

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART TEN

30th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

“William... he’s coming.”

The hyena grit his teeth. Of course. If Tobias had been affected immediately by the rage and the hatred that had overwhelmed him, it would have happened as soon as he put the amulet on. It wasn’t until an overwhelming desire entered the range of its magic – until *Fredrick* had entered the range of the magic – that it had twisted the tiger’s heart so. “Okay. Okay, that’s fine. We can handle that.”

He could only frown as Tobias shook his head and slumped harder against the desk. That amulet had really drained him... or perhaps it was the sheer power of Fredrick’s emotions that had left him so weak. Certainly William had never seen Tobias so mouth-foamingly furious in his life. “Are you-”

“I’m fine. I... *will* be fine.” Again the prince shook his head; William wasn’t sure he was all that convinced, either. “I can’t expect you to face him alone. Not like this.”

It was a sweet gesture, but entirely unhelpful. There was no way Tobias, in the state he’d been left, would be of any use to William in a fight. If it came down to Fredrick’s arrival with a force of guardians and kingsblades under his direct mental dominion, Tobias would be more likely to get in the way than anything else. That said nothing about how the tiger would react if he was forced to take another life.

William cast his gaze around. The different segments of the room and all the divine gifts that they represented were a treasure trove of artifacts that might have been useful if Tobias had been able to wield magic himself. William knew he might be able to survive the encounter, no matter what magic Fredrick was able to wield. Tobias was another matter. The prince had to be protected. “Is there any other way out of here?”

Tobias blinked as he looked up, meeting William’s gaze. “I... no. It’s a vault, William. One way in, one way out. And I’m *not* leaving.”

“If Fredrick *is* coming, then he’s coming to kill both of us.” The hyena’s eyes narrowed as he squeezed tighter on the hilt of his sword. “You have to live. You have to survive this, whatever happens, because you need to be able to take the throne when all of this is done.” He caught the roll of Tobias’ eyes as he looked around them again. Racks and shelves and more racks and more shelves... none of it made for particularly effective cover if magic was brought into the equation.

The tolling of a bell managed to bring William out of his thoughts. His head lifted, gaze cast around as the sound rang out clearly even through the vault. A glance at the ceiling revealed the source of the sound; in the grand depiction of the gods in its heart, he could see the point

where all the walls joined together. There rested a bell, swaying slowly as it was drawn back and forth by some unseen mechanism. “What does that mean, Tobias?”

The prince just shook his head as William turned back to him. “I don’t know... I didn’t even know there was a bell there.” He closed his eyes as the bell continued to ring, listening to it intently even as William started to move toward the steps. “The sound’s wrong, but the pattern is an alarm. That the city is under attack.” His eyes opened as William froze in place, and when he turned to look back over his shoulder it was to meet a strange look from Tobias. “William? *Are* we under attack?”

There really wasn’t any point in lying; the tiger already knew about his magic. “I did say I was going to need a distraction so I could have a chance at getting to Fredrick.” He nodded toward the ceiling. “If that’s an alarm and it’s going out across the city, then they’re probably drawing off his forces as we speak. This is good.”

“*Good?*” Tobias was outright glaring at William by that point; just how much of his anger was leftover from the amulet and how much was legitimately his feelings on the matter was something William couldn’t tell for sure. “If the city’s under attack, this is the worst time for us to be doing this! If Fredrick’s forces are split between protecting him and the city, innocent people are going to die!”

“Innocent people *always* die.” William fought back a wince as he spoke those words. His blood-father had used some version of those same words to try and convince him of the righteousness of their cause, and it had gone about as well on William as it was going on Tobias. “You think just killing Fredrick and Brett’s going to fix this? You think the people cheering them on and enacting their plans gladly aren’t going to keep going?”

Through the ringing of the bell, William could hear the tiger scoff at him. Clearly he was already getting over the shock of what he’d done, if he was about to start judging the hyena again. “I think I could reign them in.”

“Even if that’s true, you *asked* me to do this. Don’t forget that.” William shook his head as he brushed down the flat of his sword and made his way up one more step. “You left me a note, you dragged me out of the castle into a dingy tunnel, and you told me you wanted me to kill Fredrick. You wanted me to kill Fredrick, and I had to do it soon. You asked me to do this.”

“I didn’t ask you to set an attack on the city! I...” His eyes flicked past William to the top of the stairs, and the tiger’s voice just trailed off. William winced as he watched the prince’s jaw slacken somewhat. He knew what he’d see if he looked up as well. “Oh, Fredrick...”

Turn William did, but not without raising his sword to block first. It wasn’t the king, like William had suspected it would be. Nor was it the guardians who had been beating at the warded door. No, three figures stood tall at the top of the stairs, just at the edge of the tunnel through which one accessed the vault. A raccoon, a horse and a panther, dressed in identical white robes, trimmed with silver and blue stood together at the top of the room. William frowned, but he’d heard enough from Tobias to recognise them as the leaders of the Ratholarin Institute. They were its Triumvirate: Mattias, Davan, and Orlin.

And all six of their eyes glowed a deep purple.

William stepped back down again, frowning as he looked over at Tobias. There was no way the prince was going to be able to hide himself from them now; he needed to protect the tiger. That meant drawing the scholars closer so he could actually dispatch them. The hyena took a slow breath and nodded up to them. "Which one of you is Davan?"

There was no answer. Instead, all three of the scholars began to march down the stairs. They remained in step with one another, just as eerily synchronised as the guardians had been outside the Institute. The horse led the approach, followed by the panther and then the raccoon. William lifted his voice as Tobias pushed off the desk and started to back away, looking around desperately. "I asked you three a question! Which one of you's the one with a problem with tailraisers?"

The three remained silent, but that time there was a twitch from the horse; a sort of almost-stumble at that last word. Good. Perhaps there was enough of him left in there to break the spell, so to speak. "Come on, now! Don't be shy! I have it on very good authority from Tobias that one of *you* spends an awful lot of time thinking about the good prince with a cock in his muzzle! I was just hoping we could compare notes!"

The glow in the horse's eyes dimmed slightly, but his muzzle did twist into a snarl as his steps continued to slip out of time with his companions. "You are not welcome in this place."

"Now we're getting somewhere..." The horse's voice was strangely distorted, twisted outside of what it no doubt normally sounded like. If anything, William almost thought he could hear an echo of Fredrick's voice resonating within every word that the scholar spoke. Maybe the words weren't even his own. Maybe the king was in full control and spoke through his puppet. "Where's the king? I was told I could meet him here."

"You are not welcome in this place." Now the voice came through from all three scholars, and William was all but certain he could piece together Fredrick's tones in the midst of them all. With the strange resonance, it was Fredrick's voice that was strongest in the chorus. "You are a traitor to the crown and will be sent to sleep eternal."

"Yeah. Heard that before." William stepped to the side, but the scholars didn't look at him. Instead, they locked their eyes on Tobias. "Hey, don't you mind him. You want to worry about *me*."

The three settled on one of the ledges that rounded the room, storing more of the research materials related to magic and the gods. There they spread out as William slid a little closer to Tobias. If they weren't paying attention to him, he'd have to find some other way to deal with them. A glance aside showed that Tobias had shifted slightly further away, but his eyes were firmly fixed on the Triumvirate as he spoke. "William, their wrists."

William's eyes dipped, but he saw immediately what had caught Tobias' eye. The three scholars all wore an identical silver band about their right wrist. It was all he could see with their sleeves in the way, but it was a miracle that Tobias had noticed it at all. That had to be the source of the enchantment holding them swayed, just like the helms with the guardians and, presumably, the emblem on the kingsblade armour. That didn't necessarily help, but at least it was something he could target.

No sooner had he had that thought though than the horse lifted his right paw. What looked like liquid shadow drooled out of his fingertips, flowing like water up and into the air above his fingers. William's eyes narrowed as the back of his neck tingled. He glanced over at Tobias again; the tiger had frozen in place at the sight of the horse's magic. That wasn't a good sign.

William was in motion as soon as the horse drew his other paw back. He all but leaped toward Tobias, his sword brought up before him. When the scholar thrust his arm forward, the ball of shadow moved with the motion. It shot through the air toward the prince. William swung, not with the edge of his sword but the flat of the blade. His runes roared to life.

The shadow ball slammed into the sword, and William felt the impact less in the weapon and his muscles and more in his mind. He grunted as he slid to a halt before Tobias, sword raised and slowly shifting to block the prince from the Triumvirate. The shadow that had been loosed at Tobias swirled around the runes that William himself had carved, before it transmuted itself into smoke and vanished into thin wisps. He sighed quietly with relief; the protection runes worked on magic.

Far less happy were the scholars. They frowned as one, and all three raised their paws next. Once more the shadows began to trickle out from their bracers, swirling to points in the air just above their beckoning paws. Whatever Fredrick had done to them, they were able to draw from the same power that the king himself was tapping. That he was so able to attune himself to the stolen magic flowing in his veins was not only impressive, but *terrifying*.

Worse however was what was behind the scholars. Emerging from the vault entrance passage was another series of figures that were far more familiar to him. The first was a badger in the armour of a kingsblade, and William's heart lurched at the sight of his father's old friend and compatriot, Rachel. Behind her was Shannon, the ferret that served as Fredrick's personal kingsblade. Immediately after her, though...

Well, that was Brett.

He wore the armour of a guardian, but with his head unencumbered by any helmet. And he, like the kingsblades and the scholars and the guardians, bore the glowing eyes of those who had become Fredrick's puppets. William growled under his breath, but was forced to bring his focus back to the Triumvirate as they loosed their next assault. Two of the shadow balls slammed into his sword, while William caught the third in an outstretched paw. Divine flame wrapped around the captured, tainted magic and scorched it out of existence before whatever it was could find purchase within him. The runes of his weapon did the rest.

As Brett and the kingsblades began to make their descent, William chanced a look back at Tobias. The tiger's back was to him; he was furiously rummaging through the nearest rack of artifacts. No doubt it was to look for something that would protect him, but William was already certain that there would be nothing there. Not that they could be sure would work, and not in any reasonable stretch of time. He knew two things worked for sure: his Carisi blade, and his own magic. One of those Tobias couldn't wield.

And one of them he *could*. "Tobias, here." William stepped back as the tiger turned back toward him, and reached back with his swordarm to offer the hilt of his weapon. "Hold it tight. Block with the-"

“You can’t give me your sword!” Tobias’ shout was one of surprise and disbelief, but it was interrupted by another volley of shadow from the Triumvirate. That time William caught all three blasts on his blade, their shadow drawn to his protective runes. As long as they held, Tobias would be safe. “You need it to protect yourself!”

“I’ll be fine! You won’t be without it, and we don’t have time to argue!” There was only a short amount of time before the scholars attacked again, and the kingsblades were drawing closer by the second. He reached out with his other paw and grabbed Tobias’. He slapped it against the hilt of his blade and let go; it sagged somewhat as Tobias stumbled with the weight of it. That was something William couldn’t help with, though. “Whatever you do, do *not* let them hit you with that stuff!”

“W-why? What does it do?” Tobias yipped as the raccoon and horse both loosed their next attacks in his direction, but he nevertheless lifted William’s weapon to block their blows. He didn’t seem to need to work hard; the shadows seemed to be drawn into the runes the hyena had carved. The panther however shifted his attack toward William, and he grunted as he caught that bolt in another flaming paw. Fending off their magic was easier than conjuring great blasts, but he didn’t like the idea of doing it for a protracted period.

Still, the fastest way to deal with them would be to get through the kingsblades and Brett. They’d reached the scholars by then, and he watched as the panther smoothly stepped aside to allow them to descend. “Honestly, I don’t know. Just stay low, and keep that sword up. I’ll be back soon.” The hyena bared his teeth as he unslung his battleaxe from his back and twisted it in his paws. It wasn’t his preferred weapon, but it would have to do.

The panther was winding up for another attack on him rather than Tobias, but William wasn’t about to give him the chance. He stepped to the side, leaving Tobias with his sword as he made for Rachel. His new angle put her and Shannon between him and the panther, and William caught sight of the scholar shifting his aim instead back to Tobias. That was good.

The swing from Rachel’s axe was less good, but William leaned back from the blow before it could hit him. “Rachel, please! You must fight past his influence!” He shouted the words at her as she brought her axe about for another swing. A quick jab of William’s axe caught her arm with the head of his axe, causing no wounds but shifting the trajectory of her strike. Her swing went wide, passing by him even as he quickly pulled his weapon back.

William frowned; Rachel was a skilled and experienced warrior – not to mention a friend by that point for more than just her relationship with his father – with many more years than him in the kingsblades. There was no way she, even on a bad day, would make such a sloppy attack. It had to be whatever enchantment Fredrick had woven into them to command them; if their minds were suppressed, then perhaps their ability to use their own skills were as well. He could use that.

But getting through to the person underneath might just open those skills back up. William stepped back once more from the badger as she swing wide for him, his eyes lifting past her to Shannon and Brett. They were following Rachel down, but if he gave them room to move he could easily be caught up by the trio. That would leave Tobias vulnerable, and he couldn’t allow that to happen.

But maybe there was another solution to the problem. He watched as Rachel reared back for another swing, but that time William didn't back away. Instead he closed the gap between them, axe held sideways before him. Rachel's overhead swing never landed as he slammed the haft of his axe into her chin, knocking her back and dazing her for a second. He let go of the weapon with one paw and grasped instead for the emblem across her chainmail.

A stinging sensation came with an arc of magical energy at the touch. It left William recoiling in pain, his fingers left to tingle in the wake of the discharge. He cursed as Rachel recovered from his blow and sent another axe swing her way. William's one-paw defence only barely stalled out to momentum of her swing, and it almost knocked his own weapon into his side. Worse, it pushed him down further and opened the path for others to Tobias.

Shannon had already noticed that it seemed, and the ferret took a step to the side as she headed in that direction. William could see Tobias' wide eyes as the tiger noticed her approach. The Carisi blade in his paws twitched toward her and William cursed again. If he defended himself against her, he'd be vulnerable to the Triumvirate! "Forgive me, father..."

Rachel's next swing met the full force of William's block. Both paws rode the haft of his axe as he leaned into hers, stalling the swing of it out by the full weight of his body. He roared up into her face as he turned around her, swinging the haft of his axe up once more toward her face. It struck her muzzle, and Rachel's head snapped to the side as William rolled around her.

It brought Shannon back into view, but whatever magic was driving her didn't allow her to perceive his movements. Even as she marched toward Tobias, the swing of William's axe came quick and low. It caught the ferret's leg, gashing deep into it and staining the nearby racks with red. Shannon buckled without a word, but barely even turned to regard him. Not even her expression shifted. It was like she hadn't felt it.

William couldn't focus on her unnatural reaction though, because Brett was still there. Behind both of the females with his sword in paw and eyes filled with corrupt light, he thrust toward William the moment the hyena had exposed himself. The blow scored his armour; William gasped as the sword sliced through some of the chain at his side, thankfully if only narrowly missing his flesh. With the momentum from his wounding swing on Shannon, William was able to bring the bladeless end of his battleaxe up and around to jab into Brett's stomach.

That left the head of his weapon bared before Rachel, who by that point had recovered enough to harass him again. William was faster than her enchantment-addled reflexes however, and thrust forward with his axe. The head caught Rachel in the throat, and the badger stumbled backward as her muzzle parted, gasping for breath. Without looking over his shoulder, William leaned back and flicked up the end of his axe to strike Brett in the side of the head. A quick duck brought his weapon down again, but when he rose a second later it was to bring the head of his weapon up again. That time it was no jab, but a close-range slice across Rachel's neck.

Hot, thick blood splattered across the side of William's face as he twisted back toward Shannon again. She had stumbled as she turned toward him, her hamstrung leg unable to support the motion. Her battleaxe dropped from her paws as she snatched up her hatchet instead, and the swing of her attack came faster than William was ready for. Like Brett's thrust it scored his armour, but this blow wasn't one he could so easily avoid.

The blade bit into William's side, and he gasped as a surge of pain erupted from that point. The swing of one arm knocked her blooded hatchet clear of his side; blood spilled from the wound without the weapon to stop him up. Shannon stumbled back from his shove, but not so far that William wasn't able to step into her and lift up his leg. Her other paw rose to cover her face, but not before the hyena's boot crashed down on her face. It struck her square in the muzzle, and the sound of broken bone reached William's ears. Those bones were shunted right back into her head by the force of his kick, driving them into her brain. The glow in the kingsblade's eyes remained only as she flailed, but the light of her life was extinguished before she hit the ground.

Unfortunately, that still left Brett. With his pain muted by the domination that afflicted his mind, he'd recovered faster than William had been ready for. By the time he'd turned back to Brett, the prince had drawn his sword back for another stab. It was all William could do to twist away.

It wasn't enough.

Pain lanced through his gut as the tiger's sword pierced his middle. He cried out in pain even as his mind sharpened on the target in front of him. Brett. Close range. Sword busy. Paws busy. Close range. Paws. Brett. William looked up into the prince's glowing eyes. There was no sign of the male inside that deadened stare. Whatever of Brett was within was buried so deep there was nothing William could do to reach him if he wanted to.

It was a good thing, then, that he didn't particularly want to. William reached down, burying his claws into the tiger's wrists. He used that leverage to shred Brett's grip on the sword, leaving the weapon buried inside him with its point protruding from William's back. When Brett's grip had been suitably removed from it, William instead reached up to grab the tiger's head in both paws. Blood ran down his claws as he squeezed tightly and dug his claws in for leverage. Roared. *Wrenched* with all of his might.

Snap!

That time the glow of the enchantment vanished first. Brett's muzzle fell slack as his head was twisted to an unnatural angle. He crumpled instantly, face-first into the ground. William stumbled as he reached down to grip the sword stuck in his middle. He tapped it with a fingertip as he turned toward Rachel, but the kingsblade was already on the ground. She was out of the fight, not even trying to stem the bleeding at her throat. Whatever Fredrick had done to her, he was willing to let her perish.

William grit bloody teeth as he dropped his axe to the ground. A glance at the Triumvirate showed that they were still focused on Tobias, the prince desperately fending their blows off still. He had a moment right then, and if he didn't take care advantage of it William knew he probably wouldn't get another. Normally his magic didn't burn him, but maybe if he focused just right...

The hyena reached to the sword that had stuck him, and groaned through the pain as he pulled it free again. Blood pulsed out of the wound as he pressed one paw to the site and closed his eyes. Fresh agony struck him as he conjured the flames back to his paw, and they seared black the skin that had been split by the blade. The flow of blood stopped even as William scorched his own fur and flesh. The scream of pain was unavoidable.

It did, however, draw the attention of the scholars. The panther that had previously tried to assault him with Fredrick's magical energies turned toward William again. A new shadow orb swirled into the air before him, but William had no interest in giving him even a modicum of a chance to loose it. Blood and spittle flecked from his muzzle as he roared and charged forward, blood drooling from the still-open wounds on his back and side.

The sound attracted the rest of the scholars' attention, and they turned as one to target William. He brought up his empty paw, and flame swirled between his fingers as he approached the Triumvirate. The first bolt arrived before he did, and William snatched it out of the air with a burning paw. There was that brief surge of energy inside him; a lethargy that raced through him at the absorption of whatever dark magic he'd neutralised. It didn't stop him. It *wouldn't* stop him.

He was only barely aware of Tobias watching on with a mixture of awe and horror as the wounded hyena buried his borrowed sword in the chest of the panther scholar. The new ball of shadow sputtered out as the sword found his heart, but that did nothing for the other two. William all but bounced off the panther as he left the sword buried in him just as it had been inside the hyena. The flames in his paw leaped forward as he continued on, a short pulse that threaded through the air to pass right through the equine's throat. It burned a neat hole there, scorched black by the passage of the magical flame. As the shadows he conjured too faded away, William snatched up his hatchet from his belt in his previously sword-filled paw. His roar rose in volume as he leaped forward, bodily slamming into the raccoon before he could channel his orb in full. His hatchet blade found the scholar's chest, and the weight of William's body as it crashed into him ensured that it sank in *deep*.

It left him snarling through his pain as he lay atop the raccoon. He could feel blood spilling out between them from the wound he'd inflicted, but the scholar's eyes remained fixed on him. They stared through that unnatural glow, and then he did the worst thing that William could have possibly imagined.

He *smiled*.

He smiled, despite the hatchet buried in his chest. He smiled, despite the life drooling out from the mortal wound. He smiled, even as the glow in his eyes faded away. Whatever hold Fredrick had over the Triumvirate member evaporated, but well before his life did. William watched on as the raccoon licked at his smiling muzzle, smearing blood across it as he leaned up into the hatchet blade. "Such *power*. I wish... that we had found you... instead."

William's snarl disappeared as a shudder ran through him. The raccoon's smile broadened as he leaned back again. The strength required to hold his head up left him, and it fell back heavily against the stone floor. The scholar's expression turned vacant, but the smile lingered. The hyena shivered anew.

It was the tickle of blood continuing to run from his back that forced William to move again. He brought a shaking paw around behind himself and touched a couple of fingers to the spot where Brett's sword had poked the rest of the way through him. Even as he thanked whatever powers that had seen fit to apparently guide the blade past anything vital, he groaned in pain as he summoned the flame once more to his paw. Blood boiled off, sizzling as his flesh was burned closed once more, fur turned to blackened ash by his own magic.

When the flow of blood had been sufficiently staunch, William grunted and rolled off of the dead scholar. A glance back showed that all three had indeed succumbed to his assault; the horse was quite obviously dead, but it became clear that his aim had been better than Brett's when it came to sticking a person with a sword. The prince's weapon still stuck out of the panther's chest as he lay sprawled out on the floor, raised for all the world like a grotesque flagpole. Immediate threats dealt with.

A glance to the side showed Tobias, still cowering with the hyena's sword raised before him. Whatever flames had licked along the original runes had long since dissipated, but the ones that William himself had carved seemed to have held. The prince didn't hold his attention for long however, as a bloody gurgle reached his ears. William turned further, back toward the kingsblades.

The sound had come from Rachel. Fredrick had released his control on her as well, but too late for William to do anything to help her. Nevertheless, he turned and crawled back over toward the badger with a wince of both dread and pain. Her head rolled semi-limply toward him. There was no dominating glow in her eyes. She was free. Free to die, at least... but free to die as *herself*.

William stifled his growl as he reached the kingsblade's side. One of her paws twitched, and the hyena reached out to it without a moment's hesitation. The gash in her throat was barely spilling anymore, and Rachel lay in a far too large pool of her own blood. That she was conscious at all was a miracle in itself and her eyes, albeit unfocused, drifted toward William. Her muzzle twitched. It may have been an attempt at a smile.

He couldn't bring himself to offer the same. Hate and anger – those same feelings that Tobias had said claimed him through the amulet – surged in him for the person who had invoked them. The *monster*, who had done this to a fine soldier with a good heart. William gnashed his teeth as Rachel looked up at him in a daze. She didn't have long. Her paw was already slacking even as her muzzle tried to form words. He couldn't hear it, but her mouth might have been trying to form the name of his father.

The hyena clenched his jaw and nodded to her. "Go in peace, sister." His other arm rose to cradle her head, lifting it against his chest while his paw all but tore the emblem from her armour. "I swear that Fredrick will die for what he's done to you."

William didn't know if Zane's old friend heard him. He didn't know if she understood what he was saying even if she had, but the words weren't so much for her. As the life left her body and her last breath escaped her rent throat, William had spoken the words more for himself. An affirmation. A reminder of how Fredrick destroyed all that he touched. That he would destroy everything if he wasn't stopped. He held the badger's body a moment longer. Reached up with bloody fingers to close her eyes.

When at last he looked up again, Tobias still hadn't moved. The prince was watching him, brows knit together with concern and ears drooped. His muzzle opened as if to say something, though it appeared he thought better of it and just sighed instead. William couldn't blame him. "Are you alright?"

"I feel a little... woozy, but I think I'm alright, yes. Thank you." The tiger straightened up slightly, struggling somewhat to lift the hyena's Carisi sword. For his part, William gently

laid Rachel back down across the floor as he pushed himself back up to his knees. Being fully upright could wait a little longer. “Are... are you alright?”

“I’ve been stabbed, so... no. I don’t think I am.” William glanced down at his stomach. Through all the blood that had soaked him from charging down the Triumvirate, he could see the wound in his gut where Brett had stuck him. His flesh was seared back thanks to his magic, but it was still holding his blood inside his body. For the moment, at least; William didn’t want to imagine how easy it would be to wrench his wounds open again.

Tobias nodded back at him. William watched as the prince’s eyes dipped to his wound; he winced. It must have looked worse than William thought. “I didn’t expect you to... to burn yourself.”

“Better burned than bled out.” William closed his eyes as he reached down to Rachel’s battleaxe, grasping it tight and using it as a brace to return to his feet. The hyena laid it back down against her body once he was up, and stepped over to pick up his own weapon. “More will be on the way... we have to move. We have to go, now.”

“Go? Go where?” Tobias frowned as he stood up a little higher, hefting the sword somewhat as he started over toward William. “What about Fredrick? What about-”

“Tobias, I’ve been *stabbed*.” William leaned to the side and spat a muzzlefur’s worth of bloody spittle across the floor. He caught Tobias wincing at the display, and the tiger almost missed a step in the process. “I’m not exactly at my best here.”

“But your magic-”

“*Exhausts* me.” William sighed. The words tasted bitter on his tongue as Tobias reached him. The prince offered the sword back to William, and he quickly slung his axe back over his shoulder before he accepted the Carisi blade. Its familiar weight and balance felt much more comfortable in his paw. “Tobias, I can’t keep this up. The plan was always to catch him distracted and off-guard, because I knew I’d exhaust myself too quick if I had to fight my way to him. I just...” He sighed and glanced down at Rachel’s blood-soaked form. “Tobias, I’ve lost a lot of blood. If this was a battlefield, I’d be pulling back to be tended to. I can’t fight as well as I’m worried I will need to. Overusing my magic now could kill me.”

“Good... It will save me the trouble.”

Tobias’ head snapped up at the voice, his eyes cast upward to the top of the vault stairs. William, by contrast, didn’t even bother. He recognised the voice for what it was, even distorted by the stolen magic surging through its owner’s veins. “Good afternoon, my king.” William’s fingers tightened on the hilt of his sword. So much for running, resting, or mending.

When he at last turned, William immediately wished that he hadn’t. Fredrick indeed stood at the top of the stairs, but he was barely recognisable as the tiger he’d once been. The black stripes of his fur were shocked white, and more than half of it had fallen out entirely. That same purple glow that had lit the eyes of his puppets burned more fiercely in the eyes of the king himself. He seemed simultaneously larger and smaller; his body shifted and misshapen just enough to be noticeable. Whatever mechanisms had been used to grant him magic had deformed him terribly, but Fredrick didn’t seem to mind in the least. “The both of you, together. How *appropriate*.”

William let his whole body turn. He placed his uninjured side toward Fredrick as he raised his sword and lowered into a defensive stance. Whatever had happened to Fredrick, there was only one way forward. The king was between them and escape, and even if he wasn't, one look at him was enough to tell William all he needed to know. The problem was worse than he'd thought. "You've gone too far, Fredrick. You need to be stopped."

"You cannot stop me." The king raised his left paw, and even at that distance William could make out a series of rings that adorned each of the tiger's fingers. One for all three fingers, one on his thumb, and as he looked to the other paw William saw the same there too. How many magical artifacts had he already taken? "I was always beyond you, but now... now the gap is wider than you can possibly imagine."

The hyena growled as he took a step back to shield Tobias with his body. One paw dipped from the hilt of his sword as he conjured a small measure of flame to his grasp. "Then you now, as ever, know nothing of who you face." He held up his paw, wreathed in fire as he flashed a quiet smile. "This magic is *mine*. It isn't stolen, but given. Bound to my blood. I don't need *trinkets* to burn you to ashes."

The confidence he'd tried to convey faltered as Fredrick laughed at him. The sound echoed off the walls, bouncing around the room until it sounded like the king was laughing from every direction simultaneously. Tobias cringed back from the sound as Fredrick brought his paws together before him. "Neither do I." His fingers hooked together and he drew them slowly apart.

No sooner had he done so than brilliant violet flame flared to life between his paws. It didn't flicker in the air like William's, but instead swirled like a grand tempest; overwhelmingly powerful and only barely contained. "Your blood gives you strength? I shall take it. Add it to my own."

"Goodness... Fredrick, what have you *done*?" Tobias' voice rose, shouting up at his brother as William let the fire in his paw fade away. "The Triumvirate said they found a descendant, but-"

"There have been *many* they found with the right breeding." Fredrick stepped forward to begin his descent toward them. Unlike the others though, when his paws stepped off the stairs they didn't connect with the next. He simply stepped into the air, and it supported him as if he stood on solid ground. William caught Tobias' look of utter astonishment, but he was more concerned with what else the tiger was able to do. "Once properly treated and activated, we discovered so much more could be done." He grinned as he floated down toward them, his fangs more pronounced than they had been before. "I have finished father's work. Ratholarin has no king. Ratholarin has a *god*."

"Ratholarin has a *monster*." William all but spat the word as Fredrick laughed at him. Flames licked along his sword, concentrating in the runes laid into the blade. "That is all you have ever been. Now you just look more the part."

Fredrick's laughter died off instantly. The glow in his eyes brightened, sharpening as his head turned to William. "A monster? That is what you, *filth* that you are, think of me?"

"That is what we have always thought of you." The disgust in Tobias' voice was palpable, but it didn't divert Fredrick's seething glare from William in the slightest. He

squeezed his sword hilt tighter in response. “You are broken. *Wrong*. You have always been like this, and it cannot be allowed to continue!”

“I see you are already willing to spill royal blood here.” His eyes left William for a moment as the hyena began to growl again. As Fredrick floated closer, he could feel a sort of buzzing in the back of his mind. It was as though the magic that flooded Fredrick’s body was distorted and twisted, and the proximity to it was agitating the power within William. It was a sickening sensation, like a vibration that ran through every vein in his body and shook up his insides. “You cannot be permitted to live for this alone. I will enjoy this.”

“Fredrick, stop.” Tobias’ voice rang out, all but banishing the echoes of Fredrick’s in the process. Such was the resolution in the younger tiger’s tone that even the king paused in place, floating above them with his gaze suddenly locked on Tobias. “That’s enough. Stop this right now. Too much blood has already been shed, and... look what you pushed Brett to! That blood was lost because of you! You killed our brother!”

“No. This disgusting little *Carisi* murdered Brett.” The king’s paws curled, fingers hooking into the air at his side but not quite becoming fists. Sparks leaped between his claws. “He did it! He could have rolled over and accepted his fate! My divine will! But he resisted me, and now he will be punished for it!”

William snorted. The tiger really had lost his mind. “You’ve been punishing people for made-up crimes for so long, it’s no wonder you can’t even see your role in this.”

Fredrick barked a quick laugh in response. “My role? My role in this is to usurp the gods themselves. To lead; to rule; to purify this land and *all* lands. To see what is good promoted across the world, and to destroy all that would threaten it! Become one true, all-powerful god!” One of his arms lifted and he pointed a claw at William. It seemed as though the king wasn’t even capable of sheathing them any longer. William held fast to his sword and settled into his crouch. “You are evil. You have *always* been evil.

“And now, finally, I will purge you from my world.”