

# WILL WIGHT

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



**KICKSTARTER  
BONUS SCENE!**

## BLACKFLAME

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CRADLE : VOLUME THREE



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BLACKFLAME

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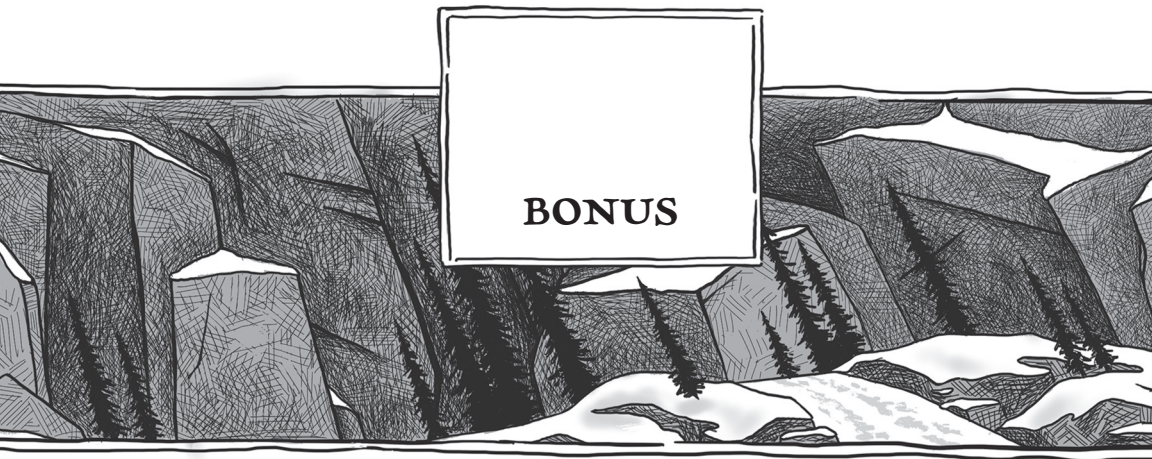
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***Blackflame* Kickstarter Bonus Scene (Part 1): Spoiler-free!**

**LOCATION: ANYTIME AFTER CHAPTER 10 OF *BLACKFLAME***

**TEN YEARS AGO**

A distant cry shook Orthos awake. He slid his head out of his shell, startled by the sound.

Though he hadn't been sleeping. He had been...What *had* he been doing?

Meditating, that was it. Cycling. Smoke choked his thoughts now, making memories hazy, but he felt better when he kept his



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spirit moving. The destruction and fire aura were well-balanced here, in the cave behind Serpent's Grave. That was why he had made it his lair for...for...

It didn't matter how long. A long time, that was what mattered.

Orthos looked around the cave. What few belongings he kept had been eroded by destruction aura, but that was why he kept so few. Everything he needed was kept beneath his shell: a strong body and a strong spirit.

Not that either of those were as strong as they had been. Like his mind, they had been ground down by time and the Path of Black Flame.

Once he'd gotten a grip on his surroundings, he stretched out and snatched up a mouthful of crunchy volcanic rock. He didn't see any trouble, so it was about time he got back to cycling. Had to keep a grip on himself.

Before he slid back into his shell, Orthos heard another cry from outside. That reminded him that there had been a first cry.

And this one was louder. Closer.

Orthos bolted out of his lair, dashing down the tunnels and out into the day. For a moment, the sunlight on the sand blinded him. How long *had* he stayed in there?

Even before his eyes adjusted, his spiritual perception started to tell him the story.

A few weak, human spirits on various Paths struggled up the mountain. Trying to reach him. Remnants rose behind them, showing that they had taken casualties on their journey.

And behind them, chasing them, an avatar of fire and destruction. A cursed wildfire in a human body.

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By the time Orthos could see clearly, he already knew what he'd see.

Serpent's Grave spread out beneath him, a city built from the bones of Orthos' noble ancestors. A trail of rubble, charred wreckage, and devastation led up from the buildings on the edge of the city. That trail was painfully easy to trace, burned into stone and sand alike.

It led to a woman with wild, black hair and a long, lashing tail. She gripped her face in one hand and shouted at the humans in robes of dark blue.

"Stop running!" she screamed. "Do *not* be afraid of me, I command you! I did not allow you to run!"

Orthos didn't know this woman, but he knew what she was: the nightmare of everyone in the Blackflame Empire. A mad Blackflame.

Madra of fire and destruction erupted in a hazy light around her, surrounding her with flame. Her Enforcer technique, the Blazing Raiment.

Orthos matched her, his own power flooding through aching madra channels and filling his body. It burned him from the inside, but he was filled with such scars already.

The Blackflame woman leaped toward another human, a worker of the Arelius family, with outstretched hands. It was clearly an attack, though she likely didn't intend it as one. Orthos knew too well the effects of Blackflame corrosion, both in the souls of others and in his own.

Before she could grab the Arelius man, Orthos' shell slammed into her side. She was launched away, tumbling down the sloping path of the mountain.

"Behind me," Orthos commanded his humans.

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The Arelius family was under his protection.

With agility that must have strained her body even further, the Blackflame woman twisted in midair, grabbing the ground with her tail and pulling herself back to her feet. She screamed wordlessly in Orthos' direction, then shoved both hands out to unleash a wide dragon's breath.

The Striker technique poured into Orthos, red-and-black energy crashing into him. He took it on his shell, cycling his spirit to endure it.

Normally, he would have dodged, but the humans behind him would never have survived.

Orthos clenched his jaw and endured, though the spiritual pain of the strain was worse even than it should have been. She was a Truegold, but not quite as strong as he was. She was much younger, after all. She might have been a child when the Blackflame family lost power.

But she was pushing her spirit beyond its limits, while Orthos was trying to restrict his.

Her dragon's breath faltered, and Orthos' madra urged him to respond in kind. That was the nature of the trouble. Blackflame madra wanted to fight, to burn, to destroy, to consume ever more.

When it consumed too much, those were the only instincts you had left. At this point, the woman was little more than a puppet of her madra. A spark flaring bright one last time before it died.

Though perhaps there was something of the woman left.

"We are loyal citizens of the Blackflame Empire!" Orthos shouted. "I am a descendant of the black dragons! We are not your enemies!"

She screamed back at him, and with her Enforcer technique run-

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ning rampant, her voice shook loose pebbles from the stones of the mountain. “Yes, you *are!* You *all* are! You won’t find me, you won’t burn me, I’LL BURN YOU FIRST!”

Abruptly, the sky darkened.

She had gathered up the aura of the mountain into clouds of black-and-red. A huge Void Dragon’s Dance, but she had begun it too abruptly. With brute strength rather than finesse.

There would be no way to control it.

“No!” Orthos shouted. He sent his own spirit upward, wrestling with the Ruler technique, though the madra required seared his channels.

This was a sloppy technique, of little use against a real opponent, but it was big, heavy, and would incinerate the other humans. It pushed Orthos to his limits, but he wrestled the clouds of darkness, slowing their spin.

His body burned. His thoughts burned. His spirit burned.

But this wasn’t too much. He could handle this.

The woman drove a fist into his face.

The Enforced attack cracked into his skull, sending him reeling. Pain rattled him, shaking his thoughts loose. The Ruler technique still dispersed, but Orthos had to turn his focus inward.

His own spirit was raging out of control.

Madra burst from him in unfocused gout, and he roared at the Blackflame woman. He wanted to beg her to stop, to give him a moment to collect himself, to talk.

She kicked him to the side, launching him into a stone cliff.

It shook, and pain filled him again. More rage escaped his containment.



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He had to hit back, he had to *crush* her, crush the enemy. But why? He couldn't remember why.

Dragon's breath licked across his body, burning into the rock and searing his own skin. Orthos pushed his madra further to protect himself, clinging only to vague scraps of memory and rationality.

This wasn't the Blackflame woman's fault. She was a danger to herself as much as to others, but that didn't mean she wasn't a threat. He could still stop this and protect everyone.

Orthos managed to calm himself down with those thoughts, only to see that her attention had turned to the mouth of the cave. A new Striker technique kindled in her palm, and she pointed it into the cave.

Fear seized his heart. Something was in that cave, something he couldn't let her destroy. What was it?

He heard screams, and he remembered.

His hatchlings were in there.

Orthos roared again, and power thundered through his channels, unleashed. His Enforcer technique looked the same as her Blazing Raiment, but it had no name. His techniques were natural. A part of him. The Blackflame family had designed their techniques by watching his ancestors.

He was a dragon, and he would keep what was his.

Orthos slammed into the woman again, and this time, her bones shattered as she shot away from the mountain like a comet. But that wasn't enough for him. Not enough to vent the heat from the fire inside him.

He opened his jaws and showed her what a true dragon's breath looked like.

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She burned to ash beneath his madra, but he wasn't done. Not *nearly* done. Blackflame still blazed inside him, demanding an outlet.

Orthos whirled on the cave behind him and found that shivering, pathetic creatures had infested *his* lair. He rushed inside, opening his mouth to tear the closest one in half.

He froze with jaws spread. They wore dark blue robes, with black-and-white highlights. A symbol of a crescent moon.

That meant something, though Blackflame urged him to ignore it. These weren't enemies, they weren't prey. They were...

For a long time, he couldn't remember.

By the time he did, the sky was dark and the humans were gone. His wounds still bled, but Orthos dragged his aching body back into the cave.

Even now, his thoughts were chaos. Putting together a single coherent idea was like trying to find one image in a dancing flame.

One certainty had engraved itself into him, like a decree written in his faltering mind and broken spirit. He was done. He had gone too far, and there was no going back.

Blackflame filled him with fury at the thought, and he roared into the tunnels at the back of his cave. He lumbered deeper inside, looking for somewhere to vent this anger.

Besides the rage, he was left with only one emotion: pride.

As his last act, he had defended his helpless hatchlings.

Orthos had died like a dragon.



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