid,” the prince said. “She’s really lovely, though.”

“You’ll have to meet some more vixens closer to your standing,” the Queen mused. “Didn’t you like any of the ones you’ve already met?”

“Sure,” Firmane said, “but they seemed so aloof.”

“They were probably scared. They were all quite young.”

“Yeah, they were young, too. They were nice, but they didn’t, um ... well, anyway.” His ears flicked self-consciously.

“Mane, they will grow to be suitable for your bed. The only reason you have been spared an arranged marriage already is that there are no real alliances to be had.” Firmane stayed silent, thinking of how his life would have been different with an arranged marriage. “After this war, you should travel to some other kingdoms. You will need a queen at your side.”

“Faon isn’t noble,” Firmane pointed out. “He’s just some farmer’s son.”

“Faon is not the King,” Firona said, her eyes narrowing a bit. “And he is much more than ‘just some farmer’s son.’” She sighed. “I still wish you and he would get along better.” Firmane looked away and shrugged.

After a few moments of silence, the Queen said, “There’s one more thing I want to tell you. You heard the council’s decision to offer protection to our people?” Firmane nodded, though he only vaguely remembered the details. “I want you to take Firshye and two guards and extend the offer personally to the northern farms.”

“What?! But Mom ...”

“No buts,” Firona said sternly. “Faon and Firstil will be traveling to the southern farms. It’s important for the offer to come from the royal family, and I cannot leave here.” It is also important, she said to herself, that you meet the people you will someday govern.

“But that’ll take weeks! The tournament ... the war!”

“Two weeks, at most. The tournament will be canceled. Even Farig sees that it will do us no good to risk injuring our best soldiers when we need them most. As for the war, I don’t believe it

will reach us in the time you will be gone. And if it does, you may have a better chance of surviving out in the country than here in the castle. If that happens, take your brother and hide and wait for news.”

Firmane studied his mother’s muzzle, but he already knew better than to expect to find a weakness there. “Fine,” he said coldly, and stood up.

“Mane,” Firona said, “The life of a prince is not supposed to be an easy one. You are a good fox, but you must become more.”

“Do I at least have a night to prepare?” Firmane said, pointedly ignoring the comment.

The Queen sighed again. “You leave at moonrise tomorrow. You may choose your guards, if you want.”

“Can I take Faladron?”

“If he wants to go. I haven’t told your brother yet, so please do that tonight.”

Firmane nodded and walked to the door without looking back. “Son,” Firona called, and he stopped with his paw on the door. “Be careful,” she said. Firmane paused a moment longer, and then stepped through the door.

*Mane, my son, the Queen thought, getting slowly to her feet. Have I failed you by trying to make your life easier? I love you, but I have a responsibility to our people to leave them with a good ruler. She walked to the door, looking around at the bare council room. Soon, she said to herself, we will be put to the test.*



Faladron had gone, of course, not that Firmane could blame him. The first time in what seemed like forever that they had together, and he ended up spending most of it waiting for the prince. “We’ll go down to the town tonight,” he muttered under his breath, stalking back to his room. “I just need to get out of here.” Then he remembered that he would be leaving for a week or more the next day, and grew morose and silent, his ears swiveled back, paws clenched into fists, and tail lashing angrily. Two foxes who had been talking quietly gave him worried looks and fell silent as he walked by them. He recognized them as fellow students from one of his fighting classes, but barely even spared them a glance.

Back at his quarters, he checked Faladron’s chambers, but his friend wasn’t there either. Resting a paw on the door of his bedroom, he stopped to compose himself a little and sniffed the air. Good – Forra was still inside. She smelled as good as ever, too. Slowly, he pushed the door open.

She must have heard him coming; she was stretched out on the bed, still nude, her tail draped demurely over her hips. As he slipped through the door and closed it behind him, she gave him a warm smile. “Hello again, m’lord.”

Just looking at her did him good. For a servant, she had a very shapely muzzle, with small cheekruffs and slender ears. Her eyes were a light amber, wide and honest, but their depth belied the air of innocence she sometimes tried to project. Her fur was neat and clean, if a rather standard shade of russet red, and creamy white down the slight curve of her chest, where her grey underfur was more visible. The white fur ran down her stomach to her hips, disappearing under her carefully draped white-tipped tail. Both her forepaws and her right hind foot were furred with the traditional black, but her left foot was white with black patches. Firmane looked at that foot as he sat down on the bed, and touched it gently. Being a fox with unusual markings was difficult, and her white sock gave him a sense of kinship with her. It was one of the things that had attracted him to her in the first place.

He turned back to her muzzle, looking questioningly at him. “I’m glad you waited, Forra,” he said with a smile. His tail had calmed somewhat, so he reached back and swept it over her legs. On

the bed, he could smell their recent lovemaking as well as her scent, and almost before he realized it, he had placed a paw on her side.

"I hope I didn't make you too late," she said, reaching out to touch his knee. She had waited all the time he was gone, hoping above all that he wouldn't send her away immediately when he returned. She knew that her dreams of being lifted from the chambermaid's dress into the robes of a queen were no more than fantasies, but she hoped she would at least be able to enjoy them for a little bit longer.

Firmane shook his head. "No. Well, yes, but it's okay. It just wasn't a very good meeting for me." He saw her smile and gave her a little nuzzle. "What—" he started to say, but was interrupted by a knock at the door. Before he could respond, it opened, and Faladron peeked around the corner.

"Mane, you decent... ? Oh, good." He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, then bowed slightly to Forra. "Hello, miss."

"Faladron, this is Forra," Firmane said. To her, with a smile, he said, "That's Faladron. You don't have to bow."

She smiled. "Pleasure to meet you, m'lord," she said to Faladron.

"Likewise," the black fox said. "Sorry I took off, Mane, but waiting around for you isn't exactly my idea of a great day off."

"I know," Firmane said. "I'm sorry. You feel like going to the town tonight? I need to talk to you anyway."

"Sure. How long are you going to be here?"

"A little while yet," the prince said, nuzzling Forra's shoulder. "And I have a couple things to do after that, too. How about twelfth hour?"

Faladron nodded. "Sounds good. Any place in particular you wanted to hit?"

"I was thinking of the Broken Tooth."

"The - what, are you itching for a fight?"

"We don't always get into fights there, Fal."

Faladron rolled his eyes, his ears splaying out. "No, not always. Just the last three times. And I always end up dragging your sorry tail out of there."

"Ha! Who knocked out the farmer who was about to cream you with a chair last time?"

"His friend, as I recall," Faladron said dryly, leaning against the door.

"Yeah," Firmane said, "but I was the one who ducked out of his way."

Faladron shook his head and sighed. "I'll prepare this time, just in case I can't talk you out of it." He opened the door and bowed again. "Nice to meet you, Miss Forra. Say, do all the mothers of FirstKeep a favor and stay with that fox so they can stop worrying about their daughters." He winked.

"Ha ha!" Firmane called after the black fox as he slipped out the door and closed it. Silence filled the room for a moment, until he looked back at Forra and said, "Sorry about that. He's my best friend, and we haven't had time together in weeks."

She nodded, giving him a gentle nuzzle. "I understand you'll have to go soon," she said.

"I'm afraid so," he sighed, leaning back to look at her. "I guess I should take care of some of these things I have to do."

With a small nod, she placed a paw on his chest. "I thank you again, m'lord," Forra said, her muzzle curved in a contented smile. She stood up as gracefully as she could, and his paws slid down her sides, steadying her when she stumbled. "If your lordship desires my company again, you know where I may be found."

He handed her her robe. "I do," he said. "Perhaps I will enjoy the pleasure of your company again – if neither of us has work to do."

"Work?" she said, putting on her robe. "Surely you work when you please, my prince?"

"You would think so, wouldn't you?" Firmane said softly as she dressed. Her robe was a light brown, untreated fabric, with no adornment save for some stains on her frayed sleeves. She felt a flash of disgust at herself, comparing it to the prince's finely woven robe, dyed a deep blue and embroidered with the royal crest along the collar and sleeves. Then she chided herself: *Just a few minutes ago you and he were only renard and vixen, and birth and rank didn't matter. What more could you ask for? Your robe befits your station; wear it with pride and remember that there is something in you that the prince considered worthwhile.* She squared her shoulders, tied the robe at her waist, and curtsied deeply.

"My thanks again for this great honor," she said, and looked up at him. He was smiling. Her ears and tail perked up happily.

"I should be thanking you, Forra," he said, standing up to fasten his robe. "You've vastly improved this day. Go in peace."

She couldn't restrain her smile, and impulsively threw her arms around him. "Thank you, my prince!" she bubbled, and kissed his muzzle. Looking at his slightly surprised smile, she was suddenly shocked by her own audacity, and backed away from him and out the door.

In the hallway outside the prince's chambers, she stopped to compose herself. What a silly thing to do, that kiss. And yet, he didn't seem to have minded. Of course, they'd kissed while mating, but that was different. Slowly, with a more dignified air, she started back towards the servants' quarters. She would have to brush her fur, but she wanted to do that where all the other vixens could hear about her day. Her muzzle curved into an almost smug smile, thinking about what the other vixens' reactions would be when they heard the prince had done it twice with her, when he'd only done it once with Folona. But her impetuous kiss, and his look of pleasant surprise – those were not for their ears. The memory of those, she would carry secreted in her heart.



Firmane couldn't shake his smile. He didn't often consort with the servants of the castle – before Forra, there'd been one chambermaid whose name he'd forgotten, and a kitchen servant who'd been his very first. As attractive as they might be, it wasn't good for his image to be seen with them. Servants from the town were another matter; they were largely unknown in the castle, and the few he had brought back with him had come and gone without much comment. He hadn't been seriously considering seeing Forra a second time when he set out to fetch her this morning, but now, he thought, perhaps a second visit would be in order. It would give him something to look forward to on his return, anyway. He would have tonight on the town, and then a week with his little brother and an escort out in the lonely country – difficult to arrange a tryst under those circumstances. He'd be pretty desperate when he got back.

*Better go tell Firshye we're going,* he reminded himself as he brushed his fur and dusted the inside of his robe with a light spice that complemented his scent. He checked his robe and fur for any marks, combed his headfur and cheekfur out, and then left his chambers to look for his favorite brother.

He found him in the garden on an outside terrace of the castle, trailing behind Faon as he pointed to one flower and then another, talking to him in a low tone. Firmane grimaced. Flowers were a diplomatic currency, scent and appearance and color all coming into play, and he'd spent years being drilled over and over on them. Faon touched a flower lightly and looked down at the cub questioningly. *Orchid,* Firmane thought automatically. Bad flower to send. A single orchid alone was tantamount to a declaration of war, but they were almost never sent alone. With other

flowers, an orchid twisted the message the other flowers carried. A bouquet of orchids, on the other paw, signaled a surrender, whether in an actual war or in a diplomatic quarrel of another sort.

Firmane walked towards his brother and foster father, looking at them and the plants. His little brother was tall for his age, his muzzle just reaching Faon's waistline. He had the light amber eyes that both his brothers shared, but where Firshye's ears were narrow and pointed, Firmane's were like Firshye's: wider and slightly rounded at the tip. Of course, he had a much more standard fur pattern than his oldest brother: his paws and feet were the same black as his ears, his chest and stomach (mostly hidden by his formal blue robe) a soft ivory, and the rest of his fur, including the top of his muzzle and head, a brilliant orange-red. His muzzle had yet to grow out to its adult length, but Firmane often caught him in very adult expressions of contemplation, almost comical on his young face. Right now, he was facing obliquely away from Firmane as he approached, but Firmane could see his young face screwed up in an effort to remember his lesson. Smiling to himself, Firmane tried to stay as quiet as he could, just for fun, and looked down at the flowers he was passing on his way over. Foxglove: representing a minor noble. Daffodils: sent in celebration of a victory or a marriage.

He glanced up covertly, looking at Faon. He was tall and stately, and had adapted well to his elevated position. His rather wide muzzle was parted slightly as he talked to Firshye, but Firmane didn't listen to what he was saying, keeping his ears swiveled to the sides. He supposed he could see how his mother could consider Faon handsome, but he thought the renard's light brownish fur and slender build were very plain. Faon was wearing a white robe, as usual, with no decoration on the collar or sleeves; just a royal crest over the heart. The common people, whom he was supposed to represent in council, liked the plain robe. It made them feel that he was one of them, which he obviously wasn't: here he was teaching the flower code of kings to a prince. He had been learning it around the time Firshye had, which was right when Firmane was completing his own training. He remembered the tension there had been between the two of them. His mother had been teaching them, and it seemed that in every argument, she'd taken Faon's side against her own sons. Firshye didn't seem to take it too hard, but Firmane remembered those times and affairs hadn't improved much since then – except that he didn't have to see Faon every day.

He looked down again, getting closer. Lilies: warnings of betrayal. Every Keep kept a garden, and sent an arrangement of flowers with any message of import to another kingdom. The flowers were an insurance that the message delivered was accurate: as only the royalty was privy to the messages the flowers carried, it would be nearly impossible for a commoner to alter the message accurately. Queens and Kings frequently made private codes between themselves as well.

"Mane!" an excited young voice called out. His fingers brushed a bunch of violets (signal of the arrival of an unwelcome presence), and he looked up to see Faon and Firshye looking at him. The eight-year old cub was bouncing excitedly and tugging at Faon's paw.

"Mane," Faon said politely, angling his head and letting himself be dragged forward.

"Lord Faon," he said, bowing his head a bit, keeping himself at a distance with a barrier of respect. "I have a message for my brother." Kneeling down, he held out his arms and welcomed the enthusiastic hug from the cub as he wriggled free of Faon. "Hi, Shye," he grinned, nuzzling his brother. "Learning your flowers?"

Firshye linked his arms around Firmane's neck and licked his muzzle several times, giggling happily. "Yeah, sorta," he said, making a face. "Dumb ol' orchids. Where've you been?"

"You don't have to be completely honest," Faon said dryly, his nose wrinkling.

Firmane looked darkly up at the taller fox. "I've been pretty busy," he said. "But how'd you like to go on a trip with me?"

“Oh, boy! Really?” The cub’s eyes glowed, and he hugged his brother’s neck tightly. “Just you and me?” His ears were perked forward at full attention, and his smile melted Firmane’s heart.

“Well, no. We need to bring along some other foxes.”

“Can Uncle Fal come along?” Firshye drew his head back so he could see his brother’s eyes.

“If he wants to,” Firmane said, ignoring Faon’s ‘hmp.’ He tousled his brother’s headfur. “You gotta be ready tomorrow morning, though. Moonrise, we leave.”

“Okay!” Firshye glanced back and then leaned forward, his small whiskers tickling his brother’s ears as he whispered, “Is *he* coming?”

Firmane looked up at Faon, sure that he knew they were talking about him, and whispered back to Firshye, “No.”

The cub smiled and nuzzled Firmane before slipping free of him and bounding back to Faon, restraining his excitement a bit as he reached him, though his tail was still swinging behind him excitedly. “Faon, may I go with Mane?” His ears twitched anxiously.

He bent down and placed his paws on his knees, and smiled at Firshye. “Of course you may,” he said. “You’re on official business.”

The cub turned back to Firmane, eyes wide. “We are?”

Firmane nodded. “We’re going to talk to the farmers in the north. To tell them ... um ...”

“To invite them to the castle,” Faon interrupted smoothly.

“Right,” Firmane continued. “And we have to go in person because it’s polite to invite someone in person.”

“Okay,” Firshye said, his tail still swinging excitedly. He bounded back to Firmane and wrapped his arms around him again. The prince hugged his little brother back just as tightly, kissing his muzzle. He caught a glimpse of Faon’s sad, slightly pained look before closing his eyes. For an instant, he felt sorry for him, seeing him forever on the outside of the bond between him and his brother. *He gets along well enough with Firshye, though, he thought. And he’s always trying to drive a wedge between me and Firshye.*

“All right,” he said aloud, gently disentangling the cub from his arms. “Learn your flowers and get a good night’s sleep, and I’ll see you in the morning.” He bumped Firshye’s nose with his and licked him across the muzzle, then stood up to go.

“Mane,” Faon said. He was taken aback by the look on Faon’s muzzle. Where Firmane was used to seeing a judgment that he always failed, now Faon’s eyes were lowered and his whiskers drooping in concern. He had broken off the head of a peony and was twisting it between two fingers. Slowly, he reached out and handed it to the prince. “Do you remember what this means?”

Peony: caution. Alone, it meant ‘Be careful.’ “Yes,” he said, taking it. “I – thank you.” He slipped the flower into a slit in the collar of his robe, avoiding Faon’s gaze. “You too,” he said awkwardly, ears splayed to either side, and walked hastily out of the garden.



The twelfth hour after sunset found Firmane waiting impatiently by the tunnel entrance for Faladron. He’d packed away the few things he would need: a robe, weapons, some money, and a few of his personal effects, and left them in a pack in his chamber. With him now he carried a small purse and a short sword, both on a belt under his robe. He’d exchanged the formal robe for a plain one with an embroidered sash, such as a merchant might wear, although anyone who looked closely at him would see his muzzle and mane and know who he was. Foxes with the “cross” fur pattern were very rare because a cross cub was considered bad luck, and often they were abandoned or killed outright once the markings became evident. Most cross foxes who survived their youth were

nobles, whose birth was announced amidst much fanfare and who could not simply disappear when their markings began to show. Firmane used to try to hide his dark mane and muzzle with colored powders, but they made him sneeze and never looked right anyway. Instead, he had gotten used to the flinching and the occasional warding sign.

He shook off these unpleasant thoughts and looked around the dark intersection, remembering that Faladron liked to show off his black coat by hiding in the shadows. There was a slight breeze blowing down the tunnel, so he wouldn't be able to smell him if he were hiding there. He peered more closely down the tunnel and – yes, there was a tiny spot of white, where possibly the tailtip of an overconfident black fox was just barely showing. He cast about for a pebble, but couldn't find one, so he reached into his purse and took out a half-silver, the least valuable coin of the realm. He weighed it and then tossed it right where the tailtip was – had been, rather; it was gone now. “Let's get going,” he called.

The coin never hit the ground. He saw a flash of white teeth as Faladron smiled and then stepped forward into the lighter shadows. He tossed the coin back to the prince. “You'd never have seen me if I hadn't shown my tail,” he smiled.

“Oh, like you did it on purpose,” Firmane grinned, catching the coin smartly and dropping it back in his purse.

“I did,” the black fox said, turning to walk alongside Firmane as the prince reached him.

Firmane snorted and punched Faladron playfully on the arm. Faladron insisted, “I did!” and returned the punch. They went on down the tunnel together playfully pushing each other, navigating the darkness by the motions of the air currents against their whiskers. The hill FirstKeep was built on was honeycombed with passages like this one, designed as escapes from the castle in times of need. It would be a mistake to call them ‘secret,’ because all the inhabitants of the castle knew about them, but few knew how to navigate them without getting lost, and fewer still could find their way back into the castle. Leaving the castle, one had only to keep going forward without doubling back, and as a stream finds the ocean, the traveler would find the exit. In the opposite direction, however, the task was akin to starting at the mouth of a river and finding one of the hundreds of tributaries. The tunnels had been cunningly designed by foxes thousands of years ago, and had served them well when needed, being altered as needed by successive generations.

Rounding the last of many corners, they could see the exit. The day was coming to an end and the first blush of dawn tinged the horizon. In an alcove of the tunnel, a bored guard sat sentry, but he stood and snapped to attention smartly as Faladron and Firmane approached.

“M'lord,” he said, lifting his muzzle and standing rigid, tail held up behind him.

“Who's that?” Firmane asked, peering closer and sniffing the air. “Felair, is it?”

“Yes, m'lord,” the fox said, still staring straight ahead.

“Oh, relax, Felair. It's only me.”

Slowly, Felair turned, and relaxed. “Thank you, m'lord,” he said. He let his tail hang down normally, and swished gently from side to side.

“I'd think you'd be used to seeing us by now,” Faladron said.

“I thought there might have been someone else with you,” the guard said. “Can't be too careful.”

“Not at this time of day,” Firmane said, peering out. “Come on, Fal, we better hurry if we want to catch any decent games.”

“Shall I tell Fenester to expect you around mid-night, m'lord?”

“Nah,” the prince said. “I have to be back early. Thanks!”

“Have fun, m'lord,” Felair said, bowing.

The tunnel opened onto a ledge that overlooked a sheer cliff, where the hillside seemed to have been sliced away. A couple hundred feet below, the road to the town wound through the forest that spread out across the land to the east. Firmane sat on the ledge and looked out over the tree-covered hills, listening for sounds from the road below and lifting his muzzle to the breeze, taking in the scents of this land, his home.

"I thought we were in a hurry," Faladron said. "Why do you have to get back early?"

"Just a sec," Firmane said. A cool breeze swirled up to him, bringing a variety of scents to his nose. He identified most of them easily, paused to consider one or two that he didn't know immediately, and then got to his feet. "I just love this view," he said, brushing himself off.

"I know. You say that every time. Why do you have to be back early?"

Firmane grinned at his friend. "You need to relax. I'll tell you at the bottom." He walked to the southern edge of the ledge, where a barely noticeable path zigzagged back and forth down the cliff face. There was more than enough light to see the path as they made their way down it, and it was only dangerous at two points anyway – one where it narrowed to be only a footspan wide for several steps, and one where a section had actually fallen away, and the foxes had to jump down to the next stretch below. They navigated it easily, but it took time, and the sun had risen by the time they stood on the road.

"Now," Faladron said as they walked along the side of the wide dirt path, "why do you have to be back early?"

Firmane looked down at the path. "Mom's sending me away for a week to visit all the northern farms and warn them of the war. We have to offer them shelter in the castle if they want it."

"Ah. That sucks, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. At least Firshye gets to go along."

"Oh. Is you-know-who going with you?"

Firmane chuckled. "Nah, that's another good thing. He and the brat are going south."

"Cool. It's just you two?"

"Well ..." Firmane looked over at his friend, and met his dark eyes. "I need to take two guards for protection. Mom said you could be one of them, if you want."

"Hm." Faladron walked quietly for a bit, then said, "Who'd be the other one?"

"I don't know. Some soldier. A captain, probably." When Faladron didn't reply, Firmane looked at him. "Do you want to come along? I know it wouldn't be fun, but ... I'd like the company." His anxious frown melted into a hopeful grin as he added, "Shye asked if you'd be coming, too."

"He did, eh? Sure, I'll come. Why not? Not been much fun at home lately." Faladron kicked a small stone.

Firmane's smile muted a bit. He turned his ears to his friend and said, "What's the matter? Your father?"

Faladron nodded. "It was worse today than it's ever been. He wouldn't even eat dinner. Mom's worried sick, and she won't talk to me about it either. When I said I was going out tonight, I don't think either of them even heard me."

"Oh." Firmane grimaced and put a paw on his friend's shoulder.

The black fox shrugged it off. "I'm okay," he said. "It's just – it gets old, you know. I don't mind him ignoring me, usually, but this is different."

"He's been like this ever since that one council meeting?" Firmane asked, not wanting Faladron to lapse into a morose silence.

"Yeah. It's been a couple months now. I – I don't know what to do. I asked Mom about it last week, and she said we just had to let him come out of it."

They passed a thicket of trees, and the town was in sight ahead of them. It straddled the stream that descended from First Keep's hill, but had spread out considerably from there. The market tower had been relocated recently, to a new building on a small hill that could be seen from a distance. Its red-shingled roof was topped by a wind vane with a wrought metal arrow pointing to the north. The shingles caught the sunlight before the rest of the town did, giving them an eerie glow that made it stand out as if lit by magic.

"He hasn't talked to you at all since then?" Firmane asked as they started descending the last slope.

"No. Well – once. I forgot about that until just now. I asked if maybe Finna could help. You know, he's pretty smart and he – he's just good to talk to. But he must have thought I meant to ask Finna what the stars tell, because he said, "I don't need to ask. I know what will happen."" Faladron shrugged. "I didn't know what else to say. I know Mom's tried to talk to him, because I heard her –" He stopped in midsentence.

The prince blinked at the curious pause. "Talking to him?"

"Yeah." Faladron walked a little more quickly, and said, "Anyway, what are you up for tonight?"

Firmane let the subject drop, quickening his pace to match his friend's. "Chase, if we can find a game."

"Oh, the Broken Tooth'll have a game. Don't you worry about that."

"I know they'll have games. I just hope we can get into one."

Faladron snorted. "If you flash money around the way you usually do, they'll be lining up to play you."

"Hey," Firmane said as they sent small stones skittering down the hill, "I win sometimes."

"You win more than I do," Faladron said. "Fox are going to want to play you just for a chance at the money, is all I meant. Not many Chasers have the treasury behind them."

"Well," Firmane paused, thinking as he joined Faladron on the level path that led into the town. "I guess not. Not for another six or seven years, anyway." They passed the guard post and waved to the fox on guard, who cast a sleepy eye their way and waved back languidly. His duty was primarily to inspect wagons and large carts coming into the city, and there wouldn't be any of those until the sun set.

"You mean you're going to wait that long to bring Shye down here?" Faladron said with a grin.

"No... but it'll be that long before I'll let him gamble." Firmane grinned back. They were approaching the first buildings of the town, a pair of inns that catered to farmers bringing their crops to town. The fancier of the two was a stone building with a clay-shingled roof and thin windows that cut dark slits in the reddish-brown of the walls. Across the road from it was a simpler wooden building, two stories of solid logs unbroken except by a few windows and their ledges. The rooms in these inns would be simple and sparse, the common rooms plainly functional. The wooden inn, the Partridge, was already closed for the night and the tattered stuffed partridge that stood over the door had been taken inside.

In years past, Firmane, Faladron, and the other kits of the town had tossed their share of rocks at the partridge, always alert for the sudden appearance of the owner in the doorway. Old Ferthen was a farmer who had bought the inn when he lost his family to whitemouth disease many years ago. He was an amiable, good-natured renard, but fanatically possessive of his inn, and it became a sort of game that he would chase the rock-throwing kits and they would work in his kitchens for an hour or so if he caught them. Perhaps it was not all in good humor to start with, but any cub who did work in Ferthen's kitchen – and Firmane and Faladron had done their share of that, too, always together – saw his anger gradually fade, whether real or put-on. And it was certainly true that no cub left his kitchen hungry.

The Partridge's companion inn, the Traveler's Rest, was much less entertaining to the kits of the town and castle. It had no stuffed traveler outside its door to be a target for stones, and no colorful owner to flee from in shrieking half-faked terror. Most kits, if they remembered it at all, remembered it for the huge stables in back, excellent hiding places whose powerful smells masked a fox's scent wonderfully.

Firmane wrinkled his nose, walking past the quiet building, and swiveled his ears, trying to catch the sounds of the Broken Tooth and the other inns in that area. Canvas-draped farmers' stalls, bearing the lingering aroma of the foods and wares that had been sold there that day, brightened on either side of him as he and Faladron headed into town with the rising sun at their backs.

Faladron's tail brushed his, so Firmane looked over, but the black fox's expression was neutral, his eyes set on the road ahead. Firmane swung his tail gently to brush back. Faladron looked over at him and grinned. "So how much money'd you bring?" Firmane asked.

"Ten crowns or so," Faladron said. "I didn't count it."

"We should be able to play a while on that."

"Yeah, unless you play all your threes out in the first three hands," Faladron said with a smirk.

Firmane shook his head. "You're not going to let me forget that, are you?"

Faladron spread his paws and smiled. "Hey, I was just warning you."

The sounds of yelling and music mixed with the rattle of metal and the scrape of wood grew louder as they turned a corner and reached the side road that housed their favorite inns. The Broken Tooth was further down than the rest, and as they walked past the Chicken's Head and the Coyote, Faladron cocked his head to the music. "Sure you don't want to hit the 'ote tonight?" he asked. "They've got Chase there, and it sounds like good music tonight." The Coyote also had a muscular bouncer named Forrin who stood three inches taller than Firmane and outweighed him by a good forty pounds (most of it in his arms and chest), and who had on occasion forcibly removed him from the establishment. Fights were not encouraged at the Coyote.

Firmane shook his head and kept going. "I'm not in a music mood tonight." He glanced sideways at Faladron with a knowing smile. "You can drool over Forrin some other time."

Faladron opened his muzzle to protest, then a thought struck him. "Not for a week or so," he grumbled, his tail drooping.

"Heh," Firmane said, and frowned as well. "Yeah." The music grew fainter as they walked toward the Broken Tooth, a large building made of thick wooden beams. Like most of the inns, it was two stories tall, but unlike most of the others, it had a dirty, run-down appearance. The street outside was dirty and littered with debris. No music came from the windows under the cracked sign depicting a growling, bloodied fox's muzzle with one canine broken halfway off. Instead, a wave of growled and murmured conversations spilled out into the street. Chairs and tables scraped, tankards clanked, the occasional clink of coins sounded lightly above the rest, and through it all, Firmane and Faladron could hear the thud of a die rolling into a Chase bowl.

The room barely noticed when they walked in, but the servers looked up and one, a vixen, smiled at the prince. She dropped off the tankards she was carrying and walked over. Firmane smiled at she approached.

"Hi, Fria," he smiled.

"Mane, my prince," she said with a grin, "haven't seen you here in a while."

"I've been busy," he said, scowling a little. "Weapons practice."

She reached out and squeezed his arm. "Ooh, working out?" Her muzzle curved into a sly smile.

"Yeah," he said, grinning as he looked around the room. "Any Chase we could get in on?"

“Well,” she said, and tilted her head to one corner, “there’s a couple wolves in who were looking for a game earlier.”

“Wolves?” Faladron said, looking. “I don’t recognize them. Friends of Wide-Ear?”

“I don’t think so. He was in earlier and talked with them for a bit, but they stayed when he left.” Fria put a paw on her hip and posed. “Shall I ask if they want your money?”

“Sure,” Firmane said.

“And a room for after?” She winked at him.

“Not today, Fria,” he said. “Got to get back soon.”

She put on a lovely little pout and made a small noise like ‘hmpf.’ Flouncing her tail, she turned her back to them and walked over to the table in the corner.

“Think we could take ‘em?” Firmane whispered to Faladron, looking at the wolves.

“You *are* looking for a fight!” Faladron said.

“No! I just mean, well, if it came to that, could we take ‘em?”

Faladron shook his head. “Why do I believe you?” He sighed. “Look, just don’t pick a fight and we’ll be fine.”

Fria was gesturing them over. Firmane sized up the two wolves as he and Faladron threaded their way through the tables. Wolves in general were larger than foxes, and these were no exception. If they stood, Firmane guessed, they’d be looking down about eight or ten inches on him. The one on the left was looking at him through narrowed almond-shaped yellow eyes, his well-muscled arms resting on the table. He wore a thick leather vest that had a crest on the front – obviously a soldier, probably the bodyguard of the other wolf, whose arms were less well defined beneath his thick grey fur. His white robe was trimmed rather gaudily with beads of all different colors, and he wore a gold band in his left ear. Faladron whispered in his friend’s ear, “Bodyguard,” and Firmane nodded, looking again at the appraising stare of the well-built wolf on the left. The wolf on the right seemed carelessly at ease, sipping from a tankard and looking up only when the two foxes were standing by the table.

“I understand you are looking for a Chase,” he said with a Northern accent. “You are a noble?”

Firmane nodded. “Firmane,” he said, extending a paw.

The wolf shook his hand in a firm grip. “I am WhiteSky,” he said, “and this is WinterMuzzle, my associate.”

Faladron stuck his paw out to WinterMuzzle. “Faladron,” he said. The wolf blinked at him, then his lips stretched back into a smile and he shook Faladron’s paw.

“A pleasure to meet you two,” WhiteSky said. “Would you join us?”

“Thank you,” Firmane said, sitting down. Faladron walked around to the other side of the table and sat across from him. Fria came back just then with a Chase board and set it down, exaggerating her movements so her chest and hips rubbed against Firmane. He inhaled, her scent strong in his nostrils, and turned to look at her, but as he did, pain shot through his foot as something came down hard on it. His muzzle shot around to face Faladron, who just smiled and leaned forward on the table.

“Thanks, Fria,” Firmane said, and she made another little ‘hmpf’ noise as she turned away and left. WhiteSky, as host, had taken the markers from the board and was sorting them out, giving each player his color. Firmane got the red ones, and counted them quickly to make sure he had them all.

“Now,” WhiteSky said, “I believe a quarter-crown is an acceptable bet?”

“Sure,” Faladron said, and Firmane nodded. As host, WhiteSky placed first on the opening roll. He hesitated for only a moment, then put a quarter-crown piece on 10. Firmane, to his left, was next and put his money on his lucky 13. WinterMuzzle placed a piece on 8, and Faladron held his silver between two fingers, staring at the board before finally placing it on 16. The squares ran

around the edge of the board, numbered from 5 to 18, with one empty to hold the tokens and one marked "MISS." The inside edges of the squares sloped down to form a flat-bottomed bowl whose surface had at one time been polished, but was now worn and pitted with age. WhiteSky shook the die and then rolled it into the bowl.

"Five," he announced, and WinterMuzzle shook his head disgustedly. WhiteSky placed another quarter-crown on his square, and Firmane followed him.

"Out," growled WinterMuzzle, flicking his coin into the bowl. Faladron considered, then tossed another coin onto his first.

"Markers," called WhiteSky, placing a marker in the bowl, color side up. Firmane and Faladron followed. WhiteSky looked at the die and the board and shook his head. "Pass," he said.

Firmane considered. "Two," he said, placing two more coins on his stack. Faladron and WhiteSky passed out the roll.

The wolf reached out and turned over the markers with a sigh. Firmane and Faladron had added three; his blue marker was a one. "Twelve," he said, and turned to Firmane. "Yours."

Firmane inclined his muzzle politely and gathered up the coins, leaving them in front of him. "My roll," he said, picking up the die, and the game went on.



After an hour or so, Firmane was just about even, and WhiteSky had gained a little at the expense of the other two. The prince was enjoying the tensions of the game, the luck of the roll and the minor strategy involved in choosing which marker to put down. He learned that WhiteSky was a traveling merchant from the Pack Lands who was selling something valuable, though he was hesitant to say exactly what. He wasn't shy about what he was interested in buying, though.

"You have such wonderful herbs and fruits here," he said jovially between rounds. "So many choices to drink! I tell you, I have no trouble selling them back home." He was already on his third drink, all three different.

Firmane grinned. "I suppose," he said. "I don't like most of them." He took another sip of his cider.

"But to have the choice!" They were setting up the board again, so WhiteSky quieted down. The wolf played Chase the way Firmane liked to play it: seriously, but not intensely. WinterMuzzle seemed a little more intense, but the large wolf took his losses well and was pretty personable when his attention was diverted from the game.

As Firmane was thinking this and looking at him, he realized that the wolf's ears were sharply focused towards him. Faladron's were, too, he noticed, though the black fox was about to roll the die. The wolf growled softly, and then both his and Faladron's muzzles snapped up, staring at something behind the prince. WhiteSky turned his muzzle slightly to look, and Firmane was about to when something slammed into both of them, rocking the table and spilling the coins everywhere.

Firmane ducked instinctively, turning his shoulder to the fox who'd been thrown into their table, and caught his muzzle square on the knee of the fox who'd thrown the other. Stars danced past his eyes and he fell to the wooden floor, clutching his muzzle and wheezing through it. He was vaguely aware of a thickly muscled leg toppling backwards near him, and the fox it was attached to ended up sprawled on the floor with a dark shape atop him. The black fox swung at the other's muzzle, but he ducked and shoved back, sending Faladron rolling to one side. They fell out of Firmane's view.

On his other side, the fox who'd fallen on him was facing WinterMuzzle, growling. The wolf was standing protectively over WhiteSky, and though his arms were held in a defensive posture, the

fox was not backing off. He was breathing hard, and Firmane heard him growl, “Damn wolves” under his breath as he charged.

WinterMuzzle pushed out with an arm, but his movements were a little slow, or perhaps the fox had taken him by surprise, because the fox spun easily around his arm and punched an elbow into his ribs. Firmane heard the thud as it landed and cringed, trying to get to his feet but still dizzy from the blow to his muzzle. The wolf staggered, threw a roundhouse punch which the fox ducked easily, and doubled over when the fox followed through with a headbutt to his stomach. He regained some composure then, grabbing the fox’s neck and throwing him back against the table. Quick as a flash, the fox lashed out with a foot that was perhaps intended to catch WinterMuzzle in the stomach. It landed squarely in the unfortunate wolf’s groin.

WinterMuzzle took a step forward, doubled over, just as Firmane kicked out and caught the fox on the side of the knee, putting all his pent-up energy and frustration into the kick. He didn’t hear the bone snap, but the leg did seem to bend at an unnatural angle as the fox screamed and hit the ground in front of WinterMuzzle. The wolf fell on him without softening his fall. With some satisfaction, Firmane heard the pained whoosh of air being driven out of lungs and the wolf’s growl, and turned to look for Faladron.

The black fox was on his feet again, squaring off against the other. His opponent’s nose was dripping blood onto his white chestfur, but Faladron seemed unharmed – until Firmane saw him move, sliding to his left with a bit of a limp. The rest of the crowd had cleared a space around them and were cheering on one or the other.

Firmane held his muzzle and watched, a dull throbbing ache growing in his head. He crouched beside the table, ready to help, but it soon became apparent his friend didn’t need any help. Faladron waited for the other to attack, and when he threw a punch, Faladron dodged it and landed one of his own squarely. They sparred this way for five or ten minutes, during which time Faladron landed five good punches while the other caught the black fox only once. Finally, panting hard, Faladron’s opponent growled in frustration and charged at him, arms flailing. Faladron sidestepped the charge neatly and threw the larger fox into the bar, where he hit with a solid crack and then dropped to the floor.

Fria was at his side as he stood up. “Are you hurt, Mane?” she asked, sounding only a little worried.

Firmane shook his head. “Fine,” he said, still holding his paw to his forehead as Faladron walked over to join them. The crowd behind him was trading money, settling bets they’d made on the fight. Faladron’s muzzle was set in a serious cast, but his eyes held a glitter of amusement.

“I think we should be getting back,” he said in a low voice as he reached Firmane. “We have to get up early.”

“Right,” Firmane nodded, and felt a paw on his shoulder. He turned and found WhiteSky behind him; the merchant was unhurt and looked very relieved.

“Prince Firmane,” he said, “you and your companion have done me a great service. You had no need to stand up for us.”

“Oh,” Firmane said, “they were just itching for a fight. They would have picked on anyone.”

WhiteSky nodded. “Nevertheless. WhiteSky of the Lakeland Pack is in your debt. If you will be at the Keep tomorrow, I will be glad to settle the debt at that time if you so desire.”

Firmane shook his muzzle with a smile. “I appreciate it, but I will not be there. Don’t let it weigh on your mind.”

WhiteSky bowed and smiled, as the activity in the inn settled back to normal. WinterMuzzle was getting up slowly, and the fox he’d landed on was struggling to sit up. His companion was still lying unconscious near the bar. WinterMuzzle glanced at them.

“They’ll be okay,” Faladron said, following the wolf’s glance. “Fria here will undoubtedly be tucking them into a bed before long.” He grinned at the vixen, who swatted at him with her cloth.

“The only bed I’ll be tucking them into is the flowerbed out front,” Fria said. “If Fortan throws them out.”

WinterMuzzle was still limping cautiously, but he gritted his teeth and growled to Faladron, “You fight well.”

Faladron’s tail swished from side to side, his smile widening. “So do you,” he said. “If he hadn’t, well, fought dirty ...”

The wolf’s muzzle tightened into a grimace. “Indeed.”

Firmane clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Let’s be on our way,” he said. “Before we bring up any more painful memories.”

Fria stepped forward and wrapped him in her arms. “Good to see you again, Mane,” she said softly. “It’s been too long.”

“Yeah,” he said, hugging her back. “I’ll see you soon.” With Faladron trailing him, he threaded his way through the tables and walked quickly out the door.

They trudged back along the road through the buildings, squinting in the bright evening light. After some quiet, Faladron said, “I was particularly impressed with how you used your head to hit him in the knee.”

“Oh, shut up,” Firmane said with a grin. “I made up for it later.”

“When he wasn’t looking.”

“How’s your leg?” Firmane changed the subject.

Faladron shrugged, still limping slightly. “It’ll be okay tomorrow. How’s your muzzle?”

“It’s okay,” Firmane said, pressing it gingerly. “Still hurts a bit.”

“Not a bad night,” Faladron said as they walked past the Partridge. “We made a little money and a friend, and had a nice tame little fight.”

“Hope that’s an omen for the rest of the trip,” Firmane said.

Faladron grinned at him, white teeth flashing in the black muzzle. “What are you worried about? I’m coming, aren’t I?”



“I’m worried about them,” Faon said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Going off with that thief.”

Firona took off her heavy robe and wrapped the lighter casual robe around herself, and sat down next to him. “Thief or no,” he said, “I think Mane and Shye are safer with him than with any two soldiers you can name. Besides, he’s the only one Mane really trusts.” She sighed. “Including me.”

“You’re his mother,” Faon said, resting a paw on her arm, “and he’s a teenager, even though he is the prince. He won’t trust you for a long time, because he resents all the things you make him do.” He smiled. “I remember my teenage years.”

“You know, by rights I should have sent him with Firstil and you with Shye, so you’d all get to know each other better and maybe get along. It’s the sort of thing a good queen would do.” Firona put her paw on Faon’s and squeezed it gently. “But I can’t help feeling that I don’t have much time left with all of you, and I’d rather be remembered in as kind a light as I can manage.”

Faon shook his head. “You worry too much, love,” he said softly. “We’re doing the same things the Common Army wants, if more slowly. Even if they win, they’ll have to see that.”

Firona seemed to be looking through him for a moment, her ears splayed out to the sides. Then they swiveled to focus on him, and she leaned over to nuzzle him gently. “If it were one fox, or

two, I would be more confident,” she said. “But all the reports I’ve heard have been that their council of leaders can barely agree on anything unless they’re faced with an enemy. They can’t give any one of them the power to make decisions, because then they’re betraying their own cause of equality amongst foxes. And a council without a leader is like a fox without eyes or nose – and in this case, he’s swinging a huge sword blindly.”

Faon shivered, so she put his arm around him and held him, some of her worries fading in the warmth of his body against hers. “I pray you’re wrong about them,” he said in a muffled voice. “And I pray they don’t arrive at all, or at least not until Mane returns. To lose him and Shye both ...”

“I gave Mane instructions,” Firona said, leaning back onto the bed and pulling him gently alongside her. She kissed his lovely muzzle lightly and smiled at the brightness she was still able to spark in his eyes. “They’ll be safe no matter what happens. At least, as safe as I can make them. Mane has a good sense of self-preservation.”

“Oh?” Faon’s eyes sparkled as he licked back along her jawline. “And do I?”

She pulled him close to her, sliding one paw gently inside his robe. “You do indeed,” she said, “though you’ve nothing to worry about. The war will not reach you in the south in a week. Though it is a terribly long time to be apart from you.”

Gently, he slid his robe off and kissed her. “Then let us not be apart one more minute until we must be,” he whispered, and drew her close.

*end of chapter 1*