

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART SEVEN

30th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

The bed was not Tobias', but it had been comfortable enough. Paranoia had been less comforting by far however, and it had kept him awake all through the night.

Returning to his room or visiting the physician had been utterly out of the question, at least once he learned that William was not on-duty. Of course the hyena wasn't; Tobias had expected to spend most of his night within the vault of the Institute. A rare night to himself would have been something William would have been all to glad to enjoy.

And so, at risk of Fredrick hearing Davan's report and viewing him as a threat, he had been forced to avoid both a healer and a familiar bed. In their place, he had taken up in an old guest room that had long since fallen into disuse. The room had been musty from being so abandoned, but an opened window had helped with that somewhat. The lock too definitely worked; Tobias had filched the key from a store on the same level via one of the castle's winding hidden passages. Rest, limited though it was, had been his even if proper sleep had eluded him.

He had thought to wait for the afternoon. After midday, William would have to have returned to the castle to resume his duties. He could find the hyena, and explain the danger to him. Perhaps William could get him out of the castle entirely. Out of the city, if it became necessary. Fredrick's reach was about to become overwhelming anyway. There was likely nowhere safe from his will in all the south sea realms, not once he had taken on so much magic. By the time William was back, Fredrick's forces might have thought him already long gone. The hope had been that they would turn their search outside the castle, so that he could make his escape.

However, as he lingered in that room through the morning with nothing but his fears and escape routes to keep him company, the vigorous beating on the door disabused him of the notion. A voice from outside it muttered quietly, but still loud enough that Tobias could hear. "...ain't here. He's gone."

He'd immediately rolled off the bed, and then under it. More rattling went up at the door, followed by vigorous pounding again as Tobias crawled toward the wall behind the bed. A small grate covered a crawlspace, and he yanked it free with a quiet grunt as a great *slam* sounded from the door. It groaned in protest as Tobias hurriedly squirmed his way down and through the crawlspace, and his tail had barely cleared it when another strike hit the door and caused it to splinter open. He almost yelped, only barely biting his tongue as he emerged into a much larger space.

The tiger turned quickly around and reached back through the crawlspace to the grate. He hauled it back into place as quickly and quietly as he could manage, and then just as quickly slipped around behind the wall and out of sight. One paw came up to cover his muzzle, further

silencing his pants for breath as he listened to whoever was out there turning over the room. “Ugh, look! I was right! He’s gone!”

“Yeah, but he had to be here. Look.” Neither of the male voices he could make out seemed to be familiar. Guardians, probably. “Someone’s been sleeping on this bed. Less dusty here.”

Tobias’ eyes widened as he peered down through the crawlspace again. As he looked past the grate to the underside of the bed, he could see the same thing that the guardian had. The dust had been disturbed to either side of the bed and, from where Tobias crouched, under the bed too. He’d left a trail, buffed clean by his own robe, right to his hiding spot!

His breath caught in his throat as he saw the boots of the guardian stepping forward to inspect the bed, though they hadn’t looked under yet. One knee came down to rest on the floor as Tobias quickly pulled back from the crawlspace, holding his breath. If he had to run, he- “Here!”

The prince almost jumped out of his fur at the shout, but it wasn’t the one who had discovered the dust. It was the other guardian, a little further away, and he heard the first start to rise again. “Look! The window’s open. Looks like he might have gone out.”

“Out. Seriously? You think that waif of a prince crawled out the window and down the side of the castle?” Tobias frowned. *Waif?* Really?

“If he thought he was gonna die? Maybe. I know I would.” Well, at least one of them thought he was capable. “And maybe he had help. No one’s seen his kingsblade, have they?”

Tobias blinked. They were looking for William as well? “I just wish they’d let us kill the pair of them. Neither one is fit to live in Ratholarin.” The tiger gulped. Well, at least he knew what they wanted now.

“Yeah, well we’ll just have to settle for killing the Carisi brat. King said he wants his little *sister* alive.” He paused as Tobias scowled. “It’s not too far a drop, anyway. Maybe a broken leg if he slipped. Could be signs down there if he did go out the window.”

“And a whole castle full of people who’d hear him scream like the little girl he is if he broke a bone... or bent a claw.” At that Tobias just rolled his eyes. The insults were as comically poor behind his back as they were to his face. “Come on. We’ll go see if there’s any markings down there to track. At least we know he *was* here.”

“And once we find him, *damn* but we’ll be rich.” The guardian laughed as Tobias winced. There was a bounty on him? Already? It was worse than he thought. He continued to hold his breath until the heavy bootfalls of the guardians left the guest room, and only then did Tobias dare breathe again. He sagged against the wall, panting in the dusty air as he closed his eyes. Word had definitely gone out. If there was a bounty to be collected on finding Tobias, then it couldn’t be a good thing. Certainly, it wouldn’t have been in Fredrick’s nature to put up a reward for finding a ‘missing’ prince. No, he’d just declared Tobias a traitor to see it sorted.

That Fredrick had also apparently lumped William in with him was a surprise. Why would he have done that? What purpose could there be to- Tobias sighed. There didn’t *need* to be a purpose for Fredrick. He hated William. That was probably why he’d insisted that Tobias be taken in alive, but William killed on sight.

That couldn't be allowed to happen, but what was Tobias able to do about it? He wasn't a warrior like William. He didn't even truly know how to defend himself against an intruder, let alone hold his own against the exceptional warriors that Brett had assembled for the ranks of the guardians. He certainly wasn't strong enough or capable enough to do anything to help William... but he couldn't just cower there in a secret room and wait for William to be caught and tortured to death. And that assumed that they actually took him alive instead of killing him like those guardians had hoped to.

Tobias looked around himself. The space he was in was little more than an alcove, though he didn't doubt that there were access points to secret halls laid somewhere in its structure. He didn't have to leave through the same door he'd entered by, but he was in an unfamiliar part of the secret passage system. If he'd known about it sooner, he could have gained entry to the room without having to worry about finding the damn key. It would have saved him a lot of effort!

He couldn't afford to think about that at the moment, though. None of that mattered quite so much as getting out. He had to find a means by which he could access the passages out of the castle. He had to find one that would get him into the city. He had to get somewhere where he could find William, and get with him to safety before everything fell apart.

But where? He didn't know where the hyena was. He never knew where William went when he left the castle, especially with Daniel gone. Who else did he know? Who else did the hyena associate with outside of Daniel and himself? Tobias frowned; were they really it? Was William just not the kind of person to make friends? The tiger had had a hard time with it to be sure, and there was nothing respectable about calling a whore perhaps his closest friend in the world, but-

That was it! Tobias all but slapped a paw to his head as realisation struck him. The Crimson Crest! William had mentioned he had a friend that worked there. If he'd been there, the courtesans would have seen him about. If they'd seen him, Soren could find his friend and point her out to him. Surely if they knew William was in danger – if Soren knew that Tobias himself was in danger – they'd be able to at least point him in the right direction. They had to. He had nowhere else he could go.

But that was a secondary concern. Tobias took a deep breath, nose twitching at the dust in the air as he looked around the alcove. There was only so many places that a secret access panel could be, and if he was going to find William he'd need to find that panel first. Get out of the alcove. Find the right passage out of the castle. Get to the Crest. Find William. After all, there was only a kingdom's worth of soldiers between him and safety.

Maybe the gods were watching, and wanted him to subvert Fredrick's plan. Maybe they wanted him to get out. Tobias hoped so; he didn't see how anything less than divine intervention was going to save his hide.

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Finding his way out of the alcove had been the easy part. It had presented Tobias access to a more familiar network of passageways, but none of those had themselves been escape routes. Indeed, all it had done is move him through the local network further away from his familiar tunnels. It'd also, consequently, taken him to places he was less sure were safe for him

to traverse openly. After all, it would only take a single servant who was beaten or bribed to sell out his position at a specific moment in time. The guardians were working for Fredrick. They had to have known that Tobias knew the secret tunnels throughout the castle as well, or better, than even their liege.

If anything though, Fredrick's paranoia about keeping those passages secret may well have done Tobias a great favour. Even as he took the shortest route in the open between secret passages, there were no guardians lurking in the dark waiting to accost him. If they knew about the passages, they were avoiding them for whatever reason. Clearly he'd not given up the information about them to just anyone.

Kingsblades, however, *did* know about the tunnels, and that meant that Tobias wasn't able to take the most well-known passages. It left him frustrated by the more winding and occasionally broken-down older routes, far less well-maintained but much more out of sight of any potential kingsblades. They were taught the main routes in and out. Tobias knew the many, many less well-trod ones.

But they were less well-trod for a reason. The lack of maintenance wound up slowing Tobias down much more than he had hoped, and he was forced to spend the better part of an hour ducking in and out of old tunnels just to avoid collapsed ceilings or impossible to negotiate rubble. It left him with a frustrating choice to make. He could either stay in the old tunnels and keep trying to find one that would actually get him out of the castle, or he could use them to clear as much distance as possible and reconnect with a main passage for his egress.

In the end – and with a convenient diversion to the passage that led to the kitchens where he was able to steal some food before being noticed – Tobias had settled on the latter option. It was hardly ideal, but he had no choice. If he continued to delay, William would be in greater danger. That would put *Tobias* in greater danger. Goodness knew he wouldn't live if not for the hyena's protection. William was his best, and indeed *only*, chance; he had to warn him.

It seemed as though luck was, for once, on Tobias' side. Once he'd committed to the main passages – not the *main* escape tunnel, but one of the secondary tunnels that would lead him almost as far as to reach the riverbanks in the merchant quarter – Tobias found himself making exceptional time. His walking pace was brisk, but his worries kept him from slowing down to take a breath. There'd be plenty of time to rest once he found William and they made it out of the city.

By the tiger's reckoning, he was almost clear of the castle grounds entirely when he first heard the footsteps of others in the tunnel. Panic immediately broke to the fore as Tobias looked further down the tunnel at the flicker of lantern light. The gentle curve of the passage kept the people within it well out of view, but he hadn't even made it halfway before someone was there to meet him. He cursed as he looked around. The tunnel was one he used to reach the Crest some nights. If he was right about where he was, there was a side-tunnel just ahead of him that would lead up to the stables. The stables were still within the castle grounds, but at least there was no sign of someone down that way. Tobias' only other option was to turn back.

He didn't have time to think, but he couldn't go so fast that his own footsteps gave him away. And so he hurried forward as quickly as he dared, almost rushing toward the lantern of whatever figure was on their way down to him. A kingsblade probably, but not the one he

needed. Tobias grit his teeth with each step that drew him nearer to his capture. Almost there. He just had to make it a little further... *there!*

It was little more than a seam in the rock wall, but Tobias knew the tunnels better than anyone else in the world. He slid into the seam just as he caught sight of the bright lantern, held before whomever was on their way toward the castle. Tobias crouched himself low and tried to steady his breathing as he looked up the way toward the stables. There was no one up the tunnel that he could see just yet. He could wait. Take a moment for the figure to pass, and then head back down behind them to the city.

The footsteps drew closer and closer, but as they did so Tobias became aware in the quiet of the tunnels of another set. His head jerked up, eyes fixed through the dark of the tunnel that led to the stables as slow, regular bootfalls sounded. Damn it all! There was another of them, and they were coming his way!

He turned away from the sound and back to the main tunnel. If the person coming down that way was able to pass him by quickly enough, he could slip out of the stable tunnel before whoever was on their way down intercepted him. He just needed them to go a little bit faster. Just hurry their gait a *tiny* bit. *Just rutting move already!*

A glance over his shoulder and back up the tunnel showed him that there was more light on its way down. He wouldn't stay hidden for long. Tobias' heart pounded in his chest. Claws extended. He couldn't stay there. He had to make a break for it. He had to move, or he was caught. He had to move, but he couldn't bring his legs to work. They froze in place, his eyes wide as he watched his doom inexorably moving toward him one plodding step at a time. He had to move. He *had* to move!

The tiger rose, but no sooner had he done so than the light moving down the main passageway passed by. It left darkness in its wake, and Tobias wasn't about to chance it any further. He eased himself back as slowly as he dared and as quickly as he could, until he had just slipped through the seam again and back into the main tunnel. The figure had indeed been a guardian, now with their back to him. Tobias sighed with relief. He was safe! He was behind the guardian! He was-

"Hey!"

-in trouble.

The shout came not from the guardian in front of him but from the one in the stable's passage. He'd moved clear of it, but not out of its line of sight. Tobias winced as the shout turned the other guardian around, but there was no time to beat himself up; the guardians would do that for him. He bolted, arms and legs pumping as he dove down the corridor in a dead sprint. More shouts went up behind him, but Tobias wasn't about to stop for a second.

He'd not got a good look at the guardian who'd been traveling down the main passageway, but he knew their armament in short order. An arrow whistled through the air and *pinged* as it bounced off a curve in the tunnel ahead, narrowly avoiding Tobias' chest. He yelped in surprise and quickly tried to dart around the corner, but in the dark he only wound up slamming into the wall. He bounced bodily off it, stumbling for a brief, wild second before he hit the ground back-first. The air went out of Tobias and left him groaning as footsteps hurried

in his direction. Dimly he was aware of the lanterns, their light jostling as their owners hurried closer. “Damn it all...”

So that was it. He was done. Caught. The tiger rolled onto his front and managed to force himself up to his knees as the bow-wielding guardian reached him. The bow itself was slung over the guardian’s shoulder, and they smoothly drew a sword from their side to point down at Tobias. There they paused, and a confused, masculine voice came through their helmet. “Prince Tobias?”

The guardian sounded surprised, as if he couldn’t even believe it was a prince that he’d captured. A brief spark of hope lit up in Tobias’ chest. If the guardian had been patrolling the city, it was possible he was on his way back. He might not have heard the orders regarding the prince just yet. He might be able to talk himself out of it! “Uh... good morning, soldier.”

“What are you... here, my prince; let me help you up.” The guardian sheathed his sword at once as he reached down to offer a gauntleted paw toward him. Tobias took it, and winced a little as he was tugged back up to his feet again. “I beg your pardon, sir. When I saw someone running, I-”

“Think nothing of it. I am unharmed... relatively speaking.” He glanced over the guardian’s shoulder at the other warrior. They were making their way much more slowly down, seeing as how their companion had already clearly captured the intruder or whatever else they thought Tobias had been. Still, he didn’t have any time to waste. The soldier that had come from the stables may have been stationed in the castle. They *would* have heard the orders regarding him. “As you were. I’m just trying to avoid the crowds above; I need something from the marketplace for my work today.”

The guardian nodded, and he could hear the smile in the soldier’s voice. Was it nice to meet a polite prince for once? “Of course, my prince. Don’t let me keep you; have a pleasant day.”

Tobias nodded and smiled back at him as he started to turn, but no sooner was his back to them that he heard another, deeper voice shout out. “No, stop him! He’s wanted for treason!”

The tiger had barely made it a single step before the guardian who had just been so nice reached out to him and grabbed Tobias by the robe. Any further forward momentum was stalled out as the guardian wrenched him back by the folds of his clothes, and Tobias gasped as he was spun about and crashed into that thick plated armour. He saw stars for a moment as his vision danced right into the path of a lantern’s light, dazing him as he groaned. “Apologies, my prince; this will only take a moment to sort out.”

“Urrgh...” was all Tobias was able to respond with. It took him a moment to collect himself, but no sooner had he than the other guardian stepped in and punched the prince square in the gut. Tobias doubled over, gasping as the wind was knocked clear out of his lungs by the blow.

As he fell out of the first guardian’s grip and hit the ground again, he could hear the newcomer’s deeper voice. “The prince and his kingsblade are accused of conspiring against the crown. We thought he’d already slipped out into the city... and you almost let him escape.”

“I... see.” The tone of the formerly-nice guardian shifted all at once as he slowly turned to look down at Tobias. “I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us, my prince. If there is some mistake, better we sort it out back in the castle.”

“The only thing to be sorted out in the castle is the means of my execution.” Tobias wheezed the words as he forced himself back up again. He glared at the guardian who’d struck him. “That is what you are taking me back for... while Fredrick plays with magic.”

No sooner had the words left his muzzle than he found a gauntleted paw backhanding me across his face. Tobias hit the ground again, the taste of blood in his muzzle as he glared at the stone floor. Were the guardians truly the best warriors in the realm, or had Brett simply chosen all the sadistic soldiers for his force? “Hrrf... not bad. Had better.”

“More where that came from, traitor.” Wetness hit the back of Tobias’ neck as the guardian lifted his helm just far enough to spit on the tiger. “Concocting lies about your king? Fleeing the castle? I’m gonna look forward to your execution.”

“Yeah? Well, you may as well do it yourself. I’m not going back there.” Tobias turned his head, not even bothering to clean the spittle from his neck as he glared at the guardian. “So you can kill me here and now. At least that way Fredrick’ll kill *you* for depriving him of his fun.”

The guardian however just chuckled to himself. “Who said anything about killing you here? I’m just gonna break your arms and legs and drag you back there myself.” He could hear the grin in the guardian’s voice as Tobias scrabbled backward from him as quickly as he could. “Don’t worry. I won’t let you pass out too quick.”

“And I won’t let him pass out at all.”

The voice came from behind Tobias, called from the darkness deeper down the main tunnel. Both of the guardians looked up to try and see who it was, but Tobias sagged with immediate relief as he recognised the voice.

William.

The hyena stood there in the middle of the tunnel, bathed in the light of the guardians’ lanterns as they turned toward him. His battleaxe was strapped to his back, hatchet at his side. In his left paw was his Carisi sword, held out as he stared down the sadistic guardian. “Step back from the prince. I won’t tell you again.”

“Yeah?” The guardian slapped his chestplate with a gauntlet as he brought his sword up to point at William. “I’d like to see you try’n stop me. That weak little thing ain’t gettin’ through my armour.” The guardian motioned down toward Tobias as he stepped forward. “Keep an eye on the traitor while I gut this Carisi scum.”

The guardian thrust his sword right at William, but the hyena swept his about to batter the blow away. He spun with the motion, and Tobias blinked as the runes engraved on the flat of William’s blade bloomed with a brilliant orange glow. Motes of flame danced off them as he came back around with a counter-thrust. The tip rushed in toward the guardian’s chestplate.

It flashed at the point of impact, but its momentum wasn’t halted. The guardian screamed, the sound echoing almost painfully down the corridor as William’s sword stabbed

right through that thick plate armour. Light bloomed out around the point of contact, and even as he winced Tobias could hear something new over those cries: the sizzling of burning fur and flesh.

When William yanked the sword free, the guardian's cries cut off. He grunted once, smoke left to curl from under his helm as he slumped to the ground. The blade of William's sword was clear of blood; the whole length of the blade continued to sizzle, and the runes glowed all the brighter. The last time the tiger had seen that was in Herovir, when a shaman had empowered the weapons!

The other guardian though stood fast. He didn't draw his weapon, but instead stared at William in what the prince could only imagine was the same shock he felt. Tobias watched as he took a step back, and his head tilted slightly as he looked down at Tobias. "What... what was..." As William took a step toward Tobias, the guardian lifted his sword. "Stay back!"

"William, stop." The words were shaky as Tobias spoke them, but they seemed to have the desired effect. The hyena paused mid-step, though his weapon remained pointed at the guardian. It didn't move as he looked down at the tiger. "He didn't hurt me. He's alright."

"He was just about to let the other one break your arms and legs and drag you back to the castle." William his sword as his eyes returned to the guardian. He, by contrast, gripped his hilt with both paws as he took another step back from William.

At least Tobias could be sure William was out to protect him. There were questions of course – how had he empowered the sword? Where had he come from? How did he know Tobias was in trouble? – but they had to wait a second. This guardian had shown that they weren't as much a monster as the others had been. Maybe a life could be saved here, and he rose to a crouch as he looked up at the armoured warrior. "You don't have to fight here. There's another option."

In his peripheral vision, Tobias watched William cock his head slightly. The guardian didn't look away from the hyena. "That... my prince, that is *magic*."

"I know. I know it is, and you saw what it just did. He could kill you any moment he chooses, but he's *not*. Right?" He glanced up at William again as he stood once more. "He's *not* going to kill you."

The hyena grimaced, but nodded, He didn't lower his sword, however. "Not if he doesn't give me a reason."

"And he won't." He held up his paws as he turned to the guardian. "Listen to me. Fredrick toys with magic. He seeks my head because I have uncovered his secret and he means to silence me."

William sighed. "He's not going to listen, Tobias."

"He *will*. Everything depends on it." Tobias slowly lowered his paws, and the guardian's sword twitched in his direction. "Surely you've been part of it. The relics brought in, but not destroyed. The order to recover any and all magical knowledge... why bring it all here if not to *use* it?"

The guardian was silent for a moment. The tip of his sword dipped as Tobias' heartbeat began to slow back down again. "To destroy it."

"But it could be destroyed elsewhere. Anywhere. It's not necessary that it be *here* to be destroyed, is it?" He extended a paw, bit by bit, toward the guardian. "The only reason for it to be here is to be studied. Understood, and used. Please, you have to see this! I am telling you the truth."

The guardian's helmeted head turned back and forth between Tobias and the still-wary William. The tiger couldn't tell one way or another if he was getting through to him. Damn those stupid helmets! If he could just see the warrior's eyes... "If it is truth... then come back with me. We will discover it together."

"That isn't happening." William gripped his sword tighter. The guardian's blade twitched back up toward him.

Tobias sighed. "You heard your compatriot. Breaking my legs and arms? Dragging me back for my execution? Did those sound like the words of someone who truly wished to see reason? Who would hear me out?" He nodded toward William. "And you heard him! They intend to kill my kingsblade as well. You could save two lives if you simply... do nothing."

"I can't do nothing. I..." The guardian slowly shook his head. His fingers flexed on the hilt of his blade. "I don't know what's going on."

"Then know this." William took a steady step forward as the guardian shifted into a defensive stance. "I can cut you down right now and your life will end. I don't want to, but I *will* if you stand in our way." He paused, and his eyes flicked briefly to Tobias. The tiger shook his head; he didn't want William to strike! He couldn't! This warrior was innocent, and just trying to do the best he could.

William bared his teeth at the prince. "Take off your armour. All of it. Drop your weapon."

The guardian didn't move an inch. "I... what?"

"Take. Off. The armour." William rolled his eyes as Tobias looked on with confusion. "If you don't wear the armour, they'll not see you as a guardian. You'll just be another Ratholarin citizen going about his day."

Tobias sighed with relief. William *was* giving the warrior an out! "Abandon this duty. Step away from the guardians, and live. You can follow this tunnel out with us. You can recover your life yet." Silently, Tobias begged any gods who might listen that the guardian heed his words.

Maybe one of them heard him, or maybe he'd convinced the warrior on his own, or maybe his fear of William's apparent magic was too great. Regardless of how and why, his sword dropped away as the guardian's shoulders slumped. He sheathed his sword as the runes on William's blade began to fade. "Alright... alright."

"Thank you." Tobias sighed as the warrior began to peel off his armour plates. He started with the helm, revealing the face of a young-ish otter male. His whiskers trembled with fear and his eyes remained locked on William's sword even as he stripped down. The hyena

watched him closely, his weapon still at the ready but much less threatening than it had been. “And thank *you*, William.”

“You’re the one who talked him down. I’m just glad not to spill more blood than I have to.” He frowned, though his eyes remained on the armour-shedding otter. “What are you even doing down here, Tobias? Escaping the castle?”

“I was coming to find you. To... warn you.” He scowled up at the hyena. “What were *you* doing, gone so long? I thought the guardians had found you and killed you. They’re after us both.”

“Yeah. I noticed that. With everything happening, I just thought coming back this way would be safer, and... Hey, that’s good.” William had held up his other paw as the otter began to unfasten his trousers. “Just the armour is fine. No need to leave naked.”

“Oh. Uh, right.” He straightened up again and backed toward the wall. Tobias couldn’t blame him; he was unarmed and unarmoured before two potential threats. “So you’re... going to take me out of here with you?”

Tobias began to nod, but William shook his head instead. “No. You can go, but don’t let anyone know you were a guardian. Get out of the city centre if you can. Things are going to become very messy very soon.”

The otter frowned as he looked at Tobias, but the tiger had no more answers for him. If that was what William had said, that was what he was willing to trust. Maybe the hyena knew more than he did about what was going on? “Let no one know that we were here. You will be in danger if you do.”

William’s sword finally started to lower, and the otter sighed with relief. “I... thank you, my prince. And I’m sorry for... what almost happened here. I never believed what they said about you.”

A little smile touched Tobias’ muzzle as he nodded to the warrior. He nodded back before his eyes flicked back to William, and the guardian slunk slowly along the wall until he had passed the stony-faced kingsblade by. Once he made it out of sword range, he turned away fully and broke into a run. Tobias sighed again. One life saved. “Thank you, William.”

“It was the right thing to do. I just hope it doesn’t cost us.” He lowered his sword but didn’t sheath it. The runes dimmed to nothing. “Fredrick decide you were too close to his precious magic?”

“Davan. He told Fredrick lies; that I was looking to learn and steal his magic.” Tobias shook his head and frowned at William’s sword. Had he found a way to awaken his own magic? “And speaking of magic, that *was* magic. Just like in Herovir. The swords retain their power?”

William winced as he looked down at the sword. “Not exactly. I just found a way to... activate it, I suppose. It’s complicated.” When he lifted his head again, it was with a focused expression that didn’t beg any further questions. “We need to get back into the castle, and we need to get in there *now*.”

Tobias thought his head might start spinning. How had he figured out how to activate a magical sword? How was he, a scholar of such things, meant to just let that go? “What do you mean, back in? They’re looking for us! They want to kill us!”

“They want to kill *me*. From what that guardian said, Fredrick wants you alive for some reason.” The hyena smirked as he rested the Carisi sword on his shoulder. “Guess he likes you better than me. I don’t think that’s likely to change anytime soon.”

The prince just shook his head. How was William so calm about this? “I can’t fight! I’m not a warrior like you. I need to escape before they capture me, or...” He shuddered. “I don’t even want to think about what Fredrick will do to me.”

William’s smirk faded and he started to frown instead. “No worse than he’ll do to everyone else if he can gain control of magic. Remember? You came to *me*, warning me and trying to get me to help you stop him.”

“That was when I didn’t think he was coming for me already!” Tobias looked down at the dead guardian between them, smoke still lazily climbing from the mortal wound William had inflicted. “If we had surprise on our side, we might have succeeded, but now? Now they’re *looking* for us. They’re not going to stop, William!”

“Not until they’re stopped. And I’m going to stop him.” The kingsblade set his jaw as he stared back at Tobias. “But I need you to help me do it. I can’t do what I need to do if I don’t have you, too.”

Tobias’ eyes bugged out. Surely not. The very idea was laughable. “What in the world could you possibly need me for? I’m... I’m nothing! I can’t do anything, I... I’d just get in the way. I-”

“Tobias.” The tiger shut up instantly as William rounded the body of the guardian and reached out his paw. He looked down at it, and his mind flashed back half of his life. A tearful tiger, terrified and alone, and a desperately hopeful hyena offering him help. “I need you to help me stop this. Please.”

He lifted his gaze from the paw to William’s face. His stare was intense, but his expression was purely earnest. Ears were perked as he nodded once. “I’ll keep you safe. I promise, I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Don’t, William... just *don’t*.” Tobias sighed as he rubbed at his eyes. His heart skipped a beat with the hyena’s words. What would they have been? What could they have been, in another place, or in another time? “You can’t promise me that.”

“Then I promise I’ll try.” He wriggled his fingers and Tobias looked back down at that paw once more. He’d longed to hold it again for so long, but not now. Not like this. Not with their lives on the line. “We don’t have time. I’ll explain everything as soon as I can, but right now we need to move. *We*, Tobias. Before Fredrick gets exactly what he wants... and you know we can’t let that happen. Let’s go, alright?”

“Alright.” He couldn’t remember agreeing with the hyena, or changing his mind about wanting to flee, but the word came out of him all the same. The warmth in his chest when William smiled at the response made him feel sure it was the right answer, but he’d not intended

it. It'd just sort of... happened. Tobias closed his eyes and sighed. "I... alright. Damn it all." He slid his paw into William's.

The hyena squeezed it tight. "Thank you."

"Yeah. Well... you needed me, so..." He coughed and squeezed back as he folded his ears down flat. He didn't know why he bothered; William would have been able to see his blush anyway. "I guess we're not running. Where are we going instead?"

"Back to the castle." William's tone was darker, and when Tobias opened his eyes again it was to a grimly determined look on his friend's face. He'd never seen such determination before. "The Institute, and Fredrick's little magic vault.

"If we're going to stop him, it has to start there."