

Being part of the royal line in a monarchy is challenging for an upcoming king-to-be. But even with the duties he must attend to with his father, he still has different hobbies and goals of his own to make.

Frostfall Duties

Ace gazes outside of the large grand window of his room, his tail wagging softly while staring out at the countryside. The wolf exhales softly while letting his blue eyes roam about, covering every inch of the scenery before him. He sighs softly in wondrous admiration, softly musing to himself, "So... this is the land I'm supposed to be ruling over soon. This is such a large territory."

The young wolf's tail wags softly while he gazes out from his window. He starts to feel anxious, wondering if he is really capable of ruling over such a large territory. Although Ace is excited over seeing this large land, he wonders, "Am I going to be capable of ruling over this vast territory? What if I'm not good enough?"

Ace turns from astonished to apprehensive from gazing out his window and he retreats away to walk back to his bed. He grabs a Monty plushie from his bed and clutches it close to his chest, attempting to squash the anxiety welling up inside of him.

The young wolf exhales softly from his nose while clutching the plushie even harder. He does have royal studies to attend to and he has upcoming training as a king, but even if he were to rule over this land, would he be able to handle it? The citizens of FrostFall hold not only his father in high regard but they have yet to meet him himself.

The poor prince is so lost in his thoughts that he is not even paying attention. He's sitting on his bed when the sound of the doorknob turning garnishes his attention, which catches him completely by surprise, followed by a muffled voice from behind the door, "Young Ace? Are you in there?"

"Aaahhh!" Alarmed by the sudden presence, Ace jumps up from his bed with the Monty plushie still in his grasp and he frantically searches for a spot to hide it. Unfortunately for him, he didn't have one but many plushies in his room. Without any further hesitation, the prince flings the plushie at the door, unaware of what's coming next.

The door opens and in steps one of the servant wolves, coming to fetch him. "Young prince, your fa--"

BUMP!

The black furred servant wolf is hit in the face with the plushie, which bounces directly off his muzzle. He appears unamused and unimpressed, staring directly at the prince with a golden-eyed scowl that said, 'Really?'. All poor Ace can do is offer a toothy smile in return along with nervous laughter while he sweatdrops, appearing embarrassed.

The servant is unamused, though a throbbing vein could be made out on his forehead. It is hard to make out due to his black fur but it is there to convey his annoyance. The servant wolf softens up and speaks again, "Young prince, your father wishes to see you. He's ordered me to fetch you so he may see you in his chambers."

Ace just stared at the servant for a bit before ambling over to the black furred wolf, claiming, "Father wants to see me? What for?" This he muttered to himself while coming towards the servant.

"He didn't tell me exactly but once you see him, he will fill you in." The servant replies while leaving the room. Ace follows behind, closing the door to his room afterwards and following the servant on his way to meet his father.

Francis stands poised with his hands clasped behind his back while staring out the window, overlooking the land he is ruling over. As king of FrostFall, his duties are a bit complicated. For one thing, there is the issue of diplomacy, where he has been working on establishing relations with neighboring lands and countries. However, his duties aren't always easy and it has nearly cost him his life before.

It happened during one session regarding his son's royal studies. Francis had taken Ace outside to give him another tour, traveling to another location to explore with him. During the exploration, father and son got separated in the marketplace when Ace caught sight of a red wolf assassin, recognizing him instantly from his history

lessons. After being attacked, his father intervened and took charge, placing his own life in danger. But after sustaining an injury from the knife-wielding assassin, Ace intervened and killed the assassin instantly, thus successfully rescuing his father and thwarting a major crisis in the process.

FLASHBACK

Francis often took his son traveling with him during his royal studies so that he could get a lay of the land. Sometimes these explorations would hint to a section of diplomacy, others would hint at other subjects, such as neighboring relations, treaties, and sometimes war tactics. Other times when Francis and Ace traveled about, it was for father-son time.

In this one particular instance, Ace followed behind Francis while brushing his hand lazily along some tall weeds during their journey. The brown wolf exhales a soft sigh out of boredom before finally speaking, "Father, where are we going now? We've pretty much covered the entire territory of FrostFall! I shouldn't have any more traveling studies to do now!"

Francis only grinned while keeping his hands clasped behind his back; his grin is hidden from Ace's view. He laughs softly while stopping and turning to face his son, pausing in his tracks. Reminding his son of what's at stake, Francis explains, "These travels are important to your knowledge and well-being, Ace. Since you're next in line to rule the kingdom, I'm doing everything I can to make sure it all runs smoothly. And yes, these travels are part of your experience so that you'll have a mental map of the entire territory."

The FrostFall King only widens his grin more, advancing closer to his son; the younger wolf just stared, unsure of how to feel over this. He's been bogged down in his studies so much he hardly has any time to relax and improve in his own hobbies. Yet instead of reprimanding his son, Francis only attempted to make things fun for him.

Ace blinks at his father's advancing and he makes a move to step back, anticipating backlash. At the same time, he wasn't sure what to expect. But Francis finely emphasizes his point across by tapping Ace's head, lightly poking the younger wolf while explaining, "Your mental map is here. That is your memory bank."

"But Dad, shouldn't a king at least carry a map with him at all times, regardless of whether he's outside or not?" Ace trails his blue eyes to the spot where Francis gently prodded him and the older wolf removed his hand.

Francis wanted to plainly answer his son's question out of what came to his own mind, but he started to think about what had just been asked. Ace had a point. FrostFall is a vast territory to rule over and relying on memory alone isn't always going to help. After considering how to answer his heir, Francis merely nods, proceeding to gently rock himself back and forth. The prince just arches an eyebrow in return, his tail slowly wagging while awaiting an answer from his father.

Francis stops his rocking before setting himself straight, being a stone in posture. While calmly staring at Ace, the king plainly admits and explains, "Hmm, you're right; you have a point, Ace. After all, memory isn't always the best reliance, especially in times of war and flight. Besides, it takes longer to consult a map when under stress than in relaxed instances."

Though the king and his son are in a serious session now, the older wolf does try to lighten up and liven the mood. He already removed his finger from his son's forehead but what he does next is unpredictable, something that Ace never anticipated or expected him to do.

Francis gently pokes Ace on the nose and a goofy grin settles on the father's face, "Boop!" And then he departs, scampering away while shouting, "Tag, you're it! Come on and catch me! Try and keep up!"

Shaking his head at his father's crazy antics, all Ace can do is comply. He isn't spoiled rotten or rich, as opposed to what some of the villagers think; he's just merely doing his duties. And this is another one of them. The younger wolf rushes off to keep up, not wanting to lose sight of his dad.

Francis is already half a mile away from his son from the head start and late reply, and he is certainly no spring wolf. But even though Francis is older, he still has plenty of energy left in him to be a child again. Unfortunately, this may have been the wrong time for this. Francis is so focused on looking back while running ahead that he doesn't even notice the brick wall looming ahead of him until it

is too late and by the time he regains his focus, he ends up eating hardened cement and splattering himself against the brick wall in full force...

WHACK!

...and peels off afterwards, staggering backwards and falling on his bottom with stars floating around his head. Groaning from the collision and his dazed state, he mutters, "Ooooooggghhhh, that's a bad idea... I'm paying for it later on."

"Dad!!!" While rushing to catch up to his father, the prince is left with a wide-open view of his own father's crazy antics and the result of it afterwards. He figures that Francis will be left temporarily out of commission for a while, yet he still rushes over to check on his father.

Upon reaching his dad, Ace kneels down to check on him, "Dad, are you alright?"

Francis snorts out his reply, "I'm dazed and battered, but other than that, I can manage... ugh, that was such a horrible idea!"

Frankly, Ace can only agree with him while grabbing him and lifting him up. "I'll say. I attest to that completely! Dad, I understand you're trying to liven up my royal studies but don't kill yourself over me!"

Francis merely scoffs at the thought and the request from his son. He turns to face his son, right as a trickle of blood begins to run down his muzzle from his right nostril. Ignoring the nosebleed, Francis claims, "As boring as you claimed your studies to be, I'd rather liven things up with you, even if it means causing injury - while unintentional, of course! Ha ha haaa!!!"

"But Dad, you're hurt! It's not worth injuring yourself over me!" Ace argues in return. He grows even more alarmed from noticing the blood running down his father's nose. The young prince wanted to get his father some immediate medical help, but at the time, they're basically in the middle of nowhere as it is and he is unfamiliar with the locals at this point.

Francis stares at Ace and reassures the prince, "I'm fine, really! Apart from a busted nose, nothing will stop me from having fun with you, even on your royal studies! So you can rest easy, my son; nothing will ever stop me from goofing around with you."

Ace just ends up chuckling at his father in response to his statement. The young wolf questions him, "Dad, when are you ever serious?"

Francis only smirked while snorting, "Whenever my life depends on it. And besides, I'm the king of this land so I can be serious when I want to be, no doubt about that. I have my own duties to attend to but a royal monarch can't always act all hard and stoic all the time. They need to lighten up and have fun; which I am doing with you."

Ace objects, "But Dad, monarchs don't always have to goof off every single time. They can't neglect their own duties to their kingdom!"

Laughing at his son, Francis jostles Ace's head while subtly reminding him, "Tell me again who it was that said their royal studies were boring."

This time, Ace turns red in the face while crying in heated exasperation, "Daaaadddd!!!"

"Now you see why I'm acting the way I am with you?" Francis smirked, relishing internally over his son's reaction upon having remembered and reminded who it was that said they were bored with their studies. The father snorts again, slightly inclining his nose upwards to divert the blood flow away, to which Ace quickly panics over.

"Dad, don't do that! You'll end up choking over your own blood!" Ace cries out in further protest.

"Is that so?" Francis merely grins evilly while giving his son a subtle wink to show how much he is playing along. Ace just smacks his own head in exasperation while shaking his head, sighing in derision.

The younger wolf relents with a sigh and he begins to march off on the search for something that can be used to help out his father. "You're something else, Dad, you know that? I'm gonna go search for a rag or something that you can use to wipe your nose."

Francis watches his son leave, though spots dance around in his vision while he becomes a bit loopy. He calls out to Ace, "Don't take too long or I'll be a dead wolf by the time you get back!"

Ace just sighed in response while exhaling through his nose. His father can really be a pain sometimes. But at least Francis is trying to lighten the mood with his jovial antics, even if it meant harm or injury in the process. Still, the paternal king would rather have his son happy and laughing during his royal studies rather than sulking and complaining over how bored he is over them.

Passing by the brick borders leading to the farmland, the young prince marches around in search of something he can find that will aid his father in his short recovery. Casting his own blue eyes around the farmland, he sets his gaze upon a black furred wolf tending to a piece of his farmland and he approaches him out of concern for his father.

"Excuse me sir, but do you have anything to spare that I can help my father with?" Ace beseeches upon approach. He waits for the other canine to finish while awaiting an answer in return.

No answer came yet, but then there is a pause, followed by the black furred wolf turning to face the young prince directly. His tail begins to wag slowly while he invites Ace to come along, "I believe I may have something for the two of you. Follow me."

Ace watches the black wolf march off and follows behind shortly after, keeping pace with him. While the prince follows behind the black furred farmer, a nagging sensation begins to well up in the back of Ace's mind. Yet, he shakes this off and ignores it, thinking nothing's wrong.

While the prince is preoccupied with his thoughts, the farmer wolf's voice catches him, snapping Ace out of his thought process. "You say here, I'll be right back."

"Hmm- Oh..." Once Ace snaps back to the present, that is when the wolf notices a storage shed before him and he couldn't help but observe how big it is. Well, big isn't really an understatement, but it was medium-sized. Still, the shed is impressive to observe, being the same color as the silo and all.

His ears perking up to the sound of rummaging coming from inside, Ace tunes his ears into the muttering coming from inside of the barn, unable to understand what this farmer is talking or muttering about. Still, Ace shakes it off once again, thinking nothing is wrong. However, a pungent scent wafts into the air, catching the canine's attention suddenly.

Tilting his head up into the air a bit, Ace wiggles his nose a little to take in more of the scent; it is then that he produces a sinking feeling in his chest upon recognizing the scent coming from the shed. He immediately covers his nose while thinking to himself, 'Is that poison or acid? This can't be real. I hope he doesn't try to kill my dad; I'll have to question the farmer about this.'

Covering his nose with his sleeve, Ace narrows his eyes in suspicion at this farmer and at how strong the smell is; the scent is so strong it makes his eyes water. What is the farmer doing?

The farmer exits the shed with a series of towels and a blanket. This is not what Ace asked for! Now the young prince will have to confront this guy not only about what he asked for, but also about that strange scent coming from inside of the storage shed.

Marching up to the farmer, Ace confronts him. "I requested something simple, not extravagant! Those simply won't do and they're too much! I just asked for something I could use to wipe off something, like a rag or something! And where is that strange, strong smell coming from?!"

The calm farmer seems to be unfazed by the now angry prince. The young wolf's outburst simply didn't do anything at all to improve matters. The farmer is only silent, just staring Ace down in return. Finally, he remarks, "I have a rag of some sort located somewhere in my shed. I'll go get that so I can send you on your merry way."

Leaving the prince behind to reel from the strange pungent scent invading the air, the farmer backtracks to his shed to obtain something more suitable for one to wipe something with. And he returns minutes later with a clean white towel in his hands. "This should do for you. Now, what do you need it for, if I may ask?"

"It's for my dad. Let's just say he had an accident and is having a nosebleed at the moment." Ace replies carefully, not wanting to go

out of terms with this little predicament. "He's waiting for me to bring something back, so if you could give me something that can help him wipe his nose, that would be appreciated."

The farmer replies, "I have so many items useful for that purpose, not a single one of them would do. Why couldn't you just bring him home and wipe his nose for him? Even I don't have any toilet paper for that purpose."

Ace takes this as an insult to his family. With his nose still covered by his sleeve, Ace retorts, "Oh really? So you expect my father to just wipe his own nose with his blank hand? Is that it? Or are you lying to me?"

It was the farmer who began chuckling this time, sending a slight chill down Ace's spine from his grotesque laughter. The black furred wolf then responds back, "I will find something useful and go with you. Then you can return to your castle with your father." Then once the wolf doubles back inside of his shed, he mumbles bitterly, "Rich people make me sick...!"

Ace's ears fly up in alarm from picking up that one single statement. But he didn't say anything. Instead, he remains silent, yet alert and wary. The longer this took, the more his suspicions increased. Just what is this guy planning?

The same black wolf emerges from his shed this time, carrying a series of small towels and handkerchiefs. As suspicious as this seems, Ace keeps his guard up. Instead of accepting the towels and handkerchiefs, Ace rejects them, claiming, "Actually, you can keep those. I'll find some other source of help for my father."

Turning away, Ace begins to head back, unaware of the precarious situation that he has just landed himself and possibly, his father, into. The recipient grows incensed and retreats to his shed, muttering, "That's it; I've had enough!"

While the young prince backtracks to meet his father, the black wolf emerges from his storage shed and begins to follow Ace at a distance to make sure he isn't detected. While trailing the prince, the black wolf keeps his hand in a fold of his garment for easy access.

So far, the trip back to the king is uneventful for now. And once Ace is out of range of that storage shed, he uncovers his nose to allow some fresh air into his lungs. What he doesn't know is that a very angry citizen is tailing him, ready to strike at any moment. That would have been the case had a small dagger not blitzed by his head seconds later, embedding itself into a tree a couple paces ahead.

"AAH!" The blade soars past him, inches from his right cheek and this makes him flinch and scream at the same time. But not only did the dagger sail harmlessly past him and embed itself into a tree up ahead, this also puts Ace in a fight or flight situation.

Ace knows that if he runs now, then not only will he be putting himself in danger but he will also put his father in danger as well. This is the last thing the wolf prince wanted to happen. Only thing that Ace can do is confront the black wolf.

Whirling around, Ace yells out, "Whoever you are, show yourself! I'm not afraid to go Karate on you!" The prince, now livid, raises his ears straight up while also keeping his eyes peeled for the same wolf that almost took off his head. He also instinctively wiggles his nose too, only to catch a familiar smell in the air.

Soon, Ace heads the rustling of bushes nearby and his eyes dart in that location, sharply off to his left. Thinking it is that same toxic smell from before, Ace draws his sleeve over his nose, but upon seeing the black wolf step out of hiding, the prince withdraws his sleeve away, uncovering his nose in the process, though it still wiggles upon smelling the air.

"You!!! It's you!!!" Ace forcefully points an accusing finger at the black wolf, completely livid at this attempted assassin. Though Ace is incensed, he is missing one thing: the wolf's name. The prince was more focused on his father's condition, thinking it would be smooth sailing. But he was dead wrong and is now faced with a life-or-death situation on his hands, one that can turn out either way.

"Hmph, I guess you are right on that." Seeing the smirk on the black wolf's muzzle only infuriates Ace even more; shedding his innocent persona, this black wolf is now showing his true colors, evident by a venomous, cold glare he is directing at Ace. Even worse, Ace notices multiple glints in the sunlight, probably more sharp weapons. But before Ace can speak, the black wolf finally introduces himself.

"Call me Escobar; your father has probably heard of me, no?" The black wolf smirks again at Ace after speaking, his smile growing dangerously wicked before falling into a cold, hard scowl.

Escobar... Escobar... where has Ace heard that name before? And then it hits him in realization! The prince's eyes in complete recognition of the figure!

"Ah! It's you! I remember you now!" Letting out a surprised exclaim, Ace once again points at the black wolf in recognition. His mind begins to run but all he could settle on is answers and memory for now.

"You... you were part of my father's royal guild of knights! Escobar, what happened for you to become an ordinary farmer?" Ace begins to sweat on the forehead; it is out of worry that he asks this question.

The black wolf picks up on the tone of worry in Ace's voice, but he isn't swayed. In fact, Escobar is unsympathetic. Huffing at the prince, the black wolf complains, "Your father demoted me which led to me being kicked out! I used to be a high-ranking knight, wanting to protect the king with my very heart and life, only to have it all ripped away!"

Demoted? That was new to the prince. But what could he have been brought down for? Ace presses Escobar for more information on what happened.

"What do you mean by 'ripped away', though? Even if you were in a lower position or rank, you were still a valuable asset to the king!" Ace challenged, hoping to reason with him.

Escobar then begins laughing; a dark laugh that even made Ace's neck hairs stand on end. The black wolf speaks again in a low, venomous voice, "Your father favored someone else over me, claiming I wasn't good enough for him!"

"Th-that's not true! My father loves you!" Ace felt his heart shatter at hearing Escobar speak and he tries again to reason with him.

"You're still a valuable asset to him!"

"Then tell me why he favors someone else more than those in the guild I used to be under." The black wolf demanded coldly, casting his steely eyes upon the prince.

Refusing to believe this, Ace falls silent at short, stopping himself from coming up with a smart retort that will infuriate the black wolf further. He then grows a bit disheartened, lightly shaking his head. The prince could hardly believe his ears, let alone the sharp curiosity pricking him to delve into this.

Crestfallen and confused, Ace gives the former knight a sympathetic gaze while lightly whispering, "Why do you believe my father held you in a lesser regard as opposed to everyone else? He still hung out with you as much as he did when you were at the top of the commanding chain!"

The young wolf feels his heart sink upon seeing another flash of metal, and he quickly sidesteps to his right to avoid another dagger screaming for him... the weapon ends up hitting a tree located further away...

THUNK!

Ace flinches upon hearing the faint thud of a second dagger embedding itself into another tree again. Though his own life is in danger, and possibly his dad's, Ace still felt pity for the black wolf. His ears lowering a bit out of pity, Ace attempts to reason with Escobar again, whispering, "Escobar, please listen to me! I'm not sure what my dad has done to you but I assure you, he doesn't believe you're not lower than anyone else; he still considers everyone the same and he still considers you a friend, even though I don't believe you two haven't talked much... anyway..."

Ace scratches the back of his head, growing more and more nervous by the moment. The black wolf kept his steely glare on the prince the whole time, but he hasn't made a move yet. Seeing this makes the prince even more nervous and glued to his spot; if he tries to even run, he already considers himself a dead man. So he bides his time trying to keep things under control.

The black wolf just keeps staring at the prince in stone cold silence for a moment, considering his next course of action. Then he speaks again, losing some of the cold edge in his voice, "You obviously

believe Francis will take me back? You are out of your mind, kid! Though I suppose it has been a long time since we talked, actually. All those letters I sent; why hasn't he received them?"

Ace blinks at the wolf before him and then scowls, confusing dawning his features. He hasn't known anything about the letters that were being sent, which leaves him completely unaware of the whole situation. He slowly shakes his head, "Letters? Unless someone must have been burning them, I don't know what to tell you about them."

Escobar hardens his gaze, his face still cold. "Then someone must be burning them or they were stolen before arrival. I have a heavy hunch it is the former, unless my letters are somewhat of high value to thieves and raiders."

Ace denied it at first, but he remains skeptical about Escobar's suspicions. "Hmm, I highly doubt that. But then again, I don't know anything about it since I don't keep up with it."

Call it as 'being oblivious' on Ace's part, but the young prince really didn't know. His father usually handles the mail and messages, although some of the servant wolves working under their command also handle the mail service as well. Still, whatever dealings with the mail service Ace has done, he hasn't thought anything of it, until now.

Scratching his head, Ace appears apologetic while waiting for an answer from the black wolf, or at least something out of him; any type of reaction will do, whether it prompts his 'fight or flight' response.

When Escobar says nothing, remaining silent, the prince turns a bit pink while assuming, "Well, I guess you're still going to keep in touch with my father, or at least try to, given the current situation."

"Hmph! Francis had better be keeping in touch with me, unless he entirely forgot." Escobar turns away from the prince, grumbling to himself, "I doubt he would forget; unless someone's been doing an inside job of keeping my letters away from him. I'm not wasting any more of your time. Go on back to your rich dad."

Ace watches distraught as the black wolf retreats back to his farmland, while also confused at the same time. He certainly had a few questions for his father when he returned. Speaking of..

Ace immediately doubles back to retreat out of the farmland, making a beeline right for his father. This confrontation with Escobar had dragged away more time than he wanted in assisting his father. Now he is uncertain if his father is remaining put at the same spot or left to go back to the palace; Francis wouldn't leave his son behind, now would he? Ace will just have to see when he gets there.

A few minutes pass by with Ace finally leaving the farmland. And once he arrives, he notices his father lying on his side, gazing up at the sky. Although Ace developed a quick scare from seeing his father on the ground, he is relieved to find him still alive. However, there is a tiny puddle of red where his nose is.

"Dad!? What have you been doing all this time!?" Seeing this throws Ace into a sort of panic, mixed with his heart sinking down his chest. Francis, however, assures him, "Son, I'm fine. Though I have yet to get my nose patched up, I will be fine."

"Waiting out here all day?" Ace crosses his arms while standing aside Francis, observing his condition. "You could have just gone back home and had someone patch you up!"

Francis raises a hand up to silence his son, objecting to the claim. "And leave my son all alone by himself? Nah, I wouldn't have that; I'm not allowing that."

"But Dad, you can't just lie out here all day with a bruised nose like that! What if your nose gets clogged up? What if you start gagging or puking?" The prince protests out of worry and concern for his father.

"Son, I will be fine, trust me!" The king reassures confidently, "Nothing of the sort will ever happen. Besides, I can handle myself out here."

Eventually, Ace gives up; there seems to be no reasoning with his father. Unless there is an alternative solution the two can come up with together.

Eventually with no other options left, Francis eventually rises up and departs to head back for the home, with Ace following behind.

The two royal monarchs eventually leave the farmlands and return back to civilization, with Francis occasionally shaking his head. This worries Ace, who assumes, "Dad, you're gonna faint."

Francis snorts in derision, holding a hand up to his son to reject his worries. Briefly, the king tilts his head up and straightens himself, assuring his son, "Nah, I'm not gonna faint, Ace. The bleeding had stopped a while ago. I do feel a bit loopy though."

Ace's eyes buck a bit at his father's comment. The younger wolf rushes to cut his father off from traveling, inspecting him briefly. Though Francis wasn't expecting his son to suddenly cut off his current line of travel just to inspect him up close and personal. This really catches Francis by surprise, leading him to comment, "You were never this concerned about me ever since I went missing that time during one of our military campaigns."

When the duo begin walking again, Francis rebuffs the comment his son made, claiming, "Hey! It's not my fault those raiders took me captive! We put up a good fight until they overpowered me! All it took was a sneak surprise attack and those thugs were dead! If it wasn't for your quick timing and spreading the news about me missing, I wouldn't be here today!"

Ace just sighs inwardly, crossing his arms again. The younger prince implies, "I was not going to sit around all day and stand idle; I knew what I had to do! I'm still happy that you're still around and not a casualty."

The king teases in return, "What's that supposed to mean? You actually love me and do not want me dead?" Seeing the inquisitive stare on his son's face, Francis assures him, "I'm joking, son! Really though, you need to lighten up, Ace. How am I going to make your royal studies fun if you're all hard and rigid all the time?"

The prince blinks at Francis, stumbling and dismayed, "What do you mean 'hard and rigid all the time'? I am not that!"

"A simple nosebleed is nothing to panic over; they simply go away after a few minutes." Francis reasons calmly and patiently with the

younger prince. Then he adds, "You panic way too much, and over the littlest things now."

"I do not..." Ace trails off suddenly, hitting a roadblock in his thought process. Then he thought about it for a bit in stormy silence. Maybe his father is right; Ace had good reason to be jumpy, yet it is only a minor issue. Then there was the earlier confrontation with the former knight, Escobar. Wait, Escobar...

At that very moment, the prince stiffens up, completely rock solid. Francis pauses to observe, tapping his shoulder lightly. "Ace, is there something wrong?"

The prince remains silent for a moment until he decides to break the news to his father. He reveals, "Dad, does the name 'Escobar' ring a bell to you?"

Now it was Francis' turn to freeze. The king stiffens like a thick board, becoming frozen in place. Yet, he breathes out in a hushed whisper, "What did you just say?"

Ace repeats himself, unaware of the growing tension inside of his father. "I said 'Escobar'. Why? Is there something I don't know?"

It takes all of Francis' self-control not to lose his composure in front of his son. Yet, he smacks his own forehead, rubbing his hand downwards before sighing heavily. The king then softly commands, "Let's just head back to the castle. I'll explain when we get there."

"Okay...?" Though Ace was clearly expecting his father to combust at any moment, the younger wolf just arches an eyebrow at him, wondering about the low tone; he's going to hear the full story once they return to the royal castle.

Upon reaching civilization, the royal pair enter the city district of FrostFall; gone are the rolling farmlands; the scenery now is replaced by housing units. Here, there are usually townsfolk and other villagers wandering about in their daily lives with some having set up shops in the area to sell their merchandise.

While setting foot along the village, Francis and Ace venture along one of the main streets. A few villagers notice the royal duo and keep on going, paying no heed to them. Others stop to bow and pay

their respects, some of them leaving the prince feeling red in the face at times. The young prince wasn't used to this sort of thing.

While Francis just gives a passing wave while walking by, Ace just sticks close to him, not wanting to be separated and engulfed in a crowd. However, one of these villagers appears suspicious to the young prince.

The lone figure is a red wolf, his golden eyes fixed on the king and his son while he is stationary by one of the merchant shops. When the red wolf and the prince lock eyes, the former narrows his eyes at the latter, brainstorming a plan into his mind. He is going to try to get rid of the king! Yet to brazenly dart out and make a frontal attack is suicide. So, to make sure his plan is enacted without a hitch, the red wolf will have to play it cool, take interest, try and bond with them. Then when the moment is right, he will make his assassination attempt.

Ace thought nothing of the red wolf at first, remembering when he first saw the figure. It was when he was younger and exploring with his father. Now since he is older and more alert, also having met the red wolf personally, Ace has been seeing this suspicious guy non-stop in the city. It's not the various sightings making him suspicious; it's the actions.

Upon observing the red wolf, the wolf prince remains on high alert. It's almost as if the two had already known each other before from past confrontation.

Hoping to monitor the suspicious red wolf, Ace withdraws privately to an alleyway, away from the crowds and his unsuspecting father. Cautiously, the wolf prince stays alert while attempting to stay in the vicinity where he can keep this strange character within viewing range.

Ace attempts to keep a close eye on the target he is monitoring while also avoiding getting sidetracked. He also has his father to think about too. Speaking of which..

"Ace!! Where are ya??!!" Ace's ears go straight up to his father's calling out for him, yet the prince only glances over his shoulder in a disapproving manner, muttering to himself, "Not now Dad, I'm on a mission!"

While Ace is more focused on his mission, Francis begins to increase his focus on locating his son, unaware of the prince and his secret mission. In reality, the king is actually completely unaware of an assassination attempt on him that is brewing in this very location. Francis didn't know it yet but a sneaky assassin is plotting to put him six feet under. But his son immediately picked up on it, noticing the strange behavior from the guy. While Ace is in the process of dealing with the threat, Francis is trying to locate his son.

Along the way, Ace is drawing ever closer to tracking down the runaway culprit. However, the red wolf he's tracking notices him and draws back, hiding behind a wall. If he can't kill the king, then his son will have to do for the time being.

Meanwhile, Ace remains on the prowl, unaware that his target has already picked up on his presence nearby. Before the young prince is aware of his target, it's too late.

Right as Ace steps out into the open, the young prince is immediately tackled to the ground from behind by the red wolf assailant.

"Gotcha!" Ace and his assailant engage in a wrestling / grappling fight with one trying to pin the other to the ground or against the wall. While this is happening, an oblivious Francis is still searching for his son when he begins to sense something isn't right.

What starts out as a brisk walk gradually turns into a fast run with Francis scrambling to find his son. But due to the scent trail Ace left behind, the king is able to pick this up... along with another mysterious scent. Upon picking up this mysterious scent with his nose, Francis' eyes inflate in panic with a frightening realization.

Francis breaks into a run in a desperate effort to reach his son, who is highly in trouble. The scent that Francis tracked is eerily familiar and recognizable, belonging to a former assassin who tried to kill him in the past. What led him to come back, Francis may never know, but now this guy wants dibs on his son. Not happening!

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"So you came back after all this time for what?? Why are you so hellbent on killing my father??" Not only is this question posed by

Ace himself in demanding to know why this particular assassin wants to destroy him and his father, but the two are now circling each other, ready to fight.

The red wolf grins subtly and eerily at Ace while whispering, "Such a desire to go on with the downfall of Frostfall's #1 king will send the land into complete chaos like never before! Of course, I was sent by the Gilded Assassination Squad to deal with him. Your father's head will make one rich. But of course, the stupid mutt was nowhere to be found! Guess the ugly prince will have to do!"

Watching his assailant cackle evilly, Ace snarls in anger, "So you've been after my father this whole time?! All for what?? Money? Power? Prestige?? What???"

"That is not your place to know and none of your business, pup! Once I'm finished with you, then I'll take down your king! You can't stop me!" The red furred assassin smugly grins at the wolf prince, confident of victory. That is until a familiar voice joins the conversation. "Care to challenge me, Hamil? I beg to differ."

Hearing his father's voice, Ace straightens up and backs out, only to pale in the face upon noticing the demonic, sinister glint in Hamil's eyes. The red wolf assassin cackles menacingly, giving Francis a cold, menacing glare. Francis, undeterred, matches the assassin with a glare of his own, though his expression is more serious and angry.

While staring the assassin down, Francis pushes his son behind him and demands, "Why are you here in the first place? If you come here just to kill me, you're digging yourself a really big hole here."

"Hmph! We'll see about that! Once I take you down, I will finally have my reward and throw this entire state into anarchy!" The red wolf exclaimed gleefully.

When Ace attempts to join the fight, Francis whirls to reason with him, "Son, get back! You have absolutely no idea how much trouble this guy is!"

Ace does as instructed, slinking back to spare some room while observing the two men before him. But somewhere along the line, he couldn't help but gather a sinking feeling in his gut, sensing that something may be wrong down the line.

"So you're the one who's been coming down here, causing us all the trouble in FrostFall." Francis acknowledges the assassin in an accusingly, yet relaxed fashion. The king removes his crown and tosses it behind his back to his son, before shedding his robe. Challenging the assassin to a fistfight, the king declares, "Well then, if it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get!!"

"Bring it on, tough guy! I will personally enjoy ripping you apart! And then I will move on to your little spawn!!" The assassin challenges in return.

**(BGM: Techno - Chronos [The Need For Speed OST])**

The wolves begin circling each other slowly, leaving Ace an innocent bystander who is caught in the crosshairs to an extent. He is left holding his father's crown and royal robe, helplessly observing the two wolves duke it out between each other. No amount of pleading will work in this case, but the young prince isn't just going to stand by and watch his father be beaten to a bloody pulp. For now, Ace waits and bides his time for the moment to jump in, anticipating a bad fight.

'Alright Dad, don't screw this up! If you die, I don't think I'll be able to cope with leading FrostFall all by myself! I'd rather jump into the fight rather than watch him be slain!' Ace complained internally, keeping a close eye on the fight.

The two wolves then charge at each other, with a helpless Ace spectating where they begin trading blows with one another, some being deflected, some connected. The blows that do connect are split between the two, though Francis is able to hold his own better than the assassin.

"You're out here, coming through MY land and terrorizing MY people! What's wrong with you?? Have you no shame??" The king barked while trading blows with the assassin. "You should have been executed on the spot a long time ago!"

"Oh really?? You think that would have stopped my legacy??" The assassin fought back, "The entire guild will be on your hide if you so much as break one of my limbs! It will be much more fun breaking

you apart and moving on to your twisted son! Then I will throw this world into chaos and anarchy!!"

Hearing the assassin's cackling and his mad ranting throws Francis in a further rage. But during the fight, Francis suddenly has a thought, and he grins in a smug manner while dodging and circling the red wolf. The king wolf claims, "Hamil, if you kill me and my son, you have an entire nation to deal with in taking turns to rip you apart."

Hamil scoffs, "Please! No one cares whether the king or his son lives or dies! I'll make sure of that!" The red wolf assassin crouches and leaps at Francis, going for a tackle to pin the king to the ground. Francis manages to roll away, before kicking Hamil away.

Francis is about to continue when a sudden rush of air disturbs his fur around his left side. "What the- Oh no - you're bringing knives to a fistfight? You're gonna cheat your way out of this? Can't handle taking a beating like a man, huh?" Francis notices the rush of air and pales slightly upon discovering a dagger embedded in one of the walls behind him. Then a hot searing pain concentrates along his right shoulder from a second dagger being thrown, slicing along his shoulder.

"Errrgghhh!!" Grunting in pain, Francis clutches his shoulder despite his fighting spirit not being extinguished. His son, Ace, is left watching in panic from his father reeling from his fresh wound. But Francis isn't done yet - not by a long shot.

"You think you can keep me down?? Think again!! I'm not quitting yet!!" Francis barks defiantly. He fails to notice a third hidden dagger in Hamil's sleeve, obscured from Francis' vision. And before the two men can jump into the fray again...

"!!!" Francis is tackled aside by his son following a knife throw. Groaning from his shoulder wound, Francis is lifted up by his son where the king demands, "Son, what do you think you're doing?? This is my fight!!!"

"Dad, aren't you forgetting I just saved you from being decapitated just now??" Ace pointed out, "I will not watch you die!" Sensing another knife throw, Ace slinks in front of his father, whose eyes become dinner plates, where the young prince intercepts and promptly grabs the handle of a fourth knife, inches from the two. The prince

immediately pitches and launches it back at the assassin where a screech and a blood-curdling scream is heard.

Having returned the intercepted knife back to its sender, Ace cracks his knuckles and saunters menacingly towards the downed assassin, passing some warning advice to his father, "Stand back and let your son handle this, Dad! Don't aggravate yourself any further!"

"You little punk!!! Look at what you did to me!! You destroyed my head fur - now I will destroy you!!" Hamil savagely snaps at the prince for returning his hidden weapon, causing major damage to the right side of his head. A gash is the result of the returned blade whereas Ace intends to do the assassin in for good.

The moment Hamil and Ace assume fighting stances is the moment Francis notices his son's fighting posture. He inwardly notes, 'So he has been observing and practicing Karate like me... let's hope it lasts!!'

The moment Hamil leaps at Ace, the prince jumps with a roundhouse kick aimed for the head. Francis can only watch and step back to avoid the barrelling red wolf sailing past him, crashing headfirst into the wall behind him. He averts and closes his eyes right as the impact lands and once the dust settles, the wounded king opens his eyes to see the assassin, now dead, lying on the floor - there is minor damage on the brick wall but massive damage to Hamil's head, which led to his immediate demise.

Francis is absolutely stunned speechless with his son's successful rescue attempt. He notices Ace marching up to him where the prince remarks, "You can thank me later, Dad. Now let's go get that shoulder wound fixed."

Unable to process what just happened, Francis is left being dragged away by the wrist from his own son, who takes his father back into the town square in search of a doctor.

#### *END OF FLASHBACK*

Back to the present, Francis laughs gingerly while caressing his wrists. "Yep, that's my boy! Hard to say he's surprised me more than once on multiple occasions!"

"Heh heh heh... yep, I have my son to thank for saving my life back then, and I have him to thank for being there." Francis continues his monologue when an ear twitch alerts him to movement nearby, followed by the sound of a door creaking behind him. Francis turns around to see the door opening up with a servant wolf popping in, followed by the prince himself marching inside and giving a head nod in the servant's direction. The servant returns the gesture, bidding farewell to Ace, "Young prince, have fun with your father and enjoy your session!"

"Thank you, sire!" Ace waves back to the servant wolf, watching him depart. And once father and son are alone, Ace turns to his father and marches up to him, hugging him in greeting. "Hello, Dad!"

Francis hugs his son in return, greeting the wolf prince, "Hello to you too, son. How is my little prince?" Francis ruffles his son's head upon asking about how he is doing.

Ace lets his father caress his head before playfully biting and nipping at his father's wrist, causing him to draw back and poke his nose, "No! Down, boy!"

Ace giggles and playfully nips at his father's finger, causing Francis to draw back. The king wolf steps aside and waltzes back to stand before the window, gazing out at the land before him. His hands clasped behind his back, Francis mentions, "Time to get serious, Ace. You know what time it is now, don't you?"

"But Dad, you never ruined a fun moment between us! Why now??" Ace whines in protest. His posture droops a little to show his deflated state, though Francis believed otherwise. Exhaling softly through his nose, the king wolf turns away from the window, facing his son and marches up to him, a wistful, reminiscent gaze in his eyes.

Francis smiles and relates, "Son, I've been thinking - or reflecting on that matter - about what happened that fateful day that assassin attacked us both. And Ace, I couldn't thank you enough for saving my hide back then."

Ace smiles back at his father and assures him, "Dad, you were injured! I was just doing a favor! A shoulder wound isn't much but if you kept going, it would have gotten worse."

Francis exhales and deflates a little mirthlessly breathing a small "Yeah...". But then he perks up, turning his attention back to the panoramic view outside of his window. Upon getting an idea popped into his head, Francis turns back to his son, "Hey Ace, why don't we head outside this time for some fresh air? It could help with your royal training."

"Yeah, why not?" Too bad the prince is left wondering where this is going. What kind of trick does his father have up his sleeve this time? Only time will tell once they get outside.

When the two wolves are escorted outside the royal grounds, the king and prince bid the servant wolves farewell and move on. With father and son moving on into the palace garden, Francis leads his son along a pathway that contains flowers on both sides. Upon a further short journey, the father and son duo come across a stone pillar section where Francis takes a seat on one of the sections, directly facing his son.

"Come on Ace, sit. I figured we could have a little chat between ourselves." Francis spreads a palm out in gesture to a stone pillar next to him, inviting his son to sit next to him.

Hopping over to sit next to his father, Ace plops down on the stone pillar, though he has a bit of discomfort from the hard, rocky surface. Still, he gently kicks his legs out while seated next to the king. Wondering what he's got to talk about, Ace wonders, "So what did you want to talk to me about? We wouldn't be out here if you had nothing to talk about unless it's something very important."

Francis exhales through his nose when he picks up his son speaking on something different. He snaps his gaze towards his son, insisting on hearing what Ace had to say. "Hmm? Can you repeat what you said? I was zoning out there."

Ace repeats himself, "You wouldn't have brought me outside to this part of the royal palace unless it was something very important. What were you thinking about?"

"Your mother." Ace stares at Francis with a mildly heated glare, thinking his father is simply joking and pulling his finger after growing a second head. However, Francis explains, "I've been thinking



about your mother just now - how proud she would be of you, had you two gotten along better. Gosh, I miss her."

Ace groans, "You brought me all the way out here to talk about *her*?? Aww man!! I thought it was something more important than that!"

Francis purses his lips in an attempt to bite his tongue. There is that underlying urge to lash out but the king refrains from outright breaking his son down. However, Francis simply reminds Ace while explaining in a calm manner, "Ace, I never taught you or your mother to disrespect or hate one another. I love you both and I wanted the best for both of you - I wanted both of you, no - I was *hoping* both of you would get along. I don't know what it was, but it seemed to me like both of you hate each other. And I can't figure out why."

Ace shrugs and shakes his head, "It's rather stupid if you tell me, but it was all over some stupid hierarchy thing. Just because I'm part dragon doesn't mean I'm higher than her; I'm still her son! I don't get what drove her up the rails to go so ballistic over a tiny matter!"

Francis sighs, leaning over to grab his son in a side hug. He could already pick up on the disappointment in Ace's tone, the same way Francis himself is feeling regarding his deceased wife. The king mentions, "Must be some sort of superiority complex. She believed she was in danger of being below you, so she resented you for that. And when she had cancer, it all went downhill from there. Ace, I love you, and I would never let anything bad happen to you. I've always wanted kids, and here I am now, with a son by my side."

Ace blushes, leaning into the initial side hug to return the gesture. Turning red in the face and ears, the prince giggles, "You're flattering me! Stop flattering me, Dad! I love you too but without all the flattering! I don't understand what the big deal was anyway! Koda and I were little at the time; young and dumb, y'know!"

"Minus the 'dumb' part, I'm sure of." Francis chuckles in return, "More like 'young and inexperienced' in your case. And speaking of Koda, have you heard from him, at all lately? I remember you presenting him to me when you two were younger. But that was such a long time ago! I wonder how he's doing..."

"Yeah, me too. I hope he's alright." Ace sighed, kicking his legs out again. He pauses and turns serious, "I haven't heard from him ever since. Maybe I should write a letter - or organize a search party for him. Koda's not only a special friend of mine but he's also a special part of FrostFall as a whole."

Francis smirks and eyeballs his son, hinting at what his son is planning. He asserts gruffly, "You're just saying that to flatter me in hopes of me saying 'yes' aren't you? But I don't mind one bit! I'll even join the search, myself! I'll help you, Ace!"

"No!!! This is something I should handle on my own!" Ace interjects in protest. The prince insists, "The less people there are, the better chance there will be at avoiding suspicion, especially when there are still enemies around that still want our heads on a platter or a pike!"

"All the more reason to increase security and hire bodyguards to assist you." Francis firmly points out. The king also insists, "Don't worry about me, Ace. I can handle myself and I will still help you. But since this is a special mission in your heart, then I won't stop you. Only know that you have my full support and backing, even if you can't stand my help or my presence at times." The king said this last part as a joking remark.

The coloring on Ace's face turns red once more from being flabbergasted. In response to his father's joking crack, Ace interjects, "But Dad, I don't hate you! I love you very much! That is very true! But this decision I am leaving up to you if you personally want to come out and help me. Dad, if we find Koda, he'll be a valuable asset to our army."

"Someone's playing favorites!" Francis jokes in a singsong manner. He boops his son on the nose once more in a light, heartfelt manner while playing along, laughing silently to himself from watching Ace heat up again.

"Dad, come on! I'm serious! He'll be a valuable part of our military! Honest!" Ace reasons again, which falls on deaf ears.

Unable to hold back a subtle smirk, Francis asserts teasingly, "You're just saying that because not only is Koda your childhood

friend, you place him in high regard over the rest of the troops in FrostFall's army."

Ace lets out a startled gasp and pouts, "That's not true! I do not consider Koda as a favorite in the military. He's special like everyone else!"

"Then why do you talk about him more and only him? Huh? Can you answer that, son?" Francis challenged, his laughter welling up inside of him.

The prince is left speechless, unable to answer. The king had him stumped there. Rendered unable to answer, the prince remains speechless, his mouth ajar.

Francis nudges and squeezes his son in another side hug before explaining to him, "Son, look, I understand this request is very important and special to you and I am not knocking that in any way. You have my full, honest permission to go ahead with the special rescue operation. Just know that I will be personally seeing to it too and you have my full support as always. If we do manage to rescue your friend, then maybe we can get to know each other more and make him a real military man."

After listening to what his father said and processing the information, the prince finally draws a breath and hugs his father tenderly, the two having reached a mutual agreement. "Thanks Dad. We can always count on each other."

"Yeah. Now come on, let's go back inside. I can make us both something to eat to pass the time." Francis stands up and waves for his son to come along, in which the prince promptly obeys. Together, the two wolf monarchs head back to the castle where they can spend the rest of their day together, plotting out the special rescue campaign.