

Interwoven

EPILOGUE

57th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

Sanwell, Tobias realised, was beautiful.

Not in its entirety, of course. It had its uglier sides, as did any city. It had the dingey alleyways and the stinking backstreets. Stables left uncleaned and tavern steps drenched in the vomit of patrons who had overindulged which the cleaners had yet to tend to. Everything past the Riverrun. The subterranean tunnels that had housed the rebels.

But as he looked out the window from the highest spire in the castle, there was no doubt. Sanwell *was* beautiful. It glittered in the dawn light as people hurried about far below. They looked like little more than ants from his point of view as they laboured, repairing the damage that had been done to the city in the Carisi rebel attack. They were just as industrious, too; so many of the scars had been healed over by the tireless efforts of those who shared his feelings.

And yet as he swept that ridiculous cape back from his shoulders and turned away from the window, Tobias knew he couldn't look at the people below the way his father or his brother had. They were not ants. They were people; living and breathing and loving and feeling and they deserved his respect far more than he deserved theirs.

"My king?"

He glanced to the side. Juni stood in the doorway, draped in a gown of sheer white silk with her paws clasped behind her back. Gone were her servant's rags, but lingering were the scars of Fredrick's abuse of her. The gown hid most of them, but Tobias knew how deep those scars were. The ones that he couldn't see were deeper still. "Are you well?"

The tiger sighed. What a loaded question that was. "No. Of course not. Not after... after everything." He looked up as she stepped into the room, and her paws came around to her front to wring nervously together. "Honestly, I'm... I feel lost."

"Well, I guess that's why I'm here." She glanced down and away. "I was... surprised, when they told me you wanted to see me after your coronation. I guess if you're out of your depth, you might want to find someone familiar." She winced as she closed her eyes. "Even if you can't trust her."

Tobias jaw tightened, but he nodded along. She wasn't wrong. "You know, Fredrick was wrong about a lot of things, but he was at least right about some of them." He took a step closer to her, and she looked up to see the tiger's smile. "You were one of them. Setting you up to hook me... it was inspired of him. Truly inspired."

"I didn't want to do it." Juni's voice turned briefly desperate, though it remained quiet.

She did fall silent again as Tobias held up a paw, but if his smile put her at ease he couldn't tell. "It doesn't matter. None of it matters now. Alright?" He reached out a paw toward her, and she eyed it warily. "You know me better than anyone. I need that today."

The hyena paused as she delicately, almost reluctantly, placed her paw in his. "You know that's not true, my king. I'm just... the only one left."

Those words pierced Tobias like a knife, and he knew well that she had chosen them deliberately. Juni never said anything she didn't intend specifically to say. She was trying to push him away from her, but he wasn't about to let her do it. Not that easily. "That doesn't make you less important. You know that, don't you?"

She had no answer for him, and so Tobias led her slowly to and through the door. "The days still to come are going to be harder still. And of everyone in Ratholarin, I need someone I can trust." His paw squeezed gently at hers as she looked up at him with confusion. "That means you."

As they began to make their way down the spire's staircase, the servants scattered from his path. They bowed their heads in respect but didn't prostrate themselves at his feet, and that was so much the better. Respect was one thing, but humiliation wasn't something he wanted from his subjects. "My king, I... lied to you. Manipulated you. Used you to advance your brother's plots."

"Indeed. And though I was no doubt an easy mark for your manipulations, that speaks to your skillful tongue and sharp mind." He tried a coy little smirk as she frowned at him. "And we both know well how skilful that tongue of yours can be."

At that she rolled her eyes, but there was still a smile on her muzzle as they reached the bottom of the stairs. The hallway to his destination wasn't far, but already he was feeling more confident about what he was yet to do. "The point is, having you with me is... it's not just necessary, Juni. It's more than just you keeping an eye out for potential threats. You *are* important to me."

She sighed. "But I'm not the one you wish to have standing here beside you. I will always be a pale imitator of *him*, and you know it."

Again, the stab at his heart. That time, Tobias couldn't help the surge of pain that came with it, and his paw slipped from the hyena's. "You have never been an imitator of William. Nor a substitute for him. The two of you are as far from one another as can be; the only thing you share is my affection, and your species. I see you *as* you, Juni. You are not William."

They stopped by the large doors that led to the throne room. The great hall beyond was packed, no doubt, and nervousness once more reared its head. Tobias shook his head as he brushed down the edge of his cape. "What do you want, Juni?"

The hyena frowned as she adjusted her gown and folded her arms. "What do you think I want?"

"No, please. No games. No turning this around. I need to know and this is extremely important." He all but mirrored her stance as he leaned back against the wall. If it dirtied his cape, so be it; Tobias didn't care. "What do you want in this world, Juni? More than anything else, what do you want?"

She glanced up at the door, brow furrowing once more as she rubbed idly at her arm. Fingers brushed down one of the scars, barely visible beneath her carefully groomed fur. “I want my son to be safe.”

Another pang struck Tobias, and he sighed. Her son. Not *his* son. Just like Sarina, their mothers had claimed the children and left him with nothing. At least in Sarina’s case, he could be certain that the child was his. “And do you trust me to help create a Ratholarin he can be safe in?”

“I do.” The answer came quickly, and it drew a sigh of relief out of Tobias. Well, that was good. At least one of them had confidence in him. “I know your heart. I know what you care about, Tobias. I know you’re the right person to lead us out of this dark moment.” She shook her head even as the tiger swelled. “I just wish you didn’t need me beside you.”

“I’m sorry that I do. I don’t have anyone else who can do this.” Tobias unfolded his arms and brushed a paw against the door. It was time. He couldn’t delay much longer. “You could say no. I won’t force you, you know.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t expect that of you. You aren’t Fredrick.” She shuddered as she drew herself up tall. “If this is the best way forward for you, then I’m... happy to help. Just as long as this lets me take care of Carey.”

Tobias’ lips pursed, but the tiger nodded. He couldn’t legitimise the bastard, of course. He and Juni had already spoken on such things, and she understood. That they couldn’t be sure which of himself or Fredrick had sired him would only make for difficult succession questions down the line. “He will have a good life in the castle. You have my word.”

Juni’s jaw tightened somewhat, but she returned the tiger’s nod. It was plain to see that it wasn’t what she wanted for her son, but that was alright. Everyone in the midst of the situation was going to have to make sacrifices, perhaps none greater than Tobias himself. He’d already taken the throne against his own best judgement. Things would only get messier from there.

There was, however, no more time to waste. He turned to face the doors, and Juni did the same. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, holding it for a moment. Once, long ago, his father had told him that of all a king’s duties, to speak to the people was among the easiest. He had been a damn liar.

Tobias pushed the doors open. They swung as much at his efforts as at the pull of the guards that stood on the other side. They revealed the grand throne room beyond, and the crowd of people that filled the great hall. A great blue carpet had been rolled out from the door, and soldiers lined it on both sides. It didn’t keep the common folk behind them from seeing him in the doorway, and he forced himself to smile as he stepped forward.

There were no cheers – not yet at any point, though Tobias was confident that he would soon see to that – but the people still knelt down as he passed them by. The tiger held his head high, eyes focused not on them but on the soldier-lined path before him. This was a king’s demeanour. This was the role he had to play. He hated it.

Still, Juni strode shoulder to shoulder with him. In another life, he wondered, would a different hyena be standing beside him? Would he be walking paw in paw with William instead? King, and his *male* Consort? Perhaps. Maybe. Potentially. He looked to Juni, but try

as he might he couldn't see William there. William was gone. William was dead, and with it perhaps Tobias' last chance to actually find some stability and happiness in his life. Juni might once have provided that, but the years had not been kind to either of them. Happiness, he thought, might just ever be out of reach. The Tobias in that other life must have been very happy indeed. He felt a pang of jealousy at that hypothetical him.

Still, it was the cards he had been dealt. His nose wrinkled as he continued on past the crowds – hundreds upon hundreds crammed into the hall – looked on. The windows were open and restored, as were the tapestries and decoration and warmth of the time before Fredrick. He was especially grateful for the windows. The common folk perhaps did not bathe as often as they should, and so many of them packed so tightly to hear him was... less than pleasant. Perhaps an edict insisting on a minimal standard of personal grooming would do everyone some good.

But he endured, and his eyes fell upon the thrones. The throne of the king looked just the same as ever, but the throne of the king's bonded had been restored after Fredrick had had it removed. It gleamed alongside Tobias' seat of power, empty for the moment. Filling it was a concern he had not expected to attend to quite so easily, albeit not with the person he had wanted. He bit back a sigh. If only William had lived. If only he'd been willing. If only.

Alas not. As Tobias climbed the dais upon which the thrones sat, Juni took up a position before the other and slowly sank down onto it. Tobias didn't sit, but he too turned to face the crowd. There was no need to sit; this would let more people see their king. "Please, rise."

The sea of people before him did so, and Tobias nodded as he looked across them all. His councillors had suggested that only the most important people be present for his speech. He had told them that it was important that *all* people knew they were important to him. "I thank you. All of you, for your support and your efforts. It is by your paws, not mine, that the glory of Ratholarin may shine once more upon our region.

"It is not a shine untainted by our recent past. It is not a glory that we can be allowed to take for granted. It is far, far more than this, and it is for this reason that I stand before you today." The tiger pressed a paw to his chest. "It is a sacred duty, bestowed not by the gods of old but by us *all*. All of us, who may work together to see this land become something far more than it otherwise could be."

The king's paw curled inward as he closed his eyes. His voice had remained steady so far, but he could already feel his fingers trembling. "The last few years have been hard, but we cannot shy away from the reality of this world that we live in. For my whole life, the actions of the kings before me have cast a shadow, long and terrible, over the lives of so, so many."

Tobias glanced aside to Juni. The hyena noticed and similarly turned her head, and she smiled and nodded encouragingly to him. "Through the actions of my grandfather, the Yarovenni were brought to heel. Through the actions of my father, the Carisi were collared by our forces." He shook his head as he turned back to the crowd. "And through the actions of my brother, we have villainised these people and many others – our brothers and our sisters in these lands – to the extent that violence was the only recourse.

"This will end. This *must* end." More than a few of the people below had begun to scowl. That was expected, of course. Fredrick's attitude of Ratholarin supremacy had been

popular among the Ratholarin, but that ire had been misplaced. “We now are thirty years deep into the Age of Enlightenment that my father declared in the wake of the Carisi surrender, and yet I for the life of me cannot imagine that we have left the Age of Chaos behind us!

“War and strife and division plague us, even as we strive as hard as we can to ensure a better future for us all! We cannot – I cannot – be the head of the Ratholarin that shuns the people that make it great. Those people whose blood comes from every corner of this region, and even from further afield than even that, are a *part* of Ratholarin. To deny them is to deny ourselves!” For as many scowls and glares rose to him from the crowd, twice as many at least nodded along with his words. He was reaching them!

And so Tobias reached out a paw, extended to the crowd before him. “The enemy of Ratholarin preys upon that division, my brothers and sisters. It is a weapon, wielded by those who wield other great and terrible weapons against us like sorcery. The enemy of Ratholarin is ever that which denies the enlightenment that *all* must be free to seek within these lands. Unshackled by the whims of gods. Untainted by the magics that have so twisted the wills of those who came before me.

“For all of his faults, Fredrick was right about the danger of the old magics. He saw the threat in allowing that magic to corrupt the wills of the highest-born of a realm, but he made the critical mistake of thinking that he was strong enough to wield it.” Tobias raised his other paw alongside the first as the people began to nod along with him. “There is no mortal who is worthy to wield the magics of the old gods. From lowest servant to the highest king, magic is a *curse*.” The tiger closed his eyes and bowed his head. His arms slowly lowered again.

An image flashed to mind of William, conjuring his magical fire. Even he, bred for the purpose and born to wield that power, had ultimately been consumed by it. What would he say, he wondered, if he sat where Juni was? If he could hear Tobias’ words? He could only hope that his friend would stand with him and see his intent as noble. “Even those who are naturally born to these powers – those who possess lineages that descend from those chosen by the old gods – are threats that we can no longer stand to ignore.”

Tobias’ eyes opened again as the crowd continued to nod along to his words. He had them. “The ruination that magic brings cannot be denied. And so, the Guardians shall be re-tasked not just with the defence of Ratholarin’s vested interests, but with a new, solemn duty: the eradication of *all* magical lines.”

A cheer went up from the crowd as Juni’s smile widened. “These so-called ‘gifts of the gods’ are weapons that may be twisted to the detriment of all! If wise kings and great scholars can succumb to their power and become monstrous, then the monstrosity of magic *must* be denied!” The cheers rose in volume as Tobias’ voice grew more forceful. “Let it be known here, today! I stand here, and ask you to stand with me in this Age of Enlightenment! Let it *earn* its name as Ratholarin leads the region in this most noble mission!

“An end to corruption! And end to magic! And at last, a final end of the old ways and old gods!” He swept his arms out wide, paws curled into fists as the cheers reached a crescendo. Tobias’ eyes swept out across the masses of people. They cried out for him. They applauded. Everyone was swept up in the energy of the moment and the righteousness of Tobias’ message. The crowd – the people – were with their king.

Once more he turned to Juni. The hyena was still looking at him, and Tobias sighed with relief as she nodded her approval once more. As the din rose throughout the throne room, Juni too began to slowly clap her paws together. The sound was absolutely swallowed up by the noise of the common people, but the motion was appreciated nonetheless.

Tobias didn't know if he could be the right king for his people. He didn't know if he could be worthy of the position, and of the right to rule after what he had done. In the roar of the people chanting his name however, he could be sure of one thing. They thought he was the right one. They thought he was worthy of the position. The tiger smiled as the people's hearts soared. He joined them, swept away on a tide of adulation that he had never, ever felt in his life before. This, he realised, was what it meant to be a king. To have *true* power.

And now, at last, it was Tobias' turn to wield it right.