

Thorn plucked a rose growing at his wrist, brought it to his nose to inhale it deeply, then tossed it over his shoulder to land on the chest of one of his fallen foes. "Not a single scratch on me," he smirked, running one hand through his spiked hair. "How unfortunate the same can't be said for you. Let this be a lesson to you. You fought well, my foe, but you were foolish to imagine you could tangle with grace and beauty itself."

He strode on, pulling his designer jacket up tight on his shoulders, hearing the sound of the other tigers on his team falling in line behind him. They were nobodies; amateurs and newbies, one and all. Useful as distractions, but little else. They gravitated to him for their own reasons, whether they hoped he'd keep them safe during the WAR(!) or were merely hoping some of his fame might rub off on them. Whatever. He turned towards his camera drone, giving it a rakish wink. As long as they didn't block his shot, he could hardly fault them for wanting to bask in his presence.

The sun crested the heavens above. Sunlight had a hard time penetrating the thick, urban architecture of Talsam, but Thorn always managed to find where the sunbeams managed to find its way through the spires and walkways of the city. It was still early in the day, and early in the WAR(!). There would be no rest until the early evening, but this didn't bother the satyger one bit; that just meant plenty of footage for his manager to comb through, while he relaxed with one of his more fun clients...

As if on cue, the speaker on his camera drone crackled to life. "Hey Thorn!" came the ever-chipper voice of his manager. "Gonna need you to head to the center capture point, that's Helmsted Plaza!"

Thorn grimaced. One hand reflexively reached up to touch the buckle of his collar. He had burned a little more charge than he meant to during that last fight in order to score the flawless victory. It would be in his best interest to sweep the perimeter, picking off those weaker competitors who merely hovered around the main conflicts, building his charge back up with easy challenges...

"Surely it can wait," he tried, hoping his manager might pick up on his concern.

"Nope!" she cheerfully replied. "Sponsors are getting antsy. They want to see some razzle-dazzle out of you."

Thorn gritted his teeth. "I don't do *razzle-dazzle*," he sneered, brushing his locks to the side. "I win with *flair*."

"Either way, the sponsors aren't paying you to pick easy fights. They wanna see you go big! So get your butt over to Helmsted Plaza, pronto."

The satyger exhaled through his nose, suspicious. "When you say sponsors, you mean Luxx, don't you?"

The speaker crackled as it struggled his manager's "Ha!" He rolled his eyes. Figured. "They *are* your biggest sponsor, kid. Not like you should be surprised they're being a bit more hands-on with this WAR(!), since they're in town and everything."

"Any idea what they're up to?" Thorn demanded, tired of the pretense.

"Nope!" his manager replied, as giddy as ever. "Good luck out there!"

The satyger huffed. "I don't need luck," he cooed. And then, to himself, though: *What I need is more charge. I've got enough to get through a single serious fight, barely. The question is, does Luxx know that...*



It wasn't that Thorn was helpless without the enhancements his collar offered. He took his training seriously -- a healthy diet, a regular training schedule, plenty of exercise and reliable sleep habits. It was a routine he had in place even before scoring his position as one of Luxx's clients, who had enforced it as part of "taking care" of one of their "assets" -- except when it amused them to force Thorn to deviate from it, at least. As a result, Thorn was in quite good shape, when it came to his mundane attributes.

But he had his limits. There was only so much "push-ups" and "flexibility training" and "lean protein" could do against opponents who could command the elements or launch their limbs like rockets. A brilliantly-executed roundhouse kick might be enough to take a low-tier combatant out of the fight, but aimed at the head of someone who can manipulate the flow or time, slip between shadows or had a body that might as well have been made of steel (or in some cases, *was* made of steel), it wasn't enough.

That's where the collar came in. Unyielding strength, slipstream speed, perfect focus -- as long as there was energy left in the collar, Thorn was a force to be reckoned with. And the most beautiful thing about the situation (besides himself) was that all he needed to do to recharge it was throw himself into challenges. If he won, all the feeling of pushing himself, of striving for victory, of *needing* to triumph and coming out on top fed straight into the collar's power source, giving him the fuel he needed for the next challenge. It was perfect, and perfect for him... as long as he kept winning, that is.

And if he lost, well... he could get charge out of that too...

The idea for how he could generate charge from a loss had started as something of a joke. A series of humiliating losses had kept him from recharging his collar, and his sponsor had him come in for some training. Luxx had quipped that if Thorn were able to get as much charge from "lowering himself" as he did from raising his abilities, he'd never run out again. The satyger offered a concept for *how* that might work, knowing how it would delight his sponsor.

He hadn't *quite* expected Luxx to actually *fund* the modifications to the enchantment, though. He had to admit Luxx did a lot for him, even if there was always one of their "amusing" little twists attached to their generosity. It had certainly made his life more interesting and fun since Luxx had presented the upgraded collar to him, for certain definitions of "fun."

The brief version was that, beyond simply being able to get something from a loss, losing a challenge could potentially gain him even more charge than winning... but only if...

He put the thought out of his mind. There'd be no need for *that*. He'd just have to go all-out on the next combat and win. Easy. Spearheading the assault on the central capture point would be enough to come out with more charge than he burned. Easy.

He arrived at the central capture point. Helmstead Plaza was dominated by a brutal, concrete monolith in the center, the kind of art installation that was typical in the Pride district. A small heap of his allies lay at the entrance, groaning and clutching at their wounds.

Okay. Maybe not "easy".

Thorn's assessment didn't take long. The smell of singed fabric; the slight twitch of their limbs, suggesting an affected nervous system; and the most obvious tell, the way their fur stood on end. Electric powers, which meant--

Thorn's eyes quickly traveled upward to the top of the monolith, only now spotting the figure lounging on top through the glare of the high-noon sun. *Her*, Thorn thought, a scowl on their lips. *Why did it have to be her...*



*Of course*, Thorn thought to himself, as his camera drone rose into the air to get a better look at his opponent. *Luxx set this up*.

His relationship with his sponsor was... complex. The short version was that Thorn had managed to con his way into becoming one of Luxx's clients, scoring a generous, long-term contract that ensured he would be well taken care of for a long, long time.

On the flipside, the terms of his contract allowed Luxx certain... indulgences. His con hadn't gone over perfectly, leaving Thorn at the mercy of the rabbat's whims even beyond what the typical Talsam tiger put up with. Most turf tigers in Talsam got away with doing as they pleased once their sponsors had determined which team they'd be fighting on, what kind of outfit they'd be wearing and the position they'd be playing in the WAR(!)... not Luxx's clients, though. And especially not Thorn, not with Luxx still both impressed and vexed by how Thorn had tricked them.

Thorn shifted anxiously from one paw to the other. If Luxx had arranged this particular matchup, then they were in the mood to see him struggle...

The tiger on top of the monolith rose to her feet. She laughed, one hand raised to her lips, her voice echoing off the concrete walls of the plaza. "Ohohohohoh! Well, well, well, Rosey! I was looking forward to our rematch! Come to get it over with?" Thorn could feel the smug expression on her face, despite how the sun behind her cast her into silhouette. "Are you that eager to lose to me?"

Thorn scoffed, smiling for the camera drone as it swiveled back to face him. "Oh, *please*," he crooned. *Shit*, he thought. *I'm so screwed*. His fights with her had never, ever gone well, but the last one in particular had been a disaster. And she had made sure to rub his nose in that loss, along with the aftermath... "You're actually *counting* that battle? I can hardly even *remember* it," he bluffed.

"Perhaps because it was so short!" The tiger, the self-declared "Storm Queen of Talsam", laughed again, even more boisterous. "Hardly much to remember at all when you crumple so immediately!"

Thorn's grin widened. "Unlike you, I don't rely on cheap shots."

The laughter stopped. The Storm Queen, Petrichor, took on a low tone. "It was *not* a cheap shot," she hissed. "*You* just let your guard down. You will *take that back*."

Now it was Thorn's turn to laugh, throwing his head back and running his hand through his mane again. "Why should I? Like I have any reason to be scared of a princess who hides on her throne."

Thorn's thoughts caught up with his boasting. Why hadn't she jumped down to fight him yet? Demanding someone take back an insult wasn't her style, not when she could simply charge at whoever had impugned her dignity. If she was hesitating, it must be because...

Thorn turned, casting a side-eye at the loose pack of tigers, milling about him. Oh. Right. The hangers-on. That explained it. Individually, they weren't much, but collectively they tipped the balance entirely in Thorn's favor. Petrichor's powers lended themselves to one-on-one duels, or hit-and-run tactics in dire conditions. In an open plaza like this, she'd have no way to avoid being surrounded.

He smiled to himself. *Revenge. Sweet, delicious revenge*. Oh, it would be so easy, too. He could picture it perfectly: he'd leap up to chase her down off the monument. Their fight would progress down on the ground below. He'd engage her while his goons surrounded her; he



wouldn't be able to hold her off for long, but long enough for the other tigers to close in. And they'd provide just enough interference to ensure he could land the finishing blow...

He imagined fist connecting with gut, imagined Petrichor tumbling to the ground at his feet...

His jaw clenched. *No!* He clenched his fist in disappointment. *No! That was so boring!* A "fight" like that wouldn't give him any charge at *all*. The cameras would hate it, the sponsors would hate it... and *he'd* hate it...

He huffed, looking away from his impromptu posse. There was nothing for it. Thorn was many things -- stylish, sophisticated, a beacon of fashion -- but the one thing he refused to be, with all his heart, was *boring*. Never mind that a boring fight would leave his collar without an ounce of charge; his pride was on the line. And so his mind was made up in an instant: "You lot," he snarled. "They need you on the East side. Go. Try and be useful, why don't you."

"But..." came a hesitant voice behind him. "But, we can help you..."

Thorn's smile was one of absolute self-assuredness. With a sweep of his hand, he plucked a rose from his mane. "My rose in my hand," he announced, eliciting a round of gasps. He could *feel* the other tigers behind him shiver at the phrase. They went silent, hanging on his every word.

He drew the flower to his nose, taking in its heavenly scent, before lowering it to rest on his chest. "WAR! blossoms in my heart. Helmstead Plaza will be the arena!" He turned his head just enough to wink at the nervous tiger behind him. "You know what the rose symbolizes, don't you?"

"It symbolizes victory!" another squeaked, finishing his saying.

"Exactly," Thorn said, turning back as he threw the rose behind him. He waited as he heard the sound of his allies stumbling to try to catch the offering as it fell. "Rest assured, my allies, my triumph is as certain as a rose's thorns. Now go. May grace and beauty guide each strike."

He turned his attention back to Petrichor as his impromptu posse shuffled away. Once it was clear they had fully departed, she hopped down off the monument, a cloud of static trailing behind her. She cackled, her bladed tail swinging back and forth behind her. "A duel, is it? You really a fool, Rosey-Posey."

"Big talk," Thorn declared, strutting to the side to slowly circle his foe. "...for a royal pretender."

Petrichor snarled in indignation. "Challenge accepted," the Storm Queen hissed, before rushing at him with her teeth bared.

Thorn felt it, the tingle from his collar that made the challenge official. He breathed out, releasing the energy stored in the collar...

Time slowed. Petrichor was one step away from being in striking range, her fist beginning its deadly arc towards his face. He saw the arc, saw how he needed to lean to escape the blow. And then beyond that -- he could feel how his weight would shift onto one paw, how he could pivot in place, his backhand coming around to turn her momentum against her...

Two steps ahead. With the collar fueling him, he could focus.

Petrichor's fist soared by his face, exactly as planned. It didn't matter that a mere inch made up the difference between dodging or being knocked to the pavement: He had chosen to dodge, and done so. He spun, his momentum turning his backhand into an unstoppable



bludgeon. The Storm Queen raised her arm, just in time to turn the knockout blow into one that merely unbalanced her, forcing her to stumble back.

Thorn saw the possibilities unfolding in front of him. He picked one that let him press the advantage, lunging forward with one leg in an attempt to hook her leg. She twisted to dodge, leaving her side vulnerable...

Thorn saw it in his mind before even his eyes managed to spot it -- Petrichor's tail, the metal tip crackling with electricity, lashing out --

He bent over backwards, letting the tail pass harmlessly above him, feeling the electrical charge send a ripple through his fur. *Not this time*, he thought to himself with a grin. It was the same trick she tried to pull last time, blind-siding with her tail. One touch, and she'd be able to jolt him hard enough to disable him. He wouldn't let that happen.

*Focus!* He thought, his leaping kick driving her back yet again. *Focus!* he thought again, stepping inside the range of her tail, its electrical end whipping uselessly behind him as he got a grip further up its length. He had channeled all of his collar's energy into speed and strength last time, believing it would be the only way to dodge the Storm Queen's initial attack and counter hard enough to end the fight before she could land a decisive blow.

He saw the feint for what it was before she even threw it. He stepped into the range of the fake punch, bringing down one fist in an overhead slam. Petrichor threw her arm up, but not in time -- his descending fist caught her across the face, staggering her backwards, her tail lashing wildly, uncontrolled, desperately attempting to stave off any follow-up.

*Focus.* There was no camera drone, no Luxx, no Talsam, no WAR(!).

There was the duel. *Focus!*

The Storm Queen launched herself forward, a straight kick aimed at Thorn's gut. There it was. He saw the ending, laid out before him. He caught the kick as he hopped backwards, exhaling as he moved with the blow, synchronizing himself with the foot trying to bury itself in his belly. Had he attempted to stand his ground, the kick would have knocked the wind from him and left him doubled-over on the ground. By moving with it instead, the knockout kick became only the gentlest of shoves.

Thorn grinned his magnificent grin. "My turn," he announced.

Petrichor's face barely had time to express its dismay, her tail only barely begun to whip around to strike at him... before he got a firm grip on her ankle, and *twisted*--

There was the curious sound of metal striking metal.

She managed a full spin before she hit the ground, rolling across the paved stones of the plaza. Thorn leapt, predicting where she'd come to a rest--

And landed across her, one hand at her throat, a hand and a paw pinning her arms, his other paw holding her lashing, furious tail in place near the base. He shifted the collar's power to strength just in time, holding in her place helplessly beneath him.

*Victory!*

He grinned wildly, triumphantly.

*Victory!!*

"Well, princess," he sneered, tightening his grip on her. "How's it feel to be put in your place?"

Petrichor smiled back at him, weakly. "Heh..." she managed to force out. "A pity about your drone, Thorn. An accident, I assure you."



Thorn's eyes went wide. *Drone...?*

There had been the curious sound of metal-on-metal...

Petrichor's tail swinging wildly as she spun through the air... his camera drone nearby, zooming in to capture his perfect counter...

Thorn could feel his heart drop into his stomach.

"Goodbye battery," she sang, "Goodbye footage, goodbye comms, goodbye sponsors..."

*No no no no*, he pleaded with the universe, *Not in the first quarter... without that footage, he'd have nothing from this WAR(!), he'd have nothing, he'd have nothing, he'd--*

Thorn turned, needing to see the damage for himself.

His camera drone hovered nearby. A small dent was visible near its base -- but the reassuring red recording light of the camera still shone.

He twisted back, raising a fist for the knockout blow, before she could--

His focus broken, the collar faltered--

She shifted herself left just in time, the last of his strength going into his punch that would crack the paving stone next to her head--

Her tail slipping free of the paw that held it in place, coming across his body to throw him backwards--

He staggered upright, feeling the strength fading from his limbs.

The Storm Queen rose. Electricity crackled around her as she laughed, towering over him.

*I'm so screwed*, he thought again, not happy to be proven right.

He saw the first jab come too late to do anything about it. Her tail jabbed him in his left arm, delivering just enough of a shock to leave it dangling limp by his side. Before he had even fully come to senses, the second jab landed, sending a second shockwave coursing through him that numbed his other arm.

He stumbled backward, biting his lip at the stinging pain rendering both his arms useless. They'd recover, he knew, as he desperately tried to ball and unball his fists... but not in time...

The Storm Queen advanced. He snarled at her, but the smile she gave him in return was one of condescending pity. She was *toying* with him.

Another quick jab with her tail took his left leg from him, numbing it to the point where it could no longer support his weight. He sank, unable to fight the pull of gravity, forced down on one knee by his stunned limb.

He raised his head, glaring, defiant.

The Storm Queen advanced. She smirked down at him. "Well, well, well... how does it feel to put in *your* proper place, hm?"

Thorn managed the best grin he could under the circumstances. He couldn't even reach his roses, not with his arms out of commission. There was nothing left to do but try to go out with style: "It's been my pleasure," he insisted, "to duel you honorably, o Queen." He tried to struggle to his feet, but the burning sting in his leg forced him back down onto one knee before he could manage more than a few inches. "...a shame I had to provide the honor for both of us."

Petrichor's eye twitched. Her tail raised, sparks flying from its tip. Thorn winced, preparing for the blow.



He wasn't disappointed. Hopefully he had at least managed to provoke her into wasting some of her juice on him.

He was surprised, as the ringing in his ears began to die down and his vision started to be able to see things aside from "white," to find himself upright. At first, this seemed like it must be some mere delusion of his inner ear, but he quickly realized that he was, in fact, oriented vertically. His head lolled as he struggled to parse this -- only to realize that Petrichor was carrying him, gripping him by his torso as she marched him across the plaza.

He could feel him being hoisted up as they approached the center and then -- there was the sound of ripping fabric, as she hooked the back of his jacket onto the monument there. Thorn groaned, as he hung uselessly from the sculpture; there was no feeling in his limbs, and thus nothing he could do to get himself down from the humiliating position.

He could see well enough to spot the satisfied grin on Petrichor's face. "There! A perfect display of my absolute victory!" she cooed.

Thorn rolled his eyes, and tried to growl back at her. "Nrrgh. This is a designer jacket, jerk..."

Petrichor's face lit up, delighted. "Oh! Well, in that case..." She stepped back towards him, a single claw raised...

Thorn grimaced as her claw danced across his chest, tearing through the jacket's material like tissue paper. He glanced downward, face twisting up as he recognized that she had torn the letters "SQ" into the luxury garment.

"Damn you. Come on..." he complained.

Petrichor's claw descended again. Thorn winced, just barely able to feel the tip, now playing across his thighs. "Auugghh." There was nothing else to say -- the outfit, part of Luxx's partnership with a high-end clothing label, would have cost Thorn more than he made in a month had he paid for it himself. Of course, the label *assumed* that it would be damaged -- that was the point of making him wear it into WAR(!), afterall -- but he was really hoping he'd get to keep this one. He certainly wasn't looking forward to fighting the rest with a gaping hole on the left of his chest and over his left thigh...

Three more quarters...

Thorn tried to tap into his collar.

Empty. Every last bit of charge expended.

He had lost...

Petrichor turned, preparing to flounce away.

He had lost...

She started to walk off...

He had lost...

...and with it, all the energy of the duel...

...it would all, just, evaporate...

...unless...

Thorn groaned. Time to take advantage of Luxx's modification.

"Wait..." he croaked out, before Petrichor could leave.

She turned, an innocent smile on her face. "Hmmm?"

Thorn bit his lip. "Could... you..." he tried to nod in the direction of his collar tag, the best he could manage under the circumstances. "Could you... use the tag..."



Petrichor simply smiled at him, pretending not to comprehend. She knew what he meant, of course, given she had taken advantage of the modification after every single one of their previous encounters. But of course, she was going to make him work for it...

Thorn rolled his eyes. "Could you... use the tag... as a favor to me." He stared at her, hating every moment of the desperate plea. "A big favor," he offered.

The Storm Queen clapped her hands together. "Oh, Rosey! Of *course* I would." She grinned at him, as smug as he could ever remember seeing her. "As a *big* favor, as you say. And I *will* be cashing that in, believe me."

Thorn groaned as she approached, her hand daintily rising to grip the metal tag dangling off his collar. One side was emblazoned with Luxx's insignia, while the other was blank -- for the moment.

Petrichor placed her thumb on the blank side of the tag. She was the victor in the challenge -- and the collar recognized this, as the energy from the duel began to channel itself into the tag. All the energy that would have gone into charging the collar instead surged into the tag, awaiting her will to shape it. "How about this..." she mused.

She concentrated.

Thorn shuddered as the curse took effect, sending an icy chill through his veins.

Petrichor released his tag from her grip. The satyger looked down, and read the fine, script text now etched into the tag's formerly blank surface:

"When Thorn is praised, he will meow his thanks."

Thorn gave an outraged cry, looking up to glare at the giggling Storm Queen. "There!" she hooted. She gave his cheek a teasing pinch, grinning down into his angry face. "The perfect blessing for a handsome little boy."

"Meow!" Thorn replied in a delighted voice, his ears flattening and his cheeks flushing at the sound of the compliment. The anger drained out of him. He groaned. He shifted where he hung, feelings of embarrassment bringing a burning sensation to his face.

It was working already. The curse would last until it had used up every last ounce of energy from the duel -- and in turn, his collar would instead receive its charge from the feelings he experienced from the curse. The more intense the feelings, the greater the charge. It was, from Luxx's perspective, a brilliant addition -- a perfect way to make sure their client could reliably "perform" for them, while also ensuring that Thorn would end up in exactly the kind of situations Luxx so loved to see play out...

"Damnit," Thorn muttered, helplessly swaying. "Damnit, damnit."

"Aww, don't be like that, Rosey-poo," Petrichor taunted, patting his face condescendingly. "This way everyone can hear how cute your meows are!"

"Meow!" Thorn replied, unable to stop himself. He sighed, and let himself go fully limp. Defeated.

"You wait right here... maybe I can pick off whatever teammates are foolish enough to try to rescue you, cutie," Petrichor declared as she climbed her way back to the top of the monument.

"Meow!!" Thorn replied, putting his heart into it.

At least he could feel power flowing back into his collar, he consoled himself. At least he'd have some charge for the second quarter. At least things couldn't get worse--



The speaker on his camera drone crackled to life. He groaned pre-emptively. *Now what--* came the desperate thought.

"That was fantastic!" his manager cheered. "My compact is lighting up, the sponsors are *loving* the footage I sent them already! Just wait until I can pull the high-def footage from the drone and edit it properly!"

"What exactly did the sponsors love," Thorn growled. "The injury, or the insult?"

"Both!" his manager responded, her voice bubbly. "I just got off the line with Luxx. They're gonna be taking you to the pet park tonight to make the most of your curse. I'll need you to come back to the house as soon as the WAR(!) ends, they're express shipping me a fancy leash for you to wear. The label was practically *begging* for them to use it on you. Wait until you see it, this thing is *stylish*."

"T-tonight?" Thorn stuttered, dismayed. "But... tonight was gonna be my fun client..." His hopes of relaxation... his visions of an evening of being in charge, of getting to enjoy some lovely playtime with a client who enjoyed letting him what they'd get up to... those visions faded, replaced by the all-too-immediate memory of Luxx's self-satisfied face, at they reached up to click the leash onto Thorn's collar and thus seal his fate...

"Oh, no worries!" his manager replied. "Already got in touch with that client. They said they're fine with being flexible! They promised to show up at the pet park so they can see your session, they sounded really excited!"

"Cool," Thorn groaned, visions of the pet park swirling in his head. "Cool," he said again, as he imagined stripping off his shredded WAR(!) outfit for whatever Luxx had picked out for him. "Cool," he repeated, as he imagined other park-goers queuing up to praise him and force meow after meow from his lips. "Cool," he said one last time, feeling the weight of the collar around his neck.

"Yeah, cool!" His manager replied, without a hint of irony in her voice. "Awesome work, Thorn!"

"Meow!!" Thorn replied, his face burning.

From high above, The Storm Queen's laugh echoed off the walls of the plaza.

*Next time*, Thorn promised himself. *Next time...*