

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART ELEVEN

30th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

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

Tobias wished he had the confidence that William seemed to radiate. The hyena was magnificent; injured and exhausted, and he stood fast between him and whatever it was that Fredrick had become. Fredrick’s boast or threat or whatever it was didn’t seem to have affected him in the least.

The tiger, instead, was shaking. Fear rocked him to his core, chilled his heart and left him almost unable to anything but cower behind his kingsblade. There was nothing he could do. He wasn’t a warrior like William. He didn’t have any magic. He was just a prince, and a disappointing one at that. He was nothing. Always nothing.

He might have sagged, but caught himself with a frown as he looked up instead at Fredrick. Whatever he had become, it was as though Fredrick’s worst impulses had become all that he was. That any nuance to his brother’s soul had been wiped out by what had happened to him. All that he’d seen of magical study with the Triumvirate had concurred: too much magic would warp the psyche. Twist a person until they were almost unrecognisable.

Almost. And Tobias knew Fredrick better than anyone else. As the king raised his paws above his head and drew that fiery energy higher, Tobias knew what he had to do. Something William couldn’t do; something that Fredrick couldn’t understand.

He laughed.

Tobias doubled over, paws on his knees, and he *laughed*. He forced the sound out, but it was so loud and so raucous and so mad-sounding that even to his own ears he couldn’t tell that the sound wasn’t genuine. Tears began to fill his eyes as he rent his throat, laughing harder and harder and harder. It took almost half a minute of abject laughter before Fredrick clearly couldn’t compose himself any further. “What is this?”

But the prince didn’t answer. Instead he looked up through tears, staring right into the burning holes that lay where Fredrick’s eyes had once been. No sooner had Fredrick begun to frown than Tobias laughed all the harder. He caught a weird look from William as well, as the hyena looked back at him with concern on his face. He even shouted up at Fredrick. “What have you done to him?”

“This is not my will.” Fredrick just sounded confused and irritated in equal parts as Tobias gasped for breath, still forcing more laughter through his muzzle as he shook his head. “What is the meaning of this, Tobias? Speak!”

“I... I can’t... I can’t...” He fell back into his laughter even as he buckled. In his thoughts though, he was smiling. *Grinning*. It was already working. He just needed William to

figure it out and take advantage. “You really... really did all this? Just to become a god, and... and you think you *did*?” He howled again, clutching his middle tightly. That was it. Get angry, Fredrick. Get mad. Lose your focus.

It was definitely working. When next he looked up, the king’s scowl was visible across his twisted features and his eyes were naught but burning slits. His full attention had shifted to the tiger behind William. Good. That’s exactly what he wanted. “Look at me! I wield too much power to be anything else!”

Tobias snorted; the giggle that followed was quieter, but it still earned a snarl from Fredrick. “Alright. Sure. If you say so, Freddie. You’re very all-powerful. Definitely a god.”

The snarl rose in volume as Fredrick’s paws returned to his sides. The flame over his head sputtered out, but the air around him rippled as if he gave off more heat than the sun on a Shining Light midday. “Do not call me that.”

“A god? Not much chance of that, given how far you are from one.” He laughed again as Fredrick started to drift closer. *Good*. “You did all this, for what? To be worshipped? To have people kneeling at your feet? Following your every command?”

“As is my right!” His voice resonated so deeply that Fredrick’s natural tones were almost lost. Something utterly alien spoke in his place; something anathema to his very physicality; something that must have been akin to the twisted, tortured magic raging inside him. “And the people *will* worship me!”

Again Tobias snorted, and William drifted slightly to the side. His step was slow, but Tobias had to hope that it was because the hyena had figured out exactly what it was he was trying to do. “The Yarovenni sorcerer-kings had magic, and *they* weren’t worshipped. The Lenkis had priests and kings and witches and *they* weren’t worshipped. Look at you!” He waved a paw toward Fredrick as he laughed anew. “Floating about like an angry cloud... the most they might do is beg you not to rain on them!”

Fredrick continued to seethe as Tobias grinned at him. *This* was what he could do. He could antagonise his brother like no one else could. Never had he thought that his ability to irritate Fredrick just by existing would potentially save the world from the king’s madness. “Look at you. Look at how *pathetic* you are. How weak you’ve always been that you need this.” His body sang with satisfaction; the words were cruel, but he had always longed to dare speak them to his brother directly. If nothing else, this day had given him that much.

Again Fredrick raised his paws, and this time thunder boomed. It echoed off the walls as lightning arced between his fingers. “Weakness? You look upon this power I wield and you *dare* to call me weak? I will destroy you for this!”

“You won’t! Because all you ever do is talk!” Tobias took a step toward Fredrick as William slid more fully aside, and he folded his arms as he summoned every last bit of resolve he could muster. “You’ve beaten me. You’ve insulted me. You’ve taken my lover from me, my wife from me, my friends from me... you’ve done all of that, but you’ve *never* just killed me!” He spread his arms wide and grinned up at Fredrick. “You don’t even have the strength to do that!”

Fredrick snarled once more, frothing from the muzzle. “You underestimate me!”

“Go rut yourself you arrogant, sniveling, conniving, self-serving, egotistical, limp-cocked, petulant, *inconsolably weak excuse for a male!*” He roared the words at the top of his voice, screaming them at Fredrick so hard that the king actually recoiled in the air from them. “You are the one who underestimates me! You have failed in every single confrontation we have had! You have never been able to crush me! You have never been able to break me!” Tobias stood up taller as he thrust a finger up toward Fredrick. “If you had the strength to kill me, you’d have done it years and years ago! No amount of magic you’ve stolen or *delusional conceit* on your part changes that, and it won’t matter how many times you say you’re a god! You will *never* be strong enough to wear that mantle.”

“*I AM A GOD!*” If Tobias’ words had been powerful enough to force Fredrick to recoil from them, then his shout in turn was a hurricane. It *physically* pushed down on Tobias, conveyed with such a weight of magic that it buckled the tiger under the force of the air that carried them. He grunted as he was flattened to the ground, knocked down hard and spread out across the floor. “I am! I am greater than you, and I am greater than father, and I am greater than *all* of Ratholarin! All of the south sea! I am greater than all the world!”

He fell silent all of a sudden, and the pressure over Tobias vanished. He managed to lift his head in time to catch a slow, wide smile spread across his brother’s muzzle. The sudden shift sent a chill through Tobias as Fredrick seemed to relax. “And you are *wrong* about me. You always have been, haven’t you? You have never understood the real power I have. A power that I had *long* before magic.”

Tobias pushed himself upright, but Fredrick lifted his right paw and clenched it into a fist. That pressure returned all at once as the glow in the king’s eyes brightened. The prince found himself pushed back to the floor again, as though the full weight of the castle was crushing him down. Tobias gasped as Fredrick chuckled to himself again. “I don’t think I’m wrong. Look, even now. Even now you’re not killing me. You’re just not strong enough. What power could you have that’s strong enough to end me?”

“Not to end you, brother. No.” His fist relaxed, and as it did so too did the pressure relent somewhat. It wasn’t enough to allow Tobias to rise again, but it did let him lift his head and meet Fredrick’s stare. “I can kill anyone, anytime. That is a pleasure that I may serve at my discretion, but it is *fleeting*.” He grinned down at Tobias and snapped his jaws. “No, my power – my true gift – is that I know *just* how to hurt people.” His other paw shot out, but not toward Tobias. It extended instead to the king’s side.

And wrapped around William’s sword as it descended toward him.

Tobias’ eyes widened; he gasped as the hyena’s leaping thrust was stopped square in its tracks. With that one paw, Fredrick had grabbed a hold of William’s blade. Its edge didn’t bite into his paw, and the hyena was left dangling from the hilt with both paws. He could only watch on as the runes on William’s sword flashed brightly, only to sputter out a moment later. “You see, Tobias, if I kill you? Your suffering stops. If you die, I can’t hurt you anymore.” Fredrick swung his paw around hard, and William cried out as he found himself unable to hold onto his weapon.

There was neither enough time nor ability to move for Tobias to clear himself from William’s trajectory. All he could do was duck his head down as William’s armoured body slammed into his back, and Tobias cried out in pain as he the hyena’s superior weight and

firmness struck him. It hurt far more than the pressure that Fredrick had applied to him through his magic, and the impact was enough to wind the tiger completely. He gasped, wheezing against the floor as Fredrick floated down to the ground. Behind him, Tobias heard William slam into one of the racks. Glass tinkled as it fell from the rack and shattered.

Fredrick still held William's Carisi sword tight in his paw, fingers wrapped around the wrong end apparently without any ill effect. He studied the weapon with an appraising, discerning eye and even nodded once at it. "I couldn't understand this before. The power inlaid in such simple shapes; the intention that carved them so cleanly into the iron. But now that the power is inlaid into *me*... I feel it. I know it."

He turned his head toward Tobias as the tiger looked up again. "You cannot imagine what this feels like, Tobias. But you will, I promise. That foul muzzle of yours will be silenced, and when you *do* speak... it will be with only *my* words." He bared his teeth as his arm flexed. Fingers tightened.

The blade in his grip shattered.

Shards of iron scattered in every direction, and it was by sheer, dumb luck that none of them managed to pierce Tobias' flesh. He still ducked his head down and away from the eruption of metal, and there was no way he could escape the laughter that rolled from deep within Fredrick's chest. "I am *beyond* such simple trickery. Did you think a sword – a meagre collection of runes and iron – would be enough to withstand my might?" He scoffed and tossed the largest intact piece of the blade still in his paw down to rest before Tobias' eyes. "You call me weak, but all you have ever had is your mind. I defy it. I defy you. I defy your little infatuation and his pathetic rebellion."

"The only rebellion here is against your rule. Your abuses of power. Your cruelty." Tobias shook his head as Fredrick smirked down at him. "That you can't even tell that anymore is proof of just how far gone you are."

"Oh? He did not tell you?" Fredrick lifted his right paw, palm raised toward the ceiling. The pressure on Tobias reversed, and the tiger yipped as he found himself yanked instead up and into the air. Suspended as he was, he could do nothing but flail as Fredrick turned him about. His back to the twisted remains of his brother, he was forced instead to stare down on William's crumpled form. The hyena had clearly bounced off Tobias, and glass was scattered all around him from whatever items he'd knocked over from the rack. He'd been looking forlornly at the hilt of his ruined Carisi sword, but now his gaze was locked on the tigers above him. "I have sent the bulk of my forces to deal with them, but he has called on all the Carisi rebels to cover this... this *pathetic* attempt to stop me."

Tobias frowned but didn't answer. If William had gone to the rebels in order to create a big enough distraction to allow them to accomplish their mission, then so be it. It was troubling that there were so many rebels even in Sanwell, but that was a problem he could worry about later if he survived. For the moment, it was good enough that Fredrick thought he was strong enough alone to handle them.

Even as the prince's mind turned the problem over and over to try and think of a solution, Fredrick just laughed and continued. "It would have been a good plan, William. Better than I would have expected from a weak-blooded little wretch like you, but then I did

underestimate *you*, didn't I?" He stepped underneath Tobias, walking toward the groaning hyena. Despite how Tobias struggled, he couldn't move himself closer. Fredrick's control of his body was complete. "All that magic flowing through your veins... if I had not been elevated like this, you would have been more than a match for me. If I had not become a god, your strength would have eclipsed my own."

"Here's a thought to consider, Fredrick... it still does!" The hyena's groans vanished in an instant, and Tobias gasped as one of William's paws shot out from under his body. A bolt of flame erupted from his palm, and it crossed the distance between himself and Fredrick before the king was able to react. It hit him in the chest, and Fredrick cried out as he was knocked back across the floor. His concentration broken, Tobias could only yelp and fall.

His legs buckled as he hit the ground, but that probably saved them from breaking entirely. The impact still rattled his body and left him groaning in pain, but he was alive. As he looked across the floor, he could see William rising to his feet again. Fresh blood was seeping across his abdomen; clearly Fredrick throwing him so far and hard had reopened his wounds.

A roar from the king pulled Tobias' attention back toward him. He scrambled back upright as his chest lay bare, smoking as what little fur was left there was burned away. His flesh bubbled, but unlike the bolt that William had loosed at Davan this attack didn't seem to pierce Fredrick through. Had the magic that suffused his body insulated him from the full force of William's attack, or had the hyena's strength just been so completely drained that that was all he could muster?

It couldn't have been the latter, as William started toward Fredrick with flaming paws and teeth bared in equal measure. Tobias' heart soared as he too started to rise. William had been acting! Throwing Fredrick off his scent by pretending to be weaker than he was! The kingsblade's rage was on full display as he stalked closer.

Until, that was, Fredrick lifted his own paws. Fingers curled into wicked hooks as he growled back at the hyena, and he shoved his arms forward. William was launched backward by some invisible force; the flames in his paws vanished as whatever power the king conjured snuffed them out completely. He hit the rack again, and this time the wooden structure shattered under the force of the impact. William cried out in pain, and as he was pinned to the wall behind the rack Tobias could see drips of red scoring the ground and the wall. "It. Does. *Not*."

Tobias pushed himself up, but one of the king's paws shifted to point a finger at his younger brother. He felt himself lifted from the ground again, floating no more than an inch above the floor but able to do nothing but flail. His paws found no purchase as Fredrick's eyes turned to him. "You will wait your turn, brother. I told you, I know how to hurt people. I cannot very well kill you until I have made you pay for your sins, can I?"

"This again? You still want to put off killing me?" Tobias snarled and spat at his brother. Fredrick didn't seem to notice, and Tobias couldn't even be certain his spittle made it far enough. "I was right. Weak, pathetic little Freddie who-"

"You cannot goad me." The words were even, but Fredrick was smiling as he lifted his head higher. "You think me so easily misled, Tobias? You think that I cannot see through you as though you were glass?" The paw pointed toward the tiger suddenly clenched into a fist, and the suspending force that kept Tobias aloft abruptly turned into a constricting one that wrapped

around him from every direction at once. It crushed him from all sides, and he couldn't help but scream out in pain as his limbs were crushed in against his body.

Fredrick's paw relaxed and so did the pain, and Tobias was left to gasp and pant for breath as he hung limp in the air. "I knew you were going to try something to distract me. To twist my focus and make me more susceptible to his attack. It would have been a fine plan, if I were as weak as you claim me to be." His eyes narrowed once more. "Perhaps I am not quite so pathetic or stupid as you believe."

Tobias growled quietly to himself and shook his head. Even if Fredrick had seen the ploy, that didn't change the satisfaction that came with speaking the words to his face. If only he'd been able to speak them years ago. *Decades*. "No. You are exactly as pathetic as I have always known you to be."

Those words drew a look of contempt across Fredrick's face. His paw dropped away, and so too did Tobias once more fall to the floor. This time the tiger was ready for it somewhat, and he hit the ground in a crouch and an irritated hiss. Fredrick mirrored the sound. "You will not be saying that for long. Not when you see what I do to your precious little William here."

Fredrick marched over toward the still-pinned hyena, and Tobias took a single step forward before the king shot him a warning glare. He froze in place, not remotely in need of any sort of magical impetus to stay where he was. He couldn't get close. Tobias had to think of something, and he had to think of it quickly. "What are you going to do?"

"Whatever I please. Whenever I please." Fredrick smiled as Tobias growled again. Perhaps if he could just keep Fredrick talking long enough, William would be able to figure a way to overwhelm his brother's magic. He could catch his second wind. "Right now, I am going to hollow out the foreign tailraiser and leave him an empty husk."

"Just like the kingsblades? The guardians? *Brett*?" He spat the last word like it was acid.

But Fredrick didn't seem to notice or care. That didn't even begin to surprise Tobias. "Oh, no. No, that was a simple matter of suppressing will." He turned his head to face Tobias again and he smiled. At least he wasn't doing anything to William. *Yet*. "Mine has become all-encompassing, brother. Just as the Rathin line has long planned; all of our family's greatest efforts over the last several hundred years – ages and ages of preparation dating back to Vargor himself – culminated within me."

"Except it's *not* culminated in you." Tobias' muzzle twisted as he scoffed at the frowning king. "You had to steal that magic. You had to take that power because it wasn't yours by right. It wasn't earned and it wasn't given and it wasn't bred into the Rathin line. If this was always the plan, then a descendant that was located would be taken as a bride. The Rathin line could have *naturally* bred magic."

"A single line. A single form of magic. No, that would not do at all. That is not enough to become a god." He lifted the paw not pointed at William and wriggled his ring-adorned fingers. "For the goal to be realised, it had to be *taken* for us and eradicated from everywhere else. It had to be imbued within us... within *me*. That is the only way, Tobias. That is how it must be."

The prince frowned. That didn't make any sense. "Even one of the divine lines would have brought vast power to the Rathin royal family. This Guavi magic alone... it could have ensured our domination for ages more to come!"

Fredrick's smile turned chilling. "But it would still be but one form of magic. If magic can be *taken* however... stripped and infused into a single person?" He laughed again, and that resonance once more filled his voice as the glow in his eyes brightened. "Even the old gods commanded only a fraction of magic. I will command them *all*. And my control over them will only grow as I consume more of their power. What I have now is *nothing* compared to what I will have when I have taken on the other forms."

Tobias' blood turned to ice. "That's the plan? Consume all of the magic in the world?"

"*All* of the magic, until I am the only being in the world with this power at my disposal. A being of unchallengeable, unfathomable, *absolute* power; a true god by any and all definition." His grin widened as he turned his gaze back on William. "And then, when this world is drained of magic and the power I command *is* absolute, my eye will turn to the gods. I will consume them as well. All of creation will belong to *me*, to reshape as I see fit."

"They will never follow you." William's head rose to look Fredrick in the eye. The king's smile faltered. "The people. You will never have their love or adoration. Their worship will be hollow. Fear is not faith, and they will never forget what you *really* are."

"They will. I will *make* them see me for what I have become." Tobias stifled a curse as Fredrick started back over to William again. He could only hope that he'd bought the hyena enough time to recover. "Do not worry, William. You will be the first to worship me, once I am done remaking you."

William rolled his eyes as Tobias gasped. "I doubt that, but clearly I can't do all that much to stop you, so... go ahead, then. Give it your best shot."

Tobias gasped as Fredrick's paw was turned over. A finger curled, beckoning William closer. The magic that the king now commanded responded, and William left a bloody trail across the floor from the droplets that dripped from his wounds. He floated forward until Fredrick's fingers could close around his throat, and his grunt was choked off by their grip. Fredrick grinned as he leaned forward.

The prince almost looked away, but found himself unable to as William's head was turned toward him. The hyena winced; purple light flashed in his eyes as Fredrick curled a finger and pressed one of the rings of his paw into William's cheek. He grit his teeth as Tobias watched on, growling under his breath as that light flashed and receded, pulsing as Fredrick's magic reached inside his mind.

But as William's eyes locked on the tiger's, Tobias wasn't about to look anywhere else. He stared back, past that corrupting, domineering purple glow. He let his mind fill instead with memories; images of the two of them when they had been younger and before the world had lost its mind. When they had played at swordfighters, princes, scholars, bandits, artists and so, so much more. When the future was full of possibility. Where they could do and be anything as long as they were together.

Even as that light threatened to overtake William, Tobias could take solace in that much at least. They *were* together. At least there, at the end, they were together again. He smiled down at William. He caught that pained snarl of the hyena's muzzle falter. It twitched, and then he too smiled right back up at him. The pain vanished. The scowl shifted to Fredrick's face.

The glow dimmed. *It wasn't working!*

William's eyes flicked toward the king. His smile widened to a reckless, broad grin. "You know what your problem is, Fredrick? You don't understand the power you wield."

The king's snarl became much more audible as he pressed the ring in harder against the side of William's head. That purple light flashed in William's eyes once more, but Tobias started to mirror his friend's smile as it faded away once more. "You've stolen it. You're wielding it. But you never *learned* how to make it work. Or what doesn't work."

"You will be *silent*." He drew the ring back and curled his paw into a fist, and Fredrick slammed that fist down against the hyena's cheek. William's head snapped to the side, but he started to *laugh*. "I do not understand... *what* do I not understand? Speak!"

"Speak or be silent? He can't do both, Fredrick." Tobias' shout drew the king's attention briefly up to him, and if William's laughter had irritated him then the sight of his youngest brother's muzzle split wide with glee at his failure positively *incensed* him.

He growled at Tobias, but the sound was one of rage before he whipped his head back to regard William. "*What do I not understand?*"

"How to throw a punch, for one." William licked at his muzzle as he lifted his head again. His smile was gone, and his face was filled with what seemed to be every ounce of contempt that had ever been felt by every single person who had ever lived within the kingdom. "But *anything*, for two. Some god you are. Don't even know how to use your powers properly."

"It'd be embarrassing if it wasn't so pathetic." Tobias nodded, though his grin faltered somewhat as Fredrick's eyes flicked back to him. He was still suspended in the air, at the king's mercy... and yet, the urge of mouth off at him was impossible to resist. When he was upset, Fredrick made mistakes. Before, it had been an act and all part of his ploy, but now? "We don't need to *goad* you. You're proving our mockery right with every breath."

Now though, Fredrick was *actually* mad, and William was grinning wider. "Oh, what's the matter, Fredrick? Are we *actually* upsetting you now? Can't use your magic properly, can't keep your composure..."

"Can't hollow out the mind of one upstart little Carisi." William's smile returned for a vicious smirk.

"*Tsk tsk*. All that effort that the Triumvirate put into you, and look how it turned out. Even a half-trained Carisi commands his magic better than you." Tobias sniffed, and Fredrick glared back up at him. "Not even a poor excuse for a god. You're a poor excuse for a king. A poor excuse for a son and a brother. A poor excuse for a *male*."

He began to chuckle, but the sound faded away as Fredrick's gaze lingered on him a moment longer. He could almost see the wheels turning within the king's head, though the smile that touched his muzzle a few moments later did nothing to return Tobias' mirth. "He

does command his magic better than me, for now. This is true.” He glanced down his front at the burn to his chest. “And thank you, brother, for the reminder. Yes, Davan did explain this to me. The insulation of the self against magic when one possesses magic.”

“Look at that. He *can* listen to someone to knows more.” William’s smirk returned as he lifted his head higher. “You can’t hollow me out, *my liege*. My magic’s awoken. It’ll protect me.”

“Yes. It will protect you.” He drew his paw back from William’s head and waved it. The hyena grunted as the force that kept him aloft suddenly vanished, and he yipped as he unceremoniously hit the ground. Tobias winced; William immediately curled in around his gut wound, a paw rushing to try and hold it closed again.

Tobias, meanwhile, found himself fixed by Fredrick’s smiling face as he was drawn closer. “My mistake was attempting to take control of your mind first. Such a waste that would have been; you would miss this show.” He reached out as Tobias arrived before him, tilting his brother’s chin up with a clawtip. He shivered as he figured out what Fredrick was angling toward, just before the king said it outright. “But no magic protects *you*.”

“Don’t you dare.” The voice was William’s, quieter and laced with pain as he seared his wound closed anew. How many times, Tobias wondered, could the hyena do that? How much harm was he causing himself just through his triage? “Don’t you lay a *finger* on him.”

“I do not take orders from you. I give the orders, William. You would do well to remember that.” His other paw extended down toward the hyena, and he gasped as he found himself pressed down by that same force into the ground. William arched his back, muscles bulging as he fought back against the push of Fredrick’s magic, but it was clear that he was as fully pinned there as he had been against the wall earlier.

Tobias’ gaze dipped to the rings of the paw Fredrick lifted before his face. He fixed on the one emblazoned with the symbol of Guavi as that same purple light began to seethe around it. It called to him; tugging his attention inward even as he fought to look away. It wanted him to look. It wanted him to let it in, but this could well be the last moments Tobias would be able to have as himself.

And so he forced himself to look down. Past the ring, past the energy that was seeding tendrils into his mind even then, and past Fredrick. He looked to William, pinned and struggling to free himself from bonds he couldn’t see. “Thank you, William.”

The struggle faded immediately. The hyena’s position wouldn’t let him see Tobias in turn, but he smiled as William squirmed to try anyway. “Thanks? But... what-”

“Thank you. For being my friend.” Tears disrupted his vision as he felt that ring growing closer, but Tobias doggedly kept his gaze on the hyena. William had fought so hard for him... if he had to take that thought to the end, he could think of no better one. “No matter what happens, thank you. Thank you for all you are.”

“Tobias, no!”

Then the ring touched the side of his forehead. The contact was electric; sensation flooded Tobias’ awareness. It was more than just the pain that he had expected; the full

kaleidoscope of emotion erupted inside of him all at once. The tiger lose sense of his body as his mind was carried off on a surging wave of *everything*.

He couldn't see.

Smell.

Hear.

Taste.

... but he could *feel*. He felt everything that he had ever felt to such a sharp degree that it might have cut his very soul. For all he knew, that was exactly what the magic in that ring was doing; dicing up his essence to be resorted and reordered as Fredrick deemed fit. All inside Tobias mind was chaos as he laughed and cried and loved and hurt a million times over, all at once. A maelstrom of experience and sensation that raged at the core of who he was. It *was* who he was, he dimly realised. It was all the sensations that his heart had committed to memory. Everything that he had ever felt and thought and been, swirled together and ripped up to the surface. It was overwhelming.

And yet through that all, he could feel the intrusion. It didn't feel like anything, and in the maelstrom that was the standout thing. All of Tobias' existence was feeling, and the intrusion of Fredrick's magic was the absence of all of it. There was no joy and love; no sadness or anger; no hate or bitterness; no icy rage or burning lust or warm kindness. It was nothing. Nothing at all reached into the heart of him, and where it travelled there was nothing left in its wake. It cut through the maelstrom. *Burned* through the maelstrom.

Tobias, no!

Fear.

There was no fear left behind the nothingness. There was no fear within it. Fear, however, was part of the maelstrom. It was part of Tobias. The words sparked the fear that swirled around the mess of violent emotions that comprised the prince. It conjured William to mind; a concept that linked that fear to pain; to longing; to loneliness; to jealousy; to care; to freedom. To love.

"Tobias!"

The sound pierced the whirling tempest. Shook up the maelstrom as that knife of nothing continued deeper into Tobias' everything. All of those feelings that connected to William flared at the sound of his voice. Everything that he was hummed with that new intrusion. It came with form. It came with shape. If he were more than a mess of emotions, Tobias might have imagined the hyena before him.

He might have imagined an outstretched paw. He might have imagined pleading eyes. He might have imagined a muzzle, skewed open and shouting desperately. He might have imagined William calling to him, but Tobias couldn't call back. He had no mouth. No tongue. No body to reach with. All he was had been reduced to feelings. All he could do was latch onto them. "Tobias, fight it!"

Fight? Fighting took muscle and sinew and iron. Fighting required more of Tobias than he had left to give. He wasn't a person with a body; he was memory and emotion and a will splintered by Fredrick's. And yet with each inward push of that splinter of nothing, fear pounded through the twisted emotional landscape of all Tobias was. It pulsed harder and faster, driven on to greater and greater heights by each call of William's voice.

The descent of the nothingness slowed. "Yes! That's it!"

Fear was bolstered by determination; the words sent a new surge through Tobias. That maelstrom intensified as his everything swelled with the hyena's words. The edge of the nothingness that had been cut into him began to melt as Tobias filled that void once more with himself. Another sound reached him in the form of *hatred*; it echoed through the nothing as it took on a new, forceful edge. It pushed down into him with renewed vigour, cutting down through Tobias.

"Remember, Tobias! You need to remember!" Memories would have been nice. Memories would have been useful to conjure, but a storm of emotions didn't have memories in a vacuum. All he had were the feelings that he was, and how to draw upon the right one? What did William want him to do? How could he face Fredrick and all the magic at the king's disposal?

The fear that had coloured his entire self flagged in the face of Fredrick's nothingness. It wasn't enough to stand up to the assault of the nothing that he brought; to the stillness in contrast to his maelstrom. Part of Tobias welcomed it. The empty spots of him were absent pain and fear and hate, and that was pleasant. Wonderful, even. The nothingness that Fredrick drove into him promised more of that. A totality of that. Peace.

Peace... but nothing more. A thread of joy was chased; it brought to Tobias the thought of the games he and William had played. That would be extinguished as well; banished by the emptiness. Juni's praise; the pride it had induced and the bitterness to discover she had been a pawn of Fredrick's from the outset. Both would go. The comfort and warmth of Soren's arms, gone. Peace. Just peace. No good. No bad. Just nothingness. The maelstrom calmed. The nothingness cut deeper.

"I need you, Tobias."

He turned.

William.

The little hyena was no more than ten or eleven, dressed in the rags of the castle servants. He was sat on a crate in the larder, knees pulled up to his chest and arms hugged tight around them. Tobias blinked as he looked down at the boy he'd known so long ago. "I'm sorry?"

"I need you." William glanced away from him. The hyena ran the back of his paw up over his eyes, smearing tears across his fur. "There. I said it. I. Need. You."

It was a memory. That much Tobias was certain of, but how he'd ended up in the middle of it was something else. The larder looked and smelled just like it used to. William was just the same size as he had been then, but Tobias was full-grown. He'd almost forgotten just how small they had been back then. The growth spurt that William had undergone around nine had

seen him leap well ahead of the tiger; when the conversation had really taken place, Tobias had been the smaller. “Why would you need me?”

The words came automatically as the memory played out. Tobias had no control over it, as he watched the sheepish William looking to the side. “Because I don’t have anyone else. Because it’s all work, and nothing else without you. I dunno.” He lowered his head. “I just feel... *better*. Whenever you’re around. I just don’t know why you asked.”

Tobias’ heart sank. He remembered, even as his muzzle opened to reply. “Just that people are saying things about us. Silly things.” He chuckled, but the sound was the memory; his muzzle was forced into position by the way things had been and he couldn’t conjure even a smile otherwise. “Brett was joking that we’d get *married*.”

He couldn’t close his eyes. He couldn’t look away. He was forced to watch and listen as a hopeful little William sniffled and looked up at him again. There had been so much hope in his eyes. They sparkled with the mere idea. “Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Yeah, maybe. I don’t know.” He spread his arms in a shrug and could do nothing but watch as William looked down again. The spark had left his eyes. “I don’t think you’d make a good wife, though.” Tobias giggled.

William didn’t. He smiled, but with all the benefit of hindsight Tobias could see how strained it had been. He shrugged back as he looked anywhere else. “Yeah, I guess not. Oh well. At least we... still get to be friends.”

“Always. I’m *always* gonna be your friend, you know.” Tobias’ words dripped with sincerity but his heart broke nonetheless. He’d believed them so strongly at the time, but in less than a year... “I need you too, William.”

William smiled again, but Tobias ached. If only he’d known. If only he’d understood. If only he’d learned then what had taken him over a decade more to figure out, he could have said it all differently. He could have made it right. He could have stopped that hurt he’d inflicted – the first of many to follow – and fix it all. He longed to, even though he couldn’t.

Through that ache and pain though, something continued to stand out to him. The smile on William’s face wasn’t frozen. It radiated up at him, and Tobias could remember the warmth he’d felt inside, in those halcyon days before the idea of marrying William had been presented as unfavourable and untenable. When he’d been innocent of the stigmas that his family had lined up with and inflicted upon him. When he’d just held the hyena’s paw and seen his smile and known in his heart that things were right.

That smile, memory alone though it may have been, sent shockwaves through Tobias. The warmth it carried was akin to the kiss of the dawn’s light and it shed that light across every corner of himself. The maelstrom swirled to life once more. Tobias held that smile close; he clutched it for all the world like he could hold that young boy in his arms once more. The maelstrom howled as it stalled out the nothingness descending through it. The memory was lost once more to the storm, but Tobias was still bound to it. He still felt it. He still *felt*. As long as he felt, Fredrick’s sliver of nothingness was held at bay. It erased whatever it touched....

... but his memories gave Tobias new form.

More and more memories came to him, and he reached into those as well. William as a boy, kissing the top of his head. His hugs. The squeeze of his paw in Tobias' and his laughter in the air. The smell of soap and bubbles and wet fur. And, yes, the pain as well. The accusation in his eyes. The hurt in his stare. The rejection at William's inspection, and his return from his first real battles. Arguments and misspoken desire and ill-formed intent. All of them rushed inward as Tobias found in them commonality. So much of his life had been lived with William and in his shadow. All he was had been coloured, in one form or another, by the hyena. For better and for worse. All Tobias was in those moments Fredrick attacked him was feelings, but William was a source of *all* of them. Every feeling Tobias had ever felt – all he had ever been – he could find through William.

It was an anchor for him. It was a shield for him. It was him, and that descending nothingness was, itself, *nothing* before it all. It pushed down harder – he could *feel* the anger and the hatred boiling at its core from Fredrick – but Tobias pushed back. He mustered all that he was and swept it up in the path of the nothingness. All his memories and all of his emotions rallied and stood fast in the wake of absolute annihilation, and again he could hear William's voice through the ether. "Yes! Yes, Tobias! Fight it! You are stronger than he is!"

Even as he pushed back with all that he was, Tobias began to return to himself. As his feelings and will held Fredrick's invasive magic at bay, Tobias' sense of self solidified once more. The world around him was fuzzy and tinted violet, sight twisted by the glow of the ring still pressed against the side of his head. He was faintly aware of his own grunts and growls; his muzzle was working on its own, unconsciously expressing the pain that Fredrick was inflicting upon him.

Not that Fredrick was doing as much as he wanted. The older tiger's eyes were wide and wild; his fangs had gashed his own lips as he seethed and poured himself as hard as he could into Tobias. The prince still held fast though; every feeling and memory raised to block the hollowing of himself that his brother brought. It was a stalemate. Tobias was helpless, but Fredrick was too strong to overwhelm.

William was much the same. The hyena's head was raised as he forced himself up and off the ground; he still lay there mostly flattened by Fredrick's will, but it seemed that the king wasn't quite so capable of drawing on two overwhelming displays of power at the same time. As he tried to force himself into Tobias, William was fighting back against that magical force that had had him so completely pinned. The hyena was grinning as Tobias' eyes met his once more. "Yes! Yes! You can do it! You can beat him!"

"Be silent!" Fredrick's roar came as he looked down at the hyena again, and Tobias fell a little more slack against his brother as still more of Fredrick's power relented in its push on him. "We will see how much help you can give him when I choke the air from your lungs!"

Fear was *powerful*. It lent strength to the physical, but even as Fredrick leaned into the power pushing down on William hard enough to silence the hyena, Tobias felt his own defences bolstered once more by it. It gave him the will to push that emptiness up and out of his mind. He watched as William's head snapped back, his eyes still straining to maintain contact with Tobias' in spite of Fredrick's effort. His muzzle fell open, gasping desperately for air. His throat constricted as Fredrick's power collapsed around it, and the fear in the younger tiger redoubled.

The violet left his gaze entirely as Tobias felt the fullness of himself come back to his command. Fingers flexed. An arm twitched. Shifted. He shuddered, panting hard with exertion as he kept his eyes on William. Watched as Fredrick made good on his threat; his powers were choking the hyena out just as surely as a tight paw. His focus was on William, and his magic had faded from Tobias. The smallest of windows. There was no time to think or plan. His arm twitched again. Brushed along his bloodsoaked side. Fingertips caught on his belt.

There was no time to think, and so he didn't. Tobias grabbed the knife, yanked it free, and he *screamed* as he cut up and across the arm driving that ring into his head.

Fredrick's roars of rage turned into cries of pain as the king's blood, dark and steaming and unnaturally hot, stained the floor. The gash was deep, straight across his forearm. Muscles were clearly severed as his fingers fell instantly slack; the tiger's paw dropped from Tobias' head, and Tobias slumped to his paws and knees as he was finally freed from Fredrick's power. He dimly heard William gasping, sucking in deep breaths as the king's focus was broken at last.

Tobias lifted his head as Fredrick stared aghast at his severed forearm. Tainted blood gushed from the wound, pulsing out rapidly to soak the floor before Tobias. It was darker, thicker than any normal blood had any right to be; flush with whatever corruption had borne magic through Fredrick's body. His eyes stared through the drooling pulses of bubbling maroon that flowed from his cut veins, right at Tobias with absolute hatred. "Insolent *cur!* I should never have let you live!" His other paw lifted toward his younger brother.

Only to whip up into the air as William grabbed a hold of Fredrick by the ankle. The hyena yanked with all of his might, and Fredrick cried out once more as he found himself tugged to the ground. He hit it hard, his head bouncing against the ground as his eyes crossed, dazed. Tobias didn't waste time he knew he didn't have. Fredrick had let him live. It would be his last mistake.

The knife bit deep into Fredrick's stomach as Tobias brought it around and down. Hot blood washed over his fingers as he screamed wordlessly back into Fredrick's face. The king's muzzle was open, his own roar of pain all but drowned out by Tobias' fury. He used the buried blade as leverage to drag himself higher up along Fredrick's body and, as soon as he had the angle, ripped the blade free. The arch of Fredrick's back almost bucked Tobias off, but he held on just long enough to drive the knife down once more.

Not into his brother's heart, but into his *throat*.

Fredrick froze.

Blood continued to pump, of course. His forearm and his stomach both were flush with the stuff, spilling from the wounds Tobias had inflicted. His eyes fixed on his younger brother as Tobias met that stare, his scream long faded away but his muzzle still slack. Fredrick's muzzle worked at the air, but whether the pain or the shock or the blood loss were to blame for his lack of words Tobias simply didn't know. All he knew was that everything in him begged to pull the blade out, and drive it down into Fredrick over and over again.

He pushed back against that urge, and instead settled for wrenching his paw about on the handle of the knife. It twisted the blade in Fredrick's neck, and the king gurgled through a muzzelful of sizzling blood. In the corner of his eye, Tobias could see a shaky paw rising. It

pointed a finger at him, but Fredrick clearly didn't have the strength of will or the focus left to actually command his magic. He was fading. He was fading *fast*.

And so Tobias, shuddering with the exertion and the lingering effects of the ring, leaned in over Fredrick's face. He stared down into his brother's eyes as fear began to fill them. "May the gods have mercy on you." There was a spark of anger in his stare, before Tobias lifted his head higher. Reared back. *Spat*, right in Fredrick's face.

The king didn't even have the strength left to recoil, and he certainly didn't have the vocal cords left to make any sort of retort. Tobias simply stared on, watching stoically as Fredrick's facial muscles began to lose the ability to control themselves. He tried to speak. He tried to snarl. He tried to spit back, but the tiger had no strength left. He'd lost it all. Tobias had taken it all from him. The anger slid from his eyes as the light of life left it. His body fell still, with the impotent rage of his snarl frozen on his bloody muzzle.

Tobias continued to stare. He just drank in the grisly, fratricidal sight. Fredrick's face, soaked in blood and spit, eyes staring up into nothingness, blood only barely trickling from the wounds he'd had inflicted upon him. His fingers, hooked into talons. Claws retracted, relaxed back into their sheath. The glow of the rings as extinguished as his life. Tobias had done that. Tobias had killed again. He'd killed his brother.

He took a deep breath. Held it a moment. Breathed it out as a sigh. He had killed again.

And that time, despite the viciousness of it all... he was *alright*. That was the worst part.

"Tobias?"

The tiger sat up, leaning back and away from Fredrick. It took him another couple of moments before he could steady himself, breathing slowly as he wiped the blood from his knife. Finally he turned to William, the hyena on the dead king's other side. He'd risen to his knees, panting just as hard as Tobias had been as he'd watched Fredrick die. "Tobias are you... are you okay?"

"I... am." The words came unbidden, and he swallowed back against them as he looked back down at Fredrick again. "I, uh... think I am." That time, it was with more certainty in his voice. He slid his knife back into its sheath. "I am... but are you? Are *you* alright?"

William nodded as he glanced down at the dead king's body once more. "Yeah. I'm alright. Sore. Hurting. Uh... hurting pretty badly." He chuckled, and winced as he grasped at his side. "I think my soldiering days are going to be properly behind me after this."

"I can think of worse fates." Tobias sighed with relief as he began to shuffle his way over around Fredrick's legs to William's side. The hyena must have known what he was going for, because his arms opened up to wrap around Tobias just as the tiger fell in against his chest. His head came to rest on William's shoulder as he sighed deeply again. His paws slid around William's waist, pulling the hyena close as much to support him as to be supported by him. "What he was doing to me... you can't imagine what that felt like..."

"I'm glad you heard me." William's voice was muffled as he turned his head, muzzle buried in against the side of the tiger's neck. "I didn't know if you would... if you could."

“I heard you. I *always* hear you.” Tobias closed his eyes as he gave William a tight squeeze. “I wouldn’t be here... I wouldn’t be *me* if it wasn’t for you. Not just now, today, but *ever*.” He leaned his head back until he could meet William’s gaze again. The poor hyena looked as exhausted as Tobias felt. “I owe you everything, you know. I didn’t know it’d all be over, but... it is, thanks to you. We stopped him.”

William just snorted and smiled. “Take the throne and we’ll call it even.”

At that, Tobias could only groan and close his eyes again. “Please, *please*... anything but that. Maybe... maybe I should have just let Fredrick unmake me. Just let him kill me. It couldn’t be worse than having to be king.”

“That can be arranged, your majesty.”

Tobias frowned at the unfamiliar voice. Thick with Carisi accent, the tiger turned slowly to look up toward the top of the vault to its source. The hyena there was covered in blood, a blooded Carisi sword clutched tight in his paw. Greying fur belied a warrior’s build, though most of both fur and build were covered by the leather armour of a warrior of Caris. The splash of purple across the shoulders of his leathers denoted him as a commander. Fredrick must have left the door open, but Tobias didn’t recognise him.

And yet, as the hyena slowly started down toward them, there was no mistaking the similarity between his face and William’s. Tobias’ eyes widened with suspicion as he glanced beside him, but William’s eyes were firmly on the Carisi commander. “No. Don’t you dare.”

“We shall see, shall we not?” The older hyena’s eyes remained focused on Tobias as he drew closer. He stopped just shy of the bodies of the Triumvirate and the kingsblades, and he smiled as he bowed his head. His eyes never left Tobias’ face. “Good afternoon, Prince Tobias, and what a pleasure it is to meet you at last. My son has told me such wonderful things about you.

“My name is William, blood of Vothos, and I am afraid that I am here to kill you.”