

Interwoven

CHOICES: PART TWO

86th Day of the Pure Snow, 16 AoE

Formal dress had never been Tobias' strong suit. Not had suits in general, really. They were all so fussy; so remarkably overbearing and overdone and *overdressed* that most of the time he couldn't be bothered to show up even to official palace events in anything more than his casual attire.

That would have been fine under normal circumstances – the trousers and shirts that he wore would more than pass for formalwear among the common folk of the city and the kingdom — but they wouldn't do for the kind of company that he was expected to greet that day. Once more his fingers dipped behind him to brush out the tails of his coat.

A slap to his paw earned a hiss from him as he glanced to the side. There, that picture of beauty, grace and severity atop one of the two thrones of Ratholarin, sat Tobias' mother. The brilliant white of the tigress' gown highlighted her stripes in a breathtaking manner, and the veil about her face did nothing to hide the irritation on her features. "You'll crease it."

"It's already creased, mother; I hardly think I could do much worse." Nevertheless he begrudgingly lifted his paws away, showed them to her, and dramatically placed them at his side. "And I doubt she will care either way. What is she now, eleven?"

"Twelve, as of a couple of weeks ago." The words came from the queen's other side, as Eric leaned forward on his own, much larger and more opulent, throne. His head turned to the side as he glared at Tobias. "And you have made your dissent about this entire arrangement clear from the moment we presented the idea to you, so do not think that I will not consider a *hair* out of place being anything less than your best attempt to sabotage it."

It almost amused Tobias that his father thought that poor grooming could be the worst he could do, but a growl to the prince's other side drew his head around. "Just remember, brother, that today is *not* for you." Brett stood tall and resplendent in his officer's uniform, suitably made all the more garish by the royal additions and accoutrement that looked as though they threatened to fall off if he were struck by more than a stiff breeze.

Fredrick was also present on Brett's other side, but he was uncharacteristically quiet as he stared off to the side. Tobias followed his gaze to one of the kitchen staff as she stood at the ready by a door. From the lecherous glint in his eye, there was little doubt what thoughts *he* was concerning himself with in that moment. "A day for me? Perish the thought, Brett. I thought it was always my lot to toil in the shadows behind my illustrious brothers."

"Sarcasm is the sign of a deficient wit." The growl came from Eric as he sat back on his throne again, and Tobias bit back a sigh in turn. "And Brett, we *all* understand that this week is for you and your bride to be. This now is merely a necessary formality."

It remained a formality that Tobias desperately wished to avoid, even as he cast his gaze around the throne room. Broad and with walls that curved toward an opulent roof that more resembled the longhouses of the far south in distant times, it featured countless tapestries and murals and paintings which depicted the glorious history of the Rathin family line. A plush, richly detailed blue and gold carpet paved the way from the doors at the other end of the room to the thrones. Kingsguard peppered the walls, axes ready for any threat.

While Tobias himself heard nothing, clearly one of the kingsguard by the main doors had done. The rat turned to his canine opposite on the other side of the door and shared a nod. As one, the pair began to move toward the doors, and Tobias tugged one more time at the sides of his coat. "Here we go..."

When the doors swung open a moment later at the paws of the two kingsguards, it was to a martial march. Soldiers of Ratholarin's army made their way into the throne room in perfect step with one another. Zane's absence from the kingsguard ranks became more apparent as the soldiers split to either side of the carpet and began to march beside it. The wolf walked with those the soldiers sought to escort, eyes and ears pointed forward.

Tobias held his breath as his eyes briefly brushed over the two lions. The larger wore an equally opulent outfit as his father, his broad mane fluffed out around a loose collar. The other was covered in a long, figure-hugging dress of red silk that trailed so long that a young mouse girl had to hurry along behind her to keep it off the ground. He paid them little mind however, as he scanned the soldiers flanking them for any sign of William.

Perhaps his wandering eyes had given him away or perhaps his brothers simply knew him too well. It came as a surprise still when Brett's elbow jabbed into Tobias' side and he chuckled under his breath. "What's wrong? She not pretty enough for you? Too busy eyeing off the males?"

"Brett." His mother's hissed warning only made him chuckle all the louder.

"There's just the one he has an eye for," Fredrick added, and as Tobias turned to glare at the elder prince he could see a smug smirk on the tiger's face. "Oh, he won't be here, brother. I'm quite certain he's elsewhere, training hard to be the best mud-caked corpse he can be."

Brett's smirk almost matched Fredrick's. "Well, who knows? Maybe her father might join you and show you how it's-"

"Enough, Brett!" Veronica's voice raised slightly, and it was threat enough to make the middle prince fall silent immediately. Tobias nodded his thanks to his mother even as he grit his teeth. Even then, on that day, they still wouldn't let anything go. What more did they want from him, or was his torment enough?

Out of the corner of his eye, Tobias could see his father rise from his throne as their guests approached. He didn't step down from the raised platform, instead spreading his arms out wide and affecting an equally broad smile. "My greetings to you, oh great King Torvin of Ingsbren! We are delighted that you and your lovely daughter could join us for the occasion of my son's wedding."

The two lions came to a halt before the raised thrones and both bowed their heads. Tobias caught a flicker in his father's smile and had to hide one of his own. Eric did so love

seeing people keel before him, yet Torvin and his daughter had robbed him of that. “We are honoured to be here for this most auspicious pairing.” Torvin’s voice boomed, much deeper than that of Tobias’ father as he lifted his head again. It was accented with something rich and almost melodic that Tobias was sure had to come from their homeland. “To you, Prince Brett of Ratholarin, we offer our most sincere congratulations and wishes for a long and fruitful union with Lady Eustace.”

There was silence for a moment, as if Brett didn’t quite know what to say. Tobias turned toward him, his expression carefully measured as the tiger cleared his throat. “You’re very kind, your majesty. I’m very much looking forward to the wedding.”

“I have little doubt that Lady Eustace is equally enthused.” There was a flash of white to the lion’s muzzle – a smile carefully restrained – as he turned back to the thrones. “And Queen Veronica, it is as ever a delight to see you again. My dear Ceralla always spoke highly of you, and regretted that she was too busy with matters of state to spend time in more casual correspondence. I am certain you know how it is, of course.”

“Yes, quite so.” Veronica bowed her head, but there was a tightness to her words that Tobias had only heard when she was irate. He tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the smile from his muzzle. “And this must of course be Princess Sarina. Oh, but she has grown; she rather does take after her father, doesn’t she?”

The name brought everything back into sharp focus, and Tobias felt his smile grow all the more forced. His eyes fell on the lioness as she looked up at him in turn. They flicked up and down as if to inspect him and though her expression didn’t change, he couldn’t help the feeling that he’d been seen, judged, and deemed beneath her.

He wasn’t the only one to notice. He could feel the eyes of both of his brothers on him, and could even hear the derisive laughter that Brett barely concealed. Sarina’s eyes flicked toward him as Tobias glanced aside, and he frowned as Brett winked down at the princess to whom his brother was betrothed.

Her head tilted upward ever so slightly as she turned toward Tobias. “I wonder if there are perhaps any exceptions here in that regard.” Even as young as she was, Tobias’ ears perked forward at her voice. She didn’t stumble over her words or use them improperly; the princess was as eloquent at her age as he was at his. It would have been humiliating if he wasn’t so impressed.

But with those words, she’d set an obvious standard. Tobias forced his smile back to the fore as he stepped forward and off the raised platform. He strode over to the pair of lions and promptly bowed before them. “King Torvin. Crown Princess Sarina. May I say that it is a pleasure to, respectively, see you again and meet you in earnest.” He lifted his head again to turn his smile on Sarina. “We did meet briefly a few years ago in fact, at an event hosted by your father.”

“I am aware.” She folded her arms across her chest as she too began to smile. “I watched your sorry attempt at dancing with great concern. I do hope you have improved somewhat in the years since, for the sake of my tail.”

Behind Tobias, he could hear both Fredrick and Brett laugh that time. But the smile on the young princess’ face wasn’t accusatory or cruel like theirs tended to be, and so he took a

chance and bowed his head anew. “Not my best showing, I would freely admit. Perhaps you would do me the honour of providing me the chance to show you my improvement with a dance at my brother’s wedding?”

Her smile only grew, and even Torvin began to nod to himself. Tobias might have sighed in relief if not for the continued amusement of his brothers. “Well, then. How could I say no to such an offer?” She even giggled quietly as Tobias straightened up again. Torvin’s smile was hidden behind a thick scruff of beard, but the tiger could see the way that fur tugged back and knew that he’d done well. “Not all cut from the same cloth, are they?”

“Indeed not. You may be the luckiest of the Ratholarin brides.” Torvin’s gaze lifted to Eric again. “Your son is eloquent and earnest, with much grace and civility. I congratulate you on instilling such noble traits in him. It pleases me to wed my daughter to one who is clearly the best student amongst his peers.”

Tobias was grateful that he was faced away from his family; he’d have hated for them to see the way his jaw dropped at the foreign king’s remarks. Sarina’s grin twitched a little wider as she looked past Tobias to the other Ratholarin royals. He fought the urge to glance at his family. It wouldn’t be good form to turn his back on their guests, and besides which he could clearly hear in the silence that followed the absolute lack of laughter from Fredrick or Brett.

It wouldn’t help him later however to simply leave things like that, though. Instead, Tobias nodded once to Torvin. “You do my family much credit, your majesty. It is our sincere hope that your respect and good grace will be naught but vindicated during this week.”

Torvin’s smile seemed only for Tobias in that moment, and he had to bite down on the glee that threatened to spill out of him. How nice to, for perhaps the first time ever, be granted respect for his manners rather than ridicule! “I have little doubt you will see to that, Prince Tobias. Little doubt indeed.”

Tobias stepped to the side to allow a clear line of sight between the lion and his father as the latter cleared his throat. “Yes, just so. But enough of such things. You must be quite weary from your journey here.” Eric waved toward the western wall. “We have servants ready to take your belongings and escort you to your rooms. There will be plenty of time to bathe and relax before the festivities are to begin.” He smiled wide and spread his arms again. “My servants and my castle are at your disposal, Torvin. Your every pleasure shall be catered to; you need but ask for it.”

Both Torvin and Sarina bowed their heads again, but still far more shallowly than most would have dared. Again, Tobias caught the twist of his father’s expression at their irreverence, and again he quietly revelled in it. “Our needs are modest but your offer is most generous indeed, my friend. By your leave, we will see you later.”

He turned as Tobias bowed his head, but not too quickly to miss Torvin place a paw on his daughter’s shoulder. His voice was lower, but the tiger was close enough to hear him. “Are you certain, my dear?”

“Quite certain, father. Thank you for your concern.” She reached up to pat his paw, and a moment later Torvin disengaged from her and started back down the carpet. Tobias lifted his head, one ear perked as Sarina clasped her paws behind her back and looked up at the throne.

“My father has been here before, but this is my first time to your great castle. He spoke of your home with utmost reverence, and that he knew that a generous liege such as yourself would be gracious enough to show me around.”

Tobias glanced up at his father before his throne as Eric’s arms fell back to his sides. His smile too seemed as forced as the ones that were plastered to the faces of his wife and sons. “Your father spoke truly, my dear princess. However, we have much to prepare before the wedding in the morning.” He waved a paw toward Tobias. “I hope it would not offend you to offer the role to your future husband?”

“Not at all, your majesty. I think he would be the perfect choice as well.” Her head turned and she offered Tobias another thin smile. “If, of course, you have no objections?”

“He does not.” Eric sat back down on his throne as Tobias frowned up at him. He’d been about to say as much himself, but in the wake of Eric’s interruption he found himself considerably less cooperative. “Our servants will have your room prepared, and will inform Tobias where to bring you when your exploration is complete.” His gaze fell on Tobias and sharpened considerably. “Take Zane, to ensure the princess’ protection.”

Tobias bowed his head again. No one for his own, he supposed. “Of course, father. It would be my pleasure.” When he straightened again, he offered his arm to the lioness. “If you would accompany me, I would be most happy to show you my home.”

Her smile warmed somewhat as she turned and nodded to the mouse holding the train of her dress. The mouse girl nodded and offered the princess the train, and she deftly tossed it over one shoulder as she hooked her arm in his. Zane, off to the side since his escort had concluded, also nodded to himself. “Then please, husband to be, lead on. I look forward to being as impressed by the character of your home as I am the character of its inhabitants.”

“I promise you that it is not quite that bad.” The response caused the lioness to snort before she could compose herself. Her free paw covered her muzzle as she giggled and nodded. The girl might have been far more practiced than he was at that age in dealing with other high-born individuals, but it was at least somewhat reassuring to know that she seemed to appreciate his efforts.

That would be enough. If he had to be pressed into a marriage against his will, he felt as though he could do a lot worse than someone who actually might appreciate him. “Well, the castle is a vast thing. We could spend hours checking every nook and cranny. Where would you like to begin?”

“Wherever you would suggest, so long as it is far from your family.” Her voice dropped to little more than a whisper as she smiled up at him. Tobias glanced back at his brothers and parents – each independently scowling at him with varying degrees of irritation – and couldn’t help but smile back. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“Trust me, nothing would make me happier.”

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The tour of the castle didn’t wind up taking the rest of the day as he had suggested, but it had been the work of at least an hour to show Sarina all the important or most impressive rooms. Tobias had almost gagged when the young lioness had insisted upon seeing his

bedchambers, only for her to have laughed his discomfort off and warn him that he would have to wait a few more years yet. His own laughter had been much more halfhearted as he'd tried to recollect himself.

Zane was absolutely silent the entire time, save for a couple of occasions when Tobias asked him to explain the history of the kingsblades and their axes. Sarina had seemed most interested in the latter, and she listened with a sort of rapt attention that reminded Tobias somewhat of his own studious endeavours. She'd confessed a great curiosity about any and every subject in the world, and had been more than happy to engage her escorts on a number of subjects from history to philosophy to science. The story of his lineage, traced all the way back to Vargor Rathin himself, she had found especially fascinating.

If he was honest with himself, Tobias might have even admitted that he'd not enjoyed a conversation with anyone in the castle quite so much in several years. But that would have forced him to confront the reality of whom precisely those conversations had been with, and that was something he was specifically uninterested in doing. The Ingsbren princess was good company at least, and that was a pleasant enough surprise to keep Tobias focused.

When at last they arrived at the guest quarters, Tobias turned to stand beside the door with a smile. "And this would be you. Right across the hall here is your father, so you are not too far from one another should you need." He nodded to one of the Ratholarin soldiers that stood stoically beside the doors. "And there will always be someone here, should you require anything at any time of the day or night. You need but to ask it."

"Then I will save some time and ask of you something now." She leaned back against the door and delicately pushed it open. "Please come in a moment, and sit with me. I would discuss a matter with you privately." She lifted her eyebrows, tail flicking as she regarded Zane. "If you would not mind, Master Kingsblade."

Tobias frowned, but he glanced up at Zane to find the wolf's eyes already on him. He shook his head, and Zane turned back to the princess with a soft smile of his own. "Of course not, princess. I will wait outside for when you are finished." He snapped his fingers and pointed down the hall, and the nearest of the door guards nodded his head and marched on his order.

As Zane smoothly took the guard's place, Tobias straightened up his coat and followed Sarina in. The room was much more neatly appointed than most of the quarters in the castle, though appointed with far less flair than those of the royal family. He watched Sarina drink in the details, and half expected her to declare it insufficient as he closed the door. She'd been not *unimpressed* during the tour, but she certainly hadn't seemed overly fond of what she'd seen either.

The lioness made her way over to the bed and sat delicately down on the edge. She brushed down her dress and pulled its long train from its place over her shoulder, allowing it instead to drape across her lap. "Sit with me, please. You must be tired as well, after all that walking."

Tobias nodded and made his way over, though he hesitated a moment before joining her atop the sheets. "To be honest, not so much. I used to spend a lot of time running throughout the castle."

She perked an ear. "You never struck me as an athletic type. That seemed more the domain of your brothers. Brett, in particular."

The tiger sighed and folded his paws over his lap. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe she just wanted a private moment to express her displeasure at being paired with him. "Brett does indeed prefer more physical pursuits, as does Fredrick. So does Irene, as a matter of fact."

"Yes, I noticed your sister's absence. I trust all is well?" She cocked her head to the side.

Tobias nodded as he glanced toward the window. "Yes, of course; you will doubtless see her at the wedding tomorrow. She simply has no time for matters of nobility." He smirked; she'd been always given so much more latitude than he. "Heh... she always fancied herself a swordfighter and traveling mercenary. A heroic warrior flitting from town to town like the old stories."

The lioness hummed to herself as she fiddled with her dress train. "I should like to meet her if given the chance. I imagine we might have much in common." Sarina shook her head. "But I did not invite you in to discuss your siblings and their proclivities. I invited you in to discuss *yours*."

The blood in Tobias' veins froze. He smoothed out his coat again most as an exercise in keeping his hands and mind busy for a moment than anything else. He reassured himself that her words could mean anything. "I'm quite certain I don't know what you mean."

She sighed as she turned toward him, and for the first time with Tobias that day the look on her face was one of boredom. "You are a young male with many very pointed rumours which swirl around him. I would know whether they are true or not, so that I might prepare myself accordingly." An eyebrow lifted. "And I would have you tell me truly, please. I believe we both deserve as much, do you not?"

Tobias caught himself frowning. "I'm not so certain that such a discussion of these matters is best undertaken with someone of your... age."

That didn't help. Her expression turned from boredom to indignation in an instant. "And I thought you a male of intellectualism. I am not asking you to bed me here and now, for such a thing *would* be most improper for my age." She tilted her head up as her gaze sharpened on him. "I am asking for a frank discussion on matters of mutual importance. Surely you can manage that."

"My apologies." Tobias bowed his head, even as he tried to control his shock with middling success. "I know that the people of Ingsbren give themselves over to the advancement of knowledge and understanding above much, but I... did not expect you to be so direct and knowledgeable about the ways of males and females."

"At my age, you likely were left in the dark; the Ratholarin way seems to be instilled ignorance of such things until it can be muddled through when one comes of age. It is not your realm's most flattering trait." She shook her head. "So. Honest and open discussion in our mutual interest. Your preference tends toward males, as the rumours go."

Once again, Tobias was floored. Not even so much anymore that she was able to so casually discuss the sexual pairings of individuals, but that such rumours had spread as far as

Ingsbren. “Please, *please* tell me that people don’t presume to speculate about which genders I would or would not bed.”

Sarina snorted in response. “If the common folk did not muse on the private lives of their nobles, however the fact and fiction line up, what else would they do with their time?” She leaned in toward him, and Tobias found himself easing back from her. “This is neither Lenkis nor Sylaria; such things are not extolled or condemned respectively as they are there. There is no shame in a male sharing his bed with another male, or a female doing the same with another female. Not in Ratholarin, and not in *Ingsbren*.”

When Tobias offered no more words in response, she drew back from him and folded her arms. “Is it to be silence after all? Would you prefer to know my preferences first so that we may be on equal footing?”

Tobias’ eyes went wide as he shook his head. “I would not have thought you old enough to have preferences yet! I... I cannot even believe you wish to have this conversation with me!”

“We are to wed, and it is expected of us both that an heir will be produced.” She frowned back at him as she curled her tail about to rest across her lap. The lioness began to idly stroke it as she looked out the window. “It is important to you, to me, to your father and to mine to ensure that we are able to accomplish that goal when the time comes.”

The princess’ frankness would have been endearing if not for the circumstances. It *had* been endearing during the tour, but now that they were alone and the subject matter had shifted so much further afield than Tobias had ever dared expect, he found himself terribly out of place. He licked across his muzzle and frowned as he tried to find the right words.

There weren’t any, not really. In the end, he could do little more than sigh again and settle on a question of his own. “What rumours specifically have you heard that you would wish to know the truth of, then?”

When he glanced up again, it was into Sarina’s softly smiling face. “The only rumour. A rumour I think you have studiously denied, but that betrays more than you know.” She waved toward the door. “It speaks of you engaging lustfully with a male servant. There are variants, of course; one speaks of a secret declaration of love shared, one speaks of a love unrequited... more than a few speak of a love scorned. They all mark you a tailraiser... such a crude term for such an allegedly enlightened age.”

That there was more than one rumour was surprising, but that none of them really caught the truth of it entirely was much less so. Tobias could only close his eyes and shake his head. Reality was never that simple. “There was no engagement of any lustful *anything*, Sarina. Let me make that clear from the outset.”

“Powerful words, and spoken with such shame.” When Tobias opened his eyes, it was to the sight of the princess staring right back at him. Her smile was gone, her expression suddenly unreadable. “Or perhaps regret is what colours them so.”

The growl slipped out before he remembered who he was talking to, but the lioness seemed not to be put off by the display. “I had a friend. A single, solitary friend in this place as I grew, and yes. He was indeed a servant. Such fraternisation was forbidden, and yet we grew... close.”

She didn't reply. Tobias was grateful for that much; at least it showed she was willing to just sit and listen to the answer she wanted. "Nothing developed in the manner you speak of, but we were... affectionate, as boys. Physically so, but not... not like that." His eyes narrowed. "My brothers would sooner spit on one another than offer even a hug. We were different. *I* am different."

"I am glad of this." Tobias blinked, but Sarina shook her head and waved toward him. "I do not mean to interrupt; please forgive me. Continue, if you would."

He nodded back as much out of reflex as anything. "He made no anguished declaration of love, or whatever nonsense makes the rounds beyond the castle. He never had to tell me of his feelings." Tobias' jaw tightened. "But I had a duty to my family and my kingdom. This is something he could not understand. We parted on unpleasant terms."

Tobias allowed his gaze to drop back down again. The last thing he'd wanted to do was think about William, and yet there he was, all but forced to do so. If it wasn't for the fondness he had for those memories he had of the time before their lives had become more complicated, he might have sought out some means of excising them. "My regret is for a lost friend. My regret is for... messy circumstances. My regret is that he couldn't see the harm his presence in my life caused me, for all the good he had done."

When he glanced up at Sarina, the princess just looked bored. He frowned as she lay back down with a sigh. "I like you, Tobias. I want you to know that before I say anything more on the subject." Her head rolled to the side to bring him back into her view. "Your brothers are brutes at the best of times, and I am certain you know that to be true. Your father's vision is narrow, and your mother... well, her reputation speaks for itself. You are a warm and welcome balm compared to the barbarism all too common in the blood of Vargor, and I appreciate that."

The tiger's eyes narrowed. Most people wouldn't dare insult his family to that depth and certainly not to his face, but at the same time she made a solid point. The lioness was blunt, but not inaccurate. "And yet, I sense there is more."

"Mmm. Most wise." She closed her eyes and faced the ceiling. "I sympathise with your loss. I understand – at arm's length, of course – how this most unpleasant business has hurt you. I even find myself wishing I could do something more to help you, but words alone are all I can do for the next few years. I implore you then to heed them well." The princess' eyes opened again, but they didn't focus on Tobias. "I need you to bed a female, and well prior to our wedding."

Silence reigned in the room. Tobias continued to lean in; the words left sitting in his ears for far too long. It was such an absurd thing to have heard – such an absurd notion for her to suggest! – that he couldn't have heard right. "I'm sorry, did you-"

"Yes, I did." She sat up again and turned to face him. The lioness curled her legs up under herself and reached out with her paws toward him. Tobias gingerly took them into his as she stared him down. "A maid would be best, but a whore would do if none in the castle are suitable to your tastes." The lioness' eyes raked him over again. "A feline partner is out of the question, of course; we must limit the chances of you siring bastards for the obvious complications such a child could cause. Perhaps a canine, or... I did notice several mice and rats on staff, and they *are* quite petite. You-"

“Hold on, hold on.” Tobias brought his paws up to cover his face. He exhaled sharply. How had his life come to this? How had he found himself there, discussing an affair he should start with his yet-underaged bride to be? Had he lost his mind entirely? “I... please, princess, this is... it’s...”

“It’s clearly doing your head in. I am quite aware, and it is for this reason that noble-born scions in Ingsbren are taught at a young age the physicalities of coupling, the politics involved, and to maintain a detached attitude toward it.” He ears twitched as she regarded Tobias closely. “You need to bed a female who is least likely to bear you children. One, maybe two if you feel you could manage.” One ear perked higher. “Your tastes *do* include the female form, do they not? You will not have any trouble with me when I am of age?”

Tobias gulped. If he was honest he’d never given it much thought. That feelings and urges when they’d arisen had been tied so intrinsically to William had left him unable to consider much of anyone else. “I don’t see why I would.”

Her stare turned a little colder. “That is not a reassuring answer, and just confirms that this course of action is necessary.” She nodded to him once and stood from the bed once more. Tobias scrambled to follow suit. “Your virility and masculinity are in question because of the crass and cruel rumours that strip you of both. You must not only do this, but be caught doing this so that all doubt be removed. Otherwise *I* will be as much a laughingstock as you, and I promise you that I am much less forgiving of such things.”

The prince’s jaw was left agape as Sarina turned and made her way over to the door. It wasn’t until she reached it that he managed to find his voice again. “Wait, what do you mean ‘caught’ doing this? You expect me to be *seen* like that? In... that circumstance?”

“If you intend to clear yourself of these rumours, then yes.” She sighed and paused at the door, before turning back around to face him again. “In truth, I care little for where your tastes lie. If they include me, so much the better for our mutual standing. If they exclude females entirely, then we need only succeed insofar as an heir is born. Perhaps a precautionary second child to serve as I have my father. After that however, you can bed as many male-folk as you like. It would be cruel of me to deny you that if that is truly your preference.” Her eyes narrowed to shining slits. “But whatever started these rumours of you must be put to bed. If you would entertain an affair with a male, you will alert me and we will determine the most discrete manner in which your appetites can be attended so that your standing – and consequently mine – is not damaged.”

As much as the lioness had suggested that she had a lot in common with Tobias’ sister, the tiger rather thought that she must have had more in common with his mother. Her ruthless, logical evisceration of the problem before her was impressive, and all the more so for her age. It was equally terrifying. To earn her ire would be a foolish thing indeed. “You have not spoken on your own desires.”

“There is nothing to tell in that regard. My interests are simple.” She turned back to the door and pulled it open. The princess stood aside and nodded to him. “I am the heir to my kingdom. Anything that strengthens it is my goal. Anything that weakens it... will be dealt with.” Her head tilted up again. “I believe you will be a strength, Tobias. Thank you for speaking honestly with me.”

It was a dismissal, but not without at least a measure of reassurance. Better to be a strength in her mind than a weakness. “It is my pleasure, and my sincere hope that we might both be a strength to one another in the years to come.” Tobias made his way to the door, but paused long enough to bow to the princess. “Shall I come collect you for dinner?”

“Please.” She returned the bow, and a warm smile was spread across her face as it lifted once again. “And thank you also simply for your conversation; I found it to be most stimulating. Good day, Prince Tobias.” She stepped back into the room.

The door didn’t begin to close until Tobias had backed fully into the corridor. It was somewhat gratifying to see the smile on Sarina’s face not fade in the least before she was lost to his view. He was left simply staring at the door as it closed before him.

Where was he even to begin processing that? He stared at the door even as his mind was miles upon miles away. Everything of the conversation was a head-spinning blur. The brazenness of the princess. The confrontation of those accursed rumours. *The suggestion of an affair!* Tobias felt as though his head might pop off and roll down the hall; a pressure was building inside him that he had no release for. How much worse would that be once their wedding came and went?

He must have been there staring for a long while, because the sound of Zane coughing drew his attention up. The wolf’s expression was focused, head tilted ever so slightly. “My prince? Are you well?”

“I... am not sure.” He turned and started to make his way down the hall. Zane fell into step beside him, and waved the guard that had formerly stood watch over Sarina’s door to resume his post. “She is a... brilliant and wise girl, for her age. Far smarter than I, I fear.”

“You discredit yourself.” The wolf frowned as Tobias began to move faster. “Yet you remain unsure if you are well or not. Clearly your legs are working.”

Tobias winced. Was it that obvious? He tried to slow himself down as the princess’ guard passed them by. His voice dropped lower. “She sought reassurance, Zane, because the rumours your son caused have spread even so far as *Ingsbren*.”

Zane froze where he stood. He planted both booted feet on the ground and didn’t move an inch until Tobias turned toward him. Even then, the wolf was stoic and statuesque as he stared down the prince. “You claim William is the cause of these rumours to *me*? To one who knows better; who has known you both since your respective births?”

The tiger grit his teeth, but a flicker of guilt stole the response from his muzzle. “Are you making an accusation against me, kingsblade?”

A growl rumbled deep in Zane’s chest, and Tobias locked his jaw as the urge to retreat struck him. Zane’s expression didn’t shift, but the irritation boiled out of him in that low, throaty sound. “William is not at fault. *You* are not at fault. You know these both to be true, so do not try to fool either of us now.”

“It hardly matters anymore anyway whose fault it is.” Tobias glanced down the hall. There was no one else really nearby, but the castle was almost always busy. Privacy wouldn’t last, and despite his obvious biases toward his son Zane had always proven to be a reasonable and honourable source of counsel. “She had a solution I’d not considered. Something I

wouldn't consider." When the kingsblade didn't reply but merely quirked a curious eyebrow, Tobias made another surreptitious glance around.

Still, no one leaped out to announce themselves. Unease still flooded the tiger as he leaned in closer to Zane. "She... suggested I bed some female. A maid, or a... a whore."

Zane's stare lingered longer than Tobias found comfortable. A part of him thought that the wolf was just considering what he'd just said, and the rest of him wondered if he was just unnerving him to mess with Tobias' mind. He finally folded his arms and nodded once. "Inspired."

"Insp... what are you..." Tobias shook his head in disbelief. How was *that* Zane's response?! He leaned up closer and dropped his voice even lower. "Is it not wrong – cruel and immoral at the *least* – to have an affair with some maidservant? To dally with a random whore out in the city?" The tiger bared his teeth as Zane smirked at him. "Is it not *beneath* a prince?"

"I suppose *she* would be beneath the prince if all went well." The wolf's smirk grew.

Tobias glared at him.

When it was clear he wasn't going to earn a chuckle from his master, Zane's smile slipped. "Preaching morality is all well and good. Being seen as chaste and honourable, yes. Good qualities to have. But your problem is that any sense of chastity is already far beyond you, thanks to those rumours. And as you are yet unwed, and of age..." He shrugged. "Sarina is wise indeed. I wonder if she came up with the idea herself, or if her father had some say in it."

That thought was equally unpleasant to Tobias. "How can I be expected to do this? It goes against all I have been taught! All I believe to be true!"

"A prince who cannot bed a female is no prince at all. Children are the lifeblood of dynasty." The wolf's head tilted the other way. "Fredrick must produce an heir to the Ratholarin throne. You must produce one to the Ingsbren throne. Word getting out that you were sleeping with an attractive female would do much to damage the rumours that surround you."

"I don't *care* about the rumours!" Tobias bit out every word as his anger surged to the surface.

A look at Zane's face told him that the wolf didn't believe a word of that. Honestly, neither did Tobias. Still, he was not prepared for the kingsblade's question. "If that were true, you would never have sent William away so."

It cut deep, slicing right to the bone. Tobias' heart lurched as the anger left him, supplanted by a wave of sadness that set his tail to twitching. "That's not fair."

"I agree." Zane bowed his head. "But you told me of your betrothed's plan for a reason. If you would disregard my counsel, such is your right. If you wish me dismissed-"

"No. That... won't be necessary." Tobias sighed. Zane was as infuriating as his son at times, but perhaps right then that was what he needed. Someone who would point out the flaws and benefits of a plan that was so far outside his comprehension that he was still reeling from the prospect of it. "Please, stay. I would hear what you would do."

Zane cleared his throat as Tobias started down the hallway again. “I am no prince. Not noble-blooded and born. What land I hold is a gift from your father. I cannot say whether any course of action I prescribe would be the right one for you.”

More honesty, as if Tobias hadn’t had enough of that already. Still, he reminded himself again that it was precisely what he needed “I appreciate that Zane, but you know more of the way of the world than I do. If I am to figure out what to do, it will not be alone.”

The wolf huffed to himself, but nodded as he followed along after Tobias. He turned his eyes forward as a servant rounded the corner. One of the rat girls that Sarina had noted earlier; Tobias’ mind began to turn. Perhaps she would-

He sighed as he cut that line of thought right there. It was nonsense. Insanity. Depravity to begin to look at the castle’s servants as potential conquests for his bedchambers. He didn’t want them. They didn’t want him. The idea of propositioning some random female – or worse still, for feeling like he ought pressure her – into his bed revolted him to his core.

The thought did briefly enter his mind that perhaps Sarina had a point. He’d not looked at any females as he’d matured. His free time had been spent, wherever it could, with William. He’d adored the servant boy. He’d wanted nothing more than to be close to him. And then, as his feelings and urges both grew... well, he knew how that had turned out. Perhaps if he’d been given a choice, he *would* have been with William. Perhaps males were where his tastes did truly lie.

Or perhaps he just had nothing to compare to. William had been a fixture in his life for so long that it had left Tobias empty in his absence. Maybe Sarina’s plan would put that to rest. Perhaps bedding a suitably receptive servant or a whore who could be paid for discretion was best. Maybe it was the suitable option. Maybe it was ideal.

It still didn’t calm the churning in his guts, nor in his mind. Nothing, he feared, would do that.