

Interwoven

NEED: PART SIX

47th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

For almost as long as Sanwell had been the seat of Rathin power, it had hosted the royal crypt. Indeed, the only temple that still stood in the whole of the realm rested atop the crypt; once devoted to Tikatos, the old god of death, it had been converted as an extension of the crypt itself. The worshipers had long gone, replaced with those who sought to learn about the history of the Rathin royal family.

But right then, buried both beneath the temple and the weight of history, Tobias felt as though he might buckle. He watched on as, surrounded by his father's small council – the Ratholarin Magi – Fredrick sat atop a massive stone version of the throne and recited to them his oath.

He'd been at it for hours, and yet Tobias somehow thought that situation worse than the death of his father.

The crypt was little more than a great domed room, columns holding up the ceiling and punctuating the graves of the royalty of Ratholarin. Ancient gems embedded in the walls glowed with arcane light that predated the Ratholarin ban on magic. The coffins of the fallen kings of the realm were branded with their names, their ages, their rules, and their families. A glance to the side showed Eric, still and frozen in time in the closest of the wall alcoves. He wouldn't remain there for long; he would be moved to a deeper level as soon as the ceremony was complete.

Irene, surprise that it was, stood at his side. Brett had remained with the small council, adding himself to their number. The Coincounter. The Eye. The Blade. The Scribe. The Orator. The Strategist. The intermediaries between the crown and the people. All wore hooded robes of white, and they looked for all the world like spectres there to drag Fredrick down into the crypt alongside his father. Tobias almost wished they were.

Finally were the wives. The soon-to-be Queen Magriolla. Lady Eustace. Princess Sarina. The wives of the princes stood back against the far wall, near to the stairs that wound down into the depths of the crypt. There was no one else present. Not even kingsblades were welcome at the coronation ceremony.

As Fredrick at last fell silent, he caught Irene sag with relief. He couldn't blame his sister; he grew tired of standing as well. "We can sit soon." His voice echoed, almost as though it was amplified by the walls around him. He might have only imagined it – no one else reacted – but still Tobias winced.

"I'm good." Her voice was rougher than he'd remembered it when he'd last seen her, but then that was true of her... well, *everything*. "Just hate what I'm about to see's all."

He couldn't begrudge her that. As the Magi gathered before Fredrick, Tobias could see the broad smile spread across his face. He was about to get all that he had ever wanted. "At least one of us gets to have a good day."

She hummed her agreement as the Magi drew back their hoods. A tall, older skunk that Tobias barely knew stepped forward. "Fredrick. Blood of Eric, blood of Vargor. What do you offer the Coincounter as proof of your worthiness to rule?"

"The promise of coin *without* counting." The words rolled out perfectly, so carefully practiced as they were.

The boar at the skunk's side took a step forward as well. "Fredrick. Blood of Eric, blood of Vargor. What do you offer the Blade as proof of your worthiness to rule?"

Fredrick's smile grew wider. "The promise of enemies weak and ripe for our swords."

Tobias shuddered. A horse stepped forward. "Fredrick. Blood of Eric, blood of Vargor. What do you offer the Orator as proof of your worthiness to rule?"

"Words of silvered tongue to be delivered to rivals near and far."

A rat, youngest-looking of them all and the only female of the group, joined the horse. "Fredrick. Blood of Eric, blood of Vargor. What do you offer the Eye as proof of your worthiness to rule?"

Fredrick's smile slipped a little at her presence, or perhaps it was the hint of accent in her voice that irked him so. "Sight through the dark of threats without and within."

Next was another tiger, one-armed and gruff. "Fredrick. Blood of Eric, blood of Vargor. What do you offer the Strategist as proof of your worthiness to rule?"

"A mind for war and ears open to hear." Fredrick nodded to the Strategist; the crippled tiger nodded back.

Finally, a small fox took his step and clasped his paws together. "Fredrick. Blood of Eric, blood of Vargor. What do you offer the Scribe as proof of your worthiness to rule?"

That time, Fredrick's eyes lifted from the Magi. They came to rest on Tobias, and the tiger felt a shiver run down his spine. "I offer the knowledge of the world, that it might show us the way to the light."

The words had been right, but there was something else under Fredrick's tone that only set Tobias ill at ease. Irene seemed to notice; her paw found his a moment later as Fredrick returned his stare to the Magi. "Are any here displeased by the promises offered?"

A quiet chorus of *nays* echoed through the crypt. The sound seemed to ring out for far, far longer than Tobias was comfortable with, rattling in his bones from every which way. He wished even one of them, just one, had raised a voice in objection. Just to stall it out a moment. Just to deny Fredrick what he wanted, if only for a second. Just to wipe the smug smile from his face.

But alas, it was not to be. He sat up higher on the stone throne, pauldrons glinting in the arcane light of the crypt as he looked down on the Magi and his family. "By blood and by

promise I am bound to this throne, from this day until my last.” He lifted his head and stared straight ahead. “My crown.”

Tobias frowned at Irene, and his expression was mirrored back at him as Brett emerged from the side of the throne. He made his way over to their father’s coffin, and the crown that was still at rest atop it. The middle brother paused, hesitating as he reached out to take the golden thing. Tobias didn’t envy Brett that duty.

Nevertheless, Brett did finally take the crown between his paws. He turned toward the Magi as they lined up, and each one brought two fingers to their face. They touched their lips and then the great sapphire that rested in the heart of the crown’s face, one by one as it passed them by until at last Brett stood before the throne. He took the steps slowly as Fredrick’s smile only grew wider.

Finally he reached the top, and he leaned forward to plant the crown squarely upon the older tiger’s head. A sigh emerged from Fredrick that might almost have been mistaken for a moan. Brett hurried back down from the throne and sank to his knees. The Magi did the same, and Tobias and Irene followed suit. “Hail to King Fredrick the Second of Ratholarin, son of Eric and blood of Vargor. May your reign be etched into history eternal.”

“Thank you. All of you.” Fredrick stood and splayed his arms wide. He inhaled sharply, breathing deep of the stale crypt air before he sighed again. His eyes fell back on the kneeling forms, though they lingered a little longer on the Coincounter. The skunk, oldest of the Magi by far, knelt awkwardly with his legs trembling. It was clearly taking its toll on his world-wearied body.

And yet, rather than call on his subjects to rise, Fredrick simply folded his arms and lifted his head. “Hear me, and hear me well. This must be a turning point for Ratholarin. Our realm is imperilled, and it must be corrected now.”

Tobias bit back a groan, but he caught Irene’s rolling eyes. Any harder and they might have rolled right out of her head. Of course Fredrick was going to issue a speech. It was just like him to milk the moment of his ascent as much as he could.

If Fredrick saw Irene’s eyes, he didn’t comment. Instead he sat back down atop the throne as his smile turned slowly into a snarl. “Father was wise. He was strong. He ruled this land well, but lamented often to me that he could not complete the work he had thought to come the close of the Age of Chaos.” Fredrick began to growl. “His Age of Enlightenment has thus far been... disappointing.”

Though Tobias couldn’t see the faces of the Magi, he clearly caught their recoil. But Fredrick was not finished. “Carisi rebellion continues unabated, untended by the Blade and the Strategist. The message of the old gods remains heard even deep in our lands, despite the efforts of the Orator and the Scribe. Merchants conspire with smugglers and insurgents even within this very city, as though my Eye and my Coincounter are powerless.” His growl turned enraged as he stared down at the small council. “How disappointing.”

The Magi looked between themselves, but whether they were stunned or afraid to speak out didn’t matter. They remained silent as Fredrick leaned back into the throne. “Ratholarin is on the edge and I will not let the blood of Vargor fail it. Swift action must be taken. Here, now, before the people who would see us fall have a chance to stand against it.”

The Strategist was the one to clear his throat, and the tiger lifted his head to stare up at Fredrick. “Speak plain of your intent, my king. What would you have us do?”

“What my father has spoken of many times to me.” Fredrick swept a paw wide. “Those not of Ratholarin origin will be purged from this realm. They will be given the choice to leave, but come the dawn of the new year if they remain? They will not be shown mercy.”

The Magi began to murmur amongst themselves, but Fredrick swiftly began to speak over them. “I care not where they are from. If their origin is Carisi, they will be gone from my lands. If their origin is Lenkis, they will be gone from my lands. If their origin is Yarovenni, or Sylarian, or Ingsbren or Marovan or *anything* other than true Ratholarin. All of them will be *gone*.”

“My king.” The quiet voice belonged to the Scribe as the fox shook his head. “Such a thing is not possible. It would require the annulment of marriages, the breaking of families... the sheer scale of this undertaking is unthi-”

“If it *has* scale then it is not impossible.” Fredrick thrust his finger toward the fox. “You are the Scribe. You will assign a number of scholars to the task of poring over the birth records. Anyone who was not born in Ratholarin will be excised from it. You have until the year’s end.”

Tobias could imagine the wide eyes of the fox as he shook his head again. He chanced a glance to the side at the wives. Each of them looked horrified, and why not? All were born of other realms. “B-before the end of the year? There is not enough time, my king; what you ask cannot be done.”

“Then the blood of those you fail will be on your paws.” Fredrick’s glare turned from the fox back to the tiger again. Tobias doubted the Strategist was quite as happy as Fredrick at this turn. “You will work with him. The announcement will be made tomorrow that only those born in this realm will be permitted to remain in it. All foreign influence will be purged, and if we must cut down the outsiders polluting this realm and spill their weak blood in our streets, then let them run red. You and the Blade will speak with our commanders and watch captains when we are concluded here to spread the word among our forces in advance of the announcement to the common people.”

Jaw loose and open, almost unable to believe what he was hearing, Tobias glanced aside to Irene. She simply stared stonily forward. The only hint that she was moved by any of those words was the tilt to her muzzle. It couldn’t even be called a snarl, but then Irene had always tended toward the subtle. He’d long envied her control of herself.

But the Scribe was not convinced, and he lifted his head a little higher. “To be clear, your majesty... your wife is of Marovan. Are you saying that she too is to be...?”

Again Tobias looked over. Magriolla’s head was bowed. Small, damp marks scarred the stone beneath her. Eustace rubbed her back. Beside her, he could see Sarina no longer looked shocked. She looked *angry* as Fredrick smiled. “Her loyalty will be assured in the days to come, and may remain. As will the wives of my brothers, so long as their loyalty too is solely with the Ratholarin crown. I foresee no trouble from them.

“But that leads me to the next matter. Loyalty.” Fredrick rose from the throne again, and there was no way to mistake the way he glared down at the robed rat before him. “You,

Eye, have proven to be *painfully* lacking. Your ability to gather and report information is not as expected from one of your station. It is enough to make one question *your* loyalties.”

The rat actually scoffed back at Fredrick in turn. “Your father heeded my counsel well, my king. If this is not good enough for you, I may be replaced at your pleasure.”

“And you will be, if your continued presence here cannot be justified.” Fredrick’s expression twisted as he balled up his paws. “My father is *dead*, and you have yet to provide me a shred of proof as to whom is responsible for his death. Surely the assassin is not so skilled as to elude your gaze.”

It didn’t take imagination to see the rat’s indignant squaring of the shoulders. “Because, as I have told you prior to this day, there appears to be no evidence of any assassination. Your father’s health was failing. Illness took him. It is that simple, and both your kingsblades, your physician, and my information all concur.”

That was news to Tobias. He’d not expected Zane to actually keep him informed, but at least he could relax a little bit. Fredrick, however, remained sceptical. “With news of rebels in this very city, you stand there and tell me that *illness* claimed my father.”

“Because it is the *truth*. My king.” She bowed her head again, though not nearly as deep as decorum would demand. “Accept it or disregard it at your pleasure, as you accept or disregard me at your pleasure.”

“I disregard it. You will find evidence, or you will find yourself perhaps stricken by a ‘mortal illness’ of your own.” Fredrick dropped hard back down into his throne as he lifted his eyes to Tobias. “But there are other matters of loyalty that need to be addressed, and you will help me.”

The younger brother blinked, but bowed his head regardless. “I stand ready to serve my realm.”

“Both you and Brett will be placed in charge of two new organisations directly under the crown.” Fredrick smiled once more as he nodded toward Brett, who emerged around the throne again to stand before him. “You will lead a new division of guardians of this realm. The kingsblades will remain the elite protectors of the royal family, but we need well-trained and experienced soldiers who can operate with the crown’s authority.”

Once again, the fox cleared his throat. “Begging your pardon, my king. Such a force would be in violation of-”

“The greater violation is allowing this kingdom that I love to fall to ruin.” Fredrick’s smile turned into a scowl in the space of a heartbeat. “These guardians will act where the watch are too slow to do so. They will investigate with my full authority, to root out any ties to foreign realms.” He thrust a finger at the Scribe. “Speak to me of legality when *your* father lies hacking for breath, struggling to avoid swallowing his own tongue. Speak to me of it when poison pumps through his veins like blood. I am your king! The law is what I dictate it to be.”

The fox sank back down to his knees with a nod. Fredrick’s eyes lifted to once more lock on Tobias, and he bowed his head to avoid the new king’s stare. “You, by contrast, will be overseeing a cultural revolution. All materials and all elements of non-Ratholarin expression will be destroyed, and only Ratholarin culture exemplified.” As Tobias’ head snapped up,

Fredrick's brow furrowed deep. "Art. Poetry. Stories and legends. Myths. If they are not Ratholarin, they do not belong." His pointing finger lanced toward Tobias. "Your mind is sharp. Turn it to this task for the good of our people."

Tobias was silent. What was there even to say to something like that? Fredrick clearly wasn't happy with his lack of enthusiasm, and he sighed. "Do we have a problem, brother?"

"Just... trying to figure out how best to serve, my king." He swallowed hard as Fredrick's smile returned. "Do you have thoughts as to how best see this done?"

"I do, and I will speak to you and Brett shortly regarding your new assignments." He stood and clapped his paws together once. Everyone in attendance bowed their heads... at least, those who were not already cowed by Fredrick's glare. "First I must consult with the small council. There are... *matters* that must be attended to before we begin." He waved a paw across the gathering. "Thank you."

He stepped down from the throne and immediately before the Magi. Tobias frowned at them even as he turned to Irene, his voice dropped to little more than a whisper. "He's gone mad."

"He was always this and you know it." Her contempt was clear, and she made no effort to hide her glare. "Why do you think I've spent so much time away? And I'll be gone again by nightfall, if I'm not given any trouble."

Tobias' eyes widened. She couldn't leave so soon! "But what if he has a task for you?"

She snorted. "Then I will do what you and everyone else here should have done, and refuse it." She turned away from him, but paused a moment. The tigress faced Tobias once more and wrapped him up in a tight hug as her voice softened. "I'm sorry, Tobi. I am. I wish I could give you the courage to do what's right, but... you have to find that in yourself."

The prince sighed against her shoulder as he squeezed her back. "Maybe the next time you're in Sanwell, you'll be proud of who I've become. If I can find that courage, that is."

"Nothing would please me more." She drew back, but not before ruffling Tobias' headfur with a smile. Her eyes darted over his shoulder, and that smile flickered. "I'm off. Looks like your wife needs to have a word. You take care of yourself, alright?"

"You too, Ree; stay safe. Love you." She smiled again and touched her forehead to his briefly before they parted once more. She turned and marched right past the Magi as Tobias adjusted his headfur once more. Fredrick turned toward her, but she held up an empty paw to him in turn and simply ignored the newly minted king. Fredrick's expression soured for a moment before he rolled his eyes and turned back to his council. Jealousy filled Tobias.

A paw touched his shoulder as Irene vanished up the stairs. He turned to see Sarina, her expression taut. "We must speak. Now."

"I didn't know what he had planned. I swear it." Tobias glanced at Fredrick as he turned to face his wife, but the king's attention was on his Magi. Nevertheless, the prince's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's not possible. What he's saying he intends to do. No one would go along with it."

“I think you and I both know that the common folk would sooner not go up against the army of Ratholarin for displeasing their king.” She grit her teeth as she tilted her head up. “And it is not as though Ratholarin has not extolled the supremacy of its own people for many, many generations. Many will laud this directive.”

Tobias opened his muzzle to remind her that Ratholarin had earned its place by blood and effort, but he shut it again before the words could escape him. Speaking them would only confirm her argument. “What are we to do? What *can* I do?”

She stroked at her belly. “I may have conceived. If it is so, then I carry a Ratholarin child. If not, then... it would behoove us both to ensure that changes in very short order.” Her face was a pristine mask of stoic, if stressed, determination. Her paws however wrung themselves ragged between the two of them. “Eustace fears because she has yet to give Brett a child. Magriolla fears because... well, look at her husband.”

“I try not to.” Tobias sighed. What a time to consider siring an heir. “I doubt I will be able to... *perform*, given all of this. But you are right; if we are to stay, we must bear a child as soon as possible.”

“Or leave.” She nodded once. “I know that was your plan. Stay for the funeral and then we would leave for Ingsbren at last.”

Tobias’ breath caught in his throat. That had been the intention. That *was* the plan. But Fredrick’s assignment of a duty to him at the least implied that his brother wanted to keep him close. And if that was what he wanted... well, refusal to leave for Ingsbren like their father had originally intended could start a war. Tobias would be a traitor to the crown, and King Torvin would be the one harbouring him.

Even as the thoughts played through his mind, he could see Sarina had already reached the same conclusions. She shook her head slowly. “But... we’re not going anywhere, are we?”

The tiger sighed. He looked once more to his brother, so smug and so pleased with the power he now wielded. Perhaps if they’d left before the coronation. Perhaps if they’d left after Eric had died. Perhaps if he’d defied his father’s last wish and, instead of staying close in his last days, just *gone*. But now? “No.

“No, I fear we are not.”

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It took the better part of an hour for Fredrick’s meeting with his council to finish up. In that time, the brothers’ wives had taken their leave. Sarina had been the last to go, Magriolla the first. Tobias’ wife had lingered as long as she was able as they listened in as best they could to Fredrick’s meeting. It seemed the Magi themselves underestimated their new liege’s ambition as much as Tobias had.

They had been left to nervous mumbling and strained glances back as they’d filed one after another up and out of the crypt. Fredrick took his place back on his stone throne as they filed out, and he seemed to relax back into it as though it was the most comfortable thing in the world for him. How that was so was well beyond Tobias. Perhaps the power that he held made anything feel better. With more than a little reluctance, Tobias began to approach. Brett, he noted, stood against the wall. He looked as confused as Tobias felt, but not nearly as concerned.

Tobias waited until the council members had left before he dared to speak, but Fredrick was the one to beat him to it. “You disapprove.” The younger tiger frowned, but he still bit his tongue. Fredrick rolled his eyes and sighed. “You can speak honestly. Please. I would know the thoughts of my brothers.”

“I... think you risk much for little.” It was as much speaking out as Tobias dared, but at the least it didn’t seem to draw Fredrick’s famously short temper. Not that time, at least.

“The risk has been calculated and deemed acceptable by more than just me.” Fredrick turned his head toward the coffin that held their father. “It was *his* wish that such a stand be taken. He told me as much, before his... his *condition* drove him to near madness.” The king’s ears drooped as he stared at Eric’s still face through the glass. “Gave me his final instructions... and my first ones. This *is* his will.”

“Then why is this the first we’ve heard of it?” Brett frowned from behind folded arms, but Fredrick didn’t even look at him.

The king was silent a few more moments, staring in contemplation at their father. What did he see, Tobias wondered? A corpse? A memory? An inspiration? He too glanced over, but there was nothing there for the youngest of the three. Nothing but a reminder of his own obsolescence.

When Fredrick spoke again, it wasn’t with the gentle tones he’d just been using. It was firm, and it didn’t invite the honesty he’d suggested moments before. “Father was killed. He was certain of it, and so am I. That neither the kingsblades nor our spymaster have been able to determine this is troubling. You both have seen the unrest that threatens our realm.” He turned at last to Brett. “Tell me, if you can, that you see no connection.”

Tobias followed Fredrick’s gaze, and a curious thing happened. Brett glanced down and away as he brushed down his uniform. He didn’t answer, and Tobias frowned. There *was* no connection. The Eye had said so. Zane, presumably, had said so. The latter was all Tobias had needed to hear to believe it. If there had been a guilty party to pursue, he had no doubt the old wolf would be more than happy to chase them to the ends of the world.

Yet there was Brett, unable to answer Fredrick’s challenge. Tobias stepped forward and shook his head. Someone had to. “There *is* no connection, Fredrick.”

The king didn’t turn to Tobias’ dissent. Instead his remained eyes locked on Brett. “No. Of course there is not.” Finally he faced Tobias, and there was the barest hint of a smile on his face. It sent a shiver through the younger brother. “But it nevertheless presents an opportunity — a pretext — that we can exploit to its fullest, for the betterment of Ratholarin and the Rathin line.”

Brett frowned. He looked shocked. “You... *knew*? You knew there was no assassin or poisoning or whatever, and you didn’t tell me? Didn’t tell us?”

“I needed to be clear when in the public eye – when surrounded by people whose loyalty I cannot be assured of – of my feelings. My surety. And I needed your reactions to be as they were, so that others would see that even my dear brothers wouldn’t speak out against me.” He stood and began to make his way down toward Tobias. “If their king is certain, then the people

will be certain. If the king accepts a lesser truth, or backs down... he will be seen as weak. That is unacceptable.”

“And what of banishing hundreds – *thousands* – of innocent people within our borders to lands that may not even take them in?” Tobias drew himself up tall as Fredrick began to scowl. “Is that acceptable?”

“Innocent is a stretch, and *anything* that strengthens Ratholarin and the crown is acceptable to me.” Fredrick thrust his arms quickly out of his sleeves, and for a brief moment Tobias thought that his brother was about to strike him. He need not have worried; the gesture was merely to free them from the thick folds of his sleeves so that he could fold them. It would have been funny if not for Fredrick’s words. “Thus, your assignments. I don’t suppose I have to tell you that your wives are not to hear a word of your work.”

“The wives we are to be stripped of.” Tobias shook his head again. “Or did you speak truly about them, and they are not to be banished?”

The older brother bared his teeth in a cold smile. “Of course I didn’t. They will be dealt with in short order; the alliances they offer are of little value to me now.”

“They’re of...” Tobias could barely echo the words. Fredrick hadn’t gone mad. He’d taken complete leave of his senses and reason! “Fredrick. Ingsbren alone has an army that nearly matches us. Do you truly wish to alienate not only Ingsbren, but also the Marovani and the Sylarians? Give them cause to ally against us?”

As Fredrick sighed, his expression shifted not to anger but to disappointment. “Ingsbren’s army is almost as large, true, but each Ratholarin soldier is better equipped and better trained. For every loss we suffer in battle, I wager we would deal back five in turn.”

“Based on what, exactly?” Tobias heard his voice grow more pleading; he’d not intended it, but nor was he sorry for it. Did Fredrick *want* a war?

“Based on my own evaluation of their forces, gleaned from our spies and strategists. It is not an empty assumption driven by pride, brother, and it will only be proven more true as we increase recruitment.” Fredrick nodded toward Brett, who’d begun to drift in from the wall. “This too will allow you to fill your ranks with the finest warriors in the realm. Warriors that will carry out our bidding, above and beyond the laws of the common folk.”

Brett still looked uncomfortable with what Fredrick was saying, but Tobias could see the wheels turning in his head. An extra-legal military command he could use to do anything... it was no wonder Fredrick had put Brett in charge of it. “You understand the discontent that this will bring the people. The suffering. The anger.”

Fredrick, however, chuckled. “Which is why you will be proving them wrong. That will be your true purpose, Tobias. The overseeing of cultural works that will show the people that the crown’s power is just and true, to remind them of the gloriousness of their existence under our steady paws, and to purge the land of any works that would speak otherwise.”

“This cannot be what father told you he wanted.” Tobias scowled as Fredrick continued to smile. Why wasn’t he angry? He’d always been enraged when anyone, *especially* Tobias, had challenged him.

But he wasn't mad. He was *happy*. "Every generation of our line has been tasked, he told me, with ensuring our continued power. The power of the crown is the power of the realm, and our realm is sick. It is being eaten away from within by parasites and disease. These are the maladies that we will wipe away. The three of us, together, just as he intended."

A glance to the side saw that Brett had begun to nod along. He had always been a sycophantic little brat, but surely he could see that Fredrick was going too far. "And what of Magriolla? Eustace? Sarina?"

Fredrick's smile finally slipped as she took on a disgusted expression. "Magriolla cannot even birth me a living heir, and she has had countless chances to do so. I shall find someone of fair and true Ratholarin blood to serve in her place." He sniffed as he looked Tobias up and down. "You, however, will need much the same treatment if only to keep the stench of your perversion from becoming known again. I shall have to do something about that as well, when time permits."

Tobias grit his teeth. "Sarina may presently be pregnant with my child. If that is so, then she must remain if only to continue the line."

"She *must* only do whatever it is that *I* command she do. Not that which would please you." The king growled as he leaned in closer to Tobias. It seemed that defiance was a step too far for the new king. "If her exile back to her homeland plagues you so, then do what you did before her arrival and find an appropriately appealing female to dump your seed into. Assuming you *can* still find one willing to bed you."

The younger tiger let the barb pass; Juni and her son were doing well the last he had heard. The mention of their wives had set Brett on edge again, and Tobias wasn't willing to let that chance go. "And what of Eustace?"

Fredrick scoffed as Brett frowned. "As useless or moreso than Magriolla. While Magriolla births only the dead, Eustace may well be utterly barren. If she cannot bear a child, then she is useless." Fredrick's eyes brightened as his smile turned cruel. "Perhaps *she* will make for a fine receptacle for your cock, brother, if Sarina leaves first. It seems you'd have as much luck impregnating her as any male you'd prefer."

"That's enough." Brett's voice was angry but quiet, and Fredrick whirled on him all at once as Tobias blinked in surprise. "Eustace is a fine lady and a good person, and I love her. Barren or not, I love her, and she is *not* useless. She is more than a womb to be seeded."

"Because you are thinking like a male in love and not a male built to rule. That is why father would never have passed me over for you to take the crown." He sniffed at Brett as the middle brother growled back at him. "She will give you no cubs. You are *expected* to sire heirs, brother. Continue to pointlessly try, if you must, but you will do it in Sylaria."

Brett recoiled, and even Tobias frowned. "Excuse me? What do you mean, I'll do it in Sylaria?"

"It is not obvious?" Fredrick's tail flicked sharply as he turned away from his brothers and made his way back to the throne. "She will go, Brett. And if it is your wish that she remain your wife, then I will grant you that boon." He whirled back to face them, cape whipping

through the air before Fredrick took the throne once more. “And I will exile you, as well. You will get to remain with her, in her homeland.

“But that will be it.” Brett’s expression hardened as Fredrick chuckled. “Nothing more. Living in a Sylarian backwater, disgraced husband of a disgraced, barren lady, without the comforts of home. Tell me, brother: how much *do* you wish to have nothing to your name?”

“Irene seems to handle it well enough.” Even as Brett spoke the words, Tobias could tell that his heart wasn’t in them. His ears had drooped along with his shoulders, and he wouldn’t even meet his brother’s gaze.

Fredrick knew it, too. He just chuckled and spread his arms out wide. “Then tell her. Tell her you are forsaking your birthright and leaving with her. Tell her that you love her more than you love your family, your reputation, your honour, and all the comforts and joys that you have become so accustomed to in your life here.” He lifted his head as Brett closed his eyes. “Well, go on. Go tell her. Tell her now, if that is how you truly feel.”

When Brett didn’t move, Tobias knew that the middle brother was defeated. He frowned sharply for a second; how could Brett be so weak? So pathetic in the face of someone he claimed to love? That second was all he had before he remembered precisely what he had done to William. It was the exact same circumstance, separated by roughly a decade. Well, a decade and a sex. He’d capitulated back then because he’d not been ready to walk out on his family and his duty.

Contempt gave way to sympathy as Brett hung his head in sullen, silent defeat. “You can do much better than her, brother. You know this is true.” Fredrick’s words too had become more gentle, as if he realised how far he’d pushed. “Besides. The Sylarians were the last to engage the Lenkis. They offered no aid in defeating Caris; they sided all too often with their neighbours, even over us.” Fredrick’s muzzle twisted. “We do not need their land through marriage and heirs. When the time is right we will take it by force of arms.”

Tobias bit his tongue. Talk of conquest would surely appeal to Brett more; the two had always been of a similar mind regarding such things. “You want to banish Eustace back to her homeland, and then plan an invasion of it? And you think Brett will simply... find this agreeable?”

“Sylaria already seeks means to undermine our power in this region. Alliances with the Marovani have already been established, Brett, and we know that they are supplying some of the Carisi who are fermenting insurrection across Ratholarin.” He nodded once. “I will tell the Eye to expect you. She will give you all of the relevant information on the matter, and so much the better. You will be working much more closely with her when you sit on the council.”

Brett just nodded dumbly along, but Tobias could only look up in surprise. “Brett will become one of the Magi?”

“As will you.” It was Fredrick’s turn to frown. “He will become the Guardian. You will be known as the Scholar. The roles I have laid out for you, as head of the Guardians and as the leader of the Ratholarin Institute necessitate an expansion of the council. These roles will be key to the future stability and prosperity of the realm. You ought be grateful.”

Before Tobias could speak, Brett nodded once. “We are both very grateful. Thank you.”

Fredrick just nodded once and sighed as he leaned back in his throne. “Good. Now, you will have much to get to and some wives to say goodbye to. They’ll be gone within a couple of weeks, so if you’ve anything pressing to say... well, now would be the time. Tell the kingsblades to wait for me above. I will stay a little longer with father.”

Brett bowed his head and Tobias swiftly followed. Truth be told, he was all too happy for the chance to escape the crypt. Everything about it felt so much more hostile than he could ever remember it being, and with just the three of them the only living souls in the place... well, that assumed that Fredrick, for all his intentions, even had something approximating a soul. Tobias wasn’t sure anymore.

He fell into step behind Brett as his older brother made his way to and up the stairs. Tobias didn’t hesitate to follow him, though he couldn’t help but speak the moment they were far enough up that Fredrick wouldn’t be able to hear them. “What he’s asking of us is madness.”

“Madness with a point. You only saw the one engagement with the Carisi; I’ve seen dozens.” Brett still didn’t sound sure, but it nonetheless stalled Tobias’ ascent somewhat to hear him already in step with Fredrick’s rhetoric. “And if the Sylarians are funding them, then it seems any alliance earned by my marriage to Eustace is... well, moot.”

Tobias reached up to grasp at Brett’s wrist, and his brother turned with deadened eyes to look back at him. “Brett... you love her. You can’t seriously want to do this.”

“What I want doesn’t matter, and arguing with Fredrick now would be like... arguing with the moon. If the moon could order my head lopped off, at least.” He produced a mirthless little smile as he tugged his paw free. “Huh. Guess I kind of know what you felt all those years ago now.” He lifted his head and resumed his ascent. “Fredrick is king. We will obey his commands and do our duty to the crown and to Ratholarin.”

And so that was it. Tobias let his paw fall back to his side as he closed his eyes. Brett was going to make the exact same mistake that Tobias had made with William. He was going to let the one he loved go, rather than fighting for them. But all the worse for Brett, because he had the benefit of knowing Eustace. Of spending years intimately with her. Overcoming challenges, coming to know each other deeply... of being sanctioned and sanctified by their families. And then to have it ripped away.

Tobias wouldn’t trade places with him for the world, but right then Brett would have potentially been happy to trade places with almost anyone anywhere else. “Hail King Fredrick the Second, I guess.”

Brett froze for a second at the words, but he didn’t stop moving for long. “Yeah. I guess.” He reached the top of the stairs a few moments later and hurried forward and out of sight.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Hail indeed.”