



*DUNE'S  
HOPE*

This is a story from the past of the Death Knight Garnacuga Sholja  
I created it to expand on his story and also of the family he lost his memory of as an undead  
And also to kind of experiment and TRY to write a coherent story of my own

Those nice renders can be found on my Twitter @SalicylAcidd

# 1 year and 7 months before Korthek's fall

“... Alright, wake up you lazy little mongrels. It's time to go and collect our prize.” The light of the dawn had already been showing its presence on the horizon before the Sholja boys decided to venture out and turn in their hunting quest. The early morning of Vol'dun seemed to be cold as ever and yet already warm enough for them to leave the comfort of their hidden hunting wagon and progress on foot. The five Sholja brothers were treading slowly in the cold sand at their usual pace in a single row, one after another with short gaps, watching each other's backs as always. At a first glance, this would have seemed like another successful hunt and a job well done. However, this time it left a mark on each of them. It was not about their injuries, partially healed by the shamanic magic. Those were quite the usual trophies from hunting. Their uneasy, concerned expressions were hinting that something was not quite right with this one. In any other case, their cheeks would be filled with joy. The brothers would exchange jokes, laughs and self-centered brags related to the fight they had just experienced or even arguments about who landed the deciding blow. Together, they would never fail a hunt and for a good reason. Sholja boys were the main hunters and esteemed caravan guardians, trained protectors of Dune's Hope and sons of its leaders. The Big one, the Calm one, the Swift one, the Sharp one, and the Fierce one. Or as they referred to each other in a slightly childish manner – Bigboy, Calmboy, Swifty, Sharpy, and Fiercy.

Bigboy was the oldest and the one who likely had the roughest upbringing as the first-born. From the very moment he was born, his father's plan for him was to become the prime example for the younger siblings. Ever since he reached his eleventh summer, his father demanded him to carry a large axe, presumably of orcish origin by its design, at all times. It did not matter whether he could weigh it or not. He was required to get the perfect feel for the axe, become one with it and figure out a way to wield it effortlessly and effectively. These weapons weren't typically in a Vulpera's arsenal of choice due to its considerable size and weight. The great and vast challenges of using such a heavy weapon in battle gave rise to the young tod's desire to become much, much stronger. He worked hard, he ate well, and his muscles and bones grew mighty.

Calmboy was the second oldest, born two years after Bigboy and he was quite the opposite. Always level-headed and calm, as suggested by his nickname, always with a straight, serious expression, adorned with a couple of golden eyes which were overflowing with charisma. He was the brain and the voice of reason of the Sholja boys. His early kithood determined his path to be one of a shamanic practitioner and so his mother, a waterspeaker, took him under her wing as opposed to his brothers, who took the ruthless mentorship of their father. Calmboy became a seasoned shaman, and he was undoubtedly the most powerful out of the brothers.

There was a larger age gap of five years between Calmboy and Swifty, the middle brother,

and thus, the three later-born brothers were sometimes referred to as The Younger Sholjas, whereas the other two were The Older Sholjas. Swifty was another type of warrior. His parents noticed his inborn talent for dancing and the near-perfect coordination between his hands and feet as the kit was jumping and spinning around the fire so naturally. Two slash weapons would be his signature weapons and he would wear as little protective gear as possible to retain his natural nimbleness, letting him move quickest as possible during a battle and sidestep incoming attacks with ease and elegance.

In his kithood, the fourth one, carrying the nickname of Sharpy, was showing clear signs of his full potential not lying beside his brothers in the front lines, but in the solitude of the high grounds, out of the enemies' sight as a jack-of-all-trades. With his piercing green and sharp eyes focusing on the smallest details in their surroundings, he would support his brothers from afar. He was trained to climb up any surface swiftly and with no sweat. His body adapted, his claws grew long and his paw pads roughened extremely, which provided him a firm grip on any perch. Guards like him were too few and far between out in Vol'dun, thus for Dune's Hope, he was a very valuable asset.

The youngest one, but most definitely not any weaker of a guard than his brothers, was Fiercy. He was quite the odd one. At a first glance, he would give an innocent impression. He barely spoke and carried an unfading happy smile on his face. If one spent just a little bit of time with him, they would find he was one of a carefree and perhaps a rather simple mind. However, in a fight, it was as if he'd become an entirely different Vulpera. Or rather, a rabid beast that knew no fear, no remorse and stabbed his foe endlessly with his dual daggers. He did not hesitate to use fangs either. Fiercy was a pure force of nature. He didn't require a lot of special training. It was mostly the cooperation with his brothers and his relentless fury that needed to be worked on. Despite that, he was on a good way to become the best brawler in all of Dune's Hope.

These were the Sholja boys. The ultimate ace of Dune's Hope, its best defensive squad as well as its reliable hunters. Raised by their father and mother to become the perfect group of guards which had little to no weakness when they fought side by side. A true example for all other guards of Dune's Hope to follow. Bigboy was the leading raging bull that attracted the foe's attention and sought to land mighty blows. Swifty never gave the foe any rest with his never-ending flurry of quick attacks and fast movement across the field. Fiercy sneaked behind the foe and ambushed it with furious attacks from behind. Sharpy fired his bow from afar, searched for the foe's weak spots, and covered his brothers' backs. Calmboy healed the wounds of his brothers during a fight and appropriately used all the gifts and blessings of the Elements to their advantage. They were deadly, they were effective, and their magnificent interplay provided great outcomes, but not only due to their skill in battle. It was no less common that thanks to Calmboy's intellect, Bigboy's leadership and Sharpy's eye, a party of Sethrak raiders would find naught but several abandoned tents and junk that served as a decoy, while the real caravan was long gone on their safe way out of the territory. The leading couple of Dune's Hope did it. They raised a strong team of five guardians to keep their caravan safest as possible and could only be proud that it had been a few years

since they last had any of their members kidnapped and enslaved by the Faithless Sethrak.

*“The hideaways and camps of caravans would be surrounded and easily raided in mere seconds. If the Sethrak succeeded, the fortunate ones would be slain quickly and painlessly. The less fortunate ones were imprisoned and enslaved until their end of days. The kits wouldn’t be spared either. They would be taken into the Empire and brought up in slavery by the Sethrak design. Those who remained free were left with burnt wagons, stolen supplies, and a handful of remaining kin. Many had never seen their kidnapped friends and family again. This is how it has always been. But remember this, my sons. Not every caravan needs to live in constant fear of the Sethrak terror. Not if you show them strength. That’s the only thing those cruel reptilian bastards understand. Strength. Then they might consider bargaining with you. But do not ever go to such lengths to catch the concern of the Emperor. We must always stay on the defending side for the good of Dune’s Hope. Defend, bargain, but never attack.”*

Such stories and subsequent mentoring talks would be provided every now and then to the brothers, coming from the lips of their father to whom Dune’s Hope was his entire life. But they were true words and the caravan lived by them, too. Dune’s Hope became recognizable for quite some Sethrak across the sands they traveled. The Sethrak Lords, who considered these sands their territory, were naturally not happy when a caravan got such a reputation. Their safety, fearlessness, and potential to fight back were dangerous to the Empire. Vulpera were slaves. A lesser race. The status quo comprised of the Sethrak being the oppressors and the Vulpera being the oppressed. It was important for the Empire that the status was maintained. Of course, perhaps if a few Lords united for a coordinated pursuit with some small help from the Emperor, caravans such as Dune’s Hope would eventually be destroyed. However, there was a major issue. Any Lord of an estate would only see themselves be ridiculed and humiliated by the Emperor’s advisors, direct subordinates, and other Lords if one attempted to ask for any help against a single caravan while also giving the Emperor a terribly furrowed brow at the sight of his glorious, supreme kin being so incompetent and incapable of dealing with one single pack of sand-ratty troublemakers. There was no such extensive aid to be had against a caravan. And Dune’s Hope knew that. Besides, Dune’s Hope specifically had a good bunch of skilled jewelers and decorators as well as a few brewers of Voldunshine who charged reasonably. Thus, some of the Lords settled the Dune’s Hope situation with a simple but mutually beneficial deal. Dune’s Hope would be granted assured safety from raids in the Lord’s territory. In return, the caravan would lay low and not meddle in the business of the concerned Sethrak. Additionally, there would be a secret trade open between the two sides. Occasionally, some special kinds of deals and strictly limited secret cooperation would be agreed upon as well. Recently, Dune’s Hope took the contract of a Sethrak Lord with the name of Brakkus. The Lord asked the caravan for help. An unusually large and rabid saurolick was causing Brakkus great trouble within his territory. He knew Dune’s Hope was keen to free the Sethraks’ slaves if they got a fair chance and so he offered them five of his slaves for the saurolick’s teeth which would

provide proof of the beast's slaying. This was the hunt that the brothers were going to turn in. The hunt so difficult and extraordinary that none of the brothers muttered a single word about it ever since they harvested the beast's teeth.



“So,” finally one of them said to break the never-ending stillness. “I don’t know for how long we’re gonna play this game of silence, but I think there’s no chance that this was a wild saurolik.” It was Sharpy who was marching at the very back of their short row and every so often turning around to see whether they were being followed or not.

“Did you figure that out in your own head?” Bigboy’s deep raspy voice boomed.

“Did you? It didn’t seem like it when I had to save you from being digested,” Sharpy replied with a teasing smirk on his lips.

Bigboy clearly wasn’t in the mood. He got injured in the hunt the most. Calmboy’s magic healed him enough to stop all his bleeding, though he would still need bandages and a few stitches later since the shaman needed to keep the rest of his potions and waterskins for later in case there was more danger awaiting them. Bigboy clenched his fists tight and turned

around with a gaze resembling the one of the furious beast they had just slain. "You can't ever stop with this, can you? Maybe if you stopped being annoying for one single hunt, we would have been home way sooner!" The row of the Vulperan brothers stopped. Sharpy's smirk faded out. He always tried to keep a positive attitude and was quite the jokester in their little squad, enjoying a bit of mutual nudging and teasing with his brothers, but he was very self-aware of the benefits he brought to the group. "I think I missed the part where you're thanking me for saving your life", Sharpy growled out disappointedly.

"That's enough," Calmboy said, calmly indeed. Both quarreling brothers momentarily regained their composure and turned their attention to the shaman. The cool-headed robed Vulpera rarely needed to raise his voice at his brothers. He was respected that much, even by his irritable older brother. "We are all well aware this wasn't simply another beast we slew many a time before. It was too quick, too smart, and constantly enraged. The beast clearly had nothing to eat for several weeks. I say someone bred this reptile for killing and then released it with a clear goal." Calmboy seemed to have this all thought out already. "Either it was someone who wanted to purposefully cause trouble to Brakkus, or..." he continued, "... it was Brakkus himself."

All the other brothers listened to the shaman, but the last part of his thorough review had a few eyebrows raised. "Brakkus himself? Why would he?" Sharpy asked.

„Granted, we've never ever seen him in person, and yet, we all know how he is," Calmboy replied. He dug his staff into the sand below and turned his golden gaze off to the horizon where the sun was coming out alive and bright. "He's one of the worst. His ego is bigger than the Emperor's. All full of himself, cruel and eager to tear all his slaves' minds and bodies to shreds. Our trade is profitable for him, but he loathes us with all his being regardless. He despises how much negotiating power our caravan has among the Sethrak. If he got at least one of us slaughtered, it would satisfy his egoistic needs and he would have us weakened while also not carrying any of the blame nor losing our trading relations, since it was our free decision to accept his contract."

Calmboy's brothers all looked at one another. None of them could say he was wrong. This truly sounded like Brakkus. After all, Brakkus was the only one who had the audacity to try and bring the matter of Dune's Hope to the Emperor himself. Needless to say, his pride was a casualty of this attempt. Outsmarting the pesky Vulpera, who were the sheer cause of his humiliation would provide a sufficient satisfaction.

"I guess we'll soon find out how it is," Bigboy said. "Let's move on." The brothers all lined up in the same order as before and continued their journey to the Lord's estate. Once again, all of them remained silent until they reached their destination. Even Swifty and Fiercy, who both barely made a chirp until then. Fiercy was a listener. He didn't speak, but he listened to all his brothers said, which gave him the best overview of all his brothers' feelings. Right now, he was mostly concerned about Swifty, who followed Bigboy with his head hanging. Swifty had barely been talking to his brothers in the previous weeks. Still, he was somewhat pleased by their success and the good feeling that this time they might truly free some of their people of slavery.

The guardians of Brakkus' estate were not alarmed when they saw the group of five Vulpera approaching them, though they did seem uneasy. When the brothers arrived, the Sethrak guardians took their precious time to properly acknowledge them and stared at each other in concern, as if they were waiting to see if the other would go and inform the Lord that the Sholja boys returned. Finally, one of the guardians hissed in anger, clenched his razor-sharp fangs, and walked away. Incompetence was inadmissible in the Sethrak society, but it was quite evident that the matter of all Sholja boys coming back from the hunt alive was not the news one would wish to deliver to the Lord personally.

The Sun was rising high up to the skies and the air temperature was getting close to its usual daytime heat. The brothers were waiting much longer than necessary. Nothing but silence. Nobody was coming in or out. They were standing at the gates of the estate with a couple of guards, who refused to answer any of the brothers' questions. "When the Lord wishes to receive you, he will," is all they kept saying.

Suddenly, Bigboy's ear perked up. At last, something was about to happen. The gate creaked as it was opening. Out of it a group of eight Wardens marched out. Behind them, three Skycallers positioned themselves right at the gate and eventually, a female Sethrak with the visage of a Commander joined them as well. All brothers sharpened their senses up and formed a near perfect pentagon with each Vulpera watching closely the dozen of Sethrak that surrounded them. They were used to this treatment and so they kept their weapons sheathed, but regardless, it was most important to be prepared for every outcome and escape if needed. The commander, a smoothly white-scaled Sethrak with light green eyes, armored in golden and steel equipment and a helmet with blue crystal-like horns, walked up to them. "It is time, Sholjas. Lord Brakkus demands your presence. Follow my lead and Sands protect you if you make a single wrong step," she said with a sonant voice, deep for a female of her species. The brothers loosened up and followed the Commander in the clasp of the Sethrak who were keeping the Sholjas in check.

The uncommon grouping of armed Sethrak and Vulpera shortly descended into the deep underground section of the fort they entered. The place was huge and truly spectacular. Lord Brakkus seemed to be a pronounced follower of traditions. It was common knowledge among the Vulpera that the complicated structures of the Sethrak cities and estates were often built within the depths of Vol'dun. Shortly, the group passed through another gate and the Sholja boys entered the audience hall of the Lord. A high, wide-open hall surrounded by five levels of floors on each side, with solid stone pavement, columns with braziers, red decorated carpets, snake-like sculptures, and crystal ornaments. The brothers proceeded on a red carpet. Just a few steps further and the Commander moved aside out of the brothers' vision. Finally, they had the honor to see Lord Brakkus in all his glory with their very own eyes.

Lord Brakkus, a tall male Sethrak surrounded by his courtesans and personal guard, wearing a bejeweled tunic, golden bracelets, earrings, and of course, his natural light-green scaly armor. His all-seeing blood-red eyes fixed upon the incoming Vulpera. Their gaze met. He

was a charming individual, despite his current posture and expression. He was sitting in his seat, slanted to a side as he was supporting his chin with an arm, firmly planted on the armrest. His displeasure would be easily read even to a Vulperan kit.

Sharpy identified the Lord's body language right away and gave a nod to Calmboy, who nodded back to him. The brothers walked to the end of the long red carpet, which apparently marked the legal zone of movement for them. Their escort moved further away, though they kept their watchful eyes on the brothers. Sharpy was only one Vulpera, but he tried his best to do the same as the sharp eye of the Sholja boys. He dug his long foot-claws firmly into the carpet, squatted, and observed their surroundings from the veil of his green hood. It felt more natural for him to be squatting in such situations, though it would have felt even more like it if he had a branch, a pillar, anything to climb up and watch from above. Alas, this was the enemy's base. Still, he spotted at least two dozen more Sethrak on the first three floors that were surrounding this enormous hall. Among them, mostly Skycallers. The last two floors seemed to mostly contain a few curious citizens. The hooded Vulpera decided to attempt and look more around the audience hall while his brothers tended to the Sethrak Lord, and maybe locate the safest path out, should the outcome of this negotiation be the worst. He had a gift of spectacular orientational sense, and he impressed his father more than once, when he safely returned to the camp after being taken far away into the dunes, the canyons, or down the caves in his sleep. Many would drop this kind of training as it could turn out extremely dangerous. It was never assured Sharpy would return. But he always did. This was just another training session for him.

With confusion, Fiercy and Swifty both noticed they were by far not the only Vulpera in the hall. There were several more Vulpera sitting in the back corner of the hall, to the right of the Lord's seat. Plenty of them. At least forty. Males and females of various fur colors and patterns, with shackles and chains on both their wrists and ankles and wide eyes that stared intently at the five Vulpera who, unlike them, were not only free but also armed. These shackled Vulpera were the Lord's slaves. Three overseers were supervising them, never turning their unblinking eyes off and trying their best to hide their enormous sadistic thirst for providing a misbehaving slave some educational agony. Surely, some slaves had to be present due to the supposed exchange, but Fiercy's inquisitive mind couldn't help but question the strangely high number of slaves. Was there anything Lord Brakkus required them to see?

When every Vulpera and every Sethrak reached their spot in the hall, the unmoving Sethrak Lord cleared his throat and put on a mandatory façade. He stood up from his seat and his eyes suddenly brightened up at the sight of the brothers.

"Sons of Dune's Hope! I am delighted to see you safely return and honored to receive you in person at last."

Bigboy and Calmboy, who stood in front of their group as the speakers, didn't buy Brakkus' evident enthusiasm for a single moment. They retained their strict expressions, and both offered nothing but an indifferent nod in response to the Lord. Calmboy then stepped forward into the spotlight of attention. The light-grey-furred Vulpera was always a sight to

see. His fur was perfectly groomed, soft and luscious from his majestic ears all the way down to his smooth toes. His body was covered in a long concealing robe made of purple cloth, bones, and other monster parts while carrying a solid wooden staff in the hand. Bracelets and anklets made of fangs of beasts tied his charismatic look together. The elegance of the young shaman was brought even further to astronomical heights by two shiny necklaces and golden or silver rings on his fingers and toes. By Vulperan standards he was very handsome, beautiful even. The mentorship of his mother was nowhere near as rough or painful as his father's, and so his body remained fresh for the most part with the lowest number of scars in comparison to the other Sholja boys. The infatuating shiny golden gems of his were gazing upon the fabricated delight that the Lord was trying to fool the Vulpera with.

"We have done as you asked, Lord Brakkus. The saurodisk has been slain. It will do no harm to your endeavors anymore." Calmboy waved his left hand as a gesture to Bigboy, who untied one of his belt pouches and turned it upside down. Faint taps were heard as the fangs of the beast were falling to the floor, one by one, until the pouch was emptied.

"Of course, of course," the Lord called out. "It will not. There was never any doubt such skilled hunters as yourselves would succeed. Alas, while it is a reason to rejoice, there is also an inconvenience."

"Pray tell, what ever do you mean, Lord Brakkus?" Calmboy asked.

The Lord took a deep breath. "Well," he glanced to his left, to the corner where several tens of Vulperan slaves continuously observed the Sholja brothers. "I have been thinking. You see, I am a trader, just like many of Dune's Hope. You surely understand it is most important for me that the deals I make are always beneficial. Alas, at this moment I think the deal I have arranged with you would have been rather unprofitable for me."

"We slew a literally rabid saurodisk that had mauled several of your people before, as you claimed. We risked our lives to kill it and get five of your slaves in return," Bigboy exclaimed with a slightly irritated tone in his voice. The burly dark-grey-furred Vulpera with quite some scars on display had a quirky temperament, and he really, really wished to say more, but he tried his best to keep his inner rage over the Lord's sudden change of mind on a leash.

"That is precisely the issue," the Sethrak Lord explained, and he took a short stroll around. "The slaves are somewhat valuable to you as your people. To me, they are precious. They are a commodity to trade with and an important workforce. Each has their own potential. And please, do not get me started on the pit fighting. Even if I lose only five slaves, it is a significant loss within my city compared to the threat of a wild beast that traversed the local sands but kept itself away from my home."

Calmboy furrowed his brow. It was more than obvious that Brakkus was playing mind games but angering the Lord would have been inconvenient. At least for now. "Very well. What do you suggest then?" Calmboy asked.

Brakkus concluded his short hike around his seat and met his own red gaze with the golden gaze of Calmboy. "The dunes tell stories of your fights with my people." The Lord squinted. "These stories are very interesting to me and the ordinary citizens alike. Therefore, I have

one additional task for you, a simpler one than the previous. Provide amusement to my Court. Pick one of you who will fight one of my champions and face them in a fair duel,” Brakkus demanded.

Calmboy would expect no less from the Sethrak Lord Brakkus. No matter the circumstances, he would get what he wanted. If he couldn't have at least one of them slain in a deadly fight against a trained saurodisk, he would have it right here and right now, before the eyes of his many slaves to break any of their notions of Vulpera, who could triumph against their oppressors, their slavemasters. Unexpectedly, the one to fight the Lord's champion was chosen quickly and unequivocally. Calmboy slightly turned his head to the side and looked over the shoulder to give a contemptuous side-eye to Swifty in the back. Bigboy, as if purposefully mimicking Calmboy, gave an identical look to their middle brother. Swifty was practically surrounded by his brothers, right in the center of the group, paradoxically in the most vulnerable spot. He turned left and right to look at Sharpy and Fiercy and found them both also staring him down. Swifty had a feeling this would happen. He wasn't injured by the beast at all unlike Bigboy and Fiercy, but most importantly, he hadn't been on good terms with his brothers and their father for the past three weeks. Ever since that one conflict at the rock of Exile in Ruin, he thought. He was furious at his brothers not too long ago. Furious for not encouraging him when he had a disagreement with their father about the direction of Dune's Hope. But it has been so long. His grudge was gone by now and instead, he was tired and saddened. For all these weeks, he was simply there, following his brothers, though feeling alienated. There was no connection with his family anymore except for his mother. And now, his brothers harshly picked him out, without a single word. Regardless, he knew he still had his dear brothers' trust despite their squabbles. He loved them all very much, more than anything else, and he would not disappoint them this time. He shut his eyes for a moment and took a deep, refreshing breath before making his way to the left side of the hall, where the gathered Sethrak guards and champions already set up an improvised arena. The other Sholjas gazed at him with their blank, empty expressions. Only Fiercy looked upset in one instant, showing a clear glimpse of concern for his brother who was about to fight a seasoned and versed culler of their people all on his own.

The arena where the duel would be taking place was a simple rectangular space inside the hall, bordered by the Sethrak guards who were the escort of the Sholja boys before. Swifty reached his spot in the arena, marked by one of the guards, and finally lifted his head to scout the grounds. To his surprise, his opponent would be already standing on the opposite side as well. Swifty stood there like a lemon. Little to no movement at all. Only his sapphire blue eyes went wide, and his jaw opened at the sight of his opponent. The Sethrak was just a little taller than the Lord, though noticeably bulky, with more body mass around the limbs and the core. Poisonous green eyes were fixing on the Vulperan opponent as they were peering from the eye holes of the horned bone mask the champion was wearing. Swifty's blue eyes were slowly descending along the Sethrak champion's hulking frame. Shoulder pads of skulls, girdle of vertebrae, bracers of fangs, all covering his dark battle-worn scaly armor. A monster hunter, much like Swifty and his brothers. With his legs already

bent in a steady battle stance, the Sethrak was gripping a long polearm with a blue crystal double-edged blade. His posture and demeanor were hinting he was all ready and eager to charge at the Vulpera.

“This fight bears only one rule,” Lord Brakkus called out, once again comfortably seated in his place. “The one who yet stands and breathes wins the duel,” he stated and used his palm to cover an arrogant smirk.

Sharpy stood up from his squat and threw a questioning glance at Calmboy. Himself, he hoped the outcome of this duel would either be a victory or a defeat with severe injuries needing immediate attention at worst. Calmboy, however, had read Brakkus’ intentions long ago and so he was only observing the arena, waiting for the hopefully victorious bloodshed to be over. Only his brow slightly furled in concern. Such was the range of emotions he ever exposed.

Swiftly was aware that every battle he fought could result in his passing, though this one would be different. There was no one to heal him, to aid him, to cover his back. This was a formal one-on-one fight with a Sethrak. One Vulpera versus one Sethrak. A symbolic battle. It was clear to him that there was no possible outcome where both contenders would live. But he had to survive and win. Not only for the slaves who were now breathlessly watching what was about to occur on the opposite side of the hall, but also for Dune’s Hope. The dark-furred Vulpera rubbed his hands together before unsheathing his large main-hand longsword and his smaller off-hand shortsword. He rested the main-hand on his shoulder while holding the off-hand backwards like a dagger. *Let it begin.*

A loud booming sound of the horn echoed throughout the hall, and all Swiftly’s senses sharpened up, though not as much as he would want to. There was a second fight going on in his head.

Swiftly involuntarily remembered the misfortune at the massive rock of Exile in Ruin, far away within the sands. The day he decided to go rogue and venture out all alone to the Sethrak camp, where their reptilian enemies allegedly captured six members of another caravan. Several days before the disaster, two Vulpera from that caravan sought Dune’s Hope out and came up with a plea. They wanted Dune’s Hope to aid them. They were of a rather weaker caravan. On their own, they weren’t capable of freeing their friends. They were pleading for help, to which Swiftly’s father, the highest leader of Dune’s Hope said no. The Sethrak, who captured these Vulpera, had close ties with another Sethrak leader Dune’s Hope had an agreement with and thus, there was no possibility of providing aid. Swiftly witnessed their exchange of words from afar.

*Dune’s Hope*, Swiftly thought. *Why are we called Dune’s Hope? To whom do we even give this hope?* Two swishes went over his ears, as his opponent attempted to land a blow. Swiftly dodged his attack with two swift flips and followed with an attack of his own, going for an overhead strike with his longsword. A loud clank echoed throughout the hall as the two fighters’ weapons clashed before pushing hard to overpower the other.

A day after witnessing his father's response, Swifty didn't hesitate to confront him and make his opinion be known. The caravan leader's middle son was always the first one to think of all their people. He was aware of the relatively great safety Dune's Hope had, but sometimes all it was doing to him was making him feel guilty. Not every Vulpera had the luck of being born in such a well-protected and strong caravan. He knew it wasn't in their power to ensure the safety and happiness of every other caravan, but he felt it was their duty to help them if they needed. Nonetheless, his father knew his son's opinion even before Swifty expressed it. He knew well the ambitious fantasies of his about Dune's Hope recruiting other caravans and establishing a mighty force of the Vulpera against the Sethrak. A force that would have had the potential of fighting back against the oppressors and free them from slavery once and for all. "We know each other well, my son," his father said that day. "Therefore, you already know what I would say." Swifty then unbelievably peered at his father as he was simply walking away from him.

Swifty heard a thud after his Sethrak opponent overpowered him in the contest of strength and then shoved his chest, pushing the Vulpera back. *Certainly not to our people. When was the last time we truly helped them? When did we ever show them the smallest glimpse of hope?* Swifty positioned himself back into his stance and charged at the Sethrak before initiating a flurry of swift whirlwind attacks. The Sethrak would dodge and block them all.

The evening of the same day, Swifty would try and approach his brothers. He struggled to convince at least one of them that their father was wrong. Swifty trusted his brothers in and out of a battle and knew that they would succeed and save those captives if all of them went together. The allegiance of those Sethrak kidnappers, however, made the efforts of getting the other Sholja boys on his side impossible. The tension escalated when Swifty mentioned the option of them going to the rescue without the agreement of their father. His brothers got infuriated like never. They had never shouted at him before. But now they did. Bigboy gripped Swifty's muzzle and pulled him close. "Don't you ever speak about this again," he warned. Bigboy then shoved his younger brother backward before each of them except Swifty retreated to their respective wagons.

For just a sliver of a moment, Swifty felt a numbing chill across his back before the feeling turned into painful burning and subsequent warmth of his own blood slowly spilling from a deep wound. The Lord's champion landed a perfectly timed slash as Swifty spun around to continue his rain of furious attacks. The Vulpera backflipped to retreat and have a short moment of respite. *Not even my brothers would listen. We always supported each other before. Even in disagreements with our parents. They should have gone with me.* He hissed through his teeth before leaping in again, aiming to strike with both his weapons.

A long sleepless night followed. Swifty couldn't let go of this. What was the point? All Vulpera were strong in their own way, but it would be much, much more if they united. Why would they forsake each other over some forced deals and pretended safety? The very next morning, he entered his parents' wagon to talk to his mother in privacy. He hoped she would express some support to him. If not his father nor his brothers, it would always be her. She would always provide a shoulder to lean on. Though even her brows furrowed over the thought of putting their own in danger considering the circumstances. But Swifty had already made up his mind. He would venture to the Exile in Ruin alone and he would free as many as he could. His words made his mother feel ill at ease.

"My boy," she said, "you know I cannot support you in this decision. But I also cannot stop you from doing what you will. You are no longer a kit. You have grown into an adult tod. I trust you to be aware of the possible consequences. Whether you fail or succeed, you will be responsible for the outcomes of your actions."

Swifty listened to her carefully as he was peering down to the carpet in the wagon, though as his only response, he would hug her tightly and thank her for her words. The following night he would commence the lone journey.

More vigorous clinks chimed throughout the hall as the two fighters clashed. Swifty parried the champion's thrust before hitting him with the hilt of his longsword and pushing him backwards.

*But I'm not like that. I wouldn't forget this. I had to go alone and try. Even if it meant I'd be killed or caught and sold like a piece of rag.*

Swifty didn't give his opponent a single moment to rest and landed another hit with the back of his hilt, following up with a slash across the Sethrak's thigh.

It was a cold night in Vol'dun that Swifty spent inside the wagon he and his brothers used for the hunts and expeditions. Thankfully, Dune's Hope wasn't far from Exile in Ruin and so, when the sun rays pierced the darkness of the night, Swifty was already laying down in the sand, sneaking up as close to the Sethrak camp as he could to evaluate his possibilities. Luckily, seven of the ten Sethrak raiders were asleep. One of the guards was sitting by the fire and the other two were patrolling back and forth, though seemingly half-awake, judging by their slow lousy movement. As expected, the six Vulperan captives were there, too. Three of them were locked in a cage and the other three were tied up at a stake, all whipped to blood and scorched for the amusement of their captors. Swifty had much higher chances of freeing the caged Vulpera without an issue. As soon as both the patrolling guards walked further away from the area, he snuck up to the cage with a metal lockpick in his teeth. The glee and relief in the eyes of the three captured Vulpera could reach the few stars that were still visible up in the dawning skies. Swifty successfully picked one of the locks. Then the second. Then the third.

"Argh!" Swifty let out a loud grunt as Lord Brakkus' champion headbutted him with the solid bone mask and did not wait a single moment to slash the staggering Vulpera across the cheek.

Swifty woke up with a terrible headache. He groaned at the numbing pain and shook his head before finding himself standing defenselessly with his hands and legs tied up to a stake. Looking up, his heart skipped a beat. What he saw were ten amused scaled faces, laughing and cracking jokes about the young Vulpera's foolishness and powerlessness. One of the Sethrak suddenly spilled boiling water on the new captive's face. Swifty sizzled in pain and kept his eyes closed, instinctively trying to protect them from the hot water. Thanks to his training, he could withstand greater pain, but there were clear limits. Another raider swished a sharp nine-tailed whip at the dark-furred Vulpera and dug its solid pointy ends deep into his belly before pulling it back rapidly. Swifty yelled out in pain as blood burst out of his ripped flesh. Mercilessly, another Sethrak hit the poor Vulpera in the shin with a dull weapon, only a moment before a steel-plated fist landed on his head.

The Sethrak champion had a clear momentum and he wouldn't let go of it now. After Swifty's messy block, he slashed his furred opponent twice across the chest with a spin of his double-edged polearm and kicked Swifty's ankle, tumbling him down. The Vulpera was laying exposed on the ground, providing the Sethrak a perfect chance. He reached his weapon back before sending it down with full strength in an attempt to land a lethal stab. Swifty barely rolled out of its reach and quickly sprung back to his feet. He took a moment to breathe and looked down at his scarred chest.

*I failed that day. Now I am aware it was a mistake. And I took full responsibility.*

"Wake up!" A familiar deep hoarse voice played on Swifty's eardrums as he struggled to awaken from his faintness. Swifty was so beaten up he couldn't quite name the voice yet. He suddenly felt relief in his wrists and ankles after something cut the ropes he was tied with. A pair of large hands supported him by the armpits and led the concussed Vulpera away from the stake. "Wake up!" The loud voice boomed again. Finally, Swifty came back to his senses. An angered face of a burly dark-furred Vulpera stared him down. A face of a Vulpera who was doing all he possibly could not to shout even louder at his stubborn younger brother. Swifty eyed the Vulpera across the whole length to convince himself was really Bigboy. After Bigboy saw his brother was well awake, his lips remained shut. He only lifted his greataxe from the ground and leaned on it expectantly, while peering at Swifty with bronze judging eyes. Swifty looked around. Dune's Hope came to save him. All of them came. Not only his brothers but also other guardians, hyena riders, archers, and sorcerers. He noticed six motionless Sethrak bodies laying on the ground. The rest seemed to have fled. Soon Swifty noticed the way everyone was looking at him. In those many tired eyes there was naught but disappointment, frustration, and incomprehension. Sharpy, the brother Swifty was especially close to, only threw one irritated look at him before avoiding any further direct eye contact. Fiercy did not look mad, but he looked very, very upset, so upset he was almost tearing up as he was leaning on his troubled mother's side. Eyeing the whole Sethrak camp, Swifty then noticed Calmboy. The light-grey-furred Vulpera was standing straight and tall, looking at his younger brother with his frowny golden eyes and arms folded. Calmboy then looked behind himself, somewhat gesturing to Swifty to turn his attention to what was there. Swifty's ears drooped and his eyes went wide open at what he saw. Those six Vulpera he was trying to save were dead. All slaughtered by the Sethrak, who couldn't accept the possibility their captives would be freed, and so they killed every single one of them as their last resort. Terrible grief struck the middle Sholja boy. He looked

back to Calmboy, but there was naught the older brother could offer to Swifty. Not a sliver of compassion. Eventually, among those grim faces, Swifty identified his father. The elder Vulpera was seething with rage. If his son wasn't badly injured, he would have immediately given him a beating. Instead, he only stepped aside and gestured his son to get going and come back home. Swifty obeyed and ever since then, he was the black sheep of the family. Due to his daring actions, Dune's Hope needed to disappear from the area. The outcome of Swifty's foolishness was the danger of a Sethrak Lord getting his vengeance. Other Vulpera from Dune's Hope eventually forgave Swifty, but his brothers and father were still rather dismissive of him for putting himself and the whole caravan in such danger.

*But I'm not alone now. Despite what happened, my brothers are here for me. Together we can do anything. And now we will free not one, not two, but five of our people.*

Finally, Swifty was in his element. He now felt level-headed and had his full attention on the charging Sethrak champion, who was eager to strike the Vulpera again. Swifty bent his knees and readied his weapons. With a counterattack, he parried the Sethrak's thrust with the longsword and slashed through his chest scales with the shortsword before recoiling back. The Sethrak hissed in anger and furiously swung his spear at his furry opponent several times. Swifty dodged the attacks with a swift jump to the side and spun on a firm leg to slash the Sethrak's ribs. The Sethrak staggered on his feet and Swifty made a couple of leaps backwards to get further away from his opponent. The Lord's mighty champion cried in rage after he turned around to face the Vulpera again. He swung his weapon at the air before going for one final charge, aiming to end it and kill the Vulpera.

*After all, freeing our people... That is what we came here for.*

The Sethrak staggered forward and stopped before dropping his weapon to the ground. Crimson red blood leaked down along his legs from the two deep cuts Swifty made in the Sethrak's side before quickly stabbing him in the back as well. The reptile never saw such a speed coming. As he was charging, the Vulpera charged back at him at a lightning speed before sliding on his knees past him and landing the three consecutive blows. Now the Sethrak stood there for a couple of seconds before falling dead to the ground. Lord Brakkus' champion was beaten.

Swifty tumbled to his knees, breathing heavily. His exhaustion was tremendous. A couple of deep breaths went through his lungs before he remembered where he was and who was there with him. First, he had to take a glance at his brothers.

Sharpy sighed in great relief. Fiercy smiled happily seeing his brother victorious. Bigboy nodded approvingly with a pretentious smirk. Calmboy didn't bat an eye, but his eyebrows were no longer furled. Swifty closed his eyes for a moment. This success felt



too satisfactory to be true, but the feeling was too short-lived indeed.

“Insolent worthless slave! You will pay for this,” the Sethrak Commander shouted. Ostensibly, not everyone was impressed by Swifty’s victory. The guards and other champions unsheathed their weapons, the Beast riders were ready to unleash their pets, the Skycallers were summoning lightning to their will, and the citizens on the highest floors leaned in to get a better look at the action.

Swifty’s only reaction was pure confusion as he was kneeling on the ground. However, his brothers reacted adequately. Bigboy had his greataxe in his arms and ready. Sharpy was aiming his bow at one of the Skycallers. Fiercy took his daggers out and eyed the closest Sethrak he would leap at and rip their heart out as soon as he got the cue. A smooth dome-like barrier of glowing water conjured by Calmboy engulfed the four brothers to negate any magical attack the Sethrak sorcerers would hurl at them.

“Enough!!!” The manly resonant voice of Lord Brakkus pierced the tension in the hall. It echoed for a good couple of seconds. Every Vulpera, every Sethrak, be it an actor or a spectator, turned their attention to the noble Sethrak Lord, who stood up from the seat. His enormous respect and charisma managed to soothe the situation in but a moment. „You are at the Court of the Lord! Lower your weapons!”

All the armed Sethrak obeyed and the Sholja boys did too, but only after they made sure all of the guards around them sheathed their weapons and called off their magic first.

The Lord stepped closer to the brothers and offered a slight bow out of his artificial respect to them. “I presented the circumstances and you have met them all. The saurolik was slain and the battle was satisfactory,” Lord Brakkus stated and gestured his clawed hand towards the slaves.

“You may proceed. Pick one slave, who will return home by your side.”

Eyes of all Sholja brothers twitched and squinted as they struggled to keep calm. “You

mean five slaves,” Bigboy corrected the Lord.

“I believe I was clear enough. Pick one slave, who will return home by your-”

A strong tap of Calmboy’s staff against the floor interrupted the Lord. “That was not the agreement,” Calmboy insisted.

In that instant, Lord Brakkus’ composed and approachable demeanor changed. He quickly scooted up to Calmboy, twisting his slender body in such a manner that he resembled a cobra that was about to snap at its prey.

“Listen to me, Sholja. By no means, you are in friendly territory. You are despised here. You have no power here at all. This is my settlement. Anything I say is valid. If I wish, I can shackle all of you this instant and sell you in the imperial city at a high price. Your dignity, your efforts, your hopes, everything would be erased and reduced to gold. Now listen to what I am telling you. Pick one of the slaves and be on your way.”

Calmboy didn’t even blink. He merely stood in front of the indignant Lord with the usual serious expression on his face and stared the Sethrak Lord down for a good while, as if demonstrating he would not be intimidated. Playing his own mind games with Brakkus in turn.

*You are good, Calm one. Oh, how I would enjoy breaking you. Your bones first and then your soul,* Lord Brakkus thought. The powerful shaman would make such a good addition to his slave collection.

Calmboy indeed ensured he would get under the Lord’s scales. These antics of his were usual in such confrontations. It would be an understatement to say that the Sethrak’s frustration with his cool head and psychological endurance granted him pure enjoyment. Nevertheless, he eventually turned his golden gaze to his brother, who was still settled down on his knees before the corpse of his former opponent, and spoke.

“Swiftly. You have won the fight. You choose the one who will join us on the way home.”

Swiftly raised his brow in surprise. Of course, it made sense he would be the one to do it. And yet, this was perhaps too great of a responsibility his brothers planted on him. How would he possibly be capable of choosing one, only one slave, if he expected to save at least five of them? Regardless, he stood up from his kneel and made his way to the other side of the hall. The audience hall was completely devoid of any noise. The unnerving silence would be disturbed only by the light taps of Swiftly’s footpaws as he walked. He felt very uncomfortable. His footsteps were much louder than they should have been. Every single eye in the hall was fixed on him. The Sethrak, the brothers, the slaves – none of them would turn away from the dark-furred one now. Every soul was paying their full attention to whom the slayer of Lord Brakkus’ champion would pick. The slaves were sitting on the floor lined up in two rows, though some of them formed a close group. All were tightly shackled, but still, they were able to reach their paw out to Swiftly. They wanted to touch him. They wanted to touch a strong and free Vulpera. The Vulpera who fought one of their cruel masters and emerged victorious. And now he was there to give them a chance to become a free Vulpera too. The slaves were gently grabbing at his paw, stained by the Sethrak’s blood, and Swiftly willingly let them do so as he was strolling by.



One of the paws grabbed his wrist firmly and didn't let go. Swifty stopped and looked at the one to whom this paw belonged to. He saw an elderly-looking red-furred vixen. She was peering into Swifty's sapphire blue eyes, smiling wide at him. Even wider when he looked back. Swifty wasn't certain what this was about. Initially, he thought she would start begging him to pick her, but she didn't. She only kept smiling happily at him and so he simply smiled back. The vixen nodded several times and rubbed her thumb along the male's wrist before letting go. Swifty didn't leave just yet. The actions of this vixen made him think. Like any good Vulpera, he had a great respect for elders and wondered how long this one had been here. She deserved to get a chance of finishing her days off in freedom and have her bones laid down to grant her soul an assured peace. Only a little more and Swifty would have made his choice. Suddenly, the vixen pushed at his elbow. She smiled at him again and nodded once more, while still pushing his elbow, possibly gesturing him to go on. Swifty was staring at her for a moment, before nodding back and doing what she was evidently telling him to do.

Swifty strolled on. His eyes inspected each slave individually. Of course, they were slaves, filthy for the most part, living in terrible conditions for who knows how long. Only a few looked to be in good health. It was quite common that a slave had more than one open scar or other rotting wounds, some of which may have later become lifelong marks on their body. One tod particularly took Swifty's attention. He was much more wounded than the majority. The thin white-furred body was mutilated with swollen bruises, deep whip marks, and burns from head to toe. The tod's broken arm was held together in an improvised cast made of non-sterile cloth and little planks of wood. Incredibly battered one, he was. Seemingly one who took a punishment for his friends willingly, if he could. Swifty walked up to him and crouched to be at his eye-level, at which the tod winced and looked away. Seeing such a beaten-up Vulpera made Swifty truly wish he could help him

somehow. Would he be a good pick? He was certainly about to make his choice.

“There are others, who need help,” the tod whispered, before taking hold of a paw that was resting on his shoulder.

Swiftly’s eyes blinked a few times before finally noticing three other slaves sitting around the tod. They all held him close. They all had their arms wrapped around him and provided him comfort. Swiftly understood. He’s not alone. He’s here for them. And they’re here for him. He will make it out alive. Swiftly untied his water flask from his belt and opened it before spilling some water over the tod’s burned paws, all four of them. He then closed the bottle and planted it at the tod’s side to use it later, if he wished. Swiftly was on his way onwards, but if he remained just a little longer, he would have noticed a content smile on the tod’s face.

The slayer of Lord Brakkus’ champion continued though he wished he’d made his choice already. Making this choice was even more difficult than he imagined. Many of the slaves looked tremendously frightened. They were peering at the free dark-furred Vulpera with their big teary eyes, wordlessly pleading him to pick them. This was their best and probably the sole chance of getting out of this hell. As soon as Swiftly passed by, some of them silently whimpered in pain before being quickly consoled and soothed by their peers, otherwise the overseers would have done so with the swish of their whip.

Swiftly walked on and on, and he was nearly at the end of the row. But there was yet one more Vulpera who caught his attention. It was an orange-furred vixen, who was sitting alone far in the corner, hardly noticeable. As the lone fox she seemed to be, she didn’t take a single glance at Swiftly as he was strolling by. In fact, she was turned away from him, with her head hung, idly picking at her claws. She looked very young. Possibly around the age of Fiercy. Thin and short in height, even for a Vulpera. She seemed to be a loner but neither did she seem to care much. She was simply minding her own business. Barely paying any attention to all that had been happening in the hall. She just kept playing with her claws and the bandages wrapped around her arms until she sensed a paw on her shoulder.

“This one,” Swiftly said.

The vixen looked at Swiftly’s paw, planted firmly on her shoulder, before her eyes rose up to him. A click sounded before her as one of the overseers unlocked the chains on her legs. She stared in tremendous awe at her ankles. They were bloody, but somehow free. Swiftly took her under her armpits and helped her stand up on her swollen feet. Then he wrapped his arm around her and led her slowly to the group of Sholja brothers. The vixen stared blankly in front of herself. It happened so quickly. Why had she been unshackled? Why was everyone else staying? Where was she even going? Her mind was so overwhelmed with confusion that she didn’t even notice the wail of grief coming from the mouths of several slaves over not being chosen. The deafening nerve-wracking weep was soon drowned out by the shrill sounds of whips and cudgels hitting the pitiful flesh as the cruel overseers began punishing the misbehaving slaves. Swiftly, however, heard all these sounds. He heard all those cries, shrieks and swishes of the whip and he was

struggling not to burst in tears. An immediate regret struck his mind, though he was aware the feeling would not have differed at all, had he chosen anyone else.

Swiftly returned to his brothers along with the vixen he had chosen. Calmboy didn't hesitate at any moment to tend to her and used some of his water magic to relieve all her limbs. She walked poorly and she needed more strength for the journey all the way to Dune's Hope. However, Lord Brakkus interrupted him and grabbed Calmboy gently by the chin. He turned the light-grey-furred Vulpera's head so that his blood reds could look him directly in those golden gems. The vixen lowered her ears and stepped back from them both, as she feared the Lord and his close presence.

"Now, begone! Leave my estate and do not look back," the Sethrak Lord growled.

Once again, Calmboy offered him his provocative wordless gaze before giving Brakkus a nod both as a confirmation and a way to express his farewells. He then tapped his staff on the pavement. Bigboy nodded and made a hand gesture, announcing the departure of the Sholja brothers. The Commander had been waiting for such a cue. Her squad surrounded the Vulperan group, now bigger by one head, and led them out of the estate. Lord Brakkus stood alone on the red carpet and peered at the departing group until the gate of the hall closed. He then gestured to the overseers to send the slaves back to their place before walking back to his seat and sitting down in the same manner as when the Sholja brothers arrived. Before their arrival, he knew that this would have been the day to remember, though for entirely different reasons. His plans were simple, but they should have succeeded. Dune's Hope should have emerged weaker as the outcome. Instead, the plans cost him a great amount of resources including two Beast Masters, killed by the starved saurodisk during the challenging process of training, and one of his greatest champions. The pesky Vulpera of Dune's Hope should have failed, but the Lord underestimated them greatly due to his own arrogance and the desire for self-gratification. He might have minimized the damage by giving them merely one of the five promised slaves, but this wouldn't even suffice for a consolation prize. He realized that the leaders of Dune's Hope might deem him untrustworthy now and halt any more trade with the Lord. There was no gain and the losses were insulting, degrading, but none were as impactful as the loss of even more dignity. The Sands would soon tell stories about the Sethrak Lord, who tried to outsmart the Vulpera of Dune's Hope but failed miserably.

The noble Sethrak supported his own chin with a palm and gritted his teeth in vexation. One day he will surely encounter Dune's Hope again, but not as a trading partner.

"You enjoyed that," Bigboy remarked to Calmboy as soon as the group left the area of the estate.

"Yeah, really! I just love it when you're doing your thing!" Sharpy added cheerfully.

Calm boy closed his eyes and smirked. "These interactions, they add spice to our adventures," he stated, before offering up the most subtle of chuckles.

Fiercy giggled as well. Swiftly smiled. He felt much better now that it was all over, though

he would never forget what he experienced that day. The orange-furred vixen they saved often kept looking back at what used to be her only home and her prison as she followed the brothers. At that point, it finally ticked to her. She was a free Vulpera. She could go anywhere she wanted. But did she have any place to return to? There was no other choice than to follow the five Vulperan brothers to their home.



The Sun began setting once more when the group arrived at the temporary settlement of Dune's Hope. The Sholja boys were gone for four whole days, so it was no wonder every Vulpera of Dune's Hope came up and gathered around to greet their esteemed guardians, celebrate their successful journey, and welcome the new face to the caravan. The ever-caring mother of the Sholja boys soon took the young vixen into her care and led her to a wagon, not only to dispose her of the shackles that had remained on her wrists until then and to heal her, but also because she noticed that the newcomer looked rather uneasy and confused, thus a slow, gentle approach seemed more appropriate.

The skies of Vol'dun soon went dark and most of the caravan, including the Sholja brothers, gathered around the fire in the center of the settlement to tell and listen to the stories of their guardians' journey. Excluding Swifty. It had been a long time ever since Swifty last came up to hang out around the fire with others even though he would have truly loved to. He was no longer frowned upon by his friends and fellows, but he would still feel uneasy and awkward around his brothers, who still rarely threw a glance at him. Considering their behavior during the journey, he wasn't certain whether they had forgiven him or not. It didn't seem like it. He retreated to his parents' wagon and after getting his medical treatment, he sat down outside on the steps. That day he put in such a great effort, but in the end, it mattered little. He couldn't stop thinking about the slaves, the choice, the Lord, the trickery, and the deception of the deal. They did achieve something that day and they did ruffle some scales indeed, but one slave out

of forty wasn't a lot. Only one-fifth of what the initial plan was, too. They should have accomplished much, much more.

The curtains of the wagon rustled behind him as someone came out. The orange-furred vixen they freed earlier walked down the steps and looked at seated Swifty. She was in far better state than before, bathed and with ointment and bandages around her festering wounds.

"Why did you pick me?" She asked.

"Why are you asking?" Swifty asked back.

"It's a simple question. There were countless others you could have chosen. Why me? Why not the poor whiney disappointed bastards, who got beaten up to a pulp?"

"I had only one chance to pick. The others would have gotten beaten up either way. But in the end, they have each other to pick themselves up again. You seemed like you had no one. How big do you think your chances of survival were?"

"I had my own ways. I don't need others."

"How much of your dignity did those ways of yours cost?"

The vixen widened her eyes as if Swifty's question offended her. It certainly did. She snarled at him and clenched her fists. "Ignorant mutt! The likes of you have no idea what it takes to survive in slavery with shackles so tight you hear your own bones cracking!"

The fuming vixen rapidly turned around to leave.

"Wait!" Swifty exclaimed in an attempt to conclude this exchange on a more positive note. "You haven't told me your name."

The vixen stopped and looked over the shoulder at him. "Nora," she growled, before refusing to give the tod any more of her attention and walking away to a secluded place, granting herself some alone time.

Swifty peered at her for a while before glumly looking down to the sand around his feet. At least he now felt somewhat better about his choice. Nora was undoubtedly strong, though naive, and not in the same way as Swifty. She will learn a lot at Dune's Hope. Swifty understood her, though he would have been glad if he saw just a little shard of gratitude in her eyes. The Swift Sholja boy was close to sinking into his ponderings again when he heard slowly approaching footsteps from the right. There was no need for him to look up and see who it was. His father walked up to him and sat on the wooden steps next to his son. Swifty felt a slight nervousness, though the presence of his father also felt comforting. They had their last proper talk before he decided to pull out the stunt at Exile in Ruin. The father and son were sitting at the steps of the wagon for a little while before the older grey fox took a deep breath to speak. "Your brothers tell stories about you at the fire. Fearlessly fighting the champion of Lord Brakkus. The clash of a ten-foot-tall snake monster, wielding enormous weapons enchanted with deadly lightning and one simple tod with two swords," he chuckled. "At least that's how your younger brothers interpret it. The older ones moderate it and presumably tell the truer version."

Swifty chuckled silently and smiled.

"Regardless, you did well today," his father continued.

“Thank you, father,” Swifty said.

The father sighed before lifting his head up to the emerging stars. “Tell me, dear son. How did it feel?”

“How did what feel?”

“All of it. All you experienced behind the gates of the estate.”

Swifty lifted his head. He didn't need long to search for the answer. “Terrible... Infuriating... Saddening... Miserable... and... Powerless,” Swifty enumerated.

“Precisely,” his father noted. “Now you have seen the state of matters deep within the Faithless Empire, just how I saw it many, many years ago. These Sethrak will never treat us fairly. If you gather your brothers and accept a fair exchange of a service for the freedom of our people, they will deceive you first and then give you much less than they promised, if anything at all. If you use brute force instead and attempt to free their prisoners, they will rather kill them all than flee to their own safety. They will do everything they can to always have the upper hand, no matter what. They will do everything to either always keep us in chains or hand us the short end of the stick. Can you imagine what they would do, if the Emperor was convinced to treat Dune's Hope as a coalition with the potential to truly organize an uprising?”

“No one would survive...,” Swifty replied.

His father nodded, before looking at his son. „Dune's Hope cannot become what you wish it would become. But I do have a dream. One not too distant from yours.“ Swifty perked his ears up and looked his father in the eyes.

„I wish that one day when the Empire inevitably falls, to build us a proper home. A safe stable home that wouldn't need to be relocated every few days. I wish to build, work, bring water to the dry soil, spread the oases, and build a home in which every Vulpera would get a chance to stand on their own two feet and grant them a proper start to a new free life. That's why I'm so protective of this caravan and why I have been making all these deals with various Lords. I want this caravan to remain the safe haven it has been and grow much, much stronger over time. And when the time comes, it will be ready to start working and fulfill this dream. I don't know when this time will come and I cannot be certain to live long enough to see it but I want to ensure this caravan's long-term survival. That's why I and your mother have raised you and your brothers to become the outstanding inspiring protectors you are. When the Sands eventually claim me, all of you will lead this caravan to greatness. Daruvala has the strength and the sense of leadership. Dariada has the wisdom and the charisma. Olderika has the wit and the subtlety. Moriluga has the fierceness and the loyalty. And you, Garnacuga...”  
Garnacuga's father planted a firm paw on his back. “... You have not only the speed and nimbleness with which you were born, but in the last few weeks, you have shown me you also have a special heart. I do not know anyone else who would willingly infiltrate that camp alone and attempt what you have attempted. We both know how badly it ended. I was angry with you because I cannot afford to lose any of my sons. My sons are the main strength of this caravan. We all need you here, as a caravan and as a family. Still, you have

impressed me. I am proud of you, Garnacuga.”

Garnacuga was peering in his father’s eyes and didn’t move a muscle while listening to him. His eyes filled up with tears after his father expressed his pride and the young Vulpera shuffled close to give his old fox a hug. This. This is exactly the reassurance he needed.

The leader of Dune’s Hope wrapped an arm around his son and returned the gesture of love, though he didn’t stay in it for way too long. He pulled back and stood up folding his arms. “Now, stop being the odd furball and go sit by the fire. Your brothers miss you,” he said before giving a warm smile to his son and turning around to leave.

“... and then, Swifty shattered the ground with his longsword and absorbed the life-force of all the Skycallers in sight, getting an incredible amount of lightning power, and then he sent a deadly thunderbolt into the Faithless monster.” Olderika was sitting on a tree branch while telling their friends about their journey.

“He burned the dumb reptile to ash!” Moriluga shouted enthusiastically.

“I’ll grab you both by the tail and throw you face first into the fire if you don’t stop with these stupid exaggerations!” Daruvala shouted at them.

All the Vulpera around the fire laughed. It was always a little difficult to get the true story out of the brothers, but a shared good laugh was guaranteed no matter what.

“Swifty is here!” Moriluga called out with his digit pointing at a dark-furred newcomer. Every single Vulpera, sitting or standing, turned their attention to where Moriluga was pointing.

Garnacuga stood there, with his head hung, tail behind his legs, and twiddling his thumbs nervously. The sensation of awkwardness was terribly numbing for him. Fortunately, there was no uncomfortable silence in sight. All the Vulpera cheered at him and beckoned him over to join them. Olderika jumped down from the branch and rushed to his beloved brother to trap him in a tight close hug. “Hero! I knew you’d make it! I knew it!” He yelled cheerfully.

“Olderika really needs to cut on the Voldunshine already. But yeah, you did fine,” Daruvala noted while trying to pull the excited archer off of their confused brother.

“They’re correct, Swifty,” Dariada’s voice sounded. The young shaman was turned away from the grouping as he was staring off into the distance, but he was still present and listening. He turned around to levy direct eye contact with Garnacuga instead of giving him one of his infamous unnerving side-eyes.

“Not only you emerged victorious in a duel between you and a fierce Sethrak champion. You chose to save a Vulpera who truly needed it. And what’s most important, you have given great hope to those who stayed behind. A hope they will never forsake.” Garnacuga’s eyes went wide and Dariada smirked and nodded. He was right. Of course, they couldn’t save them all. They couldn’t even save the amount they expected to save. But the hope. The hope was still there. He saw it in the elder vixen’s bright eyes. He felt it in the trust of the battered tod. He heard it in the wails of the slaves who cried out, because they were

more than certain a better life would have been awaiting them, had they been chosen. But despite anything, they will remember this. They will remember the sight of Sethrak blood on a Vulpera's paws. They will remember there are many strong caravans of free Vulpera outside their prison. They will keep their spirits up and do their best to survive another day. They saw that the Vulpera still had a bright future. They saw the hope. They saw Dune's Hope.

