

Interwoven

NECESSITY: PART THREE

80th Day of the Verdant Growths, 27 AoE

The knock on Tobias door drew a sigh from the prince. So much for not being disturbed. Was it so much to ask for even a moment's peace in his own chambers? "I am busy."

Silence returned, and he nodded thankfully as he turned back to his desk. The tome before him – *Xiensu and the Complete History of the Zhu Dynasty* – once more received his full attention. That Davan had assigned a study of Xiensu to Tobias had clearly been another exercise in frustrating the tiger. Xiensu culture was so far afield of the southern sea realms that it might have been an otherworldly place. That said nothing of their utterly alien language and customs!

It was almost a relief when the knocks came again, but frustration still surged within the prince. It was clear that he was not going to be allowed to focus until whatever was going on out there was attended. Tobias slid a sheet of paper over the page he had been reading and closed the tome up over it as he stood and started over to the door. "Siema, if whomever you're letting through isn't here with life-threatening news, I will be most unhappy."

When he opened the door however, the kingsblade that had been standing watch at his door was gone. Zane stood in her place. The venerable wolf's paw was raised as if he were ready to knock again. Tobias blinked. Where exactly was Siema? "Since when do you knock? Did Fredrick order you here with something for me that could not wait?"

Zane's paw lowered and uncurled. "He did not. I have come to you for myself." He glanced back over his shoulder. "I dismissed your protector so that we may speak in private. May I come in?"

A frown touched the tiger's face. Zane wasn't normally quite so formal with him. The combination of his age and how long they had known one another, not to mention their mutual history, allowed him a lot more latitude than others. It also meant that he didn't work nearly as hard to hide his feelings or intentions around Tobias. The wolf looked worried. "Of course. You're always welcome here, please." He stepped back from the door.

The kingsblade hurried in all at once, and Tobias just as quickly closed the door behind him. Zane made his way immediately to the window to stare out at the city below before he drew the curtains across it. Tobias watched with a combination of fear and intrigue. What was going on? "Zane?"

"William is in danger and I cannot help him." With those words, the kingsblade had every last ounce of Tobias attention. The tiger faced him fully, eyes wide as Zane shook his head. "You are aware of the kingsblade trials?"

“Yes, I know how they’re conducted.” The prince shook his head. William, a kingsblade? What in the world could possess him to want such a role? “William would never wish to become one. Is he to be forced?”

“No. That is the problem; he signed on for the trials himself.” Zane folded his arms, though his eyes kept drifting past Tobias and to the door to the tiger’s room. Was he worried he had been followed? “Fredrick has taken a keen interest in this matter. You know how he hates my son.”

Ah. So that was the reason William was in danger. Tobias sighed and shrugged. “Then tell William to bow out of the trials. If he does not compete, Fredrick cannot use them to harm him.”

Zane’s eyes narrowed, and Tobias instantly got the sense that he knew less than he’d thought he did. “The trials were conducted today. He triumphed over all comers, as I hear.” Tobias nodded; that sure sounded like William. Zane however was only growing more animated by the minute. “And at the end when his defeated opponent was granted the position over him, he issued a challenge. Foolish and prideful and most unlike him.”

Tobias frowned. “What do I have to do with-”

“They are to kill him. The whispers are spreading quickly amongst the guardians, and faster still amongst kingsblades.” Zane’s ears flattened as he glowered down at Tobias. “I may be older now and well and truly out of the king’s favour, but I still have my supporters within the ranks. They told me of the plan to murder him; that he cannot be allowed to succeed for the humiliation it would inflict upon Fredrick.”

The tiger’s mind started to race. It was exactly the sort of thing that Fredrick would do. If he could manipulate a situation to eliminate a threat – or an irritation – then it was something he was glad to do. Of course, he was equally glad to simply take matters into his own paws and kill whomever happened to be in his way, but clearly he felt the need to do things differently in this particular case.

But why? It couldn’t simply be the leverage that William had held over Fredrick’s head so long ago. Fredrick was king; he could simply laugh off any such accusations from so many years ago. “Is William well regarded among the army?”

Zane’s face softened slightly. “He is. He is considered as good a leader of warriors as any, and an unorthodox but skilled warrior. His record speaks for itself, and even the watch hold him in high esteem for work he has done in their service. How else could he still stand for a kingsblade position with his... his heritage?”

The wolf’s eyes tightened and his tail tucked slightly at that word. The fact that William was even still within Ratholarin at all was a surprise to Tobias. He’d heard nothing of the hyena in years, and he would have thought that William would have fled the realm as the Carisi and other non-Ratholarin individuals were exiled. Maybe his bear was too strong a draw to allow him to leave. His heart twisted a little at the thought.

Still, Tobias turned back to the problem before him. “You are right that Fredrick would do anything in his power to harm William, but for him *not* to... Perhaps he fears that exiling or outright murdering such a loyal and decorated soldier would put the idea into the minds of

others that regardless of service, they are disposable to Fredrick? But if the challenge *accidentally* kills him, then Fredrick is presumably in the clear.” The tiger frowned. Underhanded and blunt. It was quite like his eldest brother. “You think Fredrick is that petty? That he would hold such a grudge for decades and *now* finally act on it?”

Once more Zane’s eyes narrowed. “I think we both know that your brother is *exactly* that petty. And that he absolutely would hold such a grudge.” Tobias stroked his chin as he nodded along. “And it is far more than that, my prince. It is a question of legacy.”

Tobias’ frown deepened. “Legacy?”

“Why else would he be so set on the expulsion of non-Ratholarin peoples?” Zane scoffed. “Fredrick has leaned hard into all of his father’s most extreme ideas. In his efforts to prove himself a stronger and more capable ruler, he has made the mistake of exerting his power all the more directly. The things that he has done and that he has yet to do – things that your father too wished to see done until I and others talked him out of it – are seen as Eric’s failures. Fredrick will not be so easily dissuaded by mere words.”

Tobias nodded along. That made sense. “Brett always had mother’s ear. Fredrick had father’s. He would have been privy to father’s deepest desires for the realm...” The tiger shuddered. Could his father have been so set on such horrific designs for Ratholarin? How many times had a gentler heart like Zane’s spared thousands of people those abominable edicts? “But you are a kingsblade. You have Fredrick’s ear now. Surely you-”

“I can do nothing.” Zane shook his head sadly. “He listens to those who support him alone, and my role is not to question. My duty binds me to you and Fredrick, not to my son or the people of this realm.” His muzzle twisted as he growled. “I know you have seen the trajectory of this kingdom, my prince. I know you disagree with what Fredrick is doing. I am not as learned a male as you, Tobias, but I trust what I see and hear. I see and hear *much* these days that disheartens and disgusts me.”

“And what you see and hear doubtless scare you as much as they do me.” Tobias chewed on his lip as he glanced at the curtains over his window. “You are wise and thoughtful, Zane. You always have been. I should have always known that you would see this all for what it is.” He shook his head as he glanced up at the kingsblade again. “But what can *I* do? You merely need to take one look at me to know that what power I have is... well, to call it limited would be an understatement.”

“But you are looked down on so much that you are not questioned. You can sneak out of the castle to a whorehouse without most anyone noticing because it is expected that you will slink off to tend to some matter or other.” Tobias’ frown deepened, but Zane shook his head. “I am not passing judgement. Merely observing and listening. In this case, it places you in far better stead to move about and see or do whatever it is you must. Your motions, secretive as they are, have purpose and are not questioned as mine would be. You can do what I cannot.” He paused as Zane leaned in a little closer. “If, that is, you are willing.”

“Willing to do *what*, Zane?” Tobias sighed as he spread his arms out wide. “What *can* I do? I’m as helpless in this as you. My only authority is over a vault of dusty books and crumbling scrolls. Ancient artifacts and tablets and...” He sighed. “I have nothing. I *am*

nothing. Even my role and my duties are just a glorified version of caretaking the archive. I cannot even command my supposed subordinates!”

“Yet you are intelligent and methodical both. You have a sharp mind and you always have been able to reason through much more than your brothers.” Zane looked past him again to the door. “I will not be able to shirk my duties for much longer, but I cannot simply allow this to happen to William. Fredrick is not half the ruler his father was, and I will be *damned* if I let my son suffer such an ignoble end at his paws.” He stood up tall and growled quietly to himself. “If you will not help, I will have to do it myself.”

Tobias sighed. Wisdom and intellect were not the same thing. For as wise as Zane often seemed to be, he was far more emotional than he often appeared. It cost him rational thought, and Tobias found himself wondering what, in that moment, the old kingsblade would be willing to do to protect the only family he truly had in all the world. “And do what? You have said it yourself: you have no recourse. Less power than even me, though that still feels... strange, to consider.”

The tiger sighed as the kingsblade watched him. Zane was right, though. Someone had to do something, and anything that Zane could do would probably be blunt, forceful, and carry significant consequence. If anyone could think up and implement a solution, Tobias was perhaps the only one. “I owe it to William, for all the mistakes I’ve made. For all the ways I hurt him. I can promise nothing, especially so late in the day as it already is... save that I try.”

When he looked up again and met the wolf’s stare, it was to a look of abject relief written clearly across the kingsblade’s greying face. Had he been so certain that Tobias wouldn’t or couldn’t help? “Go and do what it is that you need to do. I will... think of something, and call on you if I should require further aid.” He paused as Zane nodded. No matter what plan they were to enact, one thing was sure to be needed that the wolf could help with. “And... if you can, ensure that the secret passage from the larder to the stables is clear. I will no doubt need a swift exit at some point this evening.”

“Very good, my prince. Thank you.” He bowed deep, but the bow stalled out as Tobias stepped in toward him and wrapped his arms tightly around the wolf. Zane stammered for a second, before he sighed and relented. His arms fell around Tobias and squeezed the prince tight to him. “William is everything to me, but you are as dear to me as anyone. I know what I ask of you, and I am sorry to do it, but... do this thing for me and on my life, I will owe you a debt I can never repay.”

“Any debt you incur was paid years and years ago in your service to me and to my family.” Tobias’ ears burned with the wolf’s gratitude and warmth. He had been there Tobias’ whole life. He had been more present, oftentimes, than his own father. What might he have been, he wondered, if Zane had not been there? Might he have become just as monstrous as his brothers? Tobias shook his head to clear those thoughts and squeezed Zane tight before he let the kingsblade go. The wolf rose up again and brushed himself down. “You owe me nothing. Not ever. William owes me nothing, if not less. But let us not celebrate success before we know we have achieved it.” He nodded to the door. “Go and attend your duties. I promise that I will do what I can.”

Zane bowed again, but much more swiftly. Without another word he headed to the door, pulled it open, and exited Tobias chambers. The tiger watched him go even as the wheels began

to turn in his mind. What a problem. What a horrible circumstance. What an awful position for poor Zane to be put into.

And yet sympathy for the wolf and for William wouldn't save the hyena's life. Tobias marched back over to his desk and unceremoniously set the histories of a foreign dynasty far aside. The matters of the Institute were of considerably less interest to Tobias than...

He stopped. Turned back to the book. Reached out a paw and slid it slowly back in front of him again. Fingers tapped slowly against the cover of the book. The Institute had collected a *lot* of information over the years since Fredrick's creation of it. Over those years, Tobias had seen much. Catalogued more. Memories of thankless, dreary days of tagging tablets and vessels and tomes and scrolls rushed back into him. So many minor trinkets, and so few of them even remotely of interest to Fredrick's secret quest for magic.

But still of interest to Tobias. He glanced back at his door for a second. Time would be short. Even if he could find what he was looking for, if it even was where he thought it would be, there was no way he could complete the plan alone. He needed an ally. He needed someone who would finish what he started. Someone who would do *anything* in order to keep William safe, and that someone clearly could not be William's father. Zane was too trapped. The prince needed someone else.

The wheels in Tobias' head continued to turn. That wouldn't be a problem to solve; there was just such a person in mind who would no doubt serve as the perfect compatriot in his endeavour. Tobias even knew exactly where to find him; Brett had made such things ever so simple.

None of that would matter, however, if he could not secure what he needed from the Institute. Tobias turned from the door to his closet and all but threw it open. He pulled from it a simple black cloak and closed it back up again. The prince fastened it about his shoulders with a nod and made his way back to his desk. First, he had to pen a missive for urgent delivery. Then, to the Institute to find what he needed. And then, finally, a plea for help. Many variables. Many points of failure. So many ways that anything and everything could go wrong.

Tobias could only hope that fortune might, even if just for one night, favour him.

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The passage from the larder to the stables was one of the least well known of the secret pathways in the castle. From what Tobias had learned from his time with the Institute, it had come from a time when the stables had not been within the castle grounds. It instead was an old evacuation tunnel that had fallen into disuse as the castle had expended its holdings into the city that was growing around it. The side passage that led to it from a more modern evacuation tunnel was so difficult to see if one was leaving the castle that it might have gone completely undiscovered.

Completely undiscovered, until Tobias and William had uncovered it playing together.

The prince crouched down low as he held up a small torch. Fingers brushed across the grimy stone walls near the ground to reveal scratches in its surface. They had been William's first crude attempt to write his name in the Rathin script. Tobias' name rested just below it in

much more clean lettering. The tiger sighed as his fingers came back damp. The rains that were blowing in that night were clearly seeping into the tunnels.

Footsteps reached his ears, and Tobias frowned as he turned toward them. The figure that approached had a torch of their own, but the light was held so high that the hooded figure's face wasn't visible. For a moment, Tobias thought that it could have been an assassin of some sort, looking either for him or a way into the castle. As his eyes focused on the figure's size and general shape however, he allowed himself to relax. "Thank you for seeing me."

They turned their head to regard the tunnels, and as the torch was lowered Tobias could finally see the face of Daniel, son of Amos. William's husband... at least he would be, if their bonding hadn't been annulled by royal decree. "Shoulda known. Ain't no way Fredrick or Brett would've set up a meet down here. Too prissy t'get their feet muddy." He peeled back his hood and scowled at Tobias. "Now. What in the dead gods do *you* want? And make it quick; I ain't havin' a good day."

Tobias blinked as he stood and turned toward the bear. He'd seen Daniel in a foul mood, but this was... new. The guardian was unsteady on his feet and, as he drew closer, Tobias sniffed at the air. Alcohol. He had been drinking; just how badly was he doing? "I'm... sorry you're having a bad day? I don't suspect anything that I am about to say is going to make it much worse."

When Daniel waved his paw in a slow circle, Tobias frowned. He also wasn't usually rude without good cause. "You're a guardian. You've got to have heard what the word is about William."

"Yep." Again Tobias blinked. He'd not been prepared for a single word response. He knew? He knew, and he had decided to drink himself into a stupor? It was William. It had to be something to do with William. Nothing else would cut the bear so deep.

Still, a drunk and irate Daniel was better than no Daniel at all. "I'm now all the more surprised that you are here, meeting with me and not out there with him."

"My bein' 'out there with him' would be in violation of your dear brother's edicts." The bear folded his arms, and Tobias' gaze drifted down to his left paw. The bear's rings were gone. He fought to contain his surprise and dragged his gaze back up to Daniel's face as the bear belched loudly enough to echo all the way down the tunnel. "Whatcha want, Tobias? Jus' say it."

The tiger sighed. He didn't have time for this. "I want to save him."

"Yeah? Well, he don't wanna be saved, so you and y' gods-damned whole *ruttin'* line can burn for all I care." He shook his head and glared absolute daggers at Tobias. "He *wants* this for some damn reason. If there ain't nothin' I can do to talk him down, whatcha think *you're* gonna do?"

Tobias' heart sank as it all fell into place. Of course. The drink, the anger, the naked and absolute hatred of Tobias and his whole family... Daniel had tried to stop William, and William had pushed forward anyway. A shudder ran through the prince as he thanked whatever forces governed the universe that he hadn't been present for that confrontation. "I cannot even

imagine a single reason why he would do what he's doing. But that doesn't matter. I do not mean to talk him out of it in order to save him."

Daniel just groaned and dragged his fingers down his face. "Of *all* the people in this damn city, *you* wanna help him. Ain't that somethin' now?" He looked up over his claws at the confused and frustrated tiger. "An' where were you all those other times he needed you? Where were you all those times you could've helped? Huh?"

"Not there. Never there. Yes, thank you; I was a terrible friend to him and I am well aware of the fact." He glared back at Daniel and clasped his paws behind his back. "If you've something you need to get off your chest, please. By all means. Speak your piece, if you can get some words out around the stink of beer."

The bear's response came as a snarl and a slow stalk forward until he stood over Tobias. "You best watch y' words right careful now, *my prince*. I ain't got nothin' left to play nice for."

Tobias met his glare evenly. "Good. Neither do I."

Daniel's expression turned suspicious. He leaned against the wall as he looked Tobias up and down. "Oh yeah? An' what's that mean, then?"

"That I am utterly and completely revolted by the actions of my brothers, and I am sick and tired of playing their game their way." He shook his head as Daniel leaned in closer, as much to try and clear the air of the stink of alcohol than anything else. "They are making the rules and doing unspeakable things with the power that is their birthright." He tilted his head up. "Certainly you must see that Fredrick's crusade against every tailraiser and tailtucker in the kingdom alone is a threat to me. Why would I not fight?"

"And there it is." He all but spat in Tobias face as he leaned back again. "Now that it *finally* affects you, you're willin' to take a stand. How noble you are, Prince Tobias."

Tobias sighed. He wasn't wrong, and that was a problem. He had ample reason to hate the tiger, and more legitimately than the usual suspects. "Perhaps we can move on from my personal deficiencies for a moment and address William? Time is short if we are to save him."

The bear snorted. "Save him for what? For Fredrick to call him up as kingsblade and stab him in the neck jus' 'cause he can? Or maybe for the chance for Fredrick to order him to do some awful thing in his name." Daniel shook his head again. "You wanna save him so Fredrick can order him to gut *you*?"

"I... have to believe that he would not carry out that order. That his conscience is stronger." Again Daniel scoffed at him, and Tobias felt despair tickle at the edges of his heart. Whatever had gone on between them, presumably that very night, had clearly done the bear some serious damage. In other circumstances, Tobias might have sympathised with him. Right then though, he had to convince Daniel that it wasn't a lost cause. The bear had plainly given up. "Goodness all, what's the *matter* with you? Don't you want to help him?"

The words were the wrong ones for the moment. It became painfully obvious when Daniel's paw closed around Tobias' throat a split second later. It lifted, raising the tiger effortlessly from the ground to pin him to the damp stone wall at his back. Air caught in the tiger's neck, unable to flow. He gasped, scrabbling with frantic fingertips at the bear's arm as

Daniel's voice instantly lost its slur and darkened *deep*. "Don't. Don't you dare speak to me about helping William. Not now. Not ever."

Tobias held his claws back even as his vision started to tunnel. His muzzle gaped uselessly, tongue left to loll out as he watched Daniel casually, effortlessly choking the life from him. Fear and instinct took hold, but no matter how he tugged and struggled he wasn't able to break that strong grip. Instinct won out. Claws dug in and pierced the bear's flesh. Either he was too drunk or too angry to care; they did nothing. Tobias' eyes started to roll back.

That, finally, was the moment Daniel let him go.

He hit the ground and immediately began to heave. He sucked in air so hard that he almost threw up, launching into a fit of coughs as Daniel stepped back from him again. He could see the bear tear a strip off of his cloak to wrap around his bloody forearm; of course a warrior of his experience would know just what was necessary at that moment, even drunk. "If you value your life, you'll pick your next words *real* careful."

He wasn't wrong. As Tobias gasped and wheezed on the muddy ground in a tunnel next to no one in the realm knew about, Daniel could do it. He could kill the prince right there and then and no one would find him. Brett probably wouldn't even care; Fredrick *definitely* wouldn't. He had to do exactly as the bear said and choose his words carefully, or it wouldn't be only William's life he had to worry about.

And yet, as he struggled to get his breathing under control while Daniel stared balefully down at him, a calm and restrained response wasn't going to penetrate the drunken, angry haze of the bear's mind. If he was gentle with Daniel, then he wouldn't get the help he needed. If he played with honeyed words or tried coy manipulation, the warrior would see right through him. And so, with one last cough and rub to his throat, Tobias forced himself back to his feet and looked Daniel in the eye. "I was wrong about you."

"And how's that, then? Moreover, why do I give a damn what *you* think of *me*?" Daniel's eyes rolled.

Tobias wasn't dead yet, so he cleared his throat and decided to just go for it. "I hurt William. Abandoned him when he needed me. I failed to believe in him and I lost him for my troubles." He shook his head as the bear nodded along, and then growled low and deep in his face. "I thought you were better than me. I was wrong. You *are* me."

Indignant rage flashed to life in Daniel's eyes, but he didn't move. Tobias pointed a finger up at him as he bared his teeth with every word. "When it was hard, I left him. Cut him out. Hurt him. And yeah, it hurt me to stand beside him, but those were the best times of my life. I don't doubt you can say the same." He spit on the ground, right between the bear's boots. "I was weak. Short-sighted. Foolish and pathetic. And if you turn around and cast him aside when he needs you most, then you are *exactly* as weak, short-sighted, foolish and pathetic as I am." His eyes narrowed as Daniel snarled back at him. "And you'll *deserve* it... just as I did."

"I don't have to stand here and be judged by *you*, after all you've--"

"You're doing the same damn thing!" Tobias tilted his head up, exposing his neck as Daniel stepped forward again. "Go ahead. Rip my throat out if you don't like it, but it won't change the truth. I abandoned him when it was hard. You're doing the same thing."

Daniel lowered his head until his nose and Tobias' almost touched. The bear's growl just about rattled the bones in Tobias' jaw. "So that's it, huh? It's just so hard; too hard for me to stand beside him?" He snorted once, and Tobias coughed as the stench of beer and bear breath washed over him. "He's fixin' to get himself killed. He's gonna go out there tomorrow and he's gonna be murdered, and even if he *don't* die tomorrow, there's always the next day. Or the next. Fredrick ain't gonna stop tryin' to off him." He glared down at Tobias from above, but the tiger held his stare. "So could you do that, pretty little prince? Could you stand there, at his side, and watch him kill himself?"

Tobias' eyes flicked between both of Daniel's. They were so close that they betrayed everything. It wasn't anger that was there; that was just a front for everything else. He was *afraid*. Hurt, and broken, and himself feeling betrayed. The two were more alike than the tiger had ever imagined. "I know the cost of walking away from him. So now? Yes. Yes, I could stand there. At his side, and watch him do something that might kill him. At his side, so that I could do *anything* in my power to save him." He reached out, his paws surprisingly still as he gently took the bear's head in his grasp.

Daniel all but sank into those paws as his eyes shimmered once more. Tobias shook his head. "I know you are scared. I'm scared too. And, even if he's not going to show it, William has to be. He's too smart to not be scared. But he needs help, and not you nor I can do it alone."

The bear's eyes closed. Wetness tickled the tips of Tobias' fingers Daniel's tears began to spill down his cheeks. "I wanted him to run... to jus' leave with me. But he thinks that he could... I dunno. Help people. Make 'em see him."

"And he might well be able to, but not if he has no one to stand beside him." Tobias brushed those tears aside. It was almost absurd, after all of their previous times together to find himself comforting the massive warrior. The days of his jealousy were long since past. Now they merely had something in common; someone in common that they wished to protect. And if it could be used to undermine Fredrick in the end, that was so much the better.

Daniel pulled away and swiped the back of one of his massive paws across his face. He rubbed at his eyes, clearing them of his tears as Tobias stepped back from him again. It was all up to him now, really. Either he'd listen and help... or he'd make the same mistake that Tobias had all those years ago. Much more was on the line in that decision than in Tobias' and he could only hope that the bear was wiser even in his alcohol-fuelled despair than the prince had been.

When the bear's paw fell away again, it was to two new eyes. The spark that had been absent since he'd arrived to the meeting was gone. The furrow to his brow wasn't born of irritation or anger, but fresh, new determination. The stare he fixed Tobias with wasn't murderous. It was positively *driven*. "You're right. I hate to say it, but you're *ruttin'* right. First time for everythin' I guess." He drew himself up slowly. It was like seeing a person rebuilt from scratch; reformed from the ashes of their own immolation. "What do you need me to do?"

Tobias' lower lip curled. Convincing Daniel to help was the easy part. He reached into his cloak for the hidden pocket sewn in there. Fingertips brushed along glass and he sighed. The tiger had no right to ask it of anyone, and least of all William's bonded. But there was no time, and there was certainly no choice. Tobias steeled himself and grasped the glass vessel tighter. Pulled it free, and offered it to the bear. "Oh... nothing too serious."

“We are just going to commit treason.”