

Interwoven

NEED: PART FOUR

40th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

The bells betrayed the truth before the words from Tobias lips were able to do the same. He had been deep in conversation with Soren when he had been asked to excuse himself. Tobias had taken those few moments to continue cleaning himself up after their tryst, but when the painted dog had returned it was with the grim news tolling across the city.

He'd almost left immediately, but Soren had stopped him. He'd convinced Tobias to linger a moment longer; to finish cleaning himself. It wouldn't do, he said, to charge back to the castle and attend to his duties whilst he stank of their time together. Warm, wet cloth was generously applied. Soren even offered some of his perfumes to help conceal any lingering scents. Tobias had gratefully, if distractedly, accepted.

He doubted anyone saw him leave the Crest, let alone the alley that housed its entrance. It was the early hours of the morning, the sun still yet to rise, but people had been roused from their sleep by the bells. More than a few would have been grumpy to be disturbed so. He doubted many of them felt those bells in their gut the way Tobias did.

Still, the trip back to the castle was uneventful. He took a longer, more sweeping route back than he would have preferred so as to avoid the possibility of being spotted. Even the implication of his presence at a brothel would have reflected poorly on him. He'd learned well how to conceal his intentions and habits. What people lingered in the streets were more interested in gossip than his particular comings and goings.

The secret passages would have afforded him surreptitious access, but he'd gone straight for the front gate in his haste. The guards had been confused, but allowed him through all the same. Tobias all but ran back inside the castle, his legs struggling to carry him to where his mind already was. The familiar faces of guards and servants and kingsblades were a blur. The only one to stand out was Zane.

The wolf stood sole vigil in front of Eric's door as Tobias arrived; Rachel had ostensibly been redeployed elsewhere. He clearly saw Tobias' hurried steps, and he lifted a paw with a shake of his head. "You don't want to do this." Tobias said nothing. He just pushed the paw aside and stepped past Zane to open the door. It hung open as he shoved his way through the curtains to burst back into Eric's chambers.

Veronica's wailing was the first thing to assault Tobias' senses. It stabbed his heart like a lance, skewering him as she lay slumped against the side of the bed. She was half raised up atop it, her legs splayed beneath her as she sobbed and screamed into the limp arm she clutched. Eric's arm. His father's arm. Eric wasn't visible through the bed's drapes, but Tobias was grateful for that much.

Brett was gone. So was Magriolla and Eustace. Only Fredrick remained inside with Veronica, his face a stoic mask but his own eyes reddened and his jaw fiercely, defiantly clenched. He looked up at Tobias' entry but offered no words. His stance relaxed a little bit and, after quickly looking back over at their mother as she inconsolably wept, waved a paw toward the curtains again and started toward him.

Tobias nodded and stepped aside to allow Fredrick past him. He turned to follow, but not without first looking back to his mother. There was nothing he could say. There was nothing he could do. That didn't help in the slightest; his heart ached for her. On some level, he was dimly aware that now he was there in the room... that was the only ache there. Sympathy. His heart broke for her, not for himself. As he followed Fredrick into the hall again, Tobias wondered what that said about him.

He closed the door behind them. Zane had shifted to the wall to allow them both to pass, and it was mercy when the door proved just enough insulation to silence the crying of the widowed queen. Fredrick all but slumped against the opposite wall, his gaze far, far away. It looked, at least, as though Eric's death had struck him deeply. Deeper, by far, than it had Tobias.

But he had to say something. Fredrick had ushered him out for a reason, but he didn't seem to be interested in starting a conversation. Tobias cleared his throat as he glanced up at Zane. The kingsblade was just as silent. "What... what happened?"

Fredrick looked up, though his eyes didn't meet Tobias'. "He, uh..." The older tiger swallowed and closed his eyes as he brushed down his shirt and tried to straighten up. "He started to... to choke. A couple of hours ago. He just couldn't breathe, and..." He fell silent for a moment before giving a sharp sniff and angrily swiping a sleeve across his nose. "Ocher couldn't do anything for him. We tried to help but... in the end he just... couldn't."

Tobias nodded slowly to himself as he hung his head, but Fredrick wasn't finished. "He fought. Father always fought. For half an hour he was choking there, no matter what we did. Half an *hour*, Tobias." His paws clenched. "Brett had to leave... he couldn't take the sight of it. I have seen people killed. I've killed people myself. But this, I... he was in such pain, and I have never seen him so *scared*..."

The younger prince closed his eyes. To hear what had happened still didn't stoke any deep pain in his heart. Perhaps he would have, if he'd not fled the castle before it happened. Perhaps he would have, if Eric hadn't so completely cut his heart out during their last conversation. Perhaps he would have, if not for years of ignorance and abuse. It felt wrong to not feel hurt, but it equally felt the most unwrong thing in the world.

Seeing his elder brother so devastated however was something else. Fredrick was broken. All of his posturing and presentation was gone. There was no bile or rage or hatred because pain and loss and grief had clearly hollowed it all out. He didn't even look like Fredrick anymore as Tobias opened his eyes again. "Is there... do you need anything?"

It had been meant sincerely, but the glint of irritation that flashed through Fredrick's eyes was simultaneously typical and surprising. He glared back at Tobias as if he'd just insulted Eric's memory. "Do I need anything? What sort of question is that? What do you think I need that you could *possibly* give me, Tobias? Or can you restore him?" His muzzle started to twist

into a snarl. “Do you know some old magic? Studied some old gods or something who can bring him back?” He stepped forward and uncurled his fingers to shove Tobias into the wall hard enough to draw a grunt from him. “Can you bring my father back?”

Tobias bared his teeth back for a second, but relented as Fredrick stumbled back to lean on the opposite wall again. He’d been there before. He’d been in a place where he couldn’t reckon with what was happening and had lashed out. He’d hurt people while just trying to hold onto feelings he *could* control in the midst of an awful circumstance. Fredrick would probably have gladly struck him in normal times, but those times were not normal.

Instead, Tobias closed his eyes again and sighed. “No. No, I can’t bring him back.”

“How *useful* you are.” The words were little more than a growl, barely audible. When Tobias looked up again, Fredrick’s head was turned aside. He stared down the hall as if looking for something, but his face was an angry mask of contempt. That, if nothing else, looked more like him. At least until he sighed and slumped against the wall again. “I’m... sorry. I shouldn’t be lashing out like this. It’s not your fault.”

“It’s... alright.” It wasn’t. Tobias knew it wasn’t, but this was an *apology*. From Fredrick, of all people. From the one person in all the world who seemed to believe that not a single thing he’d ever done in his life warranted any reflection, let alone apology. “I know you’re hurting. And if I can help... you only have to ask.”

Fredrick nodded as he rubbed at his eyes for a moment with an errant paw. “Actually... there is. Maybe, when mother is finally able to... to leave his side.” He looked up and, once again, his expression was empty as he stared at Tobias. “Attend to her. Brett is... I don’t even know where. With Irene, for all I know. And I’m not... you know I don’t...” He took a deep breath as he trembled. “I’m not good at that sort of thing. And she’ll need it.”

“Brett didn’t come back?” Tobias frowned. That wasn’t like him. Running away from something difficult, that *was* like him, but not coming back after the bells rang out? He’d have thought more of his brother than that. Maybe he’d given Brett too much credit over the years. Giving him less would be a challenge.

But as Fredrick shook his head, his eyes began to sharpen again. He folded his arms as he looked Tobias up and down, sniffing at the air. “No. And I thought you weren’t going to, either.” He turned more fully to face Tobias as he lifted his head a little higher. Suspicion glinted in his eyes. “Where did you go? Where were you?”

Tobias recoiled and bit his tongue. What to say? *No, I wasn’t there when father died because I had a whore to rut; terribly sorry for the clash of schedules.* That wasn’t likely to end well. “I... needed to get out of the castle after what he said. You heard him; what he said about... all of us.”

Fredrick nodded and winced sympathetically, and Tobias felt briefly bad about bringing that memory up. But it changed the tone of Fredrick’s emotions just enough perhaps to not regard him with suspicion anymore, and that was good enough for the moment. “He didn’t want me there at the end, and I just... couldn’t watch that. Not like you could.”

“But where did you go?” Fredrick leaned in closer to him, sniffing again. Could he smell Soren’s perfumes? Could he smell *Soren* himself? That suspicious glint grew again. What was he to say? What answer could he give that would satisfy Fredrick?

Eventually, he settled on no answer at all. “What does it matter? I wasn’t here. Maybe I should have been.” He heard the sound of footsteps and an ear perked up. The tiger turned to see Sarina, a little bleary-eyed herself in a soft white nightgown making her way toward them. That was bound to make things worse. “Excuse me.”

“In a moment.” Fredrick pushed off the wall and took a step closer to Tobias. “Father wasn’t well, but he wasn’t quite at death’s door. Not until you finally broke into the room – against all of our wishes – to visit him.” His eyes started to narrow once more. “Then he insulted us all... and after you left, he...”

Eyes went wide as Tobias shook his head at his brother. He could scarcely believe such an insinuation could even be made! “You think I had something to do with this?”

“Did you? The timing is most convenient.” Fredrick ground his teeth together as he stared hard at Tobias. If he was desperate for an excuse that would explain what happened – that there was someone to blame beyond the illness that plagued Eric – then Tobias was in great trouble indeed. The outcast son who visited him, stirred him up and then left, conveniently out of the castle when he died-

“There you are.” Sarina sighed, her tone relieved as she reached Tobias’ side and wrapped him up in a tight hug. Fredrick frowned as he stepped back to give her room. “I was worried when you didn’t return and then I heard the bells...”

“I’m... alright.” Tobias squeezed her gently back and took the chance to bury his head against her shoulder. It helped hide his confused expression from Fredrick as the older prince scowled at him. “I tried to get back sooner, but the streets were filling and everything was chaos, and... and I didn’t get it.”

Whatever the ‘it’ was, ‘it’ sounded better than where he really was. There were a thousand things in the city he could have gone there for, beyond just a chance to escape. Despite their multitude, he couldn’t think of a single one of them at that moment. Not with everything that had happened.

Sarina, however, was as ever well and truly present. She shook her head and leaned up to touch her muzzle to his for a short kiss. “Think nothing of it. I’m just glad you’re alright.” She nodded as she pulled away from him to bow her head to Fredrick. “I’m so sorry if I caused any problems. After Tobias came back from meeting your father, he... was distraught. He needed time to-”

“He told me as much.” Fredrick shook his head as he frowned down not at Tobias, but Sarina. The lioness bowed her head lower, but it was all a show; Tobias knew her to be sharper and less subservient than she implied. “Right now, I’m trying to figure out *where* he was.”

“He wished to find me a gift.” Sarina lifted her head again, her face the picture of innocence as she met Fredrick’s suspicious stare. “Something to thank me for supporting him so during this awful, awful time. He knows how I like Ratholarin perfumes, and so he sought to find one in the market for me.”

If circumstances would have allowed it, Tobias would have been absolutely stunned. She'd smelled Soren's perfumes on him and immediately concocted an excuse for it that would explain it away. At any other time, he might have been equal parts impressed and terrified. "You can probably smell some trace of them even now. Maybe. I'm a bit of a mess right now."

"I wondered what that was." Maybe Fredrick was tired or maybe he was actually convinced, but whatever it was the tiger slumped back against the wall again. He looked so defeated. "You chose a terrible time to do this, brother."

"The fault was mine." Again, Sarina bowed her head as she reached out to take Tobias' paw in her own. "I beg your forgiveness, Fredrick, and again offer my most sincere condolences. If there's anything that I can do to help you and your family in this difficult time..."

Tobias frowned as he looked up, but Fredrick wasn't nearly as hostile to the suggestion from her as he was from his brother. "I will keep you informed. Thank you. Your offer is... most generous." He straightened up with a nod and sighed. "But... I have much to attend to. More, with Brett off wherever he is. If you'll excuse me, there is... much to be done."

Both Tobias and Sarina nodded, before Fredrick pushed off the wall again to start down the hallway. After a moment's hesitation, as if he didn't know what post he was meant to keep anymore, Zane did the same and moved to follow. Tobias couldn't blame him. Was he to watch over the corpse of his charge, or the one who was to become his charge shortly?

He watched them go for a few moments before he was willing to speak again. No one else was in earshot, and his mother was probably still screaming behind her door. There was no one there to hear them. "Thank you."

"Mmm." She brushed through her headfur with one paw and stifled a yawn as she met his gaze. "I recognise that scent, you know. I do hope you said hello to him for me."

A quick glance down the hall showed no one still around to hear them, but Tobias hadn't expected her to be so open about it. "I needed to get out, like I told Fredrick. I had to go somewhere. Somewhere private. Safe."

"And you made the stupidest decision you could possibly have made in the process." That time there was no playfulness in her voice, and her frown banished any notion that he wasn't in trouble. "I sympathise, Tobias. I really do. I care not for where you find your comfort, so long as that comfort *is* found." Her voice lowered as she leaned in closer. "But you knew his condition. You saw it; I only heard about it from Brett after the fact, before he too left."

"And we were meant to be *leaving* tomorrow." Tobias shook his head; the last thing that he needed right then was her to dress him down. He'd known it wasn't the best idea, but he'd equally known that he'd needed it. "There wouldn't be any further need to hide anything at that point. I thought we had time to leave before father..." He cut himself off and shook his head. "I didn't want to be here to see him die. I didn't think it'd happen while I was... well..."

"I know. And I understand." The lioness sighed again as she leaned back in to wrap her arms around his middle. "Just as long as you know how stupid this was. I can forgive the stupidity as long as you recognise it, after all." He squeezed her back with a smile, and she smiled back in turn. "And I didn't even have the chance to say it yet, but... I'm so sorry."

Tobias shook his head. He was still struggling to figure out what he felt about that himself, and the confrontation with Fredrick certainly hadn't helped him in the least. "It's okay. Maybe it'll... hit me later. I don't know what to do right now. We can't leave tomorrow anymore; we can't just go without... I don't even really know what's going on, if I'm honest."

"I felt the same when mother passed." She squeezed him again before she stepped back. "And don't worry. We won't go anywhere, not until after the funeral, if that is what you need then. But what do you need from me now? What can I do for you?"

The tiger turned back to the door. He couldn't hear his mother, but she was still in there. Fredrick was right: she would need support, and none of his brothers were going to be helpful in that regard. She'd need empathy and warmth. Only Tobias was left to give her that. "Stay with me?" He turned back to her as she nodded to him. "I need to wait for mother, and I... don't want to be alone."

The lioness nodded again and pressed back into a gentle hug. Tobias sighed and rested his chin on her head as he pulled her close. Whatever happened next, he could be glad he wasn't alone. Sarina wasn't the partner he would have chosen, but none could deny that she did everything she could to improve his circumstances. Goodness knew what he would do if not for her understanding and patient nature.

He'd need it in the days to come, he knew, but for the moment her embrace was comfort enough. That, he was sure, wouldn't last.

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It was hours, well into the dawn when Veronica finally acknowledged anyone else's presence in the room. She'd had little to say, but had collapsed against Tobias when he'd gone to hold her. He'd been forced to carry her exhausted form out of the room. With nowhere else in mind to let her rest, he'd carried her all the way to his chambers. She was left to sleep on his bed, and Sarina had agreed to remain to watch over her.

The castle was a quieter place than Tobias could ever remember it being. Everyone who walked about did so with the recognition that everything in their world was about to change. How they felt about Eric and how they felt about Fredrick didn't matter compared to what the change from one to the other could mean to them. Certainly Fredrick's more recent decrees and cruelties toward the servants in the castle contributed to the persistent aura of dread that pervaded everything. There was something new to it now. That tinge; a recognition of certainty. An edge to the fear.

Tobias had taken to sitting in one of the castle's main corridors, back to the wall. He watched as people moved up and down the halls, and brushed aside – as politely as possible – the guards and servants that stopped to ask if he was alright. He was too caught up in his own thoughts for more than token efforts, and it was all thanks to Fredrick.

He wouldn't have thought anything of his father's deteriorating situation if it wasn't for what Fredrick had said to him outside Eric's chambers. That accusation; the supposition of ill intent. The insinuated flicker of an idea that maybe, perhaps, *possibly* Eric's death was preventable. That somehow, someway... there was a guilty party. Fredrick had suggested Tobias. That much was clear, and at its most innocent represented Fredrick looking to find some reasonable or logical explanation in something that inherently lacked both.

But as he'd thought about it longer, without the benefit of the obvious unease and hurt that had plagued Fredrick, Tobias realised that perhaps there was some merit to the thought. Eric had flickered between health and illness many, many times over the last five years or so. There had been one person, and one person alone, who had come to gain considerably from that surrender of health and power.

Fredrick.

"My prince?"

Zane's voice startled him out of his reverie. Tobias lifted his head to take in the kingsblade. The wolf's ears were as low as his tail, and if anything he looked as exhausted as Tobias felt. "You're not with Fredrick?"

The kingsblade shook his head and turned around to sit down beside Tobias. "I've been dismissed. Others are looking after Fredrick." He shook his head, closing his eyes and leaning back into the wall. "I was going to head to bed, but I saw you. I wanted to make sure you were... coping."

"I'm fine." The words came out before Tobias could possibly stop them, and he sighed as he tapped his head against the wall. Idiot. "As fine as could be expected, I suppose. I don't really know what I should... you know. *Do*." He frowned as he turned toward Zane. As much as Tobias wasn't really feeling too upset with what had happened, Zane had been his father's protector longer than the tiger had been alive. "Sorry, I didn't even think to ask, but... how are *you* doing?"

Zane simply sighed. He didn't open his eyes again. "Do you want the proper answer, or the honest one?" When Tobias just frowned and stared at him, Zane looked back briefly to him. "The Eric I knew died months ago. That his heart has stopped beating now feels like little more than it acknowledging that fact."

Tobias nodded as the wolf closed his eyes again. "It has been difficult to watch him lose himself to this illness. He tried to hold onto his sense of self but... well, you saw him. Eric was dead for me long before this night. I am not saddened; his pain and suffering is over now. I am merely... tired."

That was more enlightened a response than Tobias had been honestly expecting. "Small comfort, that."

"But it is comfort nonetheless, and life is a cold, dark thing if we don't take it where we can find it. Your brother seeks it in his own way." Zane shook his head again, rolling it side to side against the wall. "Do not pay much mind to his ranting and rambling. He looks to blame someone for things he cannot control."

"Fredrick's always wanted to control everything. Why should death be any different?" It was a bitter laugh that rattled from Tobias' muzzle. "And why not blame me for it? Why not make up an excuse? Shift blame?" The wolf didn't reply, and so Tobias turned to face him again. He recoiled as he found himself face to face with Zane's intense stare. "Wha-"

"Do you think blame ought to be applied?" Zane's eyes were bright, suddenly focused to an almost painful degree as Tobias leaned back from him. "Do you have any reason to believe such a thing?"

Tobias blinked as he glanced around. They were hardly alone, but no one around them seemed to be paying the pair too much mind. Not for the moment, anyway. "I... I don't... I mean, I don't know. I just thought that since Fredrick was accusing me of it, that..." He cleared his throat quietly and lowered his voice. "I don't want to be blamed for regicide, Zane. But if Fredrick truly gets it into his head..."

"And you suspect Fredrick in turn?" The kingsblade likewise dropped his volume.

But that was the question, wasn't it? Did Tobias truly believe that Fredrick could have done something so heinous? His brother had always been awful. 'Monstrous' was a word that Tobias didn't bandy about lightly, but had used to describe him more than once. Beyond his bullying and the myriad, bottomless insults at his disposal, there were so many other things he had done.

There was, after all, a knife still hidden somewhere in the castle that Fredrick would dearly like to find. Not that he would necessarily need it, since he was doubtless about to ascend to the throne. "I... wouldn't have thought of it, if not for him considering accusing me. But then, he would have the most to gain, right?" Tobias shook his head. "I don't know that I seriously believe it possible, but..."

The kingsblade hummed as he leaned back against the wall again, presumably satisfied with Tobias' answer. "To be a king is to hold the greatest power in one paw and the greatest responsibility in the other. The words of King Halmad Eshreen of Yaroven." He sighed as Tobias perked an ear. "As regent, responsibility could be shifted to Eric. Fredrick could enjoy all the power with the knowledge that anything that earned ire could be shifted to other paws. Now that he will sit the throne with all of its responsibility... I wonder if he is ready. I wonder if he truly wants it."

Tobias shrugged. "Fredrick's the one of us most likely to actually try something like that. He's still got the most to gain. It's not like Brett would."

"Brett is a coward at heart." The blunt assessment took Tobias aback; he recoiled as Zane glanced at him again. "What?"

"Nothing. Just... surprised to hear you say that." Tobias settled back into place with a frown. The death of Eric had left the kingsblade far more... *blunt*, than normal. It was impressive, given how blunt Zane usually was anyway. "It's not like I didn't know, but..."

"Brett firmly believed himself the favourite child in your father's eyes. Whether or not he was correct never mattered." Zane folded his arms as he leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling. It was almost as though the wolf just sought to use Tobias to sound out his own ideas. Did he seriously suspect that the illness had not been what truly killed his father? "He would gain nothing and lose that favour upon Eric's death. I cannot fathom a reason he would do anything to hasten your father's demise."

The tiger nodded. He brought his legs up, knees pressed to his chest as he hugged them tight. "I can't think of anyone else who'd gain something from it."

"There is then, of course, you."

It took a couple of seconds for the suggestion to sink in. So tired was he that Tobias missed it entirely at first, and when he turned back to Zane it was with confusion on his face rather than concern. "Excuse me?"

The wolf didn't make eye contact as he continued to stare at the ceiling. It was as though the accusation was the most natural thing in the world, as if he were talking about the weather or some other utterly mundane nonsense. "Fredrick was right that your leaving was a suspicious matter. The schism between you is known. And your lie about where you were, whilst a good one, was still a lie."

Tobias' ears flicked back as he frowned at Zane. "I was looking for a gift for Sarina."

"And she is a much better liar than you are. You *were* in the merchant quarter, but not looking for a gift for your wife." Zane sighed and looked around to make sure no one else was close before he finally dropped his gaze to Tobias. "When you left, I assigned another kingsblade to the door and followed you. I know where you really were."

Tobias' heart skipped a beat. He squeezed his legs tighter still as he stared Zane down as confidently as he could. If the kingsblade knew, then... "I don't know what you mean."

At that, Zane actually rolled his eyes. "No. Of course not. But let me be clear, my prince: I do not think that you would do something like that. Such cruelty is beyond you." Some of the energy left his stare as he turned it back on Tobias. "But should it get out that you visited your father on his deathbed, and he died hours later whilst you were in a whorehouse, however well regarded..."

It didn't sound good, and once more Tobias cast his gaze up and down the hall. There was still no one, but Zane had been so matter-of-fact about it all that it wouldn't take many words overheard to doom him. "Perhaps this isn't the place to discuss such *sensitive* subjects, Zane."

"I've no need to speak on them further. I merely wish to warn you." He reached out to place his paw on one of Tobias' knees. "The days to come will be difficult for your family. For all of you. For we who serve you, as well, but you know that better than your brothers do. You need to do something for me, Tobias, and I need you to make *sure* that you do it."

The tiger sat up a little higher. Something was on the kingsblade's mind, but what? "What's that?"

"I need you to keep your wits about you." One of the wolf's ears perked up and twitched, as if seeking out the sound of anyone who might be listening. "You may suspect the wrong person was striking at your father, but that does not mean that no one did. Slow-acting poisons, combined with his body's frailty these last few years... such a thing is possible."

Tobias frowned. Sure, he'd been focused on Fredrick and what the heir to the throne might have gained from Eric's death. He'd neglected entirely the possibilities of external forces at play. "You're right. Rebels and insurrectionists, infiltration from other realms..."

Zane shook his head. "There is no need to trouble yourself with such ideas right now. It may well have been poor fortune and successive illness that took their toll on your father's body. Such things are natural. They do happen."

“And what about you?” Tobias squeezed his legs tighter. “Are you going to not trouble yourself with such ideas?”

“I am a kingsblade. My charge died under my care.” Zane tilted his head up and his muzzle trembled. For all his stoicism and strength, it was clear that the loss still affected the wolf greatly. “I will not rest until I am certain that there was nothing I could have done to preserve him. That is *my* duty, Tobias. It is not yours.”

It was a fair response all things considered, but that didn’t mean Tobias was happy with it. “You don’t have to do it alone, Zane. I could help. I’m sure that my brothers-”

“Until I am certain that none of you are responsible, I cannot share the work with anyone. Just...” His paw slipped off of Tobias’ knee as he pushed himself with a grunt back up to his feet. “As I said, you must be wary. This may have just been poor health, but if it was something more?” His fangs glinted in the light as he bared them. “Anyone who could strike at a king could strike at a prince. Or his mother. Or his wife.”

Tobias gulped. He’d not considered that an assassin could kill his father and then strike elsewhere. The tiger mentally kicked himself. How could he have neglected that? “Then wary I will be. Until such a time as you are confident that father’s death was natural.”

The answer seemed to please the kingsblade. His fangs were neatly tucked back into his muzzle, and he nodded once to himself. “Very good. And... for your sake, please learn to lie better if you intend to continue those little excursions.”

The tiger opened his muzzle to tell Zane that no, he didn’t need to do that because he’d intended to be gone tomorrow and *would* be gone the moment it was reasonable for me to do so. Given what the wolf had said however, such a thing would probably only make him look more guilty. The last thing he wanted was to give a grieving Fredrick a chance to make him a viable target for whatever rage took hold. “I will try to be more careful. I promise.”

“Good.” Zane continued to study him for a moment before he nodded. “I will leave you to it, then. Do not hesitate to find me if you should need me. I may have no assignment for the moment, but my loyalty to your father extends to you and your brothers for as long as you desire it.”

“And we’re very lucky to have you, Zane. Thank you.” Tobias nodded and lay his head back again. Unlike the wolf, he had no interest in moving just yet. He wasn’t comfortable, but moving required a destination. He didn’t have one. His chambers would take him back toward his father’s suite, and Tobias wasn’t certain that he could bring himself to even be close to it – or to Fredrick or Brett, if they had retired there as well – right then.

As the wolf departed, Tobias rested his chin on his knees and folded his arms up and over his head. He grunted and closed his eyes again. Zane was right; if there was something more at play, it could have been anyone. Rebels had plenty of cause. Other nations might look to take advantage of Ratholarin weakness. Perhaps individuals with a grudge could have had a role to play. Even if illness had finally done the deed, there was no reason why some toxin or other might not have aided it. The possibilities were almost endless.

His mind raced, but Tobias forced himself to remember that such thoughts did nothing to help him. Fredrick sought them out of grief. Zane, perhaps just as much, sound them for the

same reason. Their father had fallen ill. His body had been weak, and he had died. From the lowest pauper to the highest king, that was how everyone's life ended. Maybe the excuses were just a means to keep themselves going, despite the awfulness of what had happened. Maybe it was because Tobias wasn't so enamoured with his father as they were that they could reason and investigate and question, but that he'd been less interested in doing so. Maybe grief just didn't cloud his vision to the truth: that an old male had simply grown sick and passed on.

Ocher would find out for sure. He would determine the truth, and then it was something that Tobias could worry about. He forced those thoughts out of his mind as he closed his eyes. There was no point to them. There was no point to anything. He was trapped again within the castle, unable to leave for Ingsbren until the funeral was concluded. Another delay. Another inhibition.

He would play his role, he decided. Avoid the Crest. Avoid Fredrick. Give no one reason to suspect him of anything, and give them time for their grief to melt into something more reasonable. They would accept the fate of Eric the Fourth, and then he would leave, never return, and live his life unburdened by his family ever again... *unless* Ocher found something. And if he did?

Tobias shuddered to think what would come next, and his fears refused to leave him.