

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART NINE

8th Day of the Verdant Growths, 20 AoE

It wasn't home. Not anymore.

Tobias paused as he gazed up from the streets of Sanwell to the castle he'd grown up in. It'd gnawed at him for the last few weeks, ever since his last confrontation with William. The castle. Sanwell. All of Ratholarin. It wasn't really Tobias' home. Or at least, it wasn't to be his home for long.

Pride at the success of their mission did little to ease the ache in his chest, or the haze in the prince's mind. A pair of kingsblades met him at the garrison to escort him, but Tobias barely noticed their presence. His mind was already elsewhere. Ingsbren. Sarina. A fresh start, far away. Goodness knew the tiger needed one, right then more than ever.

It wasn't until he entered the castle proper and made his way down the main hall that Tobias realised something was amiss. He glanced back at his escorts, but a quick look over them both revealed that he knew neither of them. That alone was odd; Tobias was familiar with almost every one of the kingsblades. Still, more could have been added to the ranks. It could be explained away.

It was the servants, he realised. More than a few of them wouldn't even look at him. The pawful that he noticed skittering about looked to be the worse for wear. A mouse girl wore bruises on her bare arms. A stocky goat's neck bore a fresh, angry scar. At first it seemed that the vixen he saw being dressed down by a guard in the corner was intact, but as he drew closer and moved past her, a shiver of horror ran through him at her silence. It wasn't the silence of chastisement. Her tongue was *gone*.

Something was very, very wrong.

He thought, briefly, of asking the kingsblades but decided against it. The throne room wasn't far, and he'd been informed that he was expected to present himself immediately. His father would explain it all, the tiger reasoned. There had to be a justification for these horrors. Something had to have happened while Tobias was away, and yet he couldn't help the shiver that shook him as he lingered, one paw on the door to the throne room.

When he pushed the door open however, it became clear what had happened. At least, it became clear in part. More soldiers than normal lined the throne room, armed with bows that each and every one of them clutched in anticipation of trouble. The curtains were drawn across the windows, leaving the throne room lit only by a series of oil lanterns. It was dark, but not so dark that he couldn't make out the elaborate robes of two members of the merchant's guild before the thrones. Zane, the wolf's silhouette familiar beside his father's throne.

His father was *not* in the throne. A smaller figure sat in his place, and the shiver within Tobias turned to frost as he swallowed and made his way forward. As he drew closer, he began

to overhear the terse words exchanged by the petitioners. "... due respect, such actions will lead to a loss of trust in the guild."

"That sounds like a problem for the guild." The voice was Fredrick's. It was bored, and it reached Tobias' ears as the prince – he *was* still just a prince, wasn't he? – reclined in the throne. "Your guild has been allowed to operate by the generosity of the throne for a long, long time."

"And we are most grateful, my prince." Both merchants bowed their heads deep.

"I do not want your gratitude. I want what the crown is owed." Fredrick lifted his head a little higher and looked past the merchants, as if only then finally spotting Tobias. He paused for a moment as a frown touched his face, before he snapped his fingers. "You have heard my deep concerns, as well as my... request. I suggest you take both back to your council and decide if you wish to continue to operate within our demesne. Let it not take too long."

Tobias' ears flicked back as he looked up at Zane. The wolf's face was typically unreadable; he'd find no information there. The merchants, obviously not happy with what was happening, exchanged a quick glance before they knelt before the throne. "We will endeavour not to displease you, my prince."

"Further." They both lifted their heads as Tobias paused a few paces behind them. Clearly they looked confused, because Fredrick sighed and rolled his eyes. "You will endeavour not to displease me *further*."

The rightmost of the merchants cleared his throat and bowed his head deeper. "Yes, my prince, of course. We are grateful for your patience and your wisdom." The figure turned to his companion and nodded. "Come now, Anders."

Fredrick's attention had already left them; his eyes locked firmly on Tobias. Tobias held his stare as the merchants turned away to leave, though they both recoiled when they found themselves all but bumping into Tobias. "Oh! I... beg your pardon, my prince."

"No apology is necessary. Please." The tiger stepped aside and waved them past, though his eyes never left Fredrick. He remained silent as the merchants nodded their thanks to him, and held his tongue a few moments longer. His hearing wasn't as keen as some, but he'd caught the charged words between the merchants and Fredrick from quite the distance. He didn't want to make that same mistake.

When finally enough time – and distance – had passed, Tobias strode forward and clasped his paws behind his back. "Brother."

"The correct form of address is, 'your majesty.'" Fredrick's eyes narrowed. "You had best learn quickly. I will not forgive the mistake a second time."

Tobias swallowed hard against the bile that rose in his throat. The merchants had called him a prince, so... this had to just be posturing. Fredrick's ego. "If father were dead, I would have heard. So you are, therefore, not king."

Fredrick bristled, but he snapped his fingers and waved at Zane. The kingsblade's muzzle twisted in a short-lived expression of irritation, but he nonetheless stepped forward. "My prince. Your father has taken ill; the Pure Snow caught him in a moment of poorer health."

He took a long, slow breath as he nodded back to Fredrick. “He has named Fredrick regent until such time as he is well enough to resume his duties.”

Tobias glared at Fredrick. Why had he not received word of such a thing? “I was not informed.”

The quirk of Fredrick’s eyebrow and the flick of his ear told Tobias the whole story, even if his thin smile and soft words didn’t. “No? I was certain to send a missive to Caris for you. Mayhaps they were waylaid; the road is ever so dangerous.”

It wouldn’t do to snap back or level an accusation, and so Tobias bit his tongue. Now that he was closer, he could more clearly see that Zane’s discomfort with the situation was considerably greater than he’d first thought. The wolf stepped back into his usual position beside the throne, but there was a tautness to his features and his ears seemed perpetually pinned back. “I will visit him later. Ensure that-”

“He has asked to be left undisturbed.” Fredrick leaned back in the throne again as one paw lazily stroked at an armrest. “Mother sits by his side, but he wishes no one else. Save for me, of course, to keep him abreast of the latest news.” He tilted his head up. “If you’ve a message for him, by all means tell me. I will do my best to pass it on.”

There was no reason to believe that, but Tobias offered Fredrick a little smile of his own in turn. He caught the twinkle in Fredrick’s eye; his brother knew that *Tobias* knew he had no intention of doing any such thing. “In that case, to whom am I to report?”

“To me, of course. As regent, I must be informed as to the actions of our army.” He beckoned lazily at Tobias with a single paw. “I see you seem to have survived intact, though you desperately are in need of a bath. Be grateful I do not count your offending odour as insult.”

“Your grace is the stuff of legend, Fredrick.” Tobias folded his arms, though he did take a quick sniff at himself as he glanced aside. Perhaps he’d just grown used to the scent while on the march. If the smell bothered his brother as much as his informality, so much the better. “The shaman has been killed.”

For the first time since he’d arrived, Tobias saw a genuine smile touch Fredrick’s face. He sat up a little higher on the throne and clapped his paws together. “Magnificent news. And the Carisi?”

Tobias clenched his jaw to keep his expression from souring. “A grand total of almost twelve hundred Carisi were involved in the efforts to restore Caris to their control. We have a number of prisoners captured alive, and one in particular that I believe will be of particular use.”

“I will assign one of our best to break them.” Fredrick nodded once, and that time Tobias couldn’t keep the scowl from showing on his face. “You disapprove? And how many soldiers did we sacrifice in order to attend this betrayal?”

The younger prince worked his jaw from side to side as Zane’s ears perked up. “Our final count came to roughly four hundred and fifty, in the wake of a surprise attack.” He paused as Fredrick frowned, and turned instead to Zane. “William acquitted himself superbly; he saved my life when the shaman had me cornered. He is in excellent health, and completely unharmed by the battle.”

Zane's stoic expression broke and softened as he smiled. He nodded silently, but his features had settled back into place by the time Fredrick looked over at him. The prince frowned, but turned back to Tobias a moment later. "Good. He did his job, then. Let us not laud brutes such as our common soldiers any more than is required."

"This is not father's attitude toward such things." Tobias folded his arms again. Would that Fredrick had not become such a monstrous example of petulance as he'd grown. "In accordance with his wishes on these matters and as he discussed with me before I left, I have already singled out some exceptional soldiers for commendation and reward."

Fredrick's sigh was exaggerated and dramatic. "No."

"No?" Tobias blinked and glared. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean no. There will be no commendations. There will be no rewards." The prince leaned forward on his throne and lay his paws down along his legs. "Do you know who I was speaking to when you arrived? Anders and Karoun of the Sanwell Merchants Guild. And do you know just how many crowns we are *owed* by the guild?"

Tobias said nothing in response. It turned out to be the right idea, as Fredrick sniffed derisively and shook his head. "They like to parade about and operate under the assumption that they have our favour; that we allow them to earn so much coin from our people and expect nothing in return. Now they recruit rebels and fund treasonous efforts and hide behind their coffers." Fredrick squeezed tight at his knees. "Father, grandfather... they have allowed this behaviour for far too long. It will not continue under me."

"It is not under you. It is, still, under *father*, and you are undermining his instruction." Tobias narrowed his eyes as Fredrick sighed again. "The instruction to me before I left was to keep an eye out for exceptional individuals. *He* expects them to be rewarded, Fredrick."

"Then when I next speak to him, I will present your feelings to him and see just who precisely he decides to agree with." He sniffed again and shook his head. "Your little *William*, of course, will be excluded from any such list."

Tobias opened his muzzle to object, but Zane beat him to it. "With all due respect, if a soldier saves the life of a member of the royal family, it is more than good form and generosity to reward them. It encourages others to be willing to do the same in future, to keep them – to keep *you* – safe."

"Was your opinion solicited, kingsblade?" The words were little more than a growl as Fredrick's head snapped to the side. "I know you claim the Carisi brat as your son, Zane. Are perhaps your feelings clouding your mind on this matter? Do you, perchance, wish to give him undue or unfair favour?" His eyes narrowed as Zane began to growl. "Perhaps you are unfit to stand at my side if you are unable to separate your duty from your personal feelings."

"You sit there, safe and unmolested, because my duty rests above all else." Despite the growl, Zane's voice was even. Calm, almost. Tobias didn't know how the kingsblade did it.

Fredrick wasn't done, though. "See to it you remember that. I will not remind you again, nor will I allow you to speak out of turn like this again." He turned back to Tobias without waiting for a response, and when he did his smile had turned cruel. "In fact... how certain are

you that father will side with you? That he wishes these soldiers to be credited above their station?”

“Absolutely.” Tobias’ muzzle twitched with his snarl. What game was Fredrick playing at?

“Then provide me a list. Give me a list of the soldiers to whom you have already accorded honours and I will take it to father.” Fredrick’s smile grew. “I will even encourage it. Advocate for them. And all you need to do...” His smile slipped. “... is to remove William’s name from the list.”

Tobias balked immediately. “He saved my life! He is *most* deserving of them all, and I must insist that-”

“You will insist nothing. The only thing that *wretch* deserves is my knife in his throat.” Fredrick’s paws curled into fists and slammed down on the armrests of the throne. “I have not forgotten his slights, nor yours. My memory is long, Tobias, and I will not forget what he has done.”

As he ground his teeth, Tobias weighed his options. He could push the issue, of course. If he managed to speak to his father, it was possible that Fredrick would be overruled. Tobias had been acting on Eric’s authority; the authority of a king, not a regent. The awards had already been issued on that authority.

On the other paw, Fredrick enjoyed that full authority while their father was recovering from whatever had happened. If he wanted to keep Tobias well away from their father, it was entirely possible that he could do it. If Fredrick wanted to, he could do almost anything. It was a chilling taste of what life was going to be like if Tobias’ father succumbed to whatever illness plagued him.

And besides, there were more soldiers than just William who deserved commendation. If he pushed the issue and failed to reach his father – or if he did and Eric still sided with Fredrick’s assessment of the situation – then *everyone* would lose the rewards that they were due for their exceptional service. Could he risk that all just for William’s commendation?

He sighed at last. William would have to understand. “I will assemble an... updated list. You will have it by the end of the day to present to father.”

“Excellent.” Fredrick sat back up again, though his expression hadn’t warmed in the least. “Now, I have important work to attend to. You are dismissed.” He turned toward the wolf at his side and nodded. “As are you, Zane. Please send Shannon in after you to take your place.”

“As you wish, my prince.” Zane bowed low, though Tobias’ was only as deep as he needed. He turned away before Fredrick could meet his gaze, and made for the nearest side door. It wasn’t hard to hear Zane following along after him, but Tobias bit his tongue until they could leave the throne room. Within it was Fredrick’s seat of power, both figuratively and, for the moment, quite literally.

No sooner had they left the throne room and closed the door behind them than Zane sighed. “Thank you for telling me of William.”

“You’re welcome.” Tobias turned toward the wolf and folded his arms, one ear perked. “But please, I need you to now enlighten *me*. What in the world has happened?”

Zane’s ears splayed again as he tilted his head. “A missive was sent. If it was intercepted-”

“More likely Fredrick was the one to intercept it, to leave me in the dark.” Tobias shook his head. Such cruelty had always been Fredrick’s game. “You know he would do anything to humiliate me.”

“Mmm.” The kingsblade nodded once and glanced down the hallway. No one else was particularly close. “He spoke truly in this matter, however. Your father’s condition worsened soon after you left. He is weaker than he has ever been. Weaker than I have ever seen him, and this weakness has invited... challenge.” Zane paused as he drew himself up, and Tobias frowned. “Nothing you need worry about yet. But... I fear that his end approaches faster than any of us dared consider.”

Tobias slumped. Fredrick’s power would soon be real, then, and his father... “How... I mean, how long does the physician think that he...?”

Zane shook his head and held up a paw. “Ocher does not know, my prince. He says only that the lingering frailty of the great pestilence has taken its toll on him. He may yet endure this illness.” The wolf hesitated and glanced away for a second. “But each sickness weakens him further. If not this one, then perhaps the next. Or the next yet.”

Then Eric wasn’t doomed outright. Perhaps there was still a chance and time enough to reign Fredrick in. That could wait a moment, though, and Tobias took a deep breath as he gathered his strength. “I owe your son my life.”

At that, Zane began to smile. It faded as he looked over Tobias’ face and saw a distinct lack of shared mirth there. “He has been trained well and fights alongside truly exceptional warriors. You are fortunate to have him.”

“I don’t have him, Zane. I never have.” He took a deep breath and looked around. Again, there was still no one in the hall. No one to listen, as far as he could tell. “I spoke to him. About what happened when we were younger.”

Both of the wolf’s ears perked up at once. “I see. You don’t seem pleased.”

“It... went about as well as I should have known it would.” He took another deep breath as he straightened himself up. “He rejects me still. And... he is right to do so. I just thought that I should... tell you. That I tried to do the right thing by him in the end, before it is too late.”

Zane tilted his head to the side. “Too late?”

Tobias nodded. He’d planned this conversation over the last couple of days, and it had been torture every minute. Actually speaking the words wasn’t any easier. “If I am to wed Princess Sarina and leave for Ciroven, then it is likely that he and I will never see each other again. Nor will I see you, and...” He sighed. Why was this so hard? “And I just wanted to say... thank you, for all you have done for me. And that I am so sorry for how much pain I have caused him.”

The tiger hung his head low, but a warm, massive paw on Tobias' shoulder drew his attention back up again. "You have a good heart, my prince. I hope deeply that it should never be darkened." The paw dropped away again, but not before it gave a soft squeeze. "You do not intend to deprive him of his reward."

"No, I don't *want* to deprive him of his reward." Tobias closed his eyes. "Whatever happened between him and I, he still saved my life. Came to save me when I needed it. Did his duty and then some, and he deserves to be rewarded just the same as the others."

Zane nodded. "Then do not fear. I still have Eric's ear; I am allowed access to his chambers. Present your list to Fredrick, as he has ordered. I will ensure that he knows why William's contribution has been left off, and he *will* be given his due. I swear it."

Tobias sagged with relief. At least something that day could go right. "Thank you, Zane. At the very least, my last true act within Ratholarin will be doing something good for William. Whether or not he appreciates it, I can take solace in that much before my banishment begins."

The wolf hummed to himself as he nodded again. "It is a good thing to do, and I am personally honoured on his behalf. But do not pack your belongings just yet, my prince. Your father does not wish you to leave as soon as the wedding takes place."

"He... doesn't?" Tobias frowned. Eric had been the one to explicitly negotiate that his youngest son would leave for Ingsbren. What could have changed his mind?

"Illness changes what is important to a person, my prince. It is only as we near the end that we reflect on the path that has led us there with both eyes open." Zane smirked. "The words of Ratholarin sage Varric, son of Pardin. I have never found any words more true in all my life."

The prospect of King Eric the Fourth of Ratholarin reflecting on his life and deciding that he wished to keep Tobias close was just a little too much of a strain to credulity. The tiger barked a quick, quiet laugh before he could cut it off. "I hardly think illness or mortality are good enough reasons for my father to change his feelings regarding me."

"Perhaps." Zane shrugged and shook his head. "But perhaps when he speaks to you at your wedding, you will see for yourself. You have much to attend to before then." He sniffed at the air, and his smile turned a little lopsided for a moment. "Including a bath. Fredrick was not incorrect. You reek."

Tobias chuckled as he nodded. He could barely tell after the weeks and weeks he'd spent away from such comforts, but Zane at least he trusted. "I promise to make it a priority."

"Good. Now, I must seek out our regent's preferred kingsblade." Zane stepped back from him and bowed his head. "By your leave, my prince."

With a nod from Tobias, Zane rose and turned to leave. Tobias watched him go as his smile slipped from his muzzle. Whether or not the kingsblade was right about his father's feelings, he was definitely right about having matters to attend to. Not least of all the prospect of denying William the reward that he was due. Good people deserved to be rewarded.

That, Tobias realised, was probably why his life had played out the way it had. Every hurt he'd visited upon William had come back to him. If nothing else, he could learn. He could

grow. He could use the knowledge of what he had done wrong to do better in future. Perhaps it would help Sarina to maintain her positive view of him.

But first, a bath was in order. A change of clothes. Rest. Goodness knew he couldn't handle anything else that day.

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The bath had been as delightful as it had been necessary. Two, in fact, had been required; the first had seen so much grime scrubbed from Tobias' fur that the tiger had needed a second bath drawn in order to not simply sit in his own filth. He could scarcely imagine his fur ever shining quite so much as it had when he'd dried after the second bath.

A loose, if warm robe had been his choice in the wake of such delight. Comfort was the first priority for the prince; weeks upon weeks of his travels had left him absolutely in need of such things. The lethargy that followed ensured that Tobias felt almost no desire to do anything at all, but to instead spend the rest of his day simply relaxing.

He hadn't, of course. First, he'd taken a moment to prepare that list Fredrick had demanded of him. Commander Geoffery and Captain Daniel had topped the list, naturally, but in one additional act of petulant defiance, Tobias left a space large enough for William's name right below that of his lover. The other names, committed to memory over the course of the last season, were added immediately following. Tobias wasn't going to leave anyone out. Not a single one of them.

Then he had made an identical copy that he would deliver to Zane himself later, and summoned a servant to deliver the first list to Fredrick. The servant been reluctant, but when Tobias had offered to take care of it himself the servant quickly changed his mind. Perhaps he was afraid that Tobias would report him to Fredrick? That he would be punished harder for refusing an order? The fear in his eyes had been overwhelming.

That had been the moment Tobias had started to worry for Juni.

Shame washed over him as he'd hurried to his room. That he'd not even thought of the hyena since returning – for weeks, if he was entirely honest – cut him to the core, especially with the injuries that seemed to be prevalent among the servants of the castle. He'd not thought of her. He should have.

When he arrived at his room and threw the door open however, Juni was already inside. The hyena was seated on his bed, paws in her lap. She almost jumped out of her fur at Tobias' sudden arrival, and she sighed in relief when she noticed that it was just the tiger. "My prince! I... sorry, you startled me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." He sighed and pulled the door closed behind him. As the hyena smiled up at him, he felt some of the coldness that had been left in his heart in the wake of meeting with Fredrick start to melt away. "You look well. I was worried that something had happened."

The servant girl's smile hitched for a moment, and she slid along the bed slightly and patted beside her. "It has been trying, this Pure Snow. But please, sit. We have much catching up to do, don't we?"

Tobias felt the inside of his ears begin to burn. She sure didn't waste any time, but what else should he have expected from her? He made his way over, paws untying the bonds of his robe until he caught her smile fade entirely. Maybe that hadn't been what she meant at all? "What is it?"

She extended a paw to him, and he took it as he sat down slowly beside her. "You heard about King Eric?" She winced as Tobias nodded and squeezed gently at his paw. "I'm sorry. I hope he comes through this illness all the stronger."

"Juni, what's going on?" Tobias waved his free paw toward the door. "So many of the servants look hurt. What happened while I was away?"

She averted her eyes until Tobias gave her paw a little tug. When she looked back up, it was with sadder eyes. "It's not my place to speak against a prince."

Tobias sighed. Then it was Fredrick or Brett, and he knew what the safer wager was. "But I'm a prince, and I'm asking. And you know I'm not going to say or do anything that would get you in trouble, so please." He leaned in toward her. "Please. What did Fredrick do?"

Her muzzle worked at the air for a moment, as if she was trying to find the words but they just wouldn't come. It wasn't until Tobias other paw completely wrapped hers up that she sighed. "When your father fell ill and Fredrick was named regent, some people...they dressed like servants and snuck into the castle."

The tiger's eyes widened. "Did they...?"

"The guards and kingsblades caught them before they could do any damage." Tobias' sigh of relief hitched as Juni hung her head. "But Prince Fredrick was concerned the servants themselves had been turned to some plot. Our work hours were increased and the guards were instructed to..." She cleared her throat and glanced aside. "To arrest us and... to punish us, if we were not working outside of rest times. That any such sloth on the part of the staff must be them conserving energy to strike at the crown."

Tobias' stomach twisted sharply. The concern made sense, but the reaction made none. It could have just been Fredrick taking the opportunity to exert his will. Given how he liked to flex his power and how much he enjoyed seeing people beneath him broken by that power, it was the only reason Tobias could think of. Another little reminder as to why his brother was ill suited for a throne. "Did he... I mean, are *you*...?"

She shook her head. "I'm okay. A couple bruises, but not for a while." She took a long, shuddering breath and held it as she looked up at him again. "But... soon enough, I'll be in trouble. I won't be able to work in the weeks to come."

He didn't get a chance to ask what she meant. Juni pulled her paw back, drawing the tiger's along with it. It slid up under her robe, and for a moment Tobias thought he'd misjudged her intentions yet again.

The confusion continued for a few more seconds, as his fingers brushed along her stomach. He looked up again, meeting her gaze with his muzzle open to ask what she meant. Her eyebrow quirked. Muzzle twitched. Oh.

Oh damn.

Oh no.

“You’re... you’re pregnant.” The words were little more than a shocked croak. That he could articulate himself at all in the wake of the revelation was a miracle. His throat was dry; jaw slack. Tobias’ heart pounded in his chest, and shock and fear ran through his veins thicker than blood. “But we... I was careful! We were careful! I didn’t...”

She shook her head even as Tobias’ mind cast back to when he’d last seen her. Frustrated. Worried. Worked up and overwhelmed and defiant and how he’d returned to his room, and to the hyena, and how he and she had... “Oh, goodness gracious... I did. I *did*!”

“We did.” The correction came with no solace for Tobias as he felt his heart quicken. “I know, it’s not what you wanted, and we didn’t expect it, but... I’m not unhappy about it.”

“No, you don’t understand...!” Tobias yanked his paw back, as if Juni’s stomach had grown hot enough to scald his flesh. “Now that I’m back, messages will be sent! King Torvin and Princess Sarina will be summoned for my wedding! They’ll...”

He buried his face in his paws, but not before he caught a flash of hurt across Juni’s face. He needed a moment before he could address that. He needed to think. But before he could even begin to make sense of everything, one of Juni’s paws began to rub up his back and over his shoulder. “Look at me, Tobias. Please look at me.”

It was a titanic effort to do that, and Tobias wasn’t able to muster the strength at first. His paws dropped from his face, but his eyes remained fixed on the ground as Juni sighed. “I know this isn’t what you wanted. I’m sorry for what this means; I really am. But you don’t have to worry about me, alright? I’m not going to be like him.”

Confusion and surprise combined to give Tobias the wherewithal to lift his head, though meeting her stare was still too much. “Like who?”

“That servant before me.” *William*. Juni’s eyes were stony and sharply focused on him. “He couldn’t understand what your station demands. That’s the difference between the two of us. Well... that and a few other things.” She tried a little smile.

Tobias couldn’t return it, and so she sighed and continued. “When you find out when your bride to be arrives, please tell me. I will leave the service of the castle. I’ll... go.”

The tiger’s eyes widened. “You’ll what?”

Juni glanced away and closed her eyes. “I know what you need. Maybe I could have stayed if it wasn’t for this, but I won’t be able to work and if I don’t leave...” She swallowed hard. “I won’t let your brother harm our child. You need me to leave because it means too many questions. I need to leave to protect him. Or her.” She rubbed absently at her stomach.

Tobias nodded slowly. She’d not *felt* especially pregnant – what did it feel like, anyway? – even though he’d been gone for many, many weeks. “Are you certain that you’re...?” He couldn’t even bring himself to speak the word as she nodded. “How can you be sure?”

“There are ways for a female to know, Tobias. I have the proof.” She inhaled sharply and let the breath out in a long, slow hiss. “I’ve told no one else yet. I’m glad you’ve come

back before it truly begins to show.” She smiled softly. “I’m also just glad that you’re back. That you survived. I know you were so afraid...”

The fear of what the campaign into Herovir might have wrought was nothing compared to what he faced in that moment. The tiger shook his head. “This is so much worse!”

Juni recoiled, but she draped her arms across her belly and nodded. “I’m... I’m so sorry, I didn’t-”

“No, I didn’t... that wasn’t what I meant. I...” Tobias sighed and rubbed at his face. Good grief, but he was bad at speaking with people. One would think he would have learned how to do it properly by nearly twenty-one years of age! “What are you going to do? Pregnant or with a baby, out in Sanwell? What would become of you?”

Juni opened her muzzle to replied, but it closed again a few moments later. She looked away, and Tobias shook his head. Exactly. “That is why this is so much worse. This is... gracious, this is just too much. I can’t- I *won’t* let you endure that.”

The hyena frowned as she turned more fully on the bed to face him. “We have no choice.”

“I thought that. I thought that for so, so long, but after this last campaign?” He shook his head hard. The prince reached out to her, grasping her paws and squeezing them tightly. “Yes. He didn’t understand what my station demands. Yes, he hurt me. Yes, he caused me so much pain and distress.

“But I hurt him, too. I hurt him badly, by denying him and by casting him out alone.” Tobias clenched his jaw as he rubbed his thumbs across the back of Juni’s paws. “You are not just a servant to me. You never were, but now you’re...” He looked down at her belly again. “Now you’re also the mother of my child. My firstborn. I am not going to make the same mistake with you that I did with him.”

Juni’s eyes went wide. She seemed stunned by what he was saying and, to be fair, Tobias was also more than a little surprised to hear the words leave his muzzle. “And what do you propose, then? We run away together? Vanish into the night?”

But Tobias shook his head. He’d thought of that already, and it wouldn’t work. “I’m a prince, Juni. I can’t just run away. Even if I don’t matter too much to the throne, there’s no way that my mother and father would just let me disappear.” He squeezed her paws again, and received a more gently squeeze back in turn.

She opened her muzzle, but Tobias powered on anyway. “I can’t guarantee you much. I can’t promise the world, but you’ve given me so much. More than almost anyone else in the world ever has. I won’t let this be how things go for you.” He nodded once, firmly, as if promising himself as much as the hyena. “You will remain in my service. We might have to concoct a story about your pregnancy, but this can be managed. You will be alright, I swear it.”

Tears filled up the hyena’s eyes. “You don’t have to.”

“That is *why* I must.” Tobias shook his head. He let her paws go and leaned forward to wrap her up in a tight hug. She clutched him with almost desperate force. It was clear what this

meant to her. “I didn’t have to with him, and I hurt him so badly. I am responsible for this... and I must take that responsibility.” He rubbed her back, holding her close as he felt as much as heard her sobs against his shoulder. “You are going to be alright, Juni. I will make sure of it.”

Her fingers dug in as she held him, squeezing his whole body as if terrified to let him go. He held her more loosely in turn, his body a canvass to be painted by her tears. He felt warm. It felt right. Nothing Tobias could do could change the past and fix what he had done to William, but at the very least he had not done the same thing to Juni. And he wouldn’t.

The road ahead, whatever it was, would be difficult. There would be pain and sacrifices. Sarina wouldn’t be happy, but she would understand. He had to believe that she would. Even if she didn’t, that would be alright. Some things were more important. Juni deserved better.

And Tobias would see to it that she – and his child – received it.