

Interwoven

NEED: PART EIGHT

52nd Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

The castle was dead.

Which was not to say that everyone within it was, of course. The servants and the guards and the kingsblades and the scholars and everyone else who called it home remained. But within less than a single week of his rule, King Fredrick had completely changed to nature of the seat of Ratholarin power. The number of stationed soldiers had increased, each one having been made to swear an oath of allegiance to the king. Servants walked ever with heads bowed. No one spoke unless they had to. The bustle remained, but the *life* was gone.

The eastern wing was a place Tobias had long enjoyed. The great library of the castle resided there, as did the private baths. When he was younger, it was even better because the eastern wing lay close to the laundry in the main castle proper, and equally close to where he would meet with William. As he strode the main hallway into the eastern wing, Tobias couldn't hold back a sigh. How those days seemed so alluring, and so distant.

"Is something the matter?"

Tobias closed his eyes and bit back another sigh. When he opened them and turned his head, it was to see Zane staring back down at him. Had his muzzle always had so much grey in it? Had his eyes always seemed so tired? How long was it until Tobias looked like the venerable warrior? "I was just... remembering. Your son, among other things."

The kingsblade nodded as he turned his eyes forward again. "I suspected that was part of the king's plan when he assigned me to you. Partly to free himself of me, and partly to remind you."

"I need no such reminder, and I tire of h..." He trailed off as they passed by another guard. The fox's eyes turned forward as Tobias looked at him, but it was clear he'd been listening. He gave it a few more paces before he continued with a lower tone. "I tire of his games."

Zane nodded his agreement, and the wolf's own voice dropped in volume. "And yet he is king. Our duty is not to question, but to serve our kingdom by his command."

"If you say so." Tobias shook his head. "He has not even been to see mother since his coronation. She has been chamber-bound since father's death, and he... cares little. And *don't*," he added as he glanced up at Zane in time to catch the wolf's opening muzzle, "defend him by suggesting his work requires him."

The kingsblade nodded to himself as he briefly closed his muzzle. "My place is to defend him in matters martial. I feel no need to speak to his actions regarding matters of family."

Tobias snorted. "Because family has, in the past, meant so very much to him. I wonder if anyone or anything besides his new crown does." He paused as they reached the door he'd been told to go to. It was new, and emblazoned with the sigil of the newly-formed Ratholarin Institute: a pentagram around a sword, its blade sheathed in a wrapped scroll. He knocked on it twice, and then stepped back.

As he waited, he looked up at Zane. The wolf met his gaze and perked an ear. "You disapprove."

"And age has clearly not dulled your mind in the least." That earned a smirk from the wolf, and Tobias shook his head. "Of course I disapprove. What he's planning on doing... what he's *already* done? What he'll do to..." Tobias grit his teeth. "Have you heard from William?"

What life had feed back into the kingsblade's eyes at his ribbing seeped away once again at the mention of his son. "Not since before the coronation. Fredrick has kept me too busy before now to seek him out. When last I heard he lived within the city with his... husband."

That little moment of hesitation was for Tobias' benefit, but the tiger shunted it out of his mind. Concern for the hyena would come first. Lamentation would surely be a matter for later. "I've met the male. They are a good match." Nevertheless, Tobias felt his muzzle twist a little and he quickly continued on before Zane could say anything. "If you require leave to visit him, you have it. Once I am inside, I will not be permitted to bring you with me anyway."

The wolf's nostrils flared, but he shook his head. "Your brother has assigned my duty to you. I'm not to leave your side." His ears flicked back as his hackles bristled. "And like it or not, I am a *kingsblade*. Not a *princesblade*. I serve at his command even over yours."

"And what he does not know will not harm him. Your son may need you. I insist." He nodded to Zane, but anything the wolf might have said was stalled out by the sound of a scuffle behind the door. He waved Tobias back as his paw reached for the hatchet on his belt.

He didn't need to draw it. When the door to the Institute opened a second later, it was to the sight of three figures. Two of them wore the gleaming, blue-trimmed and silvered armour of the Guardians of Ratholarin, thick and helmeted and so completely covering them that it was impossible to tell species at first glance. As they shouldered past, Tobias caught a freely-swinging pair of tails. Lion for the one, and some form of canid for the other.

The third tail belonged to a rat, old and his robes were covered in blood and bile and tears. The smell of him pervaded everything, and he groaned as he lifted his head. The legs under him were limp and his joints bent in the wrong ways, clearly broken. Bloodshot eyes, bleary and swollen managed to spot Tobias nonetheless. The rat's muzzle opened to reveal chipped and broken teeth...

... and no remaining trace of his tongue.

He recognised the rat as Iannus, his instructor as a cub. Tobias almost reached out to the soldiers to demand that they stop and release the old rat, but Zane placed a paw on his shoulder and guided him back and out of their way instead. It did nothing to break his eye contact with Iannus, as fresh tears shed clean lines down his grimy and blooded cheeks.

Tobias could only shudder with disgust as he watched the rat be dragged away. He dared not speak until they were past where the fox was posted. "This is insane."

"He is of Lenkis. From a time just shortly after their final fall." Zane shook his head; he too watched the rat as he was dragged away. "Surely you are not surprised by this."

"No. Just disappointed." Tobias hung his head low. "Iannus is a brilliant scholar and an inspired teacher. That this... whatever *this* is, is happening to him? It is a profound waste."

"Instead, some might call it a long overdue cleansing *of* waste."

Tobias blinked as he turned back to the doorway. In it stood a softly smiling figure, his robes a pristine white save for a silver and blue seam that matched the colouration of the Guardians' armour. Their wearer was a raccoon of later-middle age, one eye a sharp blue while the other was a dull, blind grey; the nasty scar that cut down that side of his face might have had something to do with that. "You are Prince Tobias, the Scholar. It is an honour to make your acquaintance."

As the raccoon bowed low, Tobias perked an eyebrow and watched him rise. Until he knew what he was dealing with, defending Iannus' honour would have to wait. "Likewise. Though I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, sir."

The raccoon's smile only widened, but the gesture seemed strangely empty. Vacant, even. "How rude of me; I had assumed that our king had give you more information. Pray forgive me." Again he bowed his head, though more quickly and shallowly than before as he pressed a paw to his chest. "I am Mattias, proud member of the Ratholarin Institute's Triumvirate."

His smile began to slip as Tobias continued to stare at him in confusion. He corrected it quickly and shook his head. "I understand. There have been many changes in recent days. Please, come in. We'll see what we can do to bring you up to speed on what is going on here." He glanced up at Zane and, once again, there was a flicker to Mattias' smile. "*You* are, of course, not required."

Zane stared silently back at the raccoon. Mattias' tone had been friendly, but there was no mistaking the insult in the tightness of his mismatched eyes and the edge in his voice. It wasn't until Tobias turned to him and offered him a nod that he looked to his charge. "Remember what we spoke about. I will be here for many hours, and you are... apparently not required."

"Yes, my prince." Zane nodded once to him, though he fixed Mattias with an icy glare as he turned to leave. Zane never *had* been one for polite sparring, after all.

Tobias watched him go even as Mattias stepped back through the doorway. When he followed Mattias he found himself in a small foyer of sorts. A couple of stone benches flanked the door they entered through. A desk which seated a canine of indeterminate breeding and androgynous appearance rested against the back wall before a staircase leading upward, with the other two walls draped in tasteful silks of blue. "I don't remember this place, and I've been everywhere in this castle."

That smile was still present on Mattias' muzzle, and it grew as the raccoon nodded to the dog and swept past him to the stairs. Tobias hurried to follow as he ascended them. "I'm

not surprised. This was the royal archives; only a pawful of scholars, the king, his council, and his heir were ever allowed access. Most of what was here has been moved to the library proper in the last couple of days.” He looked over his shoulder and nodded to Tobias. “This space has been set aside for us because of its relatively central location within this wing of the castle. We are not far from the garrison, the dungeons, and the library. All essential to our work.”

Tobias shuddered as they emerged from the stairs in what still looked like a small library. The walls were lined with shelves, each one filled with tomes on various subjects or stuffed full of tightly-bound scrolls. Tobias found his curiosity piqued; if they were right next to the library, what were those particular books doing here. “And what work is that, exactly?” He held up his paws as Mattias looked back over his shoulder with a confused expression. “I know what Fredrick has told me. I want to know if we have different thoughts on the matter.”

“We can’t have that if we are to see Ratholarin prosper.” Mattias turned back to face Tobias, and the tiger couldn’t help but recoil slightly as the raccoon clasped his paws behind his back and drew himself up tall. “The mission of the Ratholarin Institute is to advance Ratholarin education and culture by overseeing its development and shaping it to our needs, to see it spread to every corner of our realm in place of any foreign influence, and to thus advance the supremacy of our kingdom through the people within it.”

The prince thought he might be sick.

But he couldn’t hold to just what had been said. The little sparkle in Mattias’ eye and the hint of a smile that lingered on his muzzle gave away that there was more to it than just that. More that even Fredrick had yet to tell him, not that that would be a surprise. It was worth teasing to see if he could learn more. “That is what our king has said, yes.” Tobias mirrored the raccoon’s stance and leaned forward ever so slightly. “And what of our *true* purpose?”

That hint of a smile emerged in full on Mattias face, and the raccoon gave a long, slow nod as he backed toward the end of the hall. “Our king said you were sharp. Specifically, he said that you were *fairly* sharp despite your otherwise lack of redeeming qualities. I am pleased to see that at the very least he was not wrong about this particular trait.”

Of course. Trust Fredrick not to even speak a compliment without wrapping it in layer upon layer of insult. “I’m fairly certain you’ll come to see my skills for yourself in short order.” He watched the raccoon pause beside the last bookcase on the right. It wasn’t until he approached that he recognised the engraving flourishes on it, separate from the others in the room. Or, perhaps more accurately, he recognised the mechanism laid within. “May I?”

“Please.” Mattias stepped back as Tobias moved into his position, and without hesitation he jammed his thumb into a barely-discernible indent in the wood. It recessed beneath his claw and there was a quiet click, before the bookcase started to slide along the wall. A dark hall extended before him a short ways before it gave way to a large pair of elaborate double doors.

As he stepped back, Tobias could see the raccoon’s nod of approval. His smile felt a little more full – a little more *real* – at the sight, and the tiger waved him forward. “After you.”

Mattias closed his eyes and bowed his head, and started in. Tobias followed him, though he almost ran into the raccoon as he stopped a short way into the hall. There he reached into

the shadows of a nearby alcove and began to wind up something. Tobias turned as the bookcase slid slowly back into place. "It must be manually reset?"

"Many of the castle's secret passages – how I presume you knew what to look for – reset themselves through mechanisms turned by an underground aquifer. This one predates those models, I believe, by a considerable period. They certainly seem to be older by more than a hundred years." He shook his head as he made his way to the doors. "I intend to petition his majesty to allow us to install a newer mechanism when I am less busy, but I believe that for the moment it serves its intended purpose." He smiled wider as he pushed the double doors open. "Welcome to the Ratholarin Institute, my prince."

Tobias' eyes may have bugged out of his head. The room before him as surely as large as a whole section of the library, and it took up most of the eastern wing of the castle. Mattias walked down a small set of steps before them that made their way past various different levels. Each one bore shelves and racks, separated by the different sides of the room. Tobias frowned as he counted them out, one after another-

"Fifteen. Fifteen sides." Mattias spread his arms wide as Tobias found his answer provided. The room sank down lower and lower, but even as the walls closed in around level after level, it only made the broadness of the top section he stood at all the more large. A part of him wondered how much it would hurt to fall down all of those stairs, but the greater whole... "You're wondering how we did this in barely a week."

"The thought had crossed my mind." Tobias glanced up toward the ceiling and found he almost had his answer. Various emblems were emblazoned across the ceiling, carved into the stone with each marked by two sets of script. One was Old Lenkis, the oldest surviving script of their people. The other was the Rathin tongue, and Tobias could clearly see the names of the emblems... or rather, he could see the names of the old gods.

He looked down again at Mattias, whose smile had turned chillingly coy "You simply couldn't have done all of this in a week. It's impossible. Utterly impossible Unless...?"

"Unless you had harnessed the impossible to accomplish it. Yes." He spread his arms out wide. "Magic drawn from the old gods is what has allowed us this wondrous place of study. This, and as you will see so much more, is all at our disposal." He waved for Tobias to follow him down as he continued his descent. Tobias numbly followed. Magic. They were researching magic here.

They were *using* magic here.

"How?" The word was breathy, shocked and horrified in equal measure. "How could... even in a week, it would not be possible. To learn it, to wield it, and to find the right combinations of properties to achieve a specific goal would take years, if not decades!"

"Of course. But you make the critical assumption that we started a mere week ago." Mattias chuckled to himself as he waved about the room. "This place, yes, is new. A week old. But your grandfather began the study of magic for the use of the crown in the twilight of his reign. King Eric was the only one to know of our efforts until his health began to fail, and he passed the knowledge to his heir. Only then were we given permission to use what we had learned, by his degree and in his name." The raccoon's eyes glittered as he took in Tobias' stunned, silent stare around the room. "No practitioners or sorcerers exist here, of course.

Magic imbued in *vessels* is much safer than magic imbued in people, after all. An object does not develop troublesome attributes like rebellious will, and so much the better.”

Now that Tobias had heard that, he could see at least a little of what Mattias meant. The shelves and the racks all bore different items, catalogued and tagged and set aside. Each segment of the room, as determined by the walls at their back and aligned with an emblem on the ceiling, was partitioned out for each of the old gods. Racks and racks of magical artifacts. Power untold, gathered for decades and now being used for Ratholarin. For *Fredrick's* Ratholarin.

That sick feeling returned to Tobias's stomach as he looked up and over the divine symbols above him. He forced the feeling down, of course; he couldn't let his new comrade in intellectual arms see how uncomfortable this all made him. “Vicaris. Lemeos. Prosta, Miarvis, Droma...” He frowned as he glanced to the other end of the room and the emblems above it. “I am not familiar with those ones.”

“The Colossi. Gods of the gods, from the era before them if you heed the legends.” Mattias didn't even turn back toward Tobias as they made their way ever downward. “If we consider the old gods to be *the* old gods, then these are truly *ancient* gods. The original creators.” Mattias chuckled. “Little remains of their power, but what we do know is... tantalising.”

That was a question he'd reserve for later. They were almost at the bottom, and two more white-robed figures studied a selection of stones spread across a table in the heart of the room. “But nothing here of the Apex. The Heralds. The Ancients.”

“Because this is a place for the study of the *gods*, and not for pretenders.” A note of disgust entered Mattias' voice as he replied; he all but spat the last word. “The Apex was a fabrication, the Heralds were mere sorcerers, and the Ancients are nothing but myth with no historical evidence to back them up. The old gods and the Colossi, however... they and their powers are *very* real.”

The tiger shuddered as he cast his gaze up again. The scale of what had been done in so short a space of time would have been terrifying, but that this had been going on in some capacity for *generations* of his family... “And you, and this Triumvirate... you wield the magic imbued into these objects yourselves?”

Mattias chuckled as they approached the bottom of the chamber. “No, we are more than anything else scholars and administrators to the Institute's work. Or to be more specific, we do not wield the magic here in any meaningful capacity. We have found that magic is a tricky and dangerous thing to those not born to it. We have a number of...” He paused to tap at his chin. “... *wielders*. Descendants of magical lines whom we have fair dominion over. They do our king's bidding and, when we have gained all we can from them, we neutralise their threat.” Tobias didn't have a chance to ask the horrified follow-up question that Mattias' begged; the raccoon raised a paw and called out. “Davan. Orlin. We have a guest.”

Tobias wasn't certain that *guest* was the right descriptor for a prince, but the two figures nevertheless turned from the desk to regard him. They drew their hoods back; one was a tall horse, chestnut furred and with a dark stare that looked like it might have pierced Tobias clean through. The other was a panther, his eyes almost as dark as his fur to the degree that it almost

seemed a shadow had gained form and crept inside the robe. “Prince Tobias, allow me to introduce Davan and Orlin. Together with me, we serve as the Triumvirate. Your advisors, your researchers, and instruments of King Fredrick’s will.”

He fought to hold back the shudder of disgust at that last, and forced a smile to his muzzle regardless. “It is a pleasure to meet you both. Davan, Orlin. I look forward to working with you.”

“Allow me to make something clear, Tobias: you will not be working *with* us.” The horse’s eyes narrowed, and Tobias recoiled at the impropriety of his speech. “We’re here to cubsit you and make sure you’re not doing anything to impede the great work.”

Mattias sighed as the panther turned toward the horse. “Don’t be rude, Davan. Apologies, my prince.” Orlin bowed to Tobias as the tiger regathered himself. “Do not let Davan unnerve you, please. For a scholar, he is most inflexible.”

“I merely do not allow myself to be polluted by that which I study, which is more than I can say of either of you.” He folded his arms as he tilted his head up to haughtily stare down at Tobias. “There are no princes here. No authority save that of the Triumvirate and King Fredrick. Know that, dedicate yourself to the great work, and you will be spared the bulk of my ire.”

Tobias narrowed his eyes. He already disliked the horse immensely. “Only the bulk of it?”

Davan snorted back at him with contempt. “Until such a time as your perversion can be excised from you, and I am convinced it is purged *in full*? Yes. Until then, only the bulk of it. Be grateful for that, or be silent.”

“I see you take after Fredrick in more than one way.” Tobias didn’t even bother hiding his contempt. He would just avoid the horse like plague. He clearly wouldn’t become a friend and ally in... whatever this whole thing was. “And you, Orlin? Are you similarly inflexible?”

The shadows split beneath the hood to reveal nearly unnaturally white teeth bared in a fierce grin. “Oh, I’m *quite* flexible, my prince. Knowledge, after all, is power, and power shapes people as surely as it shapes history. We can fight that changing, or we can embrace it and become something greater than before.”

“Between the two of them, both ideals of knowledge and study may be expressed.” Mattias folded his arms into his sleeves as he took up a position between the two of them. “My role is, among other things, to balance our approach to our study.”

“And the rest of your role? All of your roles; all of *our* roles?” Tobias perked an eyebrow.

Mattias simply smiled back. “As I have said. The Institute is growing and expanding to include the development and dissemination of true Ratholarin culture throughout the realm, so as to ward off the influences of outside forces. We command a small force of investigative warriors – the Inquisition, currently operating as a branch of the Guardians but under Triumvirate command – that we may deploy to seek out forbidden knowledge and artifacts, and... *remove* their threat.”

“By bringing them here.” Davan’s voice deepened as his glare intensified. It was clear the horse wasn’t happy with Tobias’ words or presence, but at least the tiger suspected he had a better idea of what had happened to Iannus. Those Guardians must have been members of this Inquisition. Whether the beating had been for information or for punishment he wasn’t certain, but neither option was particularly appealing. Nor was the prospect of advocating for Iannus’ well-being; such a thing would only put Tobias in a worse place. Potentially a place right beside Iannus. “We take these items and this information from those who would use it to twist the minds and hearts of Ratholarin’s people away from their destiny.”

“And then it enters into our care, for careful categorisation and study.” Orlin’s smile grew wider. “And as we learn more, we report that knowledge to his majesty through you. Ratholarin’s knowledge of the forbidden magics and the old gods grows, and through the Institute we may use it to forge a bright, shining future under King Fredrick the Second for *all* the peoples of this world.”

Not just the peoples of Ratholarin. The peoples of the *world*. Tobias nodded and stiffened himself as best he could to keep the shudder of revulsion from showing. He had a feeling that would be a common thread of his time with the Institute. “And so even though the study of magic is forbidden, we are to engage in it here.”

“We are to do so. You are not.” Davan’s eyes narrowed as he snorted again. “You are a glorified messenger, as befits a creature so wretched. The magic contained within this vault is for the use of the Triumvirate, and even then *only* at the bequest of King Fredrick himself.”

Tobias felt his unease slide further away at the equine’s hostility. “Insult me again, scholar. See what happens if you do.”

“My position is assured by King Fredrick himself. My authority comes from him directly, and I speak with his intent.” Davan shook his head, and when it stilled again he had joined the others in a smile. His, by contrast, was cold and as mean as his stare. “I am to kill you if you step out of line. His orders, but my pleasure.”

That, certainly, sounded like Fredrick. A brief glance at Mattias saw the raccoon close his eyes and give a single, short nod. Tobias ground his teeth together as he returned his attention to Davan, and the horse’s smile had broadened. “And where, precisely, is the line?”

“You walk it with every breath.” He shook his head again and lifted an arm to point a single finger at the tiger. “You will do as we instruct. You will interfere not at all. And if you slack in your duties to report what we have learned to your liege, then it will be the last thing you do and my face will be the last thing you see. Am I understood?”

“Vividly. Thank you.” He still glared back at the horse and waved his own paw back to the desk. He was, after all, no stranger to Fredrick’s threats. “You may return to work now. I have no more questions for you.”

The horse’s eyes blazed with fury, but even as he took a step to round the desk Mattias thrust an arm out to bar his way. It barely reached the bottom of the horse’s chest, but it still stopped him in place. “That *would* be best. I think he understands his situation, Davan.”

It took a few more moments for those hateful eyes to tear themselves from Tobias and shift to Mattias. Tobias felt a little thrill of victory surge through him. He had no doubt that

there would be consequences if he did something – or didn't do something – wrong. But by placing him in such a prominent position, and even putting Tobias on the small council? Fredrick had elevated the prince to a more public station, albeit at the lead of a secretive and abhorrent secret organisation. It wouldn't do to have him die, be it murder or accident. Not unless he had some way to benefit from it, of course...

When Mattias finally had Davan's gaze, the horse nodded once and stepped back, he sat down at the table again and began to sift the rocks once more. As he did so, Mattias turned back to Tobias. "Pray forgive him, my prince."

"He is just doing his duty. There is nothing to forgive." He almost had to force the words out, but Davan's expression nonetheless did seem to soften slightly. Whether it was Tobias' acquiescence or the fact that Davan wouldn't have to deal with him anymore, the prince didn't know. He also didn't particularly care. "So, then. Artifacts."

Mattias' eyes twinkled again. "Yes, I will show you some of our most interesting acquisitions. The artifacts themselves are my specialty. Orlin is a master scholar of the histories of the gods and of magic as a whole, and Davan descends from a long line of Marovani witch-hunters with an incredible knowledge of magical neutralisation. I think you will find us quite adept in our roles."

"I have no doubt that I will." Tobias nodded and waved for the raccoon to continue. As he stepped around the desk and started to lead the tiger up toward the Guavi section of the room, he couldn't help but feel the fiery glare of Davan on his back. That was nothing new. He would grow accustomed.

What he doubted he would grow accustomed to was the nature of what was going on. That all of this was happening in secret was obvious and necessary. It subverted all that was taught to all people of Ratholarin. It directly contradicted the edicts that had been laid down during the Age of Chaos. Everything that Ratholarin was. That they were *trying* to be.

Fredrick had to have a plan, of course. A mad plan no doubt, what with the volatile powers that he was now able to toy with, but a plan nonetheless. What that plan could be was utterly beyond Tobias, but whatever it truly was? He wasn't sure he really wanted to find out.

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The tour of the Institute's vault had lasted hours. Tobias hadn't been able to contain his own professional interest in the artifacts that had been gathered, and it had been a genuine curiosity that had driven his questions to Mattias. The raccoon for his part had been very free with his knowledge, sharing what he knew of each and every aspect of what they had learned. Divine lineages, auspicious blood, godly aspects, alchemical experimentation and magical trinkets were all showed off to Tobias.

Or rather, *almost* all. More than a few items, he'd been told, were off-limits even to the prince by order of Fredrick. A question on how he was supposed to carry out his own duties if secrets were kept from him had been met with an apology and silence. For all the authority that the Triumvirate wielded, it seemed that Fredrick kept the scholars of his magical research on a very tight leash indeed. That he was being kept on an even tighter one was much less surprising.

What he had learned about the scholars themselves was of far, far greater value. It wasn't their histories, of which none of the three deigned to speak. It wasn't of any particulars regarding their lives, because each had simply said that their research was their sole focus. It wasn't of their homes or families, because each of them seemed not to have any. They did, however, share one trait beyond their lack of a life outside of their research: each, in their own way, was *absolutely* loyal to Fredrick.

Not the crown. Not the kingdom. *Fredrick*.

Davan had been the most obvious about this loyalty, and Tobias hadn't needed to question him in the least in order to determine that fact. The horse had made it abundantly clear from the moment they'd met, after all, that he and Tobias' brother had more than a few qualities and thoughts in common. Mattias, similarly, had been all too happy to worship at the figurative altar of their newly-crowned king, extolling his virtues and forward-thinking for being the first Ratholarin king in over an age to look past the dogma and not just recognise magic as a field of legitimate study, but allow its controlled use in secret. His adoration was clear, as was his dedication to whatever path Fredrick seemed to have laid out for them.

It was Orlin who ironically seemed the most sensible of the three, and almost as blunt in his assessment of Fredrick as Davan had been in his assessment of Tobias. The panther's response to the question of why he was there was simple: Fredrick allowed him to study the mysteries of the universe in a way nowhere else in the realms of the southern sea would anymore. He'd acknowledged with a coy smile that Fredrick's goals were ostensibly domination of the region and beyond through mastery of magic, but that such things mattered little to him so long as his curiosity and hunger for knowledge could be assuaged. Truth, he'd said, was worth any price.

Those words haunted Tobias all the way back to his chambers. They'd echoed over and over in his head as if ingraining themselves within his mind. It was falsehood, of course. He'd reminded himself of that with each repetition of them that bounced within his skull. Nothing, he told himself, was worth *any* price. There had to be limits. Nothing could be without limits; if people had no limits to what they would do... well, they would cease to be people. They would instead become monsters.

That, he realised, was what had bothered him from the moment Fredrick had taken his throne. Everything that he had done, from the coronation on from then, had been a performative act. A grand show, designed to project a certain image of himself to everyone who could be fooled. And then, for those who could not or would not be fooled, power. Cowing, knee-bending power, driven by a will to use that power to achieve whatever goals he set his heart to. Fredrick was a king. Within Ratholarin, he had no limits anymore. There was nothing to keep him in check; the monster was loose. What, Tobias wondered, would happen on the day when Fredrick felt he no longer had to pretend for the sake of the common folk? When he no longer deigned to pretend kindness and good intent?

Such thoughts lingered only until Tobias came into sight of his chamber door. It stood open wide, with a glaring Sarina standing in the hall in her nightgown. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her middle as she stared into the room, though the sound of Tobias' approaching footsteps certainly drew her attention from whatever was going on inside. "Finally! You must do something!"

As he drew closer, Tobias could hear the sounds of some sort of conflict within their chambers. A scuffle? “About what? What has happened here?”

“Your damned brother is what!” She thrust a paw to point through the doorway. “A half dozen of his Guardians showed up, dragged me out of bed, and began to dig through our room! All of our belongings!”

A moment’s panic took hold as Tobias thrust one hand into his pocket. There, in the little pouch he’d sewn into it, rested his Crimson Crest coin. He almost sighed in relief that it was still there; he seldom took it off his person, but if he’d slipped up and left it to be found... “Is Brett here?”

The lioness shook her head as her eyes smouldered with impotent rage. “No! But they are claiming his authority and that of your *other* brother to carry out the search.” She lifted her voice and turned back toward the door. “Even though I have done *nothing* to warrant such suspicion!”

There was no response from inside. The sounds of the room being violently turned over simply continued as if she’d said not a thing at all. “Have they said what they are looking for?”

Sarina narrowed her eyes at him. “You wish to level suspicion at me as well?”

Tobias couldn’t help but frown. He could understand her frustration and anger at the situation, but this was not his fault. “No, of course not. But if they are looking for something specific, we can clear them out faster.”

“The specific thing that *I* am looking for someone who can stop them from destroying our chambers!” Sarina all but glared at him as she waved toward the door again. “You are a prince. You are on Fredrick’s council. You have authority. Use it, please!”

The lioness certainly seemed more energised than he would have expected, and far more so for someone who had just been kicked out of the room for a search. Briefly he wondered what it was that she feared they would find. Did she think he kept his coin in the room as well? It wasn’t as though Sarina didn’t know about his visits. “I’m not in charge of them, but I will try.”

“You must do more than try.” She stepped back from the door as Tobias made his way over to it and glanced inside. Sure enough he could spot at first glance four of the gleaming, blue-and-silver armoured warriors turning the room over. Clothing was tossed aside. Drawers pulled from dressers. Chests opened and tipped over. Even the bed was stripped bare.

It was probably almost over; there was little space left in the room that seemed to be untouched by the Guardians’ search. In the middle of the room stood a single soldier, arms folded as he watched the others picking everything apart. A leader, no doubt. Tobias cleared his throat and moved over to him. “Excuse me.”

“No.”

The tiger blinked. The voice from inside the helmet was deep, but its owner hadn’t even looked at him. “Now see here. I am Prince Tobias and these are my chambers. I demand to know what you’re doing here.”

“I don’t answer your questions.”

Tobias scowled and moved around the soldier to stand right in front of him. He was about the tiger’s height, but he could determine nothing at all from his build. His tail was completely concealed by his armour; a rabbit perhaps? “Get out. Now.”

“I don’t take your orders.”

A growl slipped out of Tobias’ muzzle. “I see. And whose orders *do* you take?”

“I don’t answer your questions.” The helmed head turned slightly toward him, as if the guardian was finally focusing on him. “You will step outside until we have completed our search or we will *put* you outside.”

“Threatening a prince is a serious crime and I am going nowhere.” Tobias folded his arms and tilted his head up. Who did this male think he was? “You will get out. Now.”

“This is your final warning. Leave.”

Brett may have been cowed and defeated by Fredrick, but there was no way that he would have ordered such a search. The instruction could only have come from the king himself. That left Tobias with limited options to explore, but a message had to be sent. This sort of thing could not be allowed. “I am Prince Tobias of Ratholarin and you are vastly overstepping your authority. Get out of my chambers.”

The guardian simply stared at him for a moment longer before he turned his head aside and nodded. Tobias relaxed for a second and nodded back to the soldier in turn, but it wasn’t until one of the other guardians started toward him that he realised that it hadn’t been a nod of agreement. It had been a silent order. “What are you-”

A gauntleted fist flashed out to slam into Tobias’ muzzle as he turned toward the approaching soldier. Blood exploded in his muzzle as his vision blacked entirely for a moment. Dimly and through a surge of pain, he could hear a shrill scream he identified as being from Sarina. When he came back to himself, he was somehow still standing. Pain throbbed powerfully in his jaw and right through his muzzle, and Tobias was all but certain it was broken.

The lead guardian followed up his subordinate’s blow with one of his own. His fist slammed into Tobias’ stomach, and the tiger doubled over as bloody spittle flew from his slack muzzle. He gasped for a moment before there was another blow to his upper back, near to his neck. Tobias vision flashed away again at the impact as Sarina begged them for mercy. Even his hearing was distorted, his head ringing from the blow. It proved a mercy, as Tobias found the vicious kick to his guts from the guardian commander to be somewhat muted in his dazed state. Arms instinctively rose to cover his head.

No more strikes came though, for his head or otherwise. He coughed painfully, blood and bile spilling across his tongue and past his lips. It stained the carpet, pooling there as it drooled from his limp body. Sarina sobbed and continued to cry out for help in the corridor. No one came. No one would; no one *could*. He coughed again, the second much dryer than the first. Small favours, but the way his chest sparked with fresh pain each time he drew breath was only amplified with the heaving of his lungs.

“Sir, I have something.” Though his vision still swam in the aftermath of those brutal strikes, those words came through loud and clear. Tobias groaned as he rolled onto his back and curled his legs up slightly, one arm wrapped protectively about his middle. His head flopped to the side, where he could see another guardian standing by a half-emptied wardrobe. In his paws where what looked like a small wooden box, and he brought it over toward his commander.

Tobias cringed back as the guardian stepped right over him, but that heavy, armoured boot didn’t come down on his body. Instead, he was completely ignored as the commander opened the box and reached inside. A gauntleted paw emerged a moment later with a familiar red coin clutched between two fingers, and his head dipped to take in Tobias’ broken body. “Do you claim this coin?”

The tiger couldn’t speak even if he wanted to, either to confess or to challenge. His coin was in his pocket. Given Sarina had introduced him to Soren, he had to imagine that the coin belonged to her. Still, he doubted the guardian would let him avoid an answer. He gurgled the blood in his throat instead. A non-answer that could have been taken any way was better than a confession. Briefly, he wondered if denial would result in a beating until he *did* confess. Was that what had happened to Iannus?

As the guardian tucked the coin into his gauntlet, he reached back into the box. A small, neatly folded piece of paper was withdrawn and unfolded, and the guardian fell silent as he looked it over. “Ingsbren writing. Foreign filth.” His head lifted again, and from the angle of it Tobias had no doubt he was looking at Sarina. “The words are nonsense, even for your tongue. Is this some sort of code? Secret correspondence?”

“It is a letter to my *father* you cretin!” The words were all but shrieked at the top of Sarina’s lungs. Tobias couldn’t see her, but he could imagine the depths of her rage. “And yes, it *is* in code! So that private, familial matters between the two of us may be discussed without objection!”

“Seize her.” Tobias’ eyes went wide and focused all of a sudden as the guardian who’d brought the box to the commander left the tiger’s sight. Sarina babbled an objection, but it clearly didn’t sway any of them. “You will reveal the contents of this message and provide us with any further correspondence you have received from Ingsbren. If you do not, you shall be held in the dungeon until such time as you change your mind.”

“You cannot do this to me! You cannot! Tobias!” The pitch of the lioness’ screeches increased along with their volume, and Tobias grunted as he forced himself to start to rise. “Tobias! Don’t let them do this, please! *Please!*”

He wasn’t certain what all he could do, but the tiger quickly learned that the answer to the question was ‘nothing.’ The guardian commander’s boot lifted and came down slowly to rest on the prince’s chest, and it took barely any pressure at all to sharpen the pain still lingering there from the blows he’d suffered. “If you resist, you will join her.”

“*Tobias!*” Her shout was more distant, but there was nothing that he could do about that even if he wanted to. The pain that surged through his chest and outward across his body kept him prone, his breaths sharp and as short as he could manage to minimise the agony. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t speak. He was utterly, completely powerless.

And as he lay there, he realised it. This was what it was all about; what he'd suspected from Fredrick from the very beginning. He had his throne, but that was not enough. The power to command armies, to dictate law... that was too small for him. A boot on the chest of anyone who would stand against him, though? That was Fredrick. That was *always* Fredrick.

Tobias' tears did little to dilute the blood pooling under his face.