

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART THREE

26th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

William looked exhausted.

The hyena had told Tobias many times that he hated his adjusted sleep schedule. That it was irritating at the very least and overwhelming at the worst that he had to sleep during the day in whatever time he could grasp while Tobias toiled away in the Institute. Tobias didn't blame him, of course. Fredrick's insistence on William's presence at Tobias' side at – almost – all times was a punishment for both of them.

That didn't change the fact that, as they walked together through the halls of the castle's upper floors, the hyena seemed far more tired than usual. "You don't have to come, you know. You could head to your room, or back home if you need to, and get some rest."

William grimaced but he didn't meet Tobias' eyes. "Tempting, but no. You walk in there without me and Fredrick's just going to make things worse for either of us." He shook his head and sighed. "I just didn't get as much sleep the last couple days as I'd like. There's some whispers going around that are... putting me on edge."

"Anything I should know?" He watched as William finally glanced down his way. It was legitimate concern that drove the question, and not entirely altruistically at that; he relied on William for his protection, and if the kingsblade wasn't at his best...

But William closed his eyes and shook his head. A servant on approach was swiftly stepped around despite his temporary blindness, and she stared back at them in confusion as William smiled. "Hopefully not. Promise to tell you if that changes."

He would have to be satisfied with that answer, Tobias realised. William had grown a lot more tight-lipped about the nature of what went on with him when Tobias wasn't about. On some level he accepted that there probably wasn't much to tell; William was either on duty or asleep. He might have suspected that the hyena was spending more time with Daniel lately, if not for his comment on whispers.

Then again, there were times when he came back from various things from out in the city. Small items purchased from the marketplace, oftentimes treats and sometimes even ones he was willing to share with Tobias. Maybe it wasn't the whispers keeping him awake, but sleep deprivation. Maybe he was spreading himself too thin, and investigating something on what little time he had. "You are quite certain you're well?"

"I'm fair certain I'm quite *not*, but I'm good enough. I have to be." William tried another smile as he turned his eyes forward once more, stifling a yawn. "I'd worry more about this meeting. Fredrick say what it was about or how long it'd take?"

Tobias could only roll his eyes. “Of course not. Since when does he tell me anything? He likes to be the big boy in charge, after all. You know how he is.”

“All too well.” William sighed as he fell to a stop before a large wooden door. Tobias stared at it with a grimace spread across his face. “What do you say? Get this over with? You head right back to the Institute and I head right to bed?”

Tobias nodded quickly as he turned his head to the door. “Ugh. Would that I could simply go to bed after this myself. Both of us might actually get some rest.” He blinked as he lifted his head and turned back to William, eyes wide. “Not... not the same bed, of course. I didn’t mean to imply-”

“You didn’t.” William perked an eyebrow, tilting his head in that little way he always did as he scrutinised Tobias. The tiger’s ears burned. “I knew what you meant.”

“Oh! Oh. Good. Very good. Yes. Of course.” The prince cleared his throat as he stared hard at the door. “Yes. Because that would be... bad. And illegal. And you wouldn’t want it anyway. And neither would I! Because of course not, and-”

“You’re still talking.” William’s expression turned into a mixture of confused and amused as he placed a paw on Tobias’ shoulder. “You should really stop, for your own sake.”

“Yes. I rather should.” The urge to slam his head against the door came quickly, but Tobias resisted it. Soren’s insistence rang in his ears, but he shut that out as well. There was no way William would share a bed with him, and he just needed to get the idea out of his head. He had Soren if an itched needed scratching, and that was only until Fredrick decided on finding him a new wife.

If Fredrick found him a wife. Tobias blanched as he shook his head and sighed. If that was what the meeting was about, he was looking forward to it even less. Sarina had been a perfectly amiable companion, but forced on him nonetheless. Still, the situation wouldn’t be bettered by standing there in silence. The tiger lifted his paws to the door and pushed it open.

It had been holding back a torrent of anger. Tobias frowned as he clearly found himself walking into the middle of an argument, as Brett’s voice spilled into the hall. “-don’t *understand!* You could be killing me with this!”

“Please, save the dramatics for our brother; they do not suit you.” Fredrick sounded bored as Tobias walked in with William at his back. The meeting room was unchanged from the last time Tobias had been forced into one such with his siblings, but two more figures stood in place behind them. They were the personal kingsblades of Fredrick and Brett; the tall badger behind the king himself was Rachel, and the lanky ferret at Brett’s back was named Shannon if Tobias recalled correctly. He didn’t have much experience with either of them.

William clearly did, as he nodded to each of them in turn and even earned a small smile from Rachel in the process. Their entrance wasn’t lost on the males of the room either, and both Fredrick and Brett turned to Tobias a moment later. The eldest tiger sighed. “And about time. You’re late again, Tobias. Do you mean to displease me?”

“Yes, because that truly is all I live for, Fredrick.” Tobias sighed and shook his head. He didn’t need that, not almost first thing in the morning. “By all means, please. Finish your discussion with Brett before you lay into me.”

“Yes, I’d quite like you to finish our discussion as well.” Brett stood taller, clutching the back of the chair before him what looked to be tight enough to snap it in half. “We are far from finished with this.”

As Fredrick groaned, Tobias couldn’t help but notice the three kingsblades congregating to the side of the room. Their voices were considerably more hushed, but they spoke with a surprising intensity. He wondered what they were saying even as Fredrick made his own thoughts abundantly clear. “We cannot be finished with a discussion we are not having. When did I give you the impression that you had a choice in the matter?”

Brett bared his teeth. “She *hates* me. Her whole family hate me! The bitch will slit my throat in my sleep if this goes through!” He thrust a finger toward Tobias but his eyes remained on Fredrick. “You’ve not even bothered to assign *him* a wife. Give her to him instead!”

“So she can go utterly unsatisfied and hate me for arranging the match? Absolutely not.” Tobias growled as Fredrick chuckled to himself. “No, Tobias has no need of a wife. The last thing I wish is for his perversion to be passed into successive Rathin cubs; nothing would make me sicker than the thought of more tailraisers in this bloodline.” He paused and turned his eyes up toward the kingsblades. “Oh. I’m *sorry*, William. I didn’t see you there.”

The kingsblade conversation cut off at the acknowledgement, and William shifted to face Fredrick. He bowed his head, but Tobias could see the glint of irritation on his face. He’d seen it often enough, especially in his last years, on his father’s features too. For not being Zane’s blood, William surely took after him in many ways. “No apology is necessary, my liege.”

“Of course not; I don’t need you to tell me such things. You’re too far beneath me to deserve one.” Fredrick glanced from him back to Brett, and so much the better that he couldn’t see William’s eyes roll. “Patrice *will* be your wife. If she gives you hate, then beat it out of her. Rut it out of her at the same time you rut an heir into her. Do both at the same time for all I care, just so long as you bring her to heel.”

Tobias’ eyes went as wide as Brett’s. The middle brother stared Fredrick down. “I think that the entire Saraventi family might withdraw support from the crown if I beat and... and *rape* their daughter. My king.”

Fredrick just shook his head. The casualness with how he discussed such reprehensible acts almost voided Tobias’ stomach across the meeting room table. “They would only find out if you were to loosen the chain about her neck long enough. And besides, the Saraventis have more than a few secrets lurking in their own family that they have no desire to see come to light. I think my silence is worth their daughter’s life, and more besides.”

When Brett clearly had no good answer for that – the horror in his eyes certainly spoke loudly enough – Fredrick waved for Tobias to approach. “Come now. Sit. Don’t mind Brett; he means to sulk now in the hopes that I will relent.” Fredrick flashed a little smile at Tobias. “I will not.”

As Tobias settled into his chair, he simply sighed. More and more Fredrick was being cruel just for the sake of it. “I am to meet with Mattias in the Institute soon. I do hope that this isn’t going to take as long as forcing Brett to assault some poor noble’s daughter.”

“No. Much like Brett in his bedchambers, this will not take long.” Fredrick leaned back and folded his arms as the middle brother bristled. “An assault was lodged a couple of days ago with the watch. A small band of guardians were pursuing an undocumented Yarovenni who had somehow eluded detection. He was suspected to be working to establish a new rebel group within Sanwell, and fled to the shadow quarter.”

The youngest tiger frowned as he looked over at Brett. He was still seething, but he looked more focused as he clasped his paws together atop the table. “Did they capture this... suspect?”

Brett’s jaw tightened. His eyes flicked briefly to Fredrick, but away just as quickly as the king turned to him. “They did not. In fact, we’ve lost them all. Five warriors.”

“Except that we’ve only *lost* one of the five.” Fredrick tilted his head up, but his gaze was on William rather than Tobias. “The bodies of four of them had been recovered, murdered in the style of an execution and placed just outside the Riverrun for us to find. I don’t suppose you’d happen to know where the last one is, would you William?”

Tobias frowned as he follow Fredrick’s stare to his kingsblade. The hyena looked confused, as did Rachel and Shannon. “I would not, my liege.”

“No? I thought you’d take better care of your tailraising little whore.” Fredrick’s eyes twitched and narrowed as he sneered up at the kingsblade. “I knew you were bonded to a male, but I did *not* know until this event that one of our very select guardians was of your *filth*.”

William didn’t even flinch at the insult. Instead he held the king’s angry stare with a resolute expression that wouldn’t have looked out of place on his father’s face. William had grown so much more than Tobias had ever known. “As I have said previously, my king. I was bonded. When your edict annulling it was issued, I was not bonded any further. I have heard nothing but whispers about this attack on the guardians, and not a word about who was involved.”

Fredrick slammed both fists down on the table. “And yet I am deceived again by you. For allowing your perversion into my own inner circle where it can strike against me directly.” He whirled on Brett. “You were to choose only the strongest warriors with the truest virtue to serve within the ranks of the Guardians of Ratholarin!”

“And I heard nothing of this soldier’s proclivities. They didn’t come up, and none of the people who I spoke to about him brought it up.” Brett shook his head as he glared at Fredrick. “This was not my fault. Don’t you dare blame me.”

“You are in charge of confirming the inductees to the ranks of the guardians and you didn’t even think to *ask* after his sense of decency?”

Brett bared his teeth once more. “My questions went to the heart of what mattered. Loyalty to the crown and to Ratholarin. Combat record. Positive approval from the muzzles of those who had worked alongside him. He was asked if his rings would be a problem in the pursuit of his duties, and he said that they would not be.”

“Of course he said that. He wouldn’t have said anything else.” Fredrick stood from the table and began to walk around it toward the kingsblades. Both Shannon and Rachel drifted

further from William as the king eyed him. “I will only ask you this once, tailraiser. Where is your bonded?”

William continued to stoically stare the tiger down. “I am not bonded, my liege.”

“Good. I’d hoped you would say that.” As he drew closer, one of the king’s paws dipped into a small satchel at his side that Tobias hadn’t seen while he was seated. From it he withdrew a small black ring, with some design he couldn’t quite see etched onto its broad face. “I had looked forward to using this little item on your husband, but I shall derive just as much pleasure on using it against you.”

“My king.” The words from Rachel were firm, but her eyes were on the floor. “Master William has been nothing but-”

“Do not call him that. Do not *ever* call him that.” Fredrick’s fiery glare turned on Rachel, and Tobias cringed back from the sound of it. “This cur is not a master of anything, and if I hear of anyone according him respect he is not due I will cut out their tongue!” He reached out to grab Rachel by the muzzle, and she gasped as her jaw was forced open. “Do you understand me?”

His fingers tightened further and the badger grunted once before he released her. She immediately dropped to her knees. “I understand, my liege.”

He growled down at her with a nod. “Now stay down there until I have need of you.” He turned and nodded to Shannon. “Restrain William.”

The ferret hesitated, but she nodded nonetheless. Tobias rose from his seat as William stayed exactly where he was, and even allowed her to draw his arms behind his back. “Fredrick, what are you doing? What is th...” As he hurried closer, he began to make out the inscription on the face of the ring. Familiarity and terror alike struck him all at once. “Fredrick, you *can*’t.”

“And who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do?” He didn’t even look over at Tobias as he traced the clawtip of the finger wearing the ring down William’s cheek. “The object is mine, and I will use it as I see fit. It should divine the truth hidden in this deviant’s little mind.”

As he stroked the claw back upward, the ring began to give off a sort of translucent steam; a glowing effusion of deep, violet light in short-lived wisps. William looked out the corner of his eye at it with concern and confusion still, but he clearly didn’t know what it was. Tobias *did*. And worse, he couldn’t convince Fredrick to stop himself before he made a horrible mistake.

He had to make Fredrick stop, but only Fredrick could do that. He had to come to the conclusion to stop all by himself. “Fredrick. Brother. Has Davan informed you of the full research we have regarding this... object?”

“He has told me enough.” He pulled the ring away again as the glow faded, holding the finger up toward William. “This is a ring, *filth*, that was taken from a Dreamseer of Guavi. It will let me invade your mind, and sift through your thoughts as I see fit. More, if you resist me. I trust you won’t make that mistake.”

Everyone else in the room recoiled at the king's words, and why not? This was probably the first time they had seen that Fredrick had access to items of magical significance. For Tobias however, this was merely the painful inevitability of his research. At least Fredrick was still limited to objects imbued with power, rather than conjuring that power for himself. "Did Davan also speak of the risks? Did he tell you that it could warp and distort the mind of the wielder if they were not chosen by Guavi Herself?" He reached out tentatively as Fredrick began to frown, touching his elder brother's shoulder. "Please. If something ill were to befall you through magic... who would be left to lead Ratholarin to its destiny?"

Even as he shrugged off Tobias' paw, Fredrick turned to look down at Brett. The middle brother's eyes were full of horror, yes, but there was new fear in his face. Good, Tobias thought. Maybe now he knew the score. Maybe now he understood at last what Fredrick was after. "A fair point, brother, and well made." He stepped back from William and pulled the ring from his finger. It was swiftly tucked back into its satchel as he glared at William. "You would be wise to confess your sins to me now. When I have mastered this power, I will make you *suffer* if I find you to have lied to me."

William bowed his head as Tobias watched, biting back a relieved sigh. "I swear on my life, my king. I have not lied to you. My only intention is to bring glory to Ratholarin and serve the crown."

"See that you do." Fredrick nodded to Shannon, and she released William's arms at last. The hyena let them fall to his sides and otherwise didn't move. "You will be questioned further. If you know *anything* about the whereabouts of Daniel, son of Amos, you will confess it. If you are believed to be hiding information, I will have it tortured out of you." He stared down his muzzle at William. "And if I have to go that far, I *will* find your beloved little tailraiser, drag him to the cell next to yours, and I will *shatter* his mind before your very eyes. Am I understood?"

Tobias eyes flicked to William. He had been certain that the hyena would be utterly incapable of stringing a sentence together out of sheer rage, but he simply nodded once as though he had been offered a drink. "Understood, my liege. I will cooperate fully, whatever you require of me."

Fredrick snarled as he turned away from William. His eyes fell on Brett as he stormed back around the table again, almost bowling over the still-kneeling Rachel. "That there are subversives operating again within Sanwell is proof that your efforts, brother, are *lacking*. Far from merely a question of which female I wish for you to rut an heir into, you should be much, much more concerned with the darkness festering beneath our empire."

As the king side and sank back down into his seat, Brett looked up to meet Tobias' eyes. He didn't have to ask why. The both of them knew better than to ask the question, but that one word had stood out clearly to them both. By the time Fredrick's eyes lifted again, his brothers were looking squarely at him. "We are at war. The public does not know about this, and they should. I would have new materials drafted up and sent across the entire Ratholarin demesne. I want them to be raised in Sanwell. In Caris. In Yaroven. In the eastern and northern provinces." He nodded to Tobias. "Davan and Orlin will coordinate with you in creating them."

Tobias could only bow his head. "Of course. And what information would you wish disseminated?"

“A reiteration of the threat. That those not of true Ratholarin blood seek to lure the mightiest people of this world astray and pervert their view of us.” Fredrick snarled through the words even as he stared at the centre of the table at nothing in particular. “That their filth and immorality is being sold to our most impressionable, in order to destroy the next generation before it can even learn the truth.” His eyes narrowed as his head rose. “It will speak to the Carisi threat. The Yarovenni threat. The Lenkis threat.”

Tobias bit back a growl and nodded again. “Of course, my king.”

“The Ingsbren threat.” Fredrick’s continuation set Tobias aback, but he was still not done. “The Sylarian threat. The Skir threat. The Marovan threat. All of them, Tobias. You will work with Davan and Orlin to create a message that will reach each and every citizen of the realm, and teach them of this... this *sickness* that festers within Ratholarin.”

“Of course, my king.” Tobias wanted to scream and shout and dissent, but he’d already won a small victory against Fredrick in protecting William’s mind from being magically probed. He didn’t doubt that the hyena knew nothing about what had happened to Daniel, but that didn’t mean he trusted Fredrick to accept the truth. Not anymore. Not if he was already using dangerous magical artifacts. “If you’ll excuse me, I will attend to that now.” When Fredrick nodded, Tobias stood and waved toward William. “Come along.”

He thought for a second that Fredrick might react poorly to the instruction, and from his hesitation William clearly did too. But with a nod of his own and a quick, reassuring touch to Rachel’s shoulder, he followed Tobias as the tiger led him to the door, then out through it. He didn’t say a word, but then Tobias didn’t expect him to. What was there to say after all of that, anyway?

Once outside and the door had closed behind him though, Tobias shot a quick look up and down the hall. There didn’t seem to be anyone around. Fredrick may have had the area cleared for the meeting. So much the better. “Are you alright, William?”

“Yeah. Thanks to you.” The hyena certainly looked more awake than he had going into the meeting, but that was purely adrenaline and Tobias had no idea how long that would last. The poor thing was probably dead on his feet after all of that. “Fredrick’s using magic now.”

“The crown of Ratholarin maintains that magic is an abominable practice and insists that it be fought wherever it be found.” Tobias rattled the words off by rote, but his tone was flat as he stared up at William. Even if the corridor was empty, it was dangerous to speak of such things out in the open. “Accept that and leave it as it is, William. Anything more is a lost cause at this point.”

The hyena nodded as he followed Tobias off down the hallway. “Yeah. So I saw. He was insane in there.”

“And you can keep *that* quiet, too.” Tobias voice lowered as he sighed and looked warily about again. William was tempting fate today, and he’d already tempted it far too much already! “Did you really not know about Daniel?”

There was a moment of hesitation from William before the hyena shook his head. “I really don’t know where he is. But I doubt Fredrick or Brett would just accept that.” His

shoulder sagged. "I thought he was just busy. I didn't know he... I've not seen him." He frowned as he looked down at Tobias. "If you know anything about where he is--"

"I'll tell you right away, of course." Tobias nodded.

William, however, frowned harder. "No. Absolutely not. If you discover something about where Daniel is, don't you *dare* tell me."

The tiger blinked. Had he heard correctly? "Why wouldn't you want to know?"

"Because I want to know more than anything, and Fredrick knows that if anyone's likely to know, it's me." He growled, teeth bared as he flicked an ear. "If I don't know anything, I don't have to *pretend* to know anything. If I don't have to pretend to know anything, I can convince him all the better that I know nothing."

"But you *do* know nothing." Tobias lifted an eyebrow. "And he's going to suspect you anyway."

William sighed. "Yeah. And if I then *do* know something, he'll dig it out of my head with his new... uh, *methods*." The hyena glanced at him, and Tobias gave a shrug. It was as good a save as he could have hoped for. "I guess that's what he's got you working on. That Institute."

"And that's enough of that." Tobias sighed and shook his head. Now there was a new threat, if even his private thoughts and conversations could be discovered by Fredrick. Truly, nowhere was safe anymore. "I can't give you that information, William. I can't tell you *anything*, and especially not if he's going to go emptying your mind."

The kingsblade scowled but nodded along regardless. "Good point."

"I have those from time to time." Tobias grit his teeth. So many secrets. So many worries. So many threats, and so few of them the ones that Fredrick actually thought they were. "You should go. Get some rest. I suspect the kingsblades will be looking to question you soon, and any sleep would be good sleep at this point."

There was no response for a second, but it became clear why a moment later as he looked up to find William mid-yawn. When he finished, he shot Tobias a sheepish little smile. "You might be right, assuming I can even sleep now. Are... *you* going to be alright?"

"I know the way. Go." He nodded and waved down toward a side passage he knew would lead back to the kingsblade's chambers. "Take care of yourself, William. I hope to see you before dinner."

His smile turned a little more grim. "Yeah. We'll see if I still have a mind of my own by then." He paused, and bowed his head to the prince. "Thanks again. For saving my mind for a little while longer."

The tiger nodded, but he couldn't help a little smile of his own. "Well, what can I say? I've damaged it enough over the years. Nice to do something good for it for a change."

William didn't have an answer to that, but he lifted his head again and nodded once. Then he turned on a heel and started to make his way down the passage, and he was gone from sight a moment later. Tobias watched him go with a new threat of fear unspooling inside him.

Fredrick wouldn't stop. William had been right; Tobias may have only spared his mind for a little while longer. That Dreamseer's ring was an ill omen if ever the tiger had seen one.

But one problem at a time. First, he had work to attend to. Then, if he was lucky, perhaps he could buy some time to investigate what exactly Fredrick was up to. Only Davan would have provided the king such a dangerous artifact with the expectation that it would be used. Neither Mattias nor Orlin would have dared take the risk. Davan's ideology was so aligned with Fredrick's that the scholar probably disregarded his own learnings and bowed instead to dogma.

The consequences could be dire. A good king, corrupted by the prospect of magic's power at his fingertips? That would have been a horrible enough thought to face. Fredrick, though, was not a good king. His corruption ran deep; a scar in his heart that had existed long, long before the Institute had become a reality. Everything that he was would be twisted further and further if he started to abuse the secrets that the Institute was uncovering. Tobias shivered. Fredrick might even be able to get exactly what he wanted.

The mere prospect scared him to his core.

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When Tobias finally arrived late in the morning to the vault, he had not been greeted by Mattias as expected. Nor, in fact, had he found Davan working early at his station. He'd been concerned for a moment that he'd been left alone in the vault once more, even though such a thing was extremely unlikely. Fredrick trusted so few people with his magical research, and Tobias was absolutely not one of them.

Any thoughts that Tobias had entertained about possibly getting in some research of his own were arrested as Orlin strode down the stairs toward him a few moments later. The panther had his hood up, little more visible under it than two pools of bright yellow and a broad, toothy grin. "So good to see you, my prince. Forgive my tardiness, but I am not usually awake at this hour."

He'd had so few opportunities to meet with Orlin since he'd first been given ostensible control of the Ratholarin Institute, but Orlin was the one with whom Tobias had found himself the least disgusted by. Certainly the feline's absolute pursuit of magical knowledge regardless of how it was to be used was a moral nightmare, but it was a manageable one in the least. Davan was intractable and utterly captured by Fredrick's goals and designs. Mattias was mellower for sure, but no less reverent of the goals Fredrick represented.

Orlin just didn't care.

It was the best Tobias could hope for, so the panther's arrival was almost fortuitous. His mind began turning the possibilities over even as he smiled and nodded to the panther. "There is nothing to forgive, Orlin. Please, join me. I actually had a question you may be able to answer."

"One that Davan would not entertain?" The panther's eyes glittered as he smiled wider. "Of course. What would you like to know?"

Trust the scholar to know exactly what sort of question that Tobias wanted to ask. He smiled back, though it was a tighter thing. He had to force himself to remember that Orlin was

the least likely to turn him over to Fredrick. Orlin would do what was best for Orlin, and that might not include throwing Tobias to the figurative wolves and literal tigers. "I would know something of Guavi specifically."

The panther's smile turned coy. "Interested in a certain ring, are we?"

Tobias let himself frown. "You knew I'd ask."

"I know that our illustrious king asked Davan for something that would allow him to see into the minds of his enemies, and Davan asked me to secure a specific item that would suit his majesty's purpose." The robed feline spread his arms wide. "I can only imagine he brought it to bear in front of you. I suppose our purpose will be revealed soon, and so much the better."

"Yes, and... wait, what?" Tobias looked around himself and waved toward the shelves and stacks. "You think it will be good that all of this is revealed?"

Again the panther shrugged. "It will be what it will be. Being able to conduct research in the open with potentially more test subjects will be extremely helpful in my work, but that is beside the point." He folded his arms into his sleeves. "What did you wish to know about the ring?"

Tobias forced his mind to return to the problem before him. "Firstly, whether it was a good idea or not for Fredrick to be given it in the first place."

"Absolutely not. I said as much." Orlin leaned back, and then jumped up to sit on top of one of the tables. "But I admit, I am very curious to hear about the effects of the ring on an unprepared mind. Did Fredrick display any strange powers beyond what the ring itself was capable of? Changes in colouration of the fur? The eyes? Whispers of his voice in your mind?"

The tiger grit his teeth. What an utterly terrifying prospect. "Not that I noticed, no. I was more concerned about degenerative effects on the psyche, which would be a little harder to diagnose at the time."

Orlin looked disappointed, but he nodded anyway. "True. Between his domineering attitude, narcissistic streak and general lust for power and control, it would be hard to tell the difference between his neutral state and the influence of the artifact." His eyes glazed over for a second, before they sharpened once more on Tobias. "Does he still carry the ring with him?"

Tobias wracked his mind, but it didn't take much to remember the satchel. "Yes, I believe so. I don't believe he has returned it yet. And that is why I am doubly glad that you are here." Orlin's head slowly tilted to the side. "I need to see all of the research that has been given to Fredrick regarding the artifact, and any others that he seeks to make use of."

The panther's grin broadened. "You know I can't do that."

"What, you think *I* want magic?" Tobias snorted. "Maybe as a boy, but absolutely not now. I can see the need to study it and understand it; goodness knows that eradicating it could be almost impossible... not to mention a terrible waste." He added that last part for Orlin's benefit, and the other feline did in fact start to nod along once Tobias said as much. "I see the danger of it as surely as you do."

“All things are dangerous, my prince.” Orlin’s eyes closed, and it was like his hood contained only shadow. “It is merely a question of the manner in which they are used.”

The last thing Tobias wanted was a philosophical debate, but far more importantly he needed to have access to everything that Fredrick had seen. If he didn’t know what Fredrick was up to, how else was he going to stop him before he went too far? Orlin, Davan and Mattias sure weren’t going to step in. “True, but the greatest danger in all the world, I think, is ignorance. Would you not agree?”

Orlin’s head tilted the other way, but his eyes still didn’t open again. He seemed to be considering what Tobias said, and so the prince continued on. “Ignorance combined with magical power is potentially devastating. Fredrick is no scholar. He has not taken the time to truly come to understand the artifacts that we gather and study here. I know you see Davan for what he truly is: a sycophant who is loyal to Fredrick above and beyond his own studies.”

“True enough.” Those yellow eyes opened again and fixed on Tobias. “But his majesty’s ruling was absolute. Only he and the Triumvirate were to have access to these magical materials, so as to minimise threats to his person.”

“And what of threats he makes to his own person?” Tobias shook his head as he pointed back up the stairs toward the vault entrance. “He has been provided an artifact that you and I both know will corrupt him to his heart if he were to use it improperly... and you and I both know that he cannot possibly use it properly in his current state. Potentially even in *any* state.” He lifted both eyebrows as Orlin regarded him closely. He was almost getting through to the panther! “You want to protect him from magical threats. That is what I am trying to do. Would not more unbiased eyes on this research, as you hope for, give you the best chance of understanding it? Of giving him the ability to use it successfully?”

Orlin licked at his muzzle as he looked past Tobias to the nearby shelves full of tomes. Tobias just kept his gaze on the scholar. He was so close...! “There would still be considerable information to learn, even from his improper use of it. I admit a curiosity.”

There. That was what Tobias had been waiting for! “Fair. The information we could gain from his failure would be great indeed, and potentially save us much time and effort in refining future work.” He shook his head even as the panther nodded. “Tell me then who would aid you in your research with Fredrick mad and magically empowered? You know he is already paranoid, with an army at his command and elite soldiers with him at all times. If he loses what little sanity he has left and has the power of a Dreamseer’s ring at his disposal, let alone the other wonders kept in this vault... do you think he will let you continue? Do you think he would let you *live* to find a way to stop him?”

The panther leaned back a little. One paw braced himself on the bench as the other lifted under his hood to stroke at what Tobias presumed was his chin. “A fair point, and very well made, my prince. The research must continue, and Fredrick is indeed the only one in the region willing to conduct it.” The panther slid off the bench and strode right past the prince.

Tobias turned to watch him as he plucked a specific book from the shelf and passed it over. “A log I have kept, of exactly what instruction and treatments Fredrick has been given in the ways of magic.”

Tobias had started to nod, but he paused as Orlin spoke. “Treatments?”

Once more the panther's eyes glittered with ambition. "Oh yes. I have never known a more willing subject. Quite painful treatments, given what all we have had to do to synthesise the alchemical reactions within his blood to mimic those of a shaman. Failures all so far as I know at this point, but that may all change soon."

All Tobias could do was nod, and he slowly cracked open the book and looked over the notes. They were written in a steady if messy paw, though the Lenkis lettering did throw the prince for a moment. "Invocation of Miarvis energies for war applications of light magic... attempted infusion of Vicaris shaman blood induced toxic shock... by goodness, he *wanted* these things to happen?"

Orlin just smiled back at him. "He seeks magic at all costs. I would be more surprised if he *didn't* go this far."

"I suppose you're right." Tobias turned his attention back to the tome. It was going to be utterly impossible to stop Fredrick, if he'd already been so bold as to have the blood of dead shamans infused into his body. "That he would do this strains credulity. He's simply trying every single idea that comes to anyone without the slightest amount of care for his own well-being. Look at this! Needlepoint activation of energy centres?"

"I believe that one only failed because he refused to allow us to activate the mind source." Orlin shrugged. "He was rather skittish about the needle going through one eye and into his brain."

"Goodness forbid someone doesn't want that." Tobias shook his head as he began to flick through the pages. Each one seemed more obscene than the last. Some entries were relatively mild, as Fredrick was taught about specific artifacts and what they could do, if they could be properly activated. But as time went on the dates drew closer to the present, they became more and more desperately unhinged. Tobias had to wonder how much of Fredrick's growing madness had come directly from the methods he'd tried to employ to gain control of magical energies.

"Well, my prince?" He looked up again at Orlin's words, and the feline was smiling at him once more. "What do you think?"

There were a hundred different responses to the question, but none of which would actually convince Orlin to continue being helpful. Tobias needed time. Time to study, time to contemplate, time to figure out what had gone wrong and time to figure out what he could do to guide Fredrick from such an insane path. "I think that the best option yet lies in the blood. We know already that the bloodline of a shaman preserves the magical impetus of the god that first blessed a member of that line."

"Mmm, so I believe as well. However, none of the samples that we've used have resulted in anything other than a toxic reaction, as you can see." He nodded to the book, though his smile remained creepily unchanged. "We have, of course, also attempted to use the blood of descendants whose powers had not awakened, also with no success."

"Which implies activated power is the key there. That it alters the body somehow to be receptive to the divine power it conjures." Despite himself, Tobias found himself nodding along with Orlin. The subject was fascinating, but it would be all the more so if the subject wasn't so

dire. “Perhaps that the activation element is polluted by death? Something to make the blood inert.”

Orlin’s grin widened. “I was hoping you would say that, my prince. I am so glad that you came to me with this; another sharp mind unburdened by dogma has been sorely needed on this problem. Come, let me show you some of the samples that we have been working on. I think you will find them *quite* intriguing.”

Tobias nodded and gestured for Orlin to lead on. The panther was all too happy to do so, leaving the prince to follow in his wake. His dedication to his work would have been admirable if it wasn’t so utterly, completely amoral. And, perhaps, if the work itself didn’t have the risk of such absolutely disastrous consequences.

Still, he had an erstwhile ally now in Orlin. Someone who would actually grant him access to information and potentially tools he otherwise wouldn’t have. So long as he proved himself useful to Orlin’s quest for knowledge, he was certain that the scholar would continue to give him the access that Mattias and especially Davan would deny him. The tiger fought to unclench his jaw as he followed on.

What he’d already seen terrified him. What was left was unlikely to allay that fear.