

Tank

A Metal Bones Story

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Also By Kathleen Contine

Metal Bones

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To Virginia

One

THE ONLY THING KEEPING Tank from death was his ability to climb. He tried not to think about how high up he was as he moved his grip around a branch so he could pull himself further up the tree. He spared a glance below him where dirt paths weaved in and out of the trees like vines. The wood cracked under Tank's weight as he situated himself among the branches. His tail gripped the rough bark to keep his balance. One wrong move, and he'd fall to the jagged, moss-covered rocks lining the forest floor. He scanned the area, searching for any sign of movement.

Always look for movement before making your next move. His father's words from before they'd begun training echoed in his head. The least trained sovich will make themselves known first.

Tank closed his eyes. The sound of the forest amplified as he strained for any sign of another Sovich. Since Tank was old enough, his father had brought him training in the forest with the other members of the village. His only goal of the practice hunts was to find the other young Sovichs before they found him. Before long, Tank could pick out the sounds of someone walking through the forest with ease. A twig breaking, leaves rustling a little louder than normal. Tank's eyes darted back and forth, scouting the forest for the source of

the sound, but nothing except the white noise of the forest met his ears.

Everyone is doing better than usual today. He craned his neck, trying to spot anyone between the leaves, but they all remained hidden.

Don't let your assumptions cause you to put your guard down. His father's voice echoed in his head. Give them an inch and they'll take a mile. Next thing you know, you have a blaster in your face. Never assume anything about your adversary.

A single blast went off somewhere in the distance.

Find cover.

The branch creaked too much for Tank's liking as he inched his way backward. He could just make out the ground through the branches, but if someone walked by they wouldn't notice him.

A branch scraped against his scales and he swatted it away. As he did so, twigs snapped at the bottom of the tree. With a clawed finger on the trigger, Tank pulled out his blaster, ready for a fight. There was a rustle behind him, and a Sovich jumped onto Tank's back. Their combined weight broke the branches, causing them to tumble to the ground below.

Tank clawed at the tree, grasping for anything that would hold him. Branches zoomed by as they gained speed, their leaves smacking him in the face. He reached for a thick branch, pulling with all his might as his claws dug into the bark. The branch held steady as he hoisted himself up. A few feet below him, the Sovich steadied himself. He swayed for a moment before the wood gave way, crashing to the ground.

Tank landed on his feet behind him, drawing his blasters. The Sovich ran from him but Tank was too fast. He caught up and tackled the short creature to the forest floor. However, before he could make another move, a clawed hand dug into his neck and he was suddenly

flying through the air. Tank wheezed as he landed roughly in the dirt, the air rushing from his lungs. The other Sovich stood over him, staring down his snout at Tank and holding his spear inches from Tank's neck.

"You need to listen to your surroundings," Mork said. "Remember there'll be more than one Sovich in the Ceremony."

"I don't think I'll be climbing a tree in The Ceremony," Tank held his hand over his chest, trying to catch his breath.

"You never know, that's why you need to be prepared for anything. And you still have something important to work on," He held up Tank's blaster. "This fell when I threw you. Try to be more careful with this."

Tank sighed. "I would have hurt myself when I landed."

His father clicked his tongue. "If you think you'll hurt yourself when you fall, then you probably will. If you think you can do it then Don't let your mind stop you from being a great warrior."

"I know. I'll do better."

It was the same speech Tank got every time they went training with the others in the forest. At one point or another, his father always told him how important The Ceremony was.

"If you were in The Ceremony fighting other Sovich, you'd be dead. Someone would have already gotten the necklace and we would have to find your body." Mork pulled his spear back and held out his clawed hand to help Tank up. "I do this with you so that won't happen. This isn't for fun, Tank. It's so you'll stay alive."

Tank nodded. He'd been training for the Ceremony as long as he could remember. His father took him into the forest almost every day to practice. Tank wanted to prove to him that he could be the best Sovich that ever entered the Ceremony, but he still needed to work on his skills if he wanted to achieve that goal. Everyone always talked

about how talented his father was when he hunted or when they trained together.

There was a rustle nearby, and several other Sovich came out from behind the nearby bushes and trees. They relaxed as they surrounded Tank and his father. Most of the younger Sovich were at the same point in training as Tank, but there were a few younger ones who were on their first outing. They had wide eyes and held their blasters with a fragile grip.

“Just saw what you did, Mork. That was amazing!” one said. “Tank, you better pick up the slack if you want to be like your dad. He has to be one of the best hunters in the village, don’t you think?”

Mork puffed out his chest and threw an arm around Tank’s shoulders. “Just wait. He’ll be better than me one day.”

Tank stood straighter, his father’s words lifting him up. He would be better than Mork one day, he silently promised himself. He would prove it to everyone.

“I’m not sure about that. I saw what happened just now, and Tank still needs work when he’s so close to his Ceremony,” The young one’s father laughed.

A large black Sovich walked out from behind the others. They gave him space as he walked by, not meeting his eyes. The Sovich eyed Tank up and down and Tank met his eyes evenly.

Roaz.

“So, you think you deserve praise for what you just did then?” he scoffed.

Tank’s chest tightened as the group laughed. It wasn’t that funny. All he did was drop his blaster, that didn’t mean he was a terrible fighter. If anything, they should be scared to go against him without any weapons. His father had made sure to train him in hand-to-hand combat for that very situation.

“Last I checked, I was the only one climbing a tree. If this was The Ceremony, I would be the only one out of sight from everybody.”

Roaz rolled his eyes.

“It’s alright, Tank. They’re just joking,” Mork elbowed him.

A small Sovich spoke up. “I think you did well, Tank. If we were in the Ceremony together you would have killed me.”

“Anyone could have killed you with how much training you still need,” Roaz quipped. Another round of laughter.

Tank nodded at the young Sovich in thanks. He knew it was coming from a good place. At least someone is on my side.

“Let’s head back,” Mork said. “That’s enough training for one day.”

A soft wind blew through the forest, scattering leaves and grass across the path. Tank closed his eyes as the warmth flew around him. The faint sounds of the creatures living amongst the trees were comforting. They didn’t have to worry about training their entire lives for an event where they’d have to kill their friends and family. Every once in a while, on the really hard days, Tank wondered what would happen if he just ran off into the forest. Not having to worry about upholding his father’s name or worrying if he would win The Ceremony when the day came.

But as soon as the thought started planting itself in his mind, a much stronger one reminded him that this was who he was. This was his purpose. And as they marched back to the village from their day of training, Tank readied himself for what felt like endless days until his turn in the Ceremony.

Ever since he could remember, the elders of his village made sure to tell him that they held the Ceremony every year to honor the Sovich that came before them.

“Do you remember what you’re going to have to do when the day comes?” Mork’s voice broke the silence.

“Of course. We’re going to be dropped off somewhere in the forest and be told to run to the center and grab the necklace of our forefathers before anyone else by any means necessary,” Tank answered.

“Do you remember why?”

“We do it to remember that our ancestors fought for what we have now. If it weren’t for them, the sovich might have been wiped out years ago.”

“Exactly,” Mork smiled. “Do you remember where the necklace comes from?”

“The crystal in the center of the forest. Each year an elder makes a new one from a piece of the rock and it’s put in the center of the woods,” Tank said.

“And what does the winner do with the necklace?”

Tank sighed. He’d been quizzed every day on their history to the point he was sure his brain would explode.

“They get to leave the village and give it to someone who gives them purpose,” Tank said for what felt like the thousandth time.

“That’s right.”

Tank and his father made their way through the woods, climbing over the rocks and overgrown trees. Eventually the foliage gave way to a path that had been worn down by generations of Sovichs before them. The path zigzagged through trees and around bushes, the faint smell of rain lingering in the air from the night before, and the dirt sank more than usual with each step Tank took. They travelled along it until the tall wooden fence made of thick logs came into view, marking the border of the village.

Voices of sovich too young to join the training drifted through the air. Several of them ran by as Tank and Mork walked past rows of stone huts. A large wooden platform sat empty in the center of the village. There were no announcements to be made, so no one paid it

any mind. Fires had been lit and the smell of food wafted through the air. Tank's stomach grumbled at the thought of food.

The group of young Sovichs stopped in front of them. One of them tapped Tank on the arm. "Tank! How was training today? Did you beat everyone?" he asked.

Tank bent down on one knee so he was eye level with him. "I did alright."

"You're the best fighter here. You can defeat everyone without trying!"

"Can I hold your blaster?" another asked.

Mork cleared his throat. "Tank has to go, kids. Maybe next time."

The kids sighed, but parted to let them continue on their way. Before long, Tank found himself in front of his hut. His mother stood in the doorway with her arms held out. Her eyes lit up as soon as she saw them.

"You're back! I was starting to get worried," Tank's mother pulled him into a tight hug.

"The sun isn't all the way down yet. We were okay," Tank's father assured her.

She laughed. "I was still worried. Come inside."

She shuffled them in their hut where there was a meal waiting for them. Three steaming bowls of Tank's favorite food sat on the table. His mouth watered from the smell of the salty meat. Tank and his father sat down, digging in before his mother joined them.

"How was training today?" she asked.

"Tank still needs to work on holstering his weapons. I didn't even need to try to grab your blaster," Mork took a large bite of his meal.

"You knocked me out of a tree," Tank said.

"When you're in The Ceremony, you can't tell people that. It's either life or death," he wiped his snout with the back of his hand. "Tomorrow is the hunt. I think you should come with us."

"He's not ready to go on the hunt yet," Tank's mother said.

"If we keep saying he's not ready, then he'll never be ready. It'll be a great way to learn something new," Mork washed down the food with a swig of water. "We'll all be there to help him and you'll have a sense of accomplishment when we bring food back. What do you think, Tank?"

Tank glanced between his mother and father. He didn't want to disappoint either of them. But the Ceremony was going to be the most important event of his life and the hunt would prepare him for that.

"I'll go. I've always wondered what everyone does on the hunts," he said at last.

His dad clapped his hands together. "We'll get ready for tomorrow then. Make sure your blaster is cleaned and prepared."

Tank smiled. "Are we going with everyone else?"

"Yes. We'll all show you how we hunt. It should be very helpful to you," He clapped Tank on the back. "Get some rest tonight, Tank. We have a long day tomorrow."

"Please be careful. I don't want you coming back with any injuries," his mother's eyes were full of worry.

"Our entire hunting party is going tomorrow. You don't have to worry about anything," Tank's father answered.

"Doesn't Prylek have to pick you to go?" Tank asked.

Everyone had been hinting that Tank's name was going to be called for the next hunt.

"Not necessarily. You can still come with us if I want to bring you," Mork said. "But people feel more special if Prylek calls their name."

"How was the village while we were gone?" Tank asked his mother. The family sat around the table, eating meat soup.

"Naf got bullied more," she said, taking a bite of her food.

Tank's father scoffed. "Of course, he did. He never stands up for himself. He's always waiting on Tank to show up and save him."

"What's wrong with that?" Tank asked. Isn't that what Sovich were supposed to do?

His father sighed. "If you keep that up, he'll think you'll fight for him when you both enter the Ceremony."

Tank's mother tilted her head. "What's wrong with that? They're friends."

"They're friends, but every Sovich here has to face the fact that they'll be forced to kill another Sovich during the Ceremony one day. And that might be a friend. You're the only one on your team in there."

Tank pushed the food around in his bowl with his spoon. It was true he didn't let the big Sovich bully Naf. But if he was being honest with himself, he would just ignore Naf and go after everyone else.

"Why does everything have to do with the Ceremony anyway? Can't I just be friends with Naf?"

There was a knock and a small orange Sovich appeared in the entryway. Tank's father sighed and took another bite of his food while shooting Tank a look that said, What did I tell you?

Naf shuffled up to the table with his head down, searching for comfort from them. He rubbed his clawed hands together as his eyes shifted between Tank and his parents.

"I don't mean to interrupt, but Roaz won't let me get back to my house," he stuttered.

Tank got up from the table before Mork could object. "I'll be back soon."

He fell into line with Naf and they walked through the village toward his hut. With Naf being bright orange, he had a huge target on his back if anyone wanted to pick on him when they wanted to be especially cruel.

“How did training go today?” Naf asked. He was always left behind because no one thought he was worth the effort. Being the smallest of the Sovich it seemed obvious that he wasn’t going to win the Ceremony any time soon.

“I think I’m getting better every day. There’s a lot more I can teach you,” Tank said. “Roaz acted like I’m stupid, like he always does.”

“He’s the worst,” Naf growled.

“But I have something to tell you. My dad is taking me hunting tomorrow so I won’t be able to train you.”

Naf’s face didn’t falter. Instead he did a little jump. “That’s great, Tank. We knew they had to pick you eventually. It was only a matter of time.”

“When I get back, I’ll have even more training for us to do. So if you think about it, it’s a win-win,” Tank bumped Naf’s shoulder.

“I’m not worried. You’ll do great,” Naf replied.

A gruff voice broke their conversation. Roaz stood in the middle of the path in front of them, arms crossed. The moonlight lit up his fangs as his smile stretched across his face.

“You really thought bringing Tank with you would get you out of a beating, Naf? It won’t do you any good,” Roaz growled. He took a heavy step toward the pair. Tank positioned himself between Naf and Roaz. He gripped his blaster, waiting for the moment he would need to use it. Roaz eyed him down, but didn’t make a move.

“Get out of the way, Tank. This is between Naf and I,” Roaz said.

Tank snorted. “If you have a problem with Naf, then you have a problem with me. All he’s doing is walking to his hut.”

Roaz stood straighter. “And I’m going to practice what we learned in training on him like I do every time I catch him walking back to his hut.”

They were so close now, Tank could see Roaz’s irises. His grip on his blaster tightened. Roaz glanced over Tank’s shoulder before his

eyes locked on him.

“You both aren’t worth it,” He waved them off before walking away.

There was a thud behind him. Naf sprawled on the ground, his limbs in all directions.

“What are you doing?”

“That was terrifying! Just think of what he might have done if you weren’t here, Tank,” Naf cried.

Tank pulled Naf to his feet. “You need to be more brave, Naf. That’s the reason he picks on you in the first place. Don’t let him bully you, alright?”

Naf nodded.

They made it to Naf’s hut without running into any more trouble. Although, Naf remained convinced Roaz would come back. He didn’t stop glancing over his shoulder until he was in the doorway of his hut. Tank said goodbye and strolled back home, thoughts of what the hunt could bring dancing in his mind the whole way.

Two

TANK CHECKED HIS BLASTERS at least ten times while he waited for his father to get up, unable to contain his excitement. Going out on the hunt with some of the most skilled Sovich in the village was enough to make him giddy. By the time his father rolled out of bed, Tank had already polished his blasters, eaten, and paced the hut more times than he could count.

“How long have you been waiting?” Mork asked as he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

“Not too long,” Tank stretched his arms above his head, letting out a loud yawn.

The rays of the sun broke through the trees as they joined the other Svoich’s in the center of the village. The fog hadn’t lifted yet and the smell of the dewy grass still hung in the air. Tank couldn’t sit still. The anticipation threatened to consume him as his stomach flipped over. The older Sovichs talked amongst themselves near the entrance, their blasters polished to perfection.

Tank wanted to be them. He held up his blaster and rubbed it with his clawed hand, trying to buff it more. Mork patted him on the back.

“Don’t be so nervous. You’re fine,” he said.

An old Sovich shambled up the wooden steps to the platform, each stair creaking as he went. The wrinkles in his scales appeared as he smiled through his wispy eyebrows at the group. A hush grew over the crowd as he raised his arms.

Prylek.

"It is time again for a hunt. I know you are all excited to get started. I know that you will all do well and bring back enough for us to feast tonight," Prylek smiled, his yellowing teeth visible in the early morning sun. "We'll be waiting for something delicious."

The crowd cheered and roared, waving their weapons above their heads. Bystanders pounded on drums. The beat matched the thumping of Tank's heart in his chest. The crowd grew louder and Tank's body buzzed with nervous energy.

The crowd migrated to the gate, and Tank tried his best not to get lost in the shuffle. He stayed close to Mork. He had never been outside the village this early in the morning. If he wasn't hunting or training, he was in the village. Usually helping his mother with something to keep him out of trouble. The fog filtering through the trees intimidated him more than other Sovichs.

"Tank, this is your first time right?" a nearby Sovich asked.

"Yeah," Tank scratched his chin.

"Well, don't put too much pressure on yourself and you'll do fine. They like to make a big deal out of it, but it really isn't. Especially after you start doing it once a month. It's best to just watch," he said.

The village disappeared behind the group as they made their way into the forest. The hunt had officially started and Tank's senses heightened to take in everything he could. The sound of soft footsteps over the grass or a faint smell the wind might carry by. He wanted to do a good job his first time. The trees became thicker and they fell into a single file line.

"Why aren't we using the helibikes?" Tank asked.

"You can hear one helibike coming from the other side of the forest," another Sovich called from the front of the line. "All of the food would be gone if we all used helibikes,"

"We're going to split up the farther we get in, but for now it's good to travel in a group," Mork said. "You never know what might be watching us when we first start out."

He held a long spear over his shoulder and his scales were scarred more than the others. Most Sovich trained in hand to hand combat at a young age and then moved on to blasters, but Mork had become a master with his spear.

"Don't be nervous, Tank. Everyone expects their first time to be some amazing thing where they take down prey all on their own and come back a hero, but it really isn't. It's time to learn something new." He twirled his spear in his hand.

"I'll keep that in mind."

The overgrown brush became thicker and Tank found himself ducking under leaves and climbing over rocks to keep up with the others. Mork made it look so easy.

He glanced back at Tank. "Do you feel ready?"

"I think so. I train almost every day and I help Naf when I come back as well."

"The orange one," Mork stated.

"No one wants to train him because he doesn't have much natural skill so I've been trying to teach him," Tank climbed over a large rock as he spoke.

"Who would want to train Naf? He'll get stepped on the second the Ceremony starts," a Sovich laughed ahead of them.

He couldn't tell what Mork thought of that. He didn't grunt or shrug or anything. "It's good he has a friend like you to help him out."

"I wouldn't call him a friend. I only train with him," Tank stuttered.

“Interesting, we’ll have to see how Naf fares under your guidance.”

The group continued walking until the trees became so thick it was hard to tell if the sun had risen or not. Tank’s feet ached but he didn’t want to admit it in front of the others. They stepped off the path and the leader of the group climbed on a rock and turned to face them.

“It looks like there’s more than two trails we can follow today, but I think it’s best if we keep it to two groups.” He pointed to the five adult sovich in front of Tank and Mork. They stood straight waiting for their instructions. “I’ll take you three and you two go with Tank and Kovik. There’s been a lot of tracks around this area, so I’m sure we’ll find something to bring back to everyone. If you find something bigger than you can handle, call for the rest of us.”

Tank took a breath. He was finally going to find out how to hunt food. No more practicing and having to stop himself right before. Maybe he would even be the one to kill the animal this time. No. He needed to focus instead of daydreaming. That’s what would make him a liability for the others.

The atmosphere changed like someone had poured water over a fire. Kovik shrank unnoticed into the foliage. Tank followed suit, keeping his eyes on them so he wouldn’t get left behind. The forest seemed to hold its breath, as though it knew what mission they were on.

Kovik stopped and held a hand up, causing Tank to stop too. There was a low rumbling in the distance that Tank couldn’t place. Across from him in the grass, Mork gripped his spear.

“Get ready. The prey should be coming through here soon,” Mork whispered. “By the sounds of it, we’ll be eating well tonight.”

Tank aimed his blaster toward the opening in the trees. Whatever was walking toward them – it was big. Tank’s heart pounded. The rumble he felt in the ground as the creature drew closer was enough

for him to get excited. He was doing it. He was going to prove to everyone what he was made of.

The trees in front of them shook. Tank could just make out the outline of something between the wood. With a growl, the biggest creature Tank had ever seen walked into the daylight. Its neck extended toward the forest ceiling as it reached for fruit hanging from the treetops. It bit down on the food until it snapped in half in its beak, the juice raining on the forest floor. It towered over him, and Tank wasn't sure if it even saw him at first.

An Addork.

The creature stopped and sniffed the air as though it was taking in the scenery of the forest. It still hadn't noticed the group of Sovich standing in front of it. Tank glanced at Kovik, who held a clawed finger up to his snout for silence. Tank nodded and backed away from the Addork.

Its legs were as thick as tree trunks and its long tail swung back and forth, knocking against the trees behind it with a loud crack. It stretched its neck to sniff the top of the nearest tree and bit off a large leaf, debris raining on the others. Mork waved frantically at him to back up. Tank took several steps back, keeping his eyes on the massive Addork when there was a loud snap.

The other Sovichs heads snapped to look at Tank. He knew what had happened before he assessed the damage. His foot sat perfectly between two pieces of a broken twig. A pit formed in his stomach. The creature looked down at the group. For a second Tank thought it might go back to its meal and leave them alone. It seemed unbothered by the fact they were there. But it let out an earth shattering roar, sending spit on Tank's face.

The entire group dove for cover. Tank scrambled under a large rock, the creature's foot slamming into the ground right where he had

stood seconds before. His hands trembled as he aimed his blaster squarely at the creature's leg and fired.

It let out a howl, yanking its foot back. Tank took the opportunity to dash out from under the rock and run through the Addork's legs. With one swift movement, Tank hopped on its tail and ran up its back. Kovik rushed from his hiding place before he could be stepped on.

Tank grabbed onto its neck and pushed his blaster into the skin, ready to get his kill. As if sensing Tank's intentions, the creature tensed, thrashing wildly in an attempt to throw him off. In the commotion, Tank lost his grip on his blaster and it flew from his hand. He wrapped both arms around the beast's neck. Just don't lose your grip, Tank thought.

With a violent twist, the Addork threw its head forward and Tank tumbled over its head onto the ground. He pulled out his other blaster, but before he could make a move, there was a roar from the Addork above him.

Several blasters shot over Tank's head, hitting the creature square in the face. It hissed and stumbled backward, cracking numerous trees in half, even more angry than before. Mork leapt over him, gripping his spear until his knuckles turned white. Fire burned in his eyes and a roar escaped him as he charged the Addork.

Mork landed in front of the creature and sliced its leg. The others jumped out to help. Blaster fire lit up the woods. Tank dove under a nearby log, watching from behind as the Sovichs surrounded the Addork. Why did he think he was strong enough to do this?

"Tank, your blaster." Mork shouted.

Tank threw it and Mork caught it just in time. The creature didn't stand a chance as he shoved it between the Addork's eyes and shot at point blank range.

It collapsed on the ground, sending a cloud of dust and dirt flying in every direction, the hole in its head still smoking. The others rushed forward to assess the damage. Mork searched frantically for him before he spotted him under the log.

“Tank, are you okay? What happened?”

“I thought I could do it. But it threw me off,” Tank said.

“It’s alright son. It was your first time going on the hunt. I didn’t expect you to be able to take it down all on your own,” Mork replied.

“Are you okay?”

Tank nodded, glancing over his shoulder at the creature that now lay still on the ground. The other sovich tied thick ropes around its limbs and belly, pulling it up and lifting it over their shoulders in one fluid motion.

“This must have been the fastest we got done with a hunt in a long time,” one of them said. “We should bring Tank for bait more often.”

The adrenaline in Tank’s body was replaced with annoyance and anger. All the times to make fun of him-

“I lost my grip, that’s all. I need to work on it,” he said.

“You’ll train more. It’s alright,” Mork handed him the blaster he’d dropped.

But Tank’s annoyance didn’t waver. He didn’t like being constantly told that it would be okay.

“Tank, let’s go.”

Tank hung his head in shame. He could have done so much better. He checked his blasters a moment longer than necessary to make sure the other Sovichs were well ahead of him.

There was a tap on his shoulder. Mork smiled at him. “You did just fine.”

Three

THE next morning, Tank woke up much later than usual. He replayed the hunt over and over in his mind, trying to think of what he could have done differently. Everything he did seemed like the right decision at the time. He should have stayed back and listened to his father. Voices in the doorway pulled him from his thoughts.

“He has it in him. He just needs that extra push,” his mother said.

“I’ll work with him more. He did well on the hunt, and he’s a good fighter,” Mork answered.

Tank breathed a sigh of relief.

At least he hadn’t done a terrible job his first time on the hunt.

“He almost had it yesterday, he just lost his grip is all. I think he was more shocked about being on the hunt for the first time than anything.”

“First hunt jitters. We all had them,” Tank’s mother said.

Tank snuck across the hut, trying to hear what they were saying. He spared a glance at Mork who was rubbing his chin in thought.

“I’ll take him out to train,” Mork said confidently.

Their heads shot up when they realized Tank was standing behind them. Mork smiled.

“You’re starting a new way of training today. Come with me,” he moved toward the hut opening.

“Just go easy on him, please,” his mother said.

Mork rubbed her shoulder. “If he’s going to get better, I can’t go easy on him.”

Before Tank could reply, his father turned and pushed his way out into the morning air. Tank scrambled for his blasters, not wanting to miss anything, and rushed outside. Mork leaned against the hut, his arms crossed.

“So, yesterday didn’t go as well as you wanted it to, did it?”

“No.” Tank’s shoulders deflated.

“Well, it’s time to get to work then. As long as you’re willing to put the work in.” His father’s eyes narrowed.

“I am.” Tank took a step closer.

“No, Tank. You’ve been training for a long time. This training is the next step in that process. I need to know you’re going to take it seriously.” Mork placed a hand on Tank’s shoulder.

Tank let out a puff of air from his snout. “I’m ready to do whatever I need to do.”

Mork smirked. “Alright. I believe you, Tank. We’ll have you kicking ass soon.”

“How?”

“Grab Naf and meet me at the gate. I’ll show you how,” Mork picked up his spear and left Tank staring after him.

Tank darted toward Naf’s house. If there was any way he could become stronger than he would take it. He hurried through the village, ignoring all the strange looks thrown his way. He rushed inside without knocking. Naf’s snores filled the hut, making it simple for Tank to find him. He rushed to Naf’s bed and shook him.

“Get up, we’re training.”

Naf rubbed his eyes. “What are you talking about? No one wants to train me.”

“They do today. Come on.” Tank pulled Naf by the tail. He slid off the bed and hit his head against the floor with a yelp.

“What the heck, Tank? I was sleeping.”

Tank let out a groan. “We have the chance to get some real training right now and all you can think about is sleep? Come on Naf.”

Naf sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Fine but I’m only doing it so you won’t drag me the whole way there.”

They met Mork at the gate several minutes later. The older Sovich already seemed annoyed they were taking so long. He crossed his arms as he watched them approach. Tank rushed because he didn’t want Mork to think he wasn’t taking it seriously. Naf still lingered behind.

“The first thing we’re going to do is go into the forest to the training area. You’ve gone into the forest enough times that this shouldn’t be a problem for either one of you.” Without another word, Mork turned on his heel and marched into the woods.

Tank followed closely, not bothering to check if Naf was keeping up or not. The butterflies in his stomach were back.

“What kind of training techniques are we learning?” Tank asked.

“You’ll see.” Mork threw his spear over his shoulder. “All we’re doing now is getting there.”

Naf stumbled over the brush and rocks, trying his best to keep up. How was such a small Sovich louder than the entire hunting party when they went out yesterday?

“I should know so I can be prepared though, right?” Tank’s excitedness overpowered his logic.

“Be patient, Tank. It’s a valuable asset.” Mork smiled.

He led them deeper and deeper into the woods, not giving them any details no matter how many ways Tank asked. The trees opened up to a small area with several scattered stumps and fallen logs throughout the space. Mork reached in the smallest one and pulled out a carved stick with intricate designs woven into the wood.

Tank couldn't help the excitement bubbling in his chest. He had never gotten hand to hand combat quite right. Blasters were his specialty.

Mork threw the stick to Tank. "We're starting from square one and working our way up. Throw your weapons on the ground."

Naf's eyes widened at Tank, clearly confused they were supposed to bring any weapons. Tank rolled his eyes and dropped his blasters on the stump next to him.

"And the holster too," Mork motioned to the belt, "like I said we're going to square one."

Tank did as he asked.

"Now, I want to see how much training you have already. Get on that stump together and fight until I say stop."

Naf laughed. "I can't take Tank that long."

Mork sighed. "It isn't about if you can hold your own against Tank, it's about how well you fight."

"Fighting Naf won't exactly show how well I fight either," Tank said.

Mork smirked. "You'd be surprised." He motioned to the massive stump with his head.

Tank jumped up. The stump was big enough for him and Naf to stand on top of. The damp wood sagged when he put all his weight on it. Definitely not sturdy enough for a fight. He turned around to face them. Naf was still hyping himself up.

"Just jump up there and do it." Mork pushed Naf on the back.

Naf gave a yelp and hopped on the stump after Tank. The wood sank lower, cracking and groaning until the stump gave up under their combined weight. Naf screamed as they fell through the rotted wood, into the middle of the stump. The edges reached above Tank's head, the only visible thing being the sky outside the top.

"It looks like the location of your fight just changed," Mork's head appeared above them, a sly smirk on his face. "I'll watch your fight from up here."

"How are we supposed to fight when we both barely fit in here?" Tank asked.

"Something you have to understand is that the unexpected is not as uncommon as you might think. You were going to fight on top of the stump, now you're fighting inside the stump. You need to adapt and figure it out," Mork said.

He's right.

Without thinking, Tank grabbed Naf around the neck and pinned him against the side of the tree. Naf scratched at his arm trying to escape, but he was too small to do any damage.

"Perfect, Tank!" Mork said. "Let's pretend we're in the Ceremony and you kill him. How are you getting out of the stump now?"

Tank searched around the hollow stump. Vines stuck out at odd angles every which way. He put his foot in one while grabbing another higher one, and hoisted himself up. The vines held just long enough for him to reach the top and pull himself over the edge.

He was met with a swift thwap of Mork's stick.

"You didn't check your surroundings. What will you do when you get attacked the second you hop out?" Mork asked. "Always be vigilant about who's around you, Tank."

"Hey, can I have a hand?" Naf's voice rose in pitch.

Mork rolled his eyes and reached his arm down to pull Naf up. "Naf you need to try harder. Flailing around isn't going to get you anywhere."

Naf hung his head. "I didn't know we were already going. I was still listening to you talk."

Mork picked up the stick and whacked Naf across the head with it. "No excuses, Naf. You knew what you were doing the second you got

on that stump."

Naf grabbed his head as he fell into the dirt. "Ow! Why aren't you hitting Tank?"

"Tank listened to what I said and used it to beat the adversary. All you've done is come up with excuses as to why you can't do anything," Mork scoffed.

The forest was quiet as Mork took them through several other training exercises. They included how to properly stand and crouch when you're following someone and what to do when you think someone is following you. Tank picked it up right away, willing to learn anything Mork threw at him.

As he brought them back to the village, his head swam with ideas on how he could use his new techniques in the Ceremony when it was time. He knew there had to be a way for him to win, he just had to figure it out.

Naf on the other hand was willing to give every excuse under the sun as to why he couldn't do anything. Every pointer Mork gave him was met with a reason as to why he wasn't able to follow through. Every ounce of criticism was answered with why Mork was wrong. Tank couldn't understand why Naf wanted to be in the Ceremony in the first place if this was how he was going to train. Tank shook his head. It didn't matter. He wasn't about to let Naf's incompetence get in the way of his training.



Whenever Mork gave him a pointer, Tank tried his best to change what he was doing, whether it was holding a weapon the wrong way, stalking something too loudly, or just changing the way he hunted for targets.

"You need to make decisions faster," Mork said. "It's one of your biggest weaknesses. You hesitate as you try to think about what to do

next, and it can cost you your life. Think ahead of what your enemy might do so that you don't have to stop and think next time."

Tank nodded as he stood in front of Naf on a log that was suspended a few inches above the ground. Mork handed them both a stick similar in length to his spear. "Now I want you to knock the other one off as fast as you can. But keep in mind that you have to think ahead. What is your enemy's go-to move? What do they fall back on? Use that to your advantage." He backed away to give them room.

Tank's leg's wobbled as he tried to catch his footing. Naf clutched his stick to his chest, analyzing Tank's next move.

Think ahead.

Naf usually ran right at him, so he could sweep his feet out from under him.

Just as he thought, Naf charged forward without a plan.

In his mind's eye, Tank saw himself knocking Naf over and pushing him off the log with ease.

Tank didn't hesitate. He crouched and swung his stick as hard as he could at Naf's knees. Naf went down hard on the log, causing it to swing back and forth. Tank gripped Naf's tail and pulled him off the side before Naf could grab onto anything.

Mork applauded as Naf's body slammed on the ground. "That was great! See what happens when you think further ahead before you do something?" He laughed. "Let's do it again."

Four

MORK had been training them for several weeks. Early each morning he would collect Tank and Naf and march them out to the clearing where they would train until Mork was satisfied with their progress.

On many occasions, their training ended up with Naf in the dirt, bruised with Mork pointing out everything he did wrong. Naf would whine before getting up, leading to more criticism. Tank couldn't help but be happy with how much better he was getting. He wanted to go on another hunt to show the villagers just how much progress he had made.

The villagers gave them curious looks as the three walked through the village. Tank couldn't help but be nervous. He wanted the others to be proud of the progress he'd made, but what if he still didn't think he was good enough?

Mork patted him on the back as they passed numerous huts. "You've come a long way in such a short time. Prylek is going to be very proud of you."

"I hope you're right," Tank answered as he took a deep breath.

As if he knew they were coming, Prylek came out of his hut and opened his arms in greeting. "Mork! You being back early with Tank and Naf can only mean they're ready to show off their training," he said.

The other Sovichs in the village gathered to see what the commotion was.

Mork gave him a wide grin, the sunlight bouncing off his fangs. "We've been training hard, and I think you'll be interested in the progress Tank and Naf have made."

Prylek crossed his arms. "Very well. Let's see it."

Why was it suddenly hard to breathe? Tank had shown his father the training he had learned hundreds of times. Why was this time any different?

Oh because this time it is different.

The other Sovich's stares bore into him. He and Naf went to the center of the village. The crowd followed them, gathering more spectators. Tank gripped his blaster as though it would somehow bring him comfort. He glanced through the crowd at the familiar faces, trying to find any familiar faces. His mother watched intensely, chewing her nails. He offered her a small smile she returned.

"We're going to have a clean show of strength," Mork announced to the crowd. "Hand to hand combat only." The onlookers whispered amongst themselves.

Tank shook himself out as he stared Naf down at the other end of the enclosed circle.

Mork addressed the crowd. "You will allow the two-fighter to show off their talents and nothing more. No touching the fighters, and no helping. No cheating in any way. You have been warned." He left the circle and the excitement intensified.

The look in Naf's eye matched the emotion of the crowd. They didn't care if Tank and Naf had gotten better in training. They wanted bloodshed.

Prylek stayed silent as the sovich roared, waiting for the fight to start. There was a rumble in the sky and a raindrop plopped on Tank's snout.

You have to be kidding.

With a flash of lightning, rain poured down around them. No one cared though. The only one who seemed to be worried about their wellbeing was Tank's mother.

"Go!" Prylek shouted.

Just like always, Naf raced at Tank, his feet throwing up mud in all directions.

He didn't learn a thing from this morning.

Tank sidestepped him, but instead of punching him in the back he swung his foot around. Naf's feet went right out from under him and he landed in the mud with a splatter.

The crowd let out a collective laugh.

Naf rolled over and stood up, the mud caked to his orange scales. He gripped the stick tighter and stayed back.

"Someone do something," a Sovich from the crowd yelled.

Tank thrust his stick, poking Naf in the stomach. He dodged it and whacked Tank on the shoulder. It didn't do much damage. Tank blew air out of his snout.

Think ahead.

Naf rushed forward again. Instead of dodging, Tank grabbed it and used Naf's momentum to throw him to the ground again. He held both of the sticks in defense, waiting for Naf's next move.

Before they could begin again, Mork's voice barked through the rain, echoing toward them. "Stop!" He held his hand up and Tank and Naf froze.

"I've seen enough," Prylek said. "Tank, you aren't ready for the Ceremony yet. You've improved, it's just not time yet for you, I'm sorry."

The world seemed to stop for a moment. He wasn't processing any words that Prylek was saying. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Prylek was supposed to say good job, you're doing great, I can't wait

to see how you do in the Ceremony this year. Not tell him that he needs to work even harder. He looked to Mork for help, but Mork was just as surprised as he was.

Mork stared at Prylek in disbelief, frowning, "Tank has been training for weeks now. You can't deny that he's ready for the Ceremony."

"I said he got better. However he isn't as good as he could be," Prylek replied. "Work some more and then come back and show me how much you've improved and we'll go from there."

Tank shoved his way through the crowd toward his hut. This wasn't fair at all. He had improved so much. Were they all watching the same fight?

But deep in his heart, Tank knew they were right. He had been getting better, but he still wasn't as good as his father, and that's what really mattered in the end. His father wanted him to be as good as, if not better than him, so he knew Tank would win and not have to worry about him getting killed.

There was a tap on his shoulder. Naf.

"What do you want?" Tank asked.

"I need your help again."

"If this is about walking you to your hut, you shouldn't need me after all our training." Tank murmured.

"But, Roaz is walking around looking for us. I'm not strong enough to take him on by myself," Naf said.

Tank let out an exasperated sigh. "This is the last time, Naf. You need to be able to do this on your own."

"Thank you so much, Tank. I would try to do it myself, but Roaz is always finding a way to beat me. I hope you don't mind. I would have gone to my hut, but yours was closer."

My hut always seems to be closer.

The crowd had already dispersed, which Tank was grateful for. He'd rather not deal with anyone who saw what had happened. A shadow in their path snapped Tank from his thoughts and he glanced up at the large black Sovich standing in their way, staring down his snout at them.

"Where do you think you're going?" Roaz asked, his eyes lighting up.

"To Naf's house," Tank replied.

"No, you're not," Roaz growled.

Tank took a step forward. "Yes, we are. Naf is going home," His clawed hand hovered over his blaster. They weren't allowed to use weapons in the village, but Tank didn't want to deal with Roaz today. Roaz gave Tank a once over before smirking.

"Well, I say you can't," He punched Naf who fell backward into the mud. Naf sat in the sludge, more pathetic than before. Roaz chuckled. He reached for Tank, but not before Tank pulled out his blaster and aimed it at Roaz's face. Roaz let out a small growl.

"Tank," A voice barked above the noise. Tank turned. Mork stood behind them, his eyes narrow as he surveyed the scene.

Tank's heart sank as his father drew closer. There was no way he was getting out of this one.

"Roaz, you're better than this. Do I need to talk to Prylek about you?"

Tank's eyes widened.

Mork drew himself up to his full height. "Do you think he'd let you in The Ceremony after he found out you were acting like this toward others?"

Roaz scoffed. "Prylek wouldn't care."

Tank's father tilted his head. "You think so? Let's find out right now then," He grabbed Roaz around the neck, his claws digging into

his scales as he led him toward Prylek's hut. Roaz started digging his heels in the mud, but Tank's father pushed him more.

"Not so tough now that you have to answer to someone, are you?" he asked.

Tank and Naf followed behind as his father knocked on the side of the hut. Prylek emerged, annoyed that someone had disturbed his peace.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Roaz has been starting fights in the village," Mork said, nodding to the black Sovich in his grasp. "Claims that you won't mind at all. I wanted to check with you to ask how true that is."

Prylek sighed in disappointment. He placed a clawed hand on Roaz's shoulder. "Roaz, you're better behaved than that," He spotted Naf trying to wipe the mud off his legs.

"Naf come over here." He waved Naf forward. Naf obeyed, walking with his head down until he was in the light where he was more visible. "Look at what you did to him, Roaz. You think punching a fellow Sovich in the mud in the middle of the village will go unpunished?" Naf scurried back next to Tank.

"Your weapons will be taken away from you. I will let you know when you can have them back," Prylek said. "You need to learn to control yourself, Roaz."

Roaz dropped his head in mock sincerity. "You're right. I should know better. I'll accept whatever my punishment is."

Prylek, catching on to what Roaz was doing, smacked him across the face, leaving a scratch across his snout. "You're out of The Ceremony. Don't make me repeat myself."

Tank and Naf exchanged wide-eyed looks. In all his life, Tank had never heard of anyone not being allowed to enter The Ceremony. He'd had his share of close calls, but he always stopped before he crossed that line.

Roaz fell to his knees. "Prylek, you can't do that."

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do. I'm sick of your behavior, Roaz. It's time you paid for your actions. Get out of here and let me sleep," He went back into his hut, leaving the four of them in the darkness.

Roaz stood up. Tank was sure he'd try to attack one of them again but Mork stepped in between them.

"It's time to go home, Roaz." Mork gripped Roaz's shoulder.

Roaz stomped away from them, shouldering past Tank as he went. Before Tank could voice his happiness at Roaz finally getting what he deserved, his father crossed his arms. "You two better go home too before you get in trouble as well."

"What did we do?" Naf whined.

"You've already caused enough commotion in the village today, we don't need more."

"Mork." Prylek called from his hut. "A word, please."

Mork rushed back to Prylek's hut.

"Who knew standing up for yourself would get you in trouble," Tank said as they walked back through the village.

"I thought you did the right thing," Naf answered.

"You're just saying that because I stood up for you," Tank replied. "You need to stand up for yourself more and stop dragging me into it, Naf."

There was a thumping of footsteps behind them and Mork appeared out of breath. His brow furrowed and he didn't notice them at first.

"What's wrong?" Tank asked.

"I just got done talking to Prylek. He told me that neither of you are allowed in the Ceremony either."

Five

TANK stayed in his hut as long as he could the next day. Anything he could do to delay having to face the village. Word travelled quickly and the last thing he wanted was for everyone to know the best fighter's son had been banned from the Ceremony. The one thing he'd been looking forward to his entire life had been ripped away in an instant. All the training, all the work he'd put in had been for nothing. What would he do now? Mork said he would try to reason with Prylek.

"I can't promise I'll get you back in the Ceremony, but I'll do everything I can."

Tank didn't have much confidence. He dragged himself out of bed, trying to find any way to keep his mind off it. He silently thanked his parents for leaving before he woke up. The last thing he wanted to do was have to talk about what happened. There was a knock on the side of the doorway and Naf slipped into the hut.

"You really have the nerve to show up here right now," Tank growled.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think Prylek would throw us all out of the Ceremony. If I could go back and tell him to reconsider I would," Naf's voice rose higher and higher the more he talked.

“Well you didn’t,” Tank snarled. “I’ve told you, you need to learn to stick up for yourself. Why did I agree to take you back to your hut again?” He picked up his bowl and finished off his meal before slamming it back on the table. Anything to keep his hands busy so that he didn’t wring Naf’s neck. “Please leave me alone.”

“Is there really nothing I can do? I said I was sorry, I want to make it up to you.”

Tank slammed his bowl on the table, sloshing the liquid in every direction. Thousands of thoughts raced through Tank’s brain, each more violent than the last.

“The only thing you can do right now is to get out of my sight. I don’t care if I ever see you again. You’re dead to me,” he hissed. “You have no idea what you’ve done to me, Naf. You ruined my life. There’s nothing more for me here. You were never going to win the Ceremony and you don’t have no idea what it feels like to have it taken away.”

“I could have won if I wanted to,” Naf growled.

“No, you couldn’t. You’re weak, and you’ll always be weak. The only reason Mork trained you is because he felt bad. You think you had a shot at winning the Ceremony if I hadn’t shown you the training I’ve been learning? It makes me laugh, Naf. It really makes me laugh that you thought you had a chance.”

Hurt flashed in Naf’s eyes, but Tank couldn’t stop, his anger radiating through him.

“If we were in the Ceremony together, did you think you were going to kill me? Do you think you’re stronger than me? You’re not. You’re small and you’re a coward and you’re weak. And that’s all there is to it.”

Without a word, Naf stormed out of the hut. Tank didn’t care. He didn’t care if he never saw the Sovich again.

There was another, harder knock. He took a deep breath to calm himself down.

“Looks like we’ll never face off in the Ceremony doesn’t it?”

Roaz’s voice pierced through Tank like an arrow.

Tank didn’t have the energy to argue with Roaz. He just wanted to sleep. “I’m not up for this Roaz.”

The black Sovich leaned against the doorframe. “I just wanted to make sure you weren’t trying to train after that catastrophe you showed the entire village yesterday. You’re doing yourself a huge favor by being banned from the Ceremony if you ask me.”

Tank sighed. “I said I’m not up for this, Roaz.”

“Well too bad. I just wanted to let you know how amusing it is that you thought you would have gotten better in only a few weeks. Maybe next time, Tank.”

Tank growled. “You shouldn’t be gloating when you’re out of the Ceremony too.”

“Oh, Naf is going to pay for getting me banned,” Roaz smirked. “I just wanted to see your face today now that the reality has sunk in.”

Tank flew from the table, but Roaz had already left. He collapsed on the dirt floor. The coolness against his scales was a welcome change.

Think ahead, Tank thought. Don’t let him win.

I’ll figure this out.

Six

TANK ventured out into the night. The sleeping village was quiet as the moonlight flooded down from the sky, giving him just enough light to see by as he paced around the village. He dragged his feet through the comforting silence.

He had to figure this out. Maybe he could find some way to convince Prylek to change his mind about the Ceremony.

A strange noise pierced the air, cutting off his train of thought. Tank froze, searching for the source. The noise rang out again from the front gate, and Tank scurried toward it, the sound growing louder as he did. He ducked behind a large bush to keep out of sight. Peeking his head around the leaves, he spotted Roaz and a couple of his friends holding Naf in a net and dragging him toward the forest.

“I didn’t do anything, I swear!” Naf squeaked.

“Yeah, it’s all my fault Prylek kicked me out of the Ceremony,” Roaz spat.

“Hey!” Tank ran at them.

Roaz tied the net to his helibike and sped off into the forest, his group of friends laughed as they flew after him, kicking up leaves and dirt in their wake. For a moment, Tank thought about walking back to his hut and pretending he hadn’t seen anything. A small voice poked his brain.

But if something happens to Naf, you could have prevented it. Do you really want that on your conscience? He is your friend after all.

Tank swore under his breath and hopped on his helibike. It whirred to life and sputtered as he flew after them. Their shouts and Naf's screams were all he had to track the group as they turned off the path.

Tank laid as flat as he could against the helibike, darting in and out of the trees. His eyes darted through the dense green underbrush for any sign of them. He had to be catching up.

The trees grew closer together as Tank gripped the handlebars. He ducked his head to avoid hitting low hanging branches. He weaved in and out of the forest, trying his best to keep up with the others. Taking a sharp turn, he flew out of the woods and was riding along a swift moving river. The other sounds of the forest were drowned out by the roar of the water. A waterfall sat nestled at the head of the river.

But it wasn't the moonlight bouncing off the water that made Tank stop.

An upended tree stump balanced precariously above the top of the falls. Naf clung to the stump with all four limbs, to try to keep from tumbling into the rushing water. Roaz stood among the roots on the other end, his blaster pointed down at Naf.

"Roaz, what do you think you're doing?" Tank screamed up at them.

"You should be thanking me, Tank!" Roaz replied. "It's his fault we won't be allowed in the Ceremony this year. If he keeps stumbling around he'll do something to make Prylek mad at us again," Roaz adjusted his blaster.

"Killing a Sovich outside the Ceremony? Are you listening to yourself, Roaz?" Tank yelled. He couldn't believe what was coming out of Roaz's mouth. Naf slipped on the log but caught himself

before he tumbled over the edge. There had to be a way to get him out of there.

"If Prylek knew what you were doing, he'd kill you!" Slowly, Tank got off his helibike.

"Prylek doesn't need to know. Everyone would believe us if we said Naf slipped and fell in the river," Fire filled Roaz's eyes, and Tank knew there was no way he'd be able to talk any sense into him. He took several more steps, his hand resting on his blaster.

Roaz tightened his grip while he continued. "I'm the one who's going to win the Ceremony. I don't care what I have to do to get back in."

Roaz was within shooting distance.

No. Tank wouldn't stoop that low. There had to be another way.

The other sovich were shooting Roaz looks of disdain behind his back. They didn't speak as Tank grew closer, though he could sense their eyes on him, watching, waiting. He pulled himself up until he was at the top of the waterfall, a few feet from Roaz. Naf was covered in cuts and bruises. The trunk shook violently over the water, daring to break at any moment. Tank had no idea how he was still hanging on.

What's your next move?

Roaz pounded his chest. "No weak sovich in my Ceremony," He aimed the blaster at Naf.

"No!" Tank yelled. He dove for Roaz. The blaster went off just as he tackled him. The shot missed Naf but hit the log, splinters flying in all directions. The log cracked like a whip and split in two.

"Jump!" Tank yelled.

Naf clamored for the cliff, clawing over the splintered wood, but it was too damaged. Just as Naf found his footing, it cracked again and completely separated from the cliff. Naf and log tumbled down,

hitting the water with a violent splash. As soon as his head popped up, the river whisked him away.

Tank's heart dropped. Without thinking, without second guessing the consequences, he leapt over the waterfall after Naf. The river rushed below as his arms spread out. Before he could register what was happening, the world pulled him back down. His stomach dropped as the angry water grew closer. How did it seem rougher than usual?

Tank didn't have time to register hitting the water. The second the river engulfed him, it tossed his body every which way. Water flooded his nose as he attempted to keep his head above the surface but the river pulled him back, smashing him against rocks and pushing him under once more. The darkness made it nearly impossible for him to get his bearings, only the occasional rock and the freezing water were visible.

He held his hands out, grasping for something, anything that might be within his reach. The river forced him against another large rock. He held on as tight as he could, climbing toward the top. Over the roar of the water, Tank could just make out Naf yelling his name.

A few yards away, Naf was sitting on a rock just big enough for him, his size working in his favor for once. The log was long gone. A constant stream of water splashed onto the rock, forcing him to hold on to it. His claws dug into the sides, but couldn't find a grip on the slippery surface.

With one last pull, Tank threw himself up the rock. Assessing the situation, he realized there was no way for them to climb to the river's edge. They were both in the center. They would have to jump back in. He searched for anything that might help them. Just ahead, sat a low hanging tree branch. If they timed it right, they could both grab onto it before they were carried further downstream.

"Naf!" Tank tried to yell, but he didn't have enough strength. "Naf," The freezing mist pierced his scales, soaking him through to his

core.

The fear in Naf's eyes spoke louder than any words ever could. He slid further down the rock, clawing at the surface that refused to let him grab on. Tank wouldn't be able to tell him what to do. Even if they could reach it, Naf was too small to grab the branch. The rapids seemed to give an extra push; the fresh wave was all the river needed to carry Naf off the rock.

Tank dove into the water after him. Naf floundered as he tried to grab anything that might help him. They were approaching the branch. Tank and Naf reached toward each other, holding on as tightly as they could. They were almost under the branch. With all his might Tank reached his arm up, catching the wood in his grip. The water pressed down on him, trying to force him to let go, but he held firm. He didn't know how long he could hold onto Naf and the branch until one of them broke. The wood started breaking in his hand. Tank gripped it tighter as if somehow that would slow the process down.

There was a sudden yank on his neck, and he and Naf were lifted out of the water and dropped on top of the overhang above the river. Sweet relief washed over Tank as he collapsed on the solid ground. He coughed up water as he tried to get his bearings.

"What were you thinking?" Mork's voice rang out.

The relief vanished, quickly replaced with fear. Anything was better than the look of disappointment that he knew was coming his way.

He didn't expect Mork to pat him on the back. "You did well." Tank did a double take. He must have heard wrong. The river was so loud and he probably got water in his ears. That was the only explanation. "Roaz tried to kill Naf, father," Tank tried, but his lungs were still waterlogged.

"Don't worry about that. We'll take care of him," Mork replied.

“How did you find us?” Naf asked. He was soaking wet and lying on his back.

“You weren’t quiet when you left,” Mork ushered them off the overhang where they didn’t have to worry about the river anymore. “I saw Tank jump off the waterfall when I caught up to you.”

Tank sat on the riverbank, holding his chest as his breathing finally slowed. Everything had happened so fast. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, but how did he have enough energy to do it all again? The river seemed so harmless now.

“Where’s Roaz?” Mork asked, his spear glinting in the moonlight.

“Probably gone now,” Tank scoffed. “Mork, he tried to kill Naf. He had him over the waterfall with a blaster and was about to shoot him.”

“I saw the whole thing, Tank. I don’t know what Roaz’s punishment will be, but he’s not going to be in the Ceremony any time soon,” The tone of Mork’s voice was so cold Tank knew not to question what he was saying. He didn’t want to think about what was worse than getting kicked out of the Ceremony.

Mork pulled them to their feet and they began the long walk back to the village. The river was shimmering with moonlight as it hit the rocks and tumbled over itself, wearing down everything in its path. Tank’s tail dragged behind him as they walked, as if every ounce of him weighed a thousand pounds.

He glanced behind him at Naf. He was lagging, his head hung as if it was difficult just to put one foot in front of the other.

There was a rustle in the trees as Tank’s mother appeared sputtering about how Tank should have gotten one of the older Sovichs instead of running after them on his own.

“He captured Naf, Mom,” Tank said. “He might have killed him if I hadn’t showed up.”

“You should have gotten me or Mork. We could have lost you both today.”

"It's true though," Naf chimed in, trying to keep up. "If Tank hadn't shown up, I'd be dead."

Mork let out a puff of air through his snout. "You need to learn to protect yourself, Naf. You're a Sovich, start acting like one."

Tank's mother held up a hand. "Mork, they've been through enough tonight. Let's ease up for once?"

A heavy silence fell over them as they made their way through the forest. No one spoke until they reached the village.

I'm going to be banished, Tank thought. They're going to make me leave Whukogantu. I need to say goodbye to my family. They were led straight to Prylek's hut.

"Wait here," Mork slipped inside, leaving them in silence. Tank's mother gave them each a small smile before following him.

Tank tried his best to not give away the fact that he was about to fall apart. What would he do if he got thrown out of the village? How would he survive? He still couldn't hunt. That had been proven already. What would Prylek say when he found out Tank was back in the forest? Naf was whispering something but Tank didn't listen. He could only think about the doom looming before them.

Muffled voices broke out in the tent. Tank couldn't make out any of what was being said. Naf shook harder next to him. Out of all three voices, Mork's was the clearest.

Prylek and his father emerged from the hut.

Here it comes.

"Well it seems there was an incident tonight," Prylek smiled. "Your parents told me what happened, and I have to say I am very impressed with you, Tank. You showed much bravery, especially for a young Sovich," He nodded at Tank's father, who beamed.

"I will be lifting your ban from the Ceremony. You proved today that you deserve to be in it."

Tank wasn't sure he heard correctly. "You are?" Was all he could manage.

Prylek laughed. "Unless you want me to take it back, then you can continue to stay out of it."

"No, I'm happy with your decision," Tank insisted.

"Well, when you're old enough you will be entered. You've done well. Is there anything that we can do for you?" Prylek asked.

Tank thought for a moment. His eyes scanned around the village until they finally settled on Naf who was staring into the distance.

He at least needs a chance.

"I want Naf and Roaz to be let back into the Ceremony as well," Tank said.

Prylek's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"We were banned together and we both deserve to go back in. He's my.....my friend," Tank said.

Prylek closed his eyes and rubbed his chin in thought for a moment. "Okay. Naf and Roaz are back in the Ceremony as well."

Tank glanced at Mork, who shot him a thumbs up. "I'll train even harder now, I promise. I'll be the best Sovich you've ever seen, Prylek."

"Oh I have no doubt about that. It's good to have you back in, Tank," Prylek said with a glint in his eye. "I'll be interested to see how you do in the Ceremony."

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Leo Spearman cares about one thing: finding a cure for his brother Gaeth's "Steel Elbow," a deadly disease that is slowly turning his bones into metal. Yet when they decide to leave Earth to cure him, they find themselves breaking galactic law to get it. Tank has always dreamed of escaping his village and finding his father, but the only way anyone can leave the village is to win the Ceremony, a bloodthirsty competition with a sole survivor. After surviving at a terrible cost, the bargain for his independence takes a dark turn, and Tank must decide if the price of his safety is too high to pay. Neither Leo nor Tank knows it, but their paths will collide in the middle of a galaxy wide plot, and only their combined knowledge and experience have a chance of destroying it.

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