

Interwoven

NECESSITY: PART FIVE

81st Day of the Verdant Growths, 27 AoE

The hardest part of the scheme had been that Tobias himself was ignorant of the outcome. He had confidence in William, of course; the tiger had seen him fight and knew his skills could only have grown in the years since they'd last seen one another.

But the odds were still against the hyena, and all he had been able to accomplish was to give William a fighting chance. He had been left in the castle, unable to attend the trial as Fredrick and Brett had. Left to pace in the library, pretending idly to seek out specific tomes of ancient lore that Mattias could add to his rewriting and banning efforts, Tobias wasted minute after minute, hour after hour.

It could have failed at so many points, this ploy he'd concocted. Daniel might have been caught. Or been unable to apply the poison correctly. Or William might have armed himself differently. Or it might not have worked. Or it might have worked, but the odds were too dire for even William to survive them. Or Fredrick might have altered the parameters of the challenge to make it utterly impossible. And so Tobias paced, and paced, and paced. After a while, he didn't even bother pretending to look for books anymore.

The sound of footsteps reached Tobias' ears, hurried and too heavy to be a scholar. He turned to the end of the shelf he stood before and peered around it to see Zane making his way over at a brisk pace. The kingsblade's expression was as unreadable as ever, and Tobias felt his insides freeze. No! Had it not been enough? Had he-

Zane's arms closed around Tobias and squeezed him tightly.

The prince gasped in surprise, smothered as he was by the wolf's embrace. A moment's hope bloomed in his chest at the hug, and he brought his arms up to return it. It was good news. Surely it was good news, right?

When the kingsblade withdrew, his stoicism was completely gone. His smile was broad and dumb, and the wolf's tail even wagged vigorously behind him as he stared down at Tobias. "I do not know what role you had to play in this, my prince, but I owe you everything." His voice was little more than a whisper.

Relief flooded through Tobias and he sagged forward with a sigh. William had done it! "He passed the trial."

"I have seen him fight better; fatigue clearly afflicted him." Zane shook his head, but his smile didn't flag in the least. "The blows he struck were utterly debilitating. No-one should have cast down his opponents so quickly as he did, but... I presume I have you to thank for the method."

Tobias closed his eyes and nodded. His ears perked and twitched, listening for anyone else who might be in earshot. "You don't have to thank me. You'd best not, too; if Fredrick finds out what we did, he'll have our heads."

The wolf nodded as his tail started to slow. "He was most displeased, but a great many of the people of Sanwell heard of the challenge. The way they cheered for William was a beautiful thing." His eyes closed for a moment, as if remembering and reliving the moment. Tobias found himself jealous again that he couldn't have been there as Zane continued. "As far as I understand it, the guardian that had been assigned to fight in one of the challengers' stead has already been stripped of his position in dishonour for failing to kill him." Zane's smile turned icy. "I find myself unsympathetic."

"As do I." Tobias frowned. All that he had done, and Fredrick had still thrown a difficult element into the fight. The tiger hadn't considered such a well-armoured foe. Nothing he and Daniel could have done would have helped William to dispatch a guardian. That he'd done that alone was proof of his skill. "I am glad that this has worked out. Where is Fredrick now?"

At that, the wolf's smile faded entirely. His tail slowed, then stilled. "That is why I wished to find you immediately. He is looking for you even now. I'm to bring you to him as soon as I find you." He paused as Tobias scowled. "Out of the public eye now, I suspect his rage will be much more brazen."

Tobias sighed. That, too, was typical of Fredrick. "Indeed. He will not play games with me now." The tiger brushed down his robes and straightened up. "Where is he?"

"On his way here, doubtless." Zane stepped to the side and waved toward the library's entrance. "This will go much smoother if we meet him ourselves, but I... needed to find you first. To express the gratitude he will not permit." The ghost of his smile flitted across his muzzle. "My life is yours, my prince. Nothing means more to me than my son's well-being, and for whatever role you have played in saving him from this plot, I am forever in your debt."

"You don't owe me a thing, Zane. You never have." He reached up to gently pat the wolf's arm as he passed by toward the entrance. "I just wish I could have seen it. Not only the humiliation, but the victory. I have been worried in here all morning, wondering what news I would receive."

Zane nodded as he followed along beside. "Fredrick made his feelings clear. Brett, as the head of the Guardians, was to be there. You, being little more than a scholar in his eyes, were not necessary." He paused as Tobias held the door open for him, and nodded as he stepped into the corridor. "Though I suspect it to be more than that. That he wished you to suffer in ignorance."

"That I certainly did, until you found me." Tobias couldn't help but smile. It had worked. They'd done it, the four of them. Zane had warned him, Tobias had hatched the plan, Daniel had executed it, and William had followed through. Presumably Daniel had said nothing to the hyena as they had agreed, and if so there was no trail that would lead back to any of them.

"You were not the only one, and perhaps you had the better fate. I had to stand at Fredrick's side as it all happened." The wolf sighed as they rounded a corner and made for the main hall. "Knowing his plans, and that I could do nothing to interfere... that I could only

watch was torturous. I wonder if that is why he insisted that I be there. Either to punish William further by making me watch his death, or to punish me for supporting him all these years.”

Tobias sighed. Either was likely. “Both, if I had to guess.” He opened his muzzle to speak again, but the march of several armoured figures toward them down the hall stalled him out. He fell still as, between them with rage in his eyes, was Fredrick. “Oh. You were right. He looks quite angry.”

“I did warn you.” Zane stepped to the side as one of the servants in the path of the king and his guards was unceremoniously shoved against the wall to make room for him. The wolf bowed his head and closed his eyes as he lifted his voice. “Your brother, fetched as you have ordered, my liege.”

“Yes, I *do* have eyes of my own, Zane. Stay where you are.” Fredrick all but roared the words down the hallway, and Tobias winced even as the kingsblade stiffened. One of the king’s arms lifted and he pointed a single finger toward him. “And *you!*”

The prince tilted his head up and frowned. The soldiers to either side of Fredrick fell short of him, but Fredrick kept moving. He strode right up to Tobias until he had almost run into his brother, whereby he grabbed the smaller tiger by the shoulders. He hoisted one leg up to drive his knee deep into Tobias’ stomach before he could say or do anything further.

Tobias gasped as the wind rushed out of him. His eyes watered as he doubled over, pain surging through his gut under the blow as Fredrick held him up. “Did you think I wouldn’t know, Tobias? Did you think me so simple; so *stupid* that I would be unaware of your betrayal?”

The younger tiger simply wheezed, but pain trumped panic in that moment. Fredrick knew? How? How in the world could he have known? He opened his muzzle to speak, but only a grunt came out as Fredrick cast him back into the wall and pinned him there. “Confess it now, brother, and I will ensure you are treated far more gently than you deserve!”

He couldn’t even if he wanted to. His mind sharpened through the pain as he wracked it for what could have gone wrong. Fredrick was angry, yes, but how? If he had come straight from the challenge, he wouldn’t have had time to investigate what had been done. As he gaped wordlessly at Fredrick’s infuriated face, the truth was clear. He was lashing out because he knew something was wrong.

Fredrick knew it... but he couldn’t *prove* it.

Yet.

That meant Tobias wasn’t out of danger, but it bought him time. Time was something he could work with. He let his gaze wander, drifting down one end of the hall and then the next. He briefly looked up at Zane, but the wolf was standing there obediently with his head down. That was his way: total loyalty to the crown, and whosoever’s head it rested on. He wouldn’t break his oath to step in, however he might have sworn his life to the prince. Tobias would have to save himself. “I... I don’t...”

Fredrick’s claws poked in through his brother’s robes, grazing his shoulders as Tobias tried to force air back into his lungs. Time. If he could save himself, he’d have time to further protect himself. One salvation at a time, it seemed. “I don’t know... what you mean.”

The king's grip tightened, but his claws didn't slide further out. Instead, he pulled Tobias from the wall and slammed him into it again. The younger tiger grunted once more in pain as his head rolled back and impacted the stone with more force than Tobias would have liked. "Your little tailraiser friend won his challenge! He faced six of the best warriors in the entire realm and beat them all! Even a guardian, in full armour!" Once more he slammed Tobias into the wall. "It is impossible! How could he do this? You will tell me now!"

"My king." Zane's head was still bowed, but he took a single step forward to bring him to Fredrick's side. "I have watched William grow in skill during his time with our army. His skills won the day true, and he—"

The paw that Fredrick backhanded Zane across the muzzle with was curled into a fist, and the kingsblade's head snapped to the side under the force of the blow. Tobias' eyes went wide as he watched it happen, frozen in place. Fredrick had said a lot of things, but to strike Zane was an exceedingly rare occurrence. What was more, the blow had been a vicious one judging by the way the wolf had staggered in the wake of it.

And yet Zane simply brought his head forward again and bowed it low. Blood drooled from his muzzle to stain the floor, and he stepped back against the wall. "Apologies, my liege."

"Speak out of turn again and it'll be my blade instead of my fist." Fredrick didn't take his eyes off Tobias the whole time, and he brought his blooded fist back up to waggle a finger at his brother's face. "You are playing a dangerous game here, Tobias. Do you doubt that I would bring down my full wrath on my brother?"

Tobias took a second to clear his throat. He looked up at Zane again, and his heart lurched for the kingsblade. How he could stand to serve that despicable male before him was beyond Tobias. "Not in the least."

Fredrick's muzzle curled. "Good. Now, you will tell me by what means you helped William defeat his opponents."

"I cannot, because I did not help William defeat his opponents." Tobias lifted his head again and patted the shoulder Fredrick wasn't squeezing anymore. "You go ahead and hurt me as much as you like. It won't change the truth."

The king scoffed at him as Tobias felt those claws graze his flesh again. "You expect me to believe that? That you had absolutely nothing to do with his victory?"

That, Tobias realised, was quite a bit harder to cast doubt on. "You can believe what you want, Fredrick. You can also check in with several people. I was assigned study for the Institute last night. Davan will confirm it. Siema and Zane both are aware that I was studying in my quarters. Marvia will attest that I was in the library all morning." He glared at Fredrick as a thought struck him. The Institute! He could use it against his brother at last. "But I'll give you this. I am *glad* William beat your champions. I'm *very* glad that you have to laud him before the rest of the kingsblades. And to see how angry you are now is *most* gladdening of all."

Fredrick snarled. "If you intend to anger me further, you are succeeding."

"I don't care how angry you are." Tobias leaned forward and shook his head. "If I was able to do anything, it would have been *magic*." The snarl on Fredrick's face vanished in an

instant, and Tobias knew he had him. “I invite you to speak with Davan, Mattias and Orlin at your earliest convenience. Have them make sure that I have not tampered with any of your precious-”

“Enough.” Fredrick released Tobias shoulder before he could speak another word, and he gasped with relief as he slumped against the wall. Of course; the nervous darting of Fredrick’s eyes at his soldiers gave it away. Only the Institute’s leadership knew about his hopes to harness magic. Clearly the Ratholarin people’s aversion to magic still instilled a little fear in him; if it got out that he was looking to use it, they would not be pleased. “That is enough, Tobias.”

“Is it, Fredrick? I’m not certain that it is.” He narrowed his eyes. Logic told him to quit while he was ahead, but his stomach still churned with hurt and anger that would not be denied. “You come here with such an accusation against me. Why not play it out? Let us *all* go down to the vault and we can-”

“No. You will be silent.” Fredrick’s voice wasn’t cowed, but he was certainly quieter than he had been. The rage still burned in his eyes though as he looked back at Zane for a moment. “I will investigate this matter personally. You will not be given any quarter if I discover that you did have something to do with his victory, mark my words.”

Tobias held his gaze, which seemed to only anger him all the more. He was not the weak, mewling kitten that he once had been, and he had *won* this day. First William, now him. It took everything in Tobias to keep his smile even and small. “Then I may relax. Thank you, my king.” He bowed his head but kept his eyes locked on Fredrick’s. “Is there anything else I may help you with?”

Fredrick didn’t answer. He turned on a foot and started back the way he had come. The guards that had accompanied him did likewise a moment later, hurrying to keep up with their king. Tobias watched them go with held breath. That had been close, but there was nothing that would stop Fredrick from turning back around and beating him harder.

It wasn’t until a few moments after the angry footsteps of his brother had faded from hearing that Tobias slumped back against the wall and heaved a deep sigh that sent a wave of pain through his stomach. He was safe, for at least the moment. A glance up showed that he wasn’t the only person still feeling the weight of Fredrick’s rage. Zane’s muzzle had been gashed by his own teeth when he was struck, and blood continued to trickle from his muzzle to the floor.

As Tobias watched, Zane’s head slowly began to lift. His eyes were fixed on the hall that Fredrick had left by, and a throaty growl rumbled his bloody muzzle. Tobias stepped forward and pressed a paw to Zane’s chest. “I’m sorry.”

He didn’t turn back to face the prince. “I am the one who should be sorry. I did not defend you as I should have.”

“Any more defense and Fredrick might have simply killed you. Or me. Or both of us.” Tobias patted the wolf’s chest and Zane finally met his eyes. “You bear his abuse better than I do. You shouldn’t have to. No one should have to.” He paused as Zane closed his eyes. “He is not fit to be king.”

The kingsblade's eyes snapped back open again. "You cannot say that."

Tobias frowned. "And yet I just did."

"I am duty-bound to report any such whispers of dissent to him." Zane shook his head and brushed Tobias' paw from him. His tail had even tucked slightly; was he afraid of even *hearing* a word spoken against his liege? "Once may be disregarded as something I misheard... but speak it again and I will have no choice."

"What do I care? He's already well aware I don't support what he's doing, or him. He knows how I feel. It's why he so enjoys keeping me under his thumb." Tobias shook his head. "It's truth, Zane. He is not fit to rule."

"And even were that so, this is not the place to discuss such things." The kingsblade's gaze shot up and down the hall. Tobias followed it, but no one seemed to be in earshot; the king's violent outburst seemed to have scared everyone from the area. He didn't blame them. "Even were I lax in my duties to report such a thing, there are others who would be more than happy to do so in my stead."

That was true. Tobias sighed and rubbed at his belly. "You're right, of course. He's got the high-born all tied up in his madness; more and more sycophants arrive every day to pander to his worst ideas and impulses." He growled as he folded his arms. "Lady Valeri *praised* his efforts in purging the Carisi just yesterday, and begged his help for similar purges within her territory. You should have seen how easily she had him wrapped around her fingers, just by agreeing with every horrible thing he said."

Zane said nothing. Again he tossed a cautious glance around. Tobias wasn't worried; there was nothing save for murder that Fredrick could do to him, and such a thing would surely raise too many questions. At least it would raise too many questions right then and there; if he had time to consolidate his mechanisms of misinformation and control, then soon he might be able to spill Tobias' blood in the dining hall in front of the nobles of Ratholarin and not a one of them would speak out against his actions. Time wasn't Tobias' ally exclusively.

"High-borns chase power and wealth like a lech chases the female." Zane shook his head as Tobias looked back up at him. Apparently speaking of nobles didn't qualify as speaking out against Fredrick, even if they were his supporters. "Valeri's line contains blood Carisi, Lenkis and Skiri; the latter moreso even than Ratholarin. I suspect if Fredrick knew, he would have cast her out as well. She acts against her own interest in the hope of furthering her power. Ambition is a fickle beast, and it will turn back on her one day and bite."

"So I hope." Tobias sighed. "I just wish that something could be done. Something that would make Fredrick just... *stop*. Just for a while; just to consider what he's doing."

"Do not doubt his considerations, my prince. Doubt only the conclusions drawn." The kingsblade looked up again as a servant peeked out of a side room, looking about for any sign of trouble before the mouse stepped fully into the corridor and hurried on her way. "But for now, we had best discontinue this conversation. You need not give his majesty a chance to think you are a traitor. He doesn't need that sort of power over you."

That Tobias was already one in a manner of speaking was not lost on the tiger, but he nodded anyway. Zane was right. Someone would gladly report him to Fredrick, if only to try

and win a little favour over the king. Some accusations had already flown among the servants of the castle early on, as they sold one another out for a chance to be treated better by the new king. They had soon learned that such things brought misery down on them all.

He nodded finally to the wolf. "Perhaps this is a conversation we can continue later, in private. I ought to return to my work." He paused as Zane nodded. He wanted to keep the kingsblade close; as long as he was nearby, Tobias always felt a little safer. While the confrontation he'd just had with Fredrick showed the limits of Zane's abilities, that didn't change how reassuring just having him near would be. But alas, his work was for the Institute. Zane was not allowed. "I need to spend some more time in the library, before I head back to meet with the Triumvirate. Would you mind...?"

"I would not." Zane nodded once as he wiped the back of his paw across his muzzle. The fur came back red, but at least he wasn't dripping across the floor anymore. "Lead on, my prince."

Tobias nodded his thanks and turned back toward the library. His gait was slower than it had been on the way out. Where before he'd been eager to get his meeting with Fredrick out of the way, now he dreaded once again being away from the wolf. Especially if he needed to be around Davan; the horse's almost violent contempt for Tobias made him miss Zane's presence all the more.

At the least though, it looked like they had gotten away with it. William was alive, and victorious moreover. It might have taken theft, treason, and volumes upon volumes of deception to pull off, but Fredrick wasn't completely wise to the plan. That he'd known something was wrong was something that he would have been convinced of no matter what happened as long as William pulled through. His accusations were baseless, at least from where he stood. Tobias could take a moment and ensure that he continued to think that, if he was wise and quick enough.

The prince allowed himself a quiet sigh. One crisis averted, albeit not in totality. On, he supposed, to the next.

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The time that Tobias ultimately still had to spend in the library was minimal. The reference he sought was swiftly found once he no longer had to worry about William being killed in a staged challenge, and that had unfortunately also had the side effect of ending his time with Zane. The wolf had been left at the entrance to the Institute while Tobias had ventured inside.

Behind the desk at the end of the lobby sat the same canine that seemed to always, at every hour of every day, be there. Never once had he learned their name, or even their gender, and he found himself confused and intrigued all over again by their presence. As he clutched a book to his chest, he made his way to the desk and nodded. "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, my prince." The dog's voice, like everything else, gave away no hint of their identity. "How may I assist you today?"

Tobias held up the book. "Something for Davan. Is he inside the vault?"

The dog shook their head. "He is not."

A frown touched Tobias' brow. Davan was usually present in the afternoon, Mattias in the evening and Orlin during the night. For the horse to have gone missing was a rare thing indeed. "Is there *anyone* in the vault? Any of the Triumvirate?"

"Not to my knowledge." The dog folded their paws on top of the desk. "You are welcome to wait, if you would like."

"Absolutely not. I have work to attend to, and I will see to it. Thank you." Tobias bowed his head lightly to the dog, who frowned and stared back at him as he made his way over to the shelf with the concealed passage.

Before he could activate the mechanism to open it, he heard the sound of a chair's legs scraping against the floor. He turned to see the dog rise from behind the desk. "On Davan's orders, none are to access the vault while he is not present."

The prince sighed. Of course he had. Perhaps the horse had suspected Tobias of trying to access materials and information beyond his station; maybe Fredrick *did* fear that Tobias had taken on some of 'his' magic. "I see. Let me ask you something." He turned and stared into the dog's eyes as they nodded. "Is Davan in charge of the vault?"

"He has the authority of the Triumvirate, yes." The dog nodded, and held Tobias' stare.

"And do the other members of the Triumvirate have the authority to issue their own orders? Or are they simply to stand here and wait, engaging you in pleasant but idle conversation until Davan and Davan alone comes along to let them in?" Tobias perked an eyebrow.

The dog didn't seem to be too perturbed. "Of course members of the Triumvirate are exempt from such things."

"Of course." Tobias folded his arms, book clutched tight against his chest once more. "And who am I to them? Am I not the Scholar, the overseer of the Triumvirate and the Ratholarin Institute?"

That made the dog turn to look at the shelves. "Davan specifically said you were not to enter without him."

Tobias sighed. "And do you not see me enter it other times when other members of the Triumvirate are present? Times when he is *not* here?" As the dog frowned, Tobias shook his head. "I just need to bring this here and do some research on some recent scrolls that were found. It was on Davan's *own* instruction, and there is no way Davan will not be by shortly. I will not be idle within long enough to cause any trouble, but I *will* be idle long enough to draw his ire, and the ire of our king, if I do not get to work."

Once more the dog looked back and forth between Tobias and the shelf, but they did slowly sink back down into their chair that time as the prince's word took root. "Very well. I will inform Davan when he returns that you are below." They shook their head. "But you should reconsider. He will not be pleased."

The tiger rolled his eyes and sighed. "Yes, and I would be *very* worried about that if he were ever anything *but* displeased with me." He blinked with confusion as the dog's expression broke for the first time that he could remember, and a slight smile touched his muzzle.

Evidently no matter how loyal he was to the cause or the crown or the Institute, the dog found Davan at least a little unpalatable. Tobias nodded to them and turned back to the shelf. In a moment he'd identified the hidden button and tapped it with a claw.

The trip down into the vault was the same as it ever was. He cranked the mechanism again to ensure that anyone who might followed him down had access, and quickly descended. As long as there was no one in there, he had a chance to actually investigate unimpeded. After all, Fredrick was on the warpath. He wanted to find some evidence that Tobias – or indeed *anyone* – had done something to help William win his challenge. He would check the Institute eventually, and Tobias had to make sure nothing was out of place.

To that end, he hurried quickly around the fifteen-walled room, passing by rack upon rack of artifacts assigned to different old gods before he finally, at long last rounded Prosta's segment and entered the part of the room dedicated to Lemeos. There, Tobias gently set down the book he'd brought along beside a rack of stopped glass vials and sighed with relief. They were all accounted for. All in their place.

He didn't know why the vials had been assigned to Lemeos, of all the gods. What they had to do with a god of war, cunning and strategy was beyond Tobias, and it seemed the Triumvirate were pleased as anything to keep him as in the dark about their research as possible. It had been a miracle that Tobias had stumbled across the poisons when he had first beginning work in the vault, and yet another when he'd recalled them at his moment of need. Perhaps, he reasoned, Lemeos was at work through him. Conjuring a strategy, cunningly swiping a couple of the numerous debilitants from the rack, and ensuring William's victory in battle? If the old gods were real entities who did indeed continue to exist in spite of all Ratholarin propaganda, was Lemeos pleased?

It was the work of moments alone to double-check two of the vials in particular. The particular poisons that he had siphoned while Orlin had been distracted with a fascinating artifact of significance to the night god Vicaris looked entirely undisturbed where they sat next to their fellows. He breathed a deep sigh of relief. If anyone had come looking for them, they would have noticed them and all the other poisons present and accounted for. Tobias had seen the logs for the artifacts kept there; they were lacking in their records of volume. This had been fortunate, given that stealing the means to brew the poison would have taken too long. Extracting the liquids without damaging the vials had been harder than getting them out.

Thankfully, no one seemed to have noticed. No one seemed to have discovered his deception. Fredrick could stomp and spit and scream all he liked; the king lacked the nuanced understanding and the Institute lacked the specific bookkeeping to track the theft of a small volume of liquid. And a small amount had indeed been all that Tobias needed; if what Zane had said was right, then the text that had said that even a drop applied to the blade of a weapon would have caused the muscles of a target struck to seize had been quite accurate. The 'debilitation' he mentioned must have been the effects of the poison. Daniel had done his job well. Tobias had, too.

Picking up the book again, Tobias sighed with relief and made his way down to the heart of the vault and the work tables there. He wasn't done, of course. Fredrick's hairs were up and there was no way he was about to let Tobias off the hook if he believed truly that the prince had something to do with William's protection. That was a problem that he could attend

to at a later time, however, and as it became an issue. There was no use worrying about the future when it would arrive in its own way soon enough.

As he passed by Davan's work table though, script caught his eye. He paused for a moment as he turned to take in the scraps of parchment that adorned the horse's station. It took Tobias only a second to recognise the language as Lenkis, both the modern and older in different parts of the parchment. He looked across the desk to find more of them, some positively ancient and crumbling despite the newness of the writing on their surface. Intrigued, the tiger leaned in over the table.

It seemed, as best he could tell, to be a list of names and titles. The topmost sheet, already crumbled around the edges, had almost half of its names written in ancient Lenkis. Of them, he only recognised a couple of words: 'blood' stood out, alongside 'Aspect' and 'divine.' Tobias' eyes went wide as he looked down the list again to note the branches between the names. It was a chart of lineage. The lineage of priests, shamans, and their descendants. Family trees of magic users, and those who carried the same power in their blood.

Most of them remained in Lenkis, their names recorded in the fallen nation's tongue. Most of them were marked deceased. A few seemed to have filtered down the line into other lands, however. The Ratholarin descendants too were dead, and marked in the more familiar Rathin language. As were those from Ingsbren, save for one pairing that was marked as missing. A couple of Sylarians, a few Carisi, and-

Tobias froze and his breath caught in his throat. His Carisi was better than his Lenkis, despite his increased need for the latter. Caris had always been a staunch ally of the Lenkis people however, and his skills had come in handy in the Institute in translating some of the artifacts from that destroyed kingdom. It was the only reason that it had stood out. The way the letters played across the page were familiar to him, because they had been some of the first he had wanted to learn when he was but twelve years old.

William.

It took him a moment to collect himself and note that a family name had been provided as well. William Vothos. Husband to one Catherine Vothos. No children listed. Tobias relaxed in part, but couldn't tear his eyes from the page. William Vothos. Carisi commander. Catherine Vothos. Vicarian priestess. The tiger frowned. William had always told him that his mother was a farmer, from a small village. But it couldn't be mere coincidence. William's mother, Catherine... William, named for his dead father...

As Tobias reached for the page, one of the corners crumbled under his touch. He gasped and all but leaped back, but the rest of the parchment was intact. He sighed with relief as he traced the lineages of both back up as far as he could on the page. Catherine's was easy enough; William's mother seemed to have come from a long, long line of priestesses. He gasped anew at the mention in Lenkis of an Eleni, no last name given. *Witch*. William's maternal line was of night witches!

Frantically, his eyes traced back up and along his father's side. It was only a few generations back, once more in Lenkis script, that he saw it. Sotiris. Shaman of Miavis. William's direct paternal line had diverged from priesthood and shamanism, but there was no

doubt. His great, great, great grandfather had been a shaman. And his mother was listed as a priestess. Two gods worth of divine-touched blood, filtered down to one hyena.

A click echoed down to the work tables. Tobias' head snapped up, his eyes wide. The door. Someone had activated the mechanism; the button press was always more prominent than the actual opening. He had seconds; half a minute before he was discovered. Panic set in. He had to do something! If Fredrick found the parchment and put it together, he would have legitimate cause to go after William. Whether or not he had the ability or the knowledge to use magic wouldn't even matter.

Tobias looked down at the parchment. Brittle. Damaged from the wars with Caris no doubt, and more fragile than their age would suggest. He winced as he took it in his paws and briskly lifted it up. It disintegrated almost immediately, the worn page turning to little more than ashen dust and flakes. William and Catherine Vothos disappeared as the remains settled atop the table. Tobias vigorously rubbed his paws together over it, shedding as much of the mess from his own digits as he could.

He stepped back and snatched up his book again just as stomping footsteps reached his ears. Tobias forced himself to calm as he turned toward them and, a moment later, Davan's irritated face appeared at the top of the stairs. "What are you doing there?"

Tobias paused for breath as he held up the book. "My job? You told me to bring you this. I arrived and you were not here. No one was." He lowered the book again as Davan stormed toward him. "Most unprofessional, Davan, to leave no one in the vault."

"Your disapproval means nothing to me." When the large equine reached him at last, he roughly shouldered his way past Tobias. He didn't stop moving until he stood before his work station, staring down at it all. He frowned. Tobias held his breath. Did he know something was wrong?

The horse whirled on him a moment later. "Do you know what was here?"

Tobias looked down. Honesty was good, as far as he had learned; it would help him to sell the lie. "A list of some sort? I couldn't see through the dust as I came down. You didn't beat me here by more than a few minutes." He allowed himself a roll of his eyes as Davan began to glare. "I'm sorry to say that, no, I was not trying to glean magical secrets from your table before you arrived. I was just bringing you the tome, and then I was returning to my cataloguing efforts."

Davan's eyes remained fixed on Tobias. They followed the tiger as he shifted idly from foot to foot, paws still clutching the book. Tobias sighed, deep and theatrical. "Alright. You got me. I confess."

The horse's eyes glittered as he smiled. "You confess to what?"

"Curiosity. I did look while I waited for you." He nodded to the table. "But the state of those things... as soon as I touched one to try and pull it free of the dust, it lost its corner."

The glee on Davan's face turned to anger in a moment. "You touched one with your bare fingers? Fool! They must be treated to preserve the parchment!" He stepped forward as if to backhand Tobias, but let his arm fall back to his side instead with a disgusted grunt. "Striking you is a waste of effort."

Tobias huffed a relieved breath as Davan turned back to the parchment. “You are lucky. The attendant already destroyed a couple of them when they arrived. I shall have to be more careful than *you*.” He reached out abruptly to Tobias’ chest and pulled the book forcefully from his grip. “Now. Get yourself back to work. Some of us have important matters to attend to, and you are *wasting* their time.”

There was no answer that Tobias needed to give. Anything polite would have been suspicious, and anything rude would have drawn unwanted scrutiny. Instead, he simply started around Davan and made his way over to the Vicaris section of the vault once more. He’d not been lying fully; he did indeed have cataloguing that he needed to attend to.

He had not, however, expected to have saved William’s life twice in as many days. Goodness knew what would have happened to the hyena if the details of the parchment had been made known to Fredrick. Eventually it would have done; he had every single report on every single item brought to him personally every single night. How much attention he paid was a subject that Tobias wasn’t willing to speculate on.

How he would have reacted, though? That he was quite certain he knew the outcome to. If nothing else, the tiger knew that he had a new matter that warranted discussion with William the next time he saw him. If he was truly to become a kingsblade, then perhaps that opportunity would come sooner rather than later. He didn’t doubt that William would thrill at the chance to learn more about his line.

At that thought however, Tobias’ ears drooped. Would he, though? Would William really want to know? And, even more importantly, *should* he know? If he knew, what might he do? What might he become interested in? If there was magic in his blood, then he might seek the means to awaken it. To wield it. To what end Tobias couldn’t imagine, but Fredrick for certain wouldn’t tolerate another person in his midst that had access to that sort of power.

And that assumed that the power was the only problem. Did William need that knowledge? If he told William, who might William tell? Zane? Daniel? And if he did, who might *they* tell in turn? They would have every reason to keep his secret, but the more people knew a thing the more likely it would be to get out. And then everyone would be in danger.

Tobias shook his head to himself. No. No, William couldn’t know. It had to end with Tobias himself. He would not do anything that would put the blood of William, or of those he actually cared about, on his paws. He would feel guilty; it already knotted in his stomach, but guilty for concealing the truth was different from the guilt of causing someone’s death. He would carry that too.

At least William would never have to forgive him if he never found out.