

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART NINE

30th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

His paw was sticky.

That was the thought that was lodged in Tobias' mind like an itch he couldn't scratch. The drying blood in his fur and across his paws and claws wasn't warm anymore, and it had begun to just... gunk up everything. Every time his fingers squeezed or shifted on his dagger, the tiger could feel the sickening shift of ever more viscous fluids. It was an omnipresent reminder of what he'd done.

Tobias wanted to be sick, but it was only horror and the job before him that kept his stomach from heaving bile. That, and the warmth of William's paw in his own other, cleaner one. It was a lifeline; a conduit to normalcy. To a time before what he'd done. What was yet to be done. To a moment where he had cleaner paws and a cleaner soul. Breaths were shallow. Eyes unfocused. It was like he was a helpless passenger within the carriage of his body; helpless to do anything but writhe and panic while it carried on. It provided a modicum of distance such that he could almost disconnect himself entirely. *Tobias* had not taken that life, his body had. His mind was far away, a mere observer.

But almost wasn't close enough. Every step down toward the heart of the vault left him alone with his thoughts. William was focused on everything around him, and the tiger couldn't even begin to imagine what was running through his friend's mind. Too many of his thoughts were consumed on what he'd done. If there'd been a better way. If he'd just taken the easiest and most horrific choice before him. *If he'd have to do it again.*

"Where are they?"

William's voice pierced the black fog that filled Tobias' mind. It drew the tiger's attention back to him, and the rest of the world faded back into his awareness as he looked to the hyena. William's eyes were on him, concerned but focused. "I'm sorry?" His throat felt scratchy. Sticky. Like blood was congealing in it, too. Like it was gumming up every part of him. Tobias' nostrils flared as he sucked in a shuddering breath. There was no air in the room.

Maybe the hyena knew, or maybe he was just being kind, but the squeeze to Tobias' paw was more reassuring than anything else he'd ever felt in his life. It relaxed his throat; the air flowed as he sighed. "Those Triumvirates you mentioned. The scholars here. You said at least one would be here."

"I... I did." He was right; that *was* strange. Tobias forced himself to look around and focus on the problem. No Mattias. No Davan. No Orlin. *No one* was there. "They... wouldn't leave the vault empty. Not ever. Not for more than a couple of minutes, ever since the Institute started." His eyes fell on William again. "Something is very wrong."

The hyena nodded back at him and turned to look about himself. His paw tugged slightly at Tobias' as though he was looking to free it. The tiger's fingers tightened in response. "I should have a look around. Make sure no one's lurking, waiting to strike." He paused for a second as Tobias' fingers twitched again. "Uh... I'm going to need that back, though."

Panic hit Tobias all at once, shining through his new focus and fed by the cold shock that lingered in the wake of what he'd done. "I... William, I-"

"I'm going to be right here." His voice was gentle as he turned back toward Tobias, and though there was no smile on his face – and who could smile at a time like this anyway? – it was still some measure of comfort. "I promised you I wasn't going to let anything happen to you if I could help it. I won't be far... and you're going to be alright."

"I'm not alright." The words were born of desperation, but they spoke a far deeper truth than Tobias had intended. He looked down, eyes firmly on the floor before he closed them completely. "I don't know how to be alright now. I don't know what to do, or..."

The sigh that came from William didn't sound irritated or impatient, but Tobias cringed back from it all the same. It wasn't until a tug of William's arm drew the prince in closer to him and the hyena's other arm wrapped about his middle that he whimpered and collapsed against the kingsblade. "It's... normal, Tobias. It's normal not to be alright at a time like this."

"How did..." His voice was muffled as he all but buried his head in William's shoulder. "How did you...?"

"I don't know." The words were surprisingly comforting, even though the hyena's voice sounded strained. "It was hard... there were days where I couldn't come to terms with it. Where I wondered if I'd lost a part of myself I'd never get back. I wouldn't have made it through without Daniel."

That cold inside Tobias expanded as he clutched the hyena's paw tightly. He couldn't bring his other arm around; it still couldn't disengage from his dagger, and he didn't want to smear his friend's armour with yet more blood. "I wish I had a Daniel to help me."

"You'll have me. Won't be the same, but I'm not abandoning you, Tobias." He drew back despite Tobias' attempt to lean up and into him, and a fingertip stroked up under the tiger's chin. It tilted his muzzle up. "Hey. Look at me, okay? Open your eyes."

It took a titanic effort, but Tobias was able to eventually force them open. Tears ran down his cheeks anew as he did so, and William stared deep into him. Could he see what Tobias had done? Could he see the guilt? "I didn't think I'd be alright, but I was. You will be too. I wish I could make it feel better now, but I can't. Can you trust me? Believe me, just for today?"

That was the best Tobias could hope for. William was right: he didn't feel like he'd ever be okay again. Like that cold hole inside him was just yawning wider and wider and wider and it would soon be large enough to swallow him completely and he'd deserve it and be done and gone and it would be all the better for it because- "Hey."

Tobias swallowed hard as William lifted a paw. His thumb brushed across the prince's cheek, wiping away one of the tears as he continued to hold Tobias' paw. "Just believe me for today. Just today, while we fix... everything. That's all I'm asking."

"I c-can..." Tobias' throat closed up again; he couldn't force the words out. His chest tightened, aching as he forced himself to nod. He *did* trust William. He trusted the hyena with everything in him. He was a far better male than Tobias had been; far better than he deserved. If William could trust him, then he could trust William. Just for the day. "I can."

It took some more doing as William nodded, but Tobias forced his fingers to loosen. They trembled as William continued to hold his paw, but bit by bit he was able to release the hyena. "See? You're already doing better than when I went through this. You're so much stronger than I was." William's muzzle twitched as Tobias glanced down at their still-joined paws. It was just something he was saying; something to reassure the tiger. Knowing that didn't make it feel any less powerful or calming. Tobias heart squeezed again as William also let go, his paw allowed to fall back to his side. "You stay here, see if you can find anything to explain what's going on. I'll make sure we're safe."

Tobias nodded again as William began to turn away, but he reached out with his clean paw to quickly grasp William's arm. "Wait, just... before you go." The hyena lifted an eyebrow as he glanced back at the prince. "I just... you said you couldn't come to terms with it, like... you lost part of yourself. That's how *I* feel now, and I just..." He winced as he shook his head. "How... I mean, how long did it..."

"How long did it take until I found that part of myself again?" Tobias couldn't respond in words as his throat tightened once more, but he was able to nod after a second. He watched as William looked away for a moment, and when his gaze returned it was a little sadder than it had been before. "I... don't know, Tobias; I'm sorry. I'll let you know when I find it."

"I... I see." The urge to simply hold fast to the hyena's arm was almost overwhelming, but Tobias forced himself to let it go. It wasn't the answer he had hoped to hear, but it was honest. Tobias would have to figure that part out for himself in due time. "I'll... be here. Be safe? Please?"

"Always. You too, and don't worry. I won't be far if you need me." William nodded to the tiger as he turned away again, sword raised as he made his way around toward the nearest set of shelves. Tobias watched him until the hyena was completely obscured, and then resisted the urge to follow on after him. He couldn't. He had his own work to do. He had to figure out what was going on.

At least it was a problem that Tobias could focus his mind on. Shutting out the memories of what had just happened was impossible, but he could at least push it aside for a moment to set himself to the problem. William had needed access to the vault for whatever reason, and now the kingsblade had it. It was just as much an opportunity for Tobias, to see what the Triumvirate were up to with Fredrick without them censoring themselves. If William was going to actually kill the king, Tobias needed to know if there were any magical surprises coming. The last thing he wanted was for William to have to deal with magic.

The first table he visited was Davan's. Tobias reasoned that if any of the Triumvirate were going to have their work be key to Fredrick's plans, Davan would be the most likely to hold it. Unfortunately, a minute of sifting through the notebooks and scribblings scattered across Davan's station revealed nothing of any use to the tiger.

Mattias' station went similarly, though one of the notebooks that he flicked through seemed to contain some information on an amulet that had been left uncatalogued at his desk. It was the work of only a moment for Tobias to find the amulet under a stack of papers, the iron chain half-rusted but the golden circle that hung from it was perfectly intact. As was the eye-catchingly cut sapphire crescent moon that was set in the centre of the ring; it glinted in the light in a peculiar way, as though the light came from within the crystalline structure of the gem itself. Tobias felt more of his concerns and worries and guilt melt away as he looked the gemstone over.

He set it down atop the desk and looked away, firmly at first and then with greater reluctance as those dark feelings began to cloud his mind and heart once more. He pushed them aside as best he could as he picked it back up, carrying it with him as he made his way over to Orlin's desk, though he chanced a quick glance up at William. The hyena was searching amongst the shelves, but as he looked on he noted that the kingsblade was stopping every so often to take in the sight of the artifacts that had already been catalogued. Was he as fascinated as Tobias had been, seeing all of those powerful relics and records?

That too had to be put out of his mind as he stopped in front of Orlin's desk. Tobias scanned the documents atop it and sighed to himself; he should have checked Orlin's first. "I think I've found something. William?"

"Coming." Tobias pushed a couple of errant sheets aside as the hyena's footsteps hurried back toward him. The notebook that had caught his eyes was drawn to the centre of the desk, and Tobias set down the moon amulet down beside it as he read the pages. "Alright, I'm... Tobias, what's that?"

The tiger blinked and looked up at William; the kingsblade had a book in one paw, but his other clutched at a copper-hilted dagger whose blade seemed to be forged out of pure diamond. Tobias briefly wondered where that item had come from, but set that aside as he noticed that the hyena's eyes weren't on him. They were on the amulet as it lay just barely shy of his left paw. "This? I don't know; it was on Mattias' desk. Something he was working on." He took hold of it again and ran a finger across the gem. "Why? Do you know what it is?"

"Yeah. It's an *anagnos kardia*." He frowned at it as Tobias' finger continued to stroke over it. "It reads desires. Priests of Vicaris would use it for a whole lot of different ceremonies." Tobias frowned as William shrugged. "I've been doing some reading lately."

"I'm surprised you could find any reading on the old gods out in Sanwell anymore." Tobias looked down at the amulet. It might read desires, but if all it did was help the tiger to feel better that was good enough for him. He started to lift it up to place around his neck.

William reached across the desk as his eyes went wide. "Wait! Wait a second. What are you..." He shook his head as Tobias froze, the amulet raised above him. "That thing was used by *priests*, Tobias. Trained to use magic and who knew what they were doing. Fredrick's already messing with magic; do you want it to mess with you, too?"

There was a wisdom in what William was saying, but the clarity that the amulet provided Tobias' mind, at least for the moment, was worth the consideration. "Yes, Fredrick is using magic. And here we are, in potentially the largest armoury in the realm. Anything here could be useful in stopping him." He nodded toward the diamond knife as he lowered the

amulet over his head. William winced as the gem settled against Tobias' chest, but the tiger didn't tuck it under his robe. There was already an amulet under there, anyway. "And what about that? Arming yourself, are you?"

William looked down at the dagger with a frown. "Yeah, but I know what this is for. Which reminds me. Can you clear some space? I need to work while you explain."

Tobias watched as William tucked the book under one arm and drew his Carisi sword. He sighed as he began to shift the papers atop the desk, shoving them to one side until William had enough room to slap the sword down on the surface. "It's this notebook... a log of experiments that they were running last night on a subject who was a descendant of a shaman."

"Sounds like a fun time." William's voice was a growl as he laid down the book under his arm against the hilt of his sword. He flicked it back open to a specific page as he touched the tip of the diamond knife to the flat of his blade. "What kind of experiments?"

"You tell me." Tobias tugged the notebook closer to himself as he watched William carve into the blade with the knife. With his guilt and pain assuaged by whatever the amulet was doing, he found his mind sharpened. Focused again. "What in the world are you doing?"

The hyena just sighed as he focused on his carving. The cuts were shallow, about as deep as the runes that already adorned the other side of the weapon. "If I'm right? I'm engraving some protective runes into this. Something to help fend off magic. Prosta's not really what I'd go for and my ancient Lenkis is a bit shaky, but this is all I could find." He looked up and nodded at the tiger. "What?"

Tobias' frown only deepened. The words that had just come out of William would have been more at home on a scholar of ancient times and of magic than of a warrior. William had always been well-spoken and Tobias himself had taught the hyena his Rathin letters, but this was something else entirely. "Inscribing magic runes? And you know ancient Lenkis?"

"Shaky. I'm *shaky* on ancient Lenkis. The grammar's a mess." William's eyes had turned back to the sword as he spoke, moving from one rune to the next. "I mean, the grammar of the Lenkis language *now* is a mess compared to Rathin, but it's closer to Carisi and a bit-

"No. No, you don't just come up with that sort of knowledge by reading a book. You get that sort of thing taught to you." Tobias folded his arms as he watched William sigh and lay the knife flat against his sword. "You said you might be able to get help dealing with Fredrick. What exactly did you mean? What sort of help?" The hyena lifted his empty paw as he turned back toward Tobias. The tiger looked at it, confused, until a flame flickered to life between his fingers. "By the...!"

William lowered his paw, but the flame remained suspended exactly where it was in the air. It twisted into a small orb as William leaned around it to look Tobias in the eye again. The tiger was only dimly aware of that; his focus was on the ball of flame as it burned out of nowhere before his eyes. "I did say it was complicated."

The hyena reached up to snatch the little ball of fire out of the air. It puffed away into smoke as Tobias stood there, slack-jawed. William stared back at him, his expression as utterly unreadable as Tobias' thoughts. He leaned in closer, slowly waving his paw in front of the tiger. "Tobias?"

“Yes. Sorry. Just... okay. That happened.” The prince shook his head as he let his eyes finally focus on William. “Well, that... sure explains a few things. I take it you discovered your lineage?”

“Something like that. This was pushed on me starting a long time ago.” William shook his head as he picked up the knife and resumed his carving.

“Longer than you think. I think... I saw your bloodline being charted through the generations.” The hyena nodded but didn’t look up, and Tobias breathed a sigh of relief. Good. He wasn’t angry to hear that. “I don’t know what to say. I... only have about a hundred questions.”

“Pick the most pressing ones.” William sighed as he traced a claw across some of the new runes that he’d just carved into the iron. Embers trailed in its wake, filling the space he’d carved out with what looked like liquid flame. “We’re not going to have a lot of time when they break down that ward.”

“Okay. I... sure.” Tobias took a deep breath. *This* was something he could focus on! “Your... wow, this feels insane just to even say. Your *powers*. Given your parentage and their lines, I can only assume you’re channelling Miarvis?”

“Yeah. Apparently it was meant to be Vicaris’ magic, but things went wrong and this was the only option available to, uh... to *them*.” He glanced up briefly. “Long story. We don’t have time for it. Next question.”

Well, that was another dozen or so questions Tobias had to ask later, but they would have to wait. “Vicaris? Seriously? Perverted night magic? *Sex* magic?”

William lifted his head at that and fixed Tobias with a sharp stare. “A little less commentary on matters you don’t understand and a little more *focus*, if you please?” Tobias blinked, raising both paws quickly to ward the hyena off. “Night magic encompasses a number of disciplines, as I understand it. Verdancy, physicality, energetics... the lot. Vicaris might have been the god of pleasure and revelry, but his demesne was the whole of magic just as much as the night. My...” He frowned. “I’ve been told that might be why my potential for magic is so high. The influence of mother’s line.”

Tobias nodded slowly. Told by whom, though? Someone knowledgeable at least; he might have made the same inference, if he were studying William like one of Fredrick’s subjects. The very thought of the hyena, chained up and being bled half to death while he was beaten to awaken his powers... it sickened Tobias to his core. That it had happened goodness knew how many times to goodness knew how many innocent people didn’t do much better. “How long?”

The hyena paused as he plucked up the knife again to resume his carving. The runes he’d filled with fire continued to burn absent his applied effort... or so Tobias could only guess. “About five years. Maybe six... I stopped counting.”

“Six years. I...” He shook his head. This was insanity. Absolute, utter bedlam. They had talked and joked and imagined what it would be like to have magic when they were cubs running through the castle together. Days when their imagination could run wild, back before the weight of the world crushed them down. “Wait. Does Daniel-”

“Yeah. He knows. He’s okay with it.” Again the hyena paused as he looked up and met Tobias’ gaze. “Kind of surprised that *you’re* taking this so well. We’re trying to stop someone who’s using magic, after all. You don’t think I’m going to go mad?”

“I think I will reserve judgement until after we have dealt with the immediate crisis.” Tobias shook his head as William nodded back to him. “After all, this is... you were born to this sort of magic. It’s part of you. What Fredrick’s doing is not that.”

“It’s not part of you, either, but you’re still wearing that amulet.” William’s eyes narrowed as he nodded to it and resumed his carving. “That thing’ll do as much damage to you as Fredrick if you wear it for too long.”

“Right now it’s keeping me sane, so I don’t think it’s going anywhere.” Tobias frowned. What, did the hyena want him to suffer? There was too much at stake right now for him to be hysterical. Whatever the amulet was doing was good. He’d never felt more sure of anything.

William, by contrast, didn’t look nearly as convinced. “That’s because it’s feeding on your pain and feeding back calm. It’s not going to help you, Tobias... not in the end. You need to give it to me as soon as we’re done here and I’ll destroy it. You can’t keep it.”

The urge to defend the amulet boiled up out of nowhere instead Tobias, but it came on so strong and so quick that something in his rational mind tweaked itself active once more. William was right. He wasn’t acting like his normal, thoughtful self. His mind felt sharper, his heart beat steadily, and the blood all over his paw didn’t bother him.

He blinked. It didn’t bother him.

Teeth grit as Tobias reached down to brush across the amulet. William was right. He’d been a mess, but the pain he’d been feeling in the wake of what he’d done was natural. Right. He wasn’t supposed to feel nothing after killing someone... whatever the amulet was doing, it would be far too easy to misuse it. Or to be misused *by* it.

He settled for a quick nod instead of answering as he pushed forward Orlin’s notebook again. “Alright. We can worry about the rest of the questions later. I guess you know what you’re doing with it, so... back to Fredrick.”

“Back to Fredrick.” William nodded again. “He had a descendant with the gift captured. He woke it up. What then?”

The gift. That was exactly how all the old texts referred to magic, and it was not a phrase that Tobias had ever heard William utter before. Clearly it was more than just ancient Lenkis language he’d been learning while he’d developed his powers. “I was just getting to that part.” His eyes dipped to the pages again. “If it follows the way things were going, they would have... yes, here. They prepared her blood to be infused into him. They thought they’d identified the markers in it that were causing the toxicity and...” Tobias fell silent as his eyes widened.

William knew something was wrong. Tobias didn’t doubt it showed on his face as he read those last few lines back again, and then again to make sure. “Uh, Tobias? You alright?”

“They did it.” His muzzle went dry, despite his best efforts to moisten it again. “The entry – the whole *journal* – just ends here. He even noted a rough time.” Tobias looked up,

meeting William's eyes as the hyena tilted his head to the side. "Midnight. *Almost half a day ago*. No one's been back here since then. They had to have succeeded."

The kingsblade grit his teeth. "Read back. Do they say whose magic the descendant's line is from?" Tobias flicked back a couple of pages; he thought he'd seen something like that just before William had shown his own magic to him. Remembering that alone made him shake his head in disbelief; how had William kept that from him? "Don't tell me it was Guavi. Please don't tell me it was Guavi."

With a frown, Tobias paused his flipping through the pages. It was right there, the sigil used in place of the name of the god. "It... was Guavi." He winced as William muttered a Carisi curse under his breath. "How did you know?"

"Guardians attacked while you were..." He trailed off, and some of the hyena's sudden anger melted off as he looked with new concern at Tobias. "While you were getting us into the vault. A kingsblade, too. The kingsblade had a complex rune woven into an emblem he wore, and it had the symbol of Guavi as a part of it. A rune I've never seen."

Tobias frowned. He felt that dark, cold awfulness tickle at the edge of his heart, but it didn't take a hold of him like it had before. He supposed he had the amulet to thank for that; it would be hard to give that up when the time came, but he had to trust the person who could naturally do magic that it would be bad for him. "Guavi is the goddess of dreams. That can't be too bad, can it?"

"Miarvis is the goddess of light. You've only seen a candlelight from me, but I can do much, much worse." William sent the diamond knife skidding across the table with a shove as he plucked up his sword again. "Guavi is more than just a goddess of dreams. Her followers had the power to twist perceptions of the waking world. Change your senses... change your *mind*."

Tobias eyes went wide, but William just bushed down the iron filings from his sword as he continued. "The priests of Guavi wouldn't use it that way, except to punish people who harmed her followers. Sorcerers who drew their power from her... well, they learned to do a lot with it." He glanced up at Tobias. "I felt the power as soon as they attacked. Their eyes glowed, they were too coordinated... too *unnatural*."

"Goodness..." Tobias stumbled back, barely catching himself against Mattias' desk as the full volume of William's implication sank in. If he was right... "You don't... you don't think Fredrick was controlling their minds, do you?"

"It wouldn't surprise me if that was exactly what he wanted." William suddenly looked angry; his eyes flickered with repressed firelight as his fingertips burst to life again. He drew his paw down along the flat of his blade, and both the original runes and the new ones that he'd scribed into the iron began to glow. "If he was going to take control of any form of magic, Guavi would almost be the worst."

"It sure feels like the worst." Dread so filled Tobias that even the amulet couldn't drown it out, and he shivered as he looked back up the stairs toward the entrance to the vault. The guardians outside, apparently utterly dominated by Fredrick, *would* break in. It was just a matter of time. "All Fredrick ever wanted was for people to bow to him. To shower him in praise. In *worship*."

“Yeah. Well, with this sort of power, he could do exactly that. No one would have any choice ever again.” William bared his teeth as the flaming runes in his sword dimmed once more. He slid the weapon back into its sheath as he looked up at Tobias. “We’ll need something that can protect us from the same. If they were using those runes in the emblems to bond them to him...” He frowned. “Maybe there was a similar rune carved into the guardians’ helmets. That glow in their eyes...”

Tobias shivered. That wasn’t natural, and as much as he felt comforted by the knowledge of William’s magic – at least for the moment – the idea of an utterly dominated and coerced force of soldiers under Fredrick’s direct command was terrifying. “That might be a problem.”

He started to flick through the journal again. There had to be something more in there to give them information! William made his way over to Davan’s station and began to sift through the papers; maybe with the knowledge and experience he had, he’d find something that Tobias missed. “How’s it a problem?”

“How is it *not* a problem?” Tobias frowned as he scanned down the pages. “Everything that I was learning here was all about finding ways to give Fredrick absolute power. Davan believed in the cause, Mattias believed in Ratholarin’s right to reign supreme, and Orlin was willing to do anything that let him study his magical curiosities. None of them are the sort to bother to learn to protect themselves against Fredrick.”

“They sound like a terrible choice of people to study magic.” William’s voice dripped with disgust as he violently shoved some of Davan’s papers off the table and across the floor.

Tobias couldn’t help but agree. He glanced up at the rustling of William’s efforts. It was nice that they were agreed again, after all the years of them being on opposite sides. “And yet the perfect ones to study magic for Fredrick. They’d give him everything he... here!” Tobias placed a finger on the notebook’s page as William turned back to him. “It’s the Dreamseer’s ring. That’s what was used to awaken the magic in the subject. Orlin theorised that it could be used to block out the effects of someone attempting to influence them with Guavi’s power.”

Again there came a growl from William. “That’s the first thing I looked for while you were reading up here. I checked the Guavi section first. The ring’s gone.”

Tobias frowned. *Damn!* “There isn’t another one. Apparently the ring was taken from the body of a sorceress who attacked the western villages with some mercenaries years and years ago. Kurest.”

He looked up as William shivered. “I was there.”

“You were... there?” Tobias frowned and shook his head. “That’s too much a coincidence.”

“Trust me, I’m not looking at coincidence as the cause behind a lot of things these days.” The hyena sighed as he glanced up toward the entrance to the vault. “This has to have begun longer ago than we thought.

The tiger shook his head. That didn’t make sense, though. “This program only started under Fredrick; it was one of his first edicts when he took his damn throne. This ring was

recovered when *father* was still king, if it was during the Kurest revolt. It should have been destroyed back then.”

“Unless even then your father had an interest in such things.” William growled quietly to himself as Tobias looked up again. “This place, everything it is... we never knew about it. We never discovered the tunnels in the library or the royal archives, and I was only made aware of them when I became a kingsblade. Eric could have been hoarding magical items for decades before Fredrick got his crown.”

Tobias’ eyes lifted to gaze around the vault. All the racks and racks of books and scrolls and artifacts and relics that had allegedly been gathered by the Ratholarin Institute ever since Fredrick had instated it, drawn from the raids of the guardians all across Ratholarin... so many of those racks had been filled *before* he’d been introduced to Mattias that fateful day. “No... no, it’s not possible. I would have known. Father would have made mention of it to us, just as Fredrick did.”

“Fredrick had no heirs. You and Brett were going to be too important in growing his power for him to leave you in the dark.” William waved a paw up and around the vault. “All of this is just the latest part of it. The plan Ratholarin has always had; the one that Fredrick kept alluding to all these years. It’s never been about eradicating magic.”

“It’s been about hoarding it. Concentrating it. Using it.” Tobias shook his head as he looked around again. All those priceless relics of the past, all the history and knowledge and reverence that was contained within the vault. All of it was a weapon; a blunt instrument in the paws of someone like Fredrick. “Knowing he was doing it is one thing, but seeing how far it has gone? This is... this is insane, William. We can’t let this stand.”

“We won’t. We’ll stop this.” He locked his eyes on Tobias’ and the tiger shuddered at the intensity of it. “It has to burn. All of it.”

The thought turned the tiger’s stomach and his heart twitched in his chest, but William was right. If even a scrap of it was allowed to exist, it could be used to threaten innocent people again. Even if William was able to use his magic for pure and noble purpose, that didn’t mean that others would. The madness had to end. It had to stop, right there and right then. “Then I suppose it’s a good thing you take after your paternal magical line, isn’t it?”

The hyena’s expression soured, but he nodded along as Tobias felt his chest begin to tighten. “Get up the stairs. Once you’re in a safer place, I’ll burn it all down. Then we can go, see if we can’t find Fredrick.”

Tobias nodded, but no sooner had he done so than he found himself doubled over. He grunted, teeth bared as he snarled at the air. A boiling storm of rage and hatred pressed in against his chest, pounding as if being hammered into him. It took a second for his mind to return enough to identify the source not as himself, but from the amulet. It vibrated about his neck, and he glanced down at it as the sapphire’s inner light began to glow brighter. “Ugh!”

“Tobias? What is it?” William’s voice sounded distant as that hatred continued to mount inside him. It quickened the tiger’s blood; he drooled across the table as he snarled through a torrent of rage. “Tobias? Tobias!”

The prince snapped his head up, but his vision was tunnelled. It fixed on William, the hyena's form outlined in pulsating red as Tobias panted. His claws extended toward his friend *that fiend* as he raised his arm *to choke the life from his pathetic form and make him suffer for what he's done to me!*

William's sword rose *because of course he'd try to kill me* as he took a step back *right that he should fear me!* Tobias snarled at him as he rounded the table, roaring and swiping the desk up and end over end *just as he would this Carisi wretch who dared break his heart!* William's muzzle moved, silent to Tobias' ears *but his hateful words pierced him regardless.* He stalked forward *to tear William's face to shreds with his bare claws!*

The rage vanished, cut clean from Tobias' body as William flicked his sword out in a single, clean motion. It arced toward Tobias almost faster than the tiger could see, but not for his neck. It struck the amulet itself, and the rusted chain gave away before the tip of William's sword. The moment that pendant dropped from around Tobias' neck he lurched backward, gasping for air before he slumped to the ground.

The world went dark for a moment, his head swimming in the aftermath of what exactly had happened. He didn't even feel the impact against the ground, his vision blurred even as William knelt down beside him. The hyena's voice whispered at the edge of his mind as he worked his muzzle back and forth, trying to form words. They didn't come.

It wasn't until William's paw touched Tobias' chest that he found himself able to breathe once more. Spittle drooled from the corners of his muzzle as he fought to clear his mouth, and he coughed quietly to himself as he forced his eyes to focus on William's face. "W..."

"Take it easy. Just stay still for a moment." The hyena's words were soft and almost ethereal, but they seemed to solidify in Tobias' ears as the tightness and rage that had wound up inside him ebbed away. It left the tiger feeling oddly empty, like a part of him had been hollowed out to make room for so much awfulness. "That amulet was a bad idea... I shouldn't have let you wear it."

The amulet. Tobias' head rolled to the side to bring the broken thing back into view. The gem and the pendant themselves seemed to be somehow intact, but the chain had shattered; pieces of the rusty thing were scattered across the immediate area. He sighed and worked his muzzle for a second before the prince was able to speak again. "I... don't know what..."

"It wasn't you." William leaned back and offered Tobias his paw, and the tiger gingerly took it as the kingsblade pulled him slowly into a sitting position. "It was the magic inside. Sensing and feeding on your desires, amplifying them to-"

"Wait, sensing?" Tobias' head rang as it jerked up quickly to look at William. The hyena frowned, but nodded back to him. "But a... a priest of Vicaris wouldn't need to sense their own emotions. And I don't... I never wanted to do what... what I felt."

Again William nodded, even as a shadow of dread began to stretch across Tobias' heart. "No, you're right. They'd wear them to feel the innermost desires of those around them. You probably didn't get anything from me because..." He paused and shrugged. The more Tobias heard, the more he was certain: those feelings had not been his own. They could only have come from one source... "I think it's because of my awakened magic. I was told it'd protect

me against... nevermind. I don't know, exactly. I wasn't taught how it all works, just how to use it."

"It wasn't me. And it wasn't you. Then..." Tobias shuddered as he tried to rise, and only managed to do so when William helped to lift him back upright again. His whole body trembled, partly with exertion in the wake of what the amulet had wrought and partly with fear of what was about to happen. "I have always known that hate and rage was there, but to feel it... I cannot begin to fathom how he lives with it."

William's jaw tightened as he glanced up toward the entrance to the vault high above. "Who? Who lives with it?"

"Who else could hate so hard?" Tobias sighed as he braced himself against one of the not-upended desks. As he followed William's gaze, he almost expected to see his brother standing there atop the stairs, looking down on them like a god from on high; like the god he thought himself destined to be. The spot was empty, but that was only a matter of time. Tobias shuddered. "It was Fredrick. Fredrick's feelings... Fredrick's rage and hate. I felt it all, strong enough to overwhelm anything and everything else."

"William... he's coming."