

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART ONE

88th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 20 AoE

Pleasure. *Danger*.

The two thoughts were inextricable as consciousness returned to Tobias and salacious dreams became salacious reality. He blinked sleepily as he lay in bed, his mind conjured to awakening by the gentle rocking of hips against him. He could feel the shifting body wrapped in his arm as he lay on his side; could hear the desperate panting for breath that came along with it. Shivered at the sensation of his malehood, hard and dripping into the sheets of his bed as it sawed between soaking wet thighs. They burned hot around his malehood, and for a moment he allowed himself the delicious pleasure of that friction as the hyena in his bed grunted with need.

But then her fingers traced down along his shaft and pressed his tip in on her grind back, and suddenly he wasn't just idly grinding against her but *inside* her. That heat, so much more intense than he usually dared to sink into, welcomed him and stole a moan from his muzzle, and before he could stop himself he clutched Juni tight and bucked forward. He sank himself as completely as he could in that position inside her, sheathing himself in that needy passage and holding there.

Her grunts turned into lustful, delighted moans as she shook and shuddered against him. Her other paw lifted and reached back to stroke against Tobias' cheek. "F-forgive me..."

Oh, to be able to do that. Tobias felt his balls twitch and his cock throb as he grit his teeth. It'd be so easy. So deliciously, awfully easy to stay there. To roll her onto her belly. Grab her hips and rut the needy maidservant until neither one of them could walk. Tug her tail out of the way and give her exactly what she wanted. The thought was nearly overwhelming.

Nearly. His jaw locked as he slid a paw to her hip and squeezed tightly, and then pulled himself back. Her plaintive whine and a quick grind back of her hips – the latter at least stalled out by his paw – almost broke his resolve, but a few more inches and he was free. His tip lingered for a dangerous second just barely within her need-enflamed folds, and he grunted as he rolled onto his back. His malehood slid smoothly back from between her thighs and smeared her juices across the sheets that covered him, tenting them with his hardness. "You know I forgive you."

"I just... need it... so bad." Lewd squelching sounds turned Tobias' head. The hyena's paws were back beneath the sheets, ostensibly between her legs as she pawed at her sex with reckless abandon. The sounds of her efforts and her moans continued to fray Tobias' resolve, but he couldn't let himself be tempted further. A damp spot spread from where his shaft propped up the sheets as he leaked into them. "I'm sorry..."

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for.” He leaned in to gently kiss the back of her neck, and she shuddered once again. It’d be so easy to just roll her over... “But you ought to know better. You’re in heat. We can’t.”

“A girl can dream.” The words were a breathy sigh as she continued to feverishly work her fingers to slake her need. Tobias knew from experience that she wouldn’t be able to.

Equally, he knew that he couldn’t be the one to help her, not in the way they both wanted. Instead he squeezed the sheets with both paws and stared up at the ceiling. That tantalising, teasing scent; those heady moans of need; the lingering warmth that clung to his shaft were all temptation that he couldn’t let himself fall into. He had done, only once, when they’d begun. The memories of those nights filled his mind and his shaft grew all the harder.

But then he heard Juni’s breath hitch, and she squeaked. That was it, he knew from experience. A moment later she shook and shuddered, no doubt gushing across the sheets of Tobias’ bed as she rocked herself into an orgasm. He could only listen and watch. Listen, because there was no choice. Watch, because he couldn’t look away.

It was almost a full minute before Juni was able to breathe evenly again, let alone speak. Tobias knew that while she recovered he had a brief window to escape, and that if he didn’t he would not only reek of her heat until he could bathe – and thus sport an erection for all in the castle to admire until such time as he did – but would be all the more likely to succumb and spend his day dumping as much of his seed into her receptive body as his own would allow.

He crawled out of bed as best he could, just barely able to dodge the desperate grasping of one of the hyena’s slick paws. A glance at the window showed the sun already well up; he’d be late. It would be easy and honest to blame Juni the night before for his tardiness, but somehow Tobias doubted that excuse would work on his father. The hyena sighed as he rose, malehood on full display with his stretch. “Must you go?”

“You know I must. Trust me, I would... *desperately* love to stay.” He shook his head as he took a few steps from the bed to a nearby washbasin. There he knelt down, pulled a cloth that hung from its edge into the water, and soaked it. His words contained not even a hint of a lie. Heat or no, he wasn’t going to look forward to the day ahead of him. “And if I don’t get up now and leave immediately, I’ll do precisely that.”

“Won’t catch me complaining.” She rolled over in the bed to watch him, sheets bundled up about her breasts as Tobias quickly began to wipe down his shaft and the immediate area around it. “Shame, though. The things I’d do to you right now would make whores blush.”

Tobias shuddered. He didn’t doubt that for a second, and he knew well that he would miss that. Sarina, he doubted, would be quite so... enthusiastic. He wondered if anyone else in the world could be as voracious as Juni was. “Yes, well...”

As he finished washing up his nethers, he chanced a glance back at the hyena. The needy pout on her face had vanished, replaced with an almost pleading look in her eye. “I know it’s almost time. You don’t have to pretend you don’t know where you’re going.”

Technically, Tobias supposed, he didn’t know where he was going. The morning meeting had been planned for a week, but it was only suspicion that it had something to do with his impending wedding. That was the thought that sent his malehood receding back into

his sheath. “We don’t know it’s to plan for her arrival. Or if she’d be averse to you still offering your... unique services.”

That certainly drew a frown from the hyena. Had he said something wrong? Didn’t Juni want to keep going? “You’ll have little need for me, I fear, with a younger female in your bed.”

The prince sighed as he stood up and made his way toward the bed again. “She’s not a replacement for you, you know.” He had to reach down as he watched her eyes lock on his softening malehood, muzzle slowly opening as she leaned toward it. He palmed the top of her head to push her reluctantly back, though the retreat of his shaft did stall out for a moment. “And I didn’t choose her. I chose you. Don’t you forget that, now.”

“I didn’t forget.” She licked her lips and smiled, even though her eyes stayed firmly between his legs rather than on his face. “Are you *sure* you can’t come back to bed?” She reached down to slide the sheets along her body, baring herself for the tiger. Her legs spread wide to reveal her glistening slit and soaked thighs, her heat scent freed to fill his nostrils again. One breath and Tobias couldn’t help but groan. “You might have to settle with her... but I could sure use a little going away present. You could put one in me.”

“Nnnngh... *no*. No, I can’t.” Tobias set his jaw and forced himself to step back again as his shaft made its best attempt to roar back to full hardness. It twitched, bobbing in the air and drooling pre again as it firmed anew at the display; her legs spread wider as her fingers dipped down inside herself. He could replace those fingers with his cock. Sink down onto her and into her and- “I can’t, Juni. I can’t.”

“But you want to.”

“By every perverted old god and lustful demon that ever graced the temples of Lenkis yes I want to.” He hissed as he forced himself to back quickly away from her. He almost tripped over the washbasin, and quickly knelt back down again to scrub the rest of himself. Her scent. He had to get that heat scent off himself. “I want to rut you until you can’t move. I want to seed you so deep you can’t *stop* bearing my children.”

She moaned in response and Tobias shuddered as he forced himself to stay right where he was, cloth in paw as he vigorously rubbed himself down. His malehood remained frustratingly, desperately firm. It knew what it wanted and wasn’t burdened by station and responsibility. “So get over here and *do it*.”

“No.” Every begging note in Juni’s voice seemed crafted specifically to tempt the tiger, and he was deathly afraid of how well it was working. He couldn’t let her break him. It could ruin him. Ruin her. Both of them. “No, Juni. I can’t.”

With his back to her he couldn’t see the pleading in her eyes, but he could almost imagine her stare on him nonetheless. The hyena didn’t argue, and so much the better. Tobias wasn’t sure how much more of that he could take. Instead, he savoured the silence as best he could and used the reprieve to wash up as best he could. There’d be no way to scrub her scent from him entirely, but if he could scrub enough of it away he wouldn’t turn the meeting into an absolute disaster. At least her silence allowed him to soften fully, small mercy that that was.

Tobias knew she was disappointed. He was, too, and she knew it. As he swiftly dressed he made a distinct point of still not looking at her. Too much risk. Too much danger. He didn’t

dare turn back to her until he was completely clothed, and even then he was grateful that she'd tugged the sheets back up to cover herself. Juni's chest remained bare, breasts resting on top of the sheets and concealed only in part by a lazing arm. "I'm sorry. You've been the best part of my life these last few years. You know if I could..."

She smiled back at him. "You shouldn't worry about it. I know you're just doing what you have to, and I do know what you'd prefer." She lay her head back down again and closed her eyes with a deep sigh. "Just promise that when this heat's done and before she arrives, you give me a chance to say goodbye properly. I need that. I think you do, too."

"If I have any say in it at all." He started back toward the bed as her eyes opened once more, but had to stop himself. He couldn't get too close, not without running the risk of smearing her scent all over him again... or worse. Instead he reached up to touch his lips with a pair of fingers and waved them toward her.

She mirrored the gesture with a smile and nodded. "I'll see you later then, handsome. Don't let your brothers push you around."

He smiled back at her and made his way to the door. For a moment he lingered there, hesitant. The tiger could turn back around. Shuck his clothes, ditch the meeting, and give her what she wanted. What he wanted, if he was honest. The thought was tantalising in the extreme, and his sheath thickened in response to the thought.

That was the warning he needed to snap out of it, though. Rationality and reason. That was what he needed; not lust and impulse. Tobias pushed the door open and smiled at Juni one last time before he stepped into the corridor and closed the door again.

The cool air of the castle halls greeted him, absent the scent of a needy female in heat. It was almost a relief to the tiger, and he breathed it deep as he turned and started to make his way to the spires. Clarity of mind was key, if he was going to plan a wedding. However much it would spoil what he'd developed with Juni, there was no escaping the necessity of it.

But the hyena was right. He did owe her, and himself, a pleasant end to their little affair. It was a thought that Tobias was certain would follow him all the way through the rest of his day.

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He'd not made for the spire immediately, of course. Lingering thoughts and memories of Juni's scent had made it less than ideal for him to present himself before his parents and discuss his bride to be. Instead he'd taken to roaming the castle itself for the better part of ten minutes, a long walk that took him to almost every part of his home a couple of times over. It'd taken that long for him to clear his mind and focus on what would doubtless be the task of the moment. He'd be later, but more presentable.

Arrival at the top of the spire showed Tobias more familiar faces than he'd expected though, and the sight of one in particular made him doubt the purpose of the meeting instantly. His mother and father sat in those absurd, small replicas of their thrones. Fredrick and Brett sat in the two smaller chairs that had been brought beside Eric's, but none of them held Tobias' interest like the final person in the room.

“Iannus.” He smiled as he looked the old rat up and down. The scholar glanced away from the conversation he’d had with the king, and his eyes all but lit up at the sight of Tobias. “It has been far too long, sir.”

The rat’s muzzle split in a broad grin as he turned more fully to face Tobias, and made his way slowly over to offer his paw. “It is good to see you again, dear boy. By goodness, look at how you’ve grown. Such a strapping lad!” He looked back at Eric as Tobias took and squeezed the offered paw. “You must be very proud, my liege.”

Fredrick snorted. “Not really.”

Tobias glared at his brother, and the comment obviously took the wind out of Iannus’ sails. The rat frowned as he patted Tobias’ paw. However, instead of arguing, Eric sat up a little higher in his chair. “Do you know why you are here, Tobias? And two hours late, really?”

Iannus drew his paw back and stepped to the side as Tobias looked up at his father. One of the king’s arms hung limp at his side, but there was a twitch to his fingers that drew a frown across Tobias’ face. It wasn’t getting better. “Apologies, father; I had a... late night.” He straightened up a little. “I had thought we were to plan for my wedding and the rite of new life. But now...” He glanced briefly at Iannus. “Now I am not so certain.”

Eric cleared his throat, but swiftly launched into a series of wracking coughs. As he struggled to sip at a cup of water offered by Veronica, Brett stood up. “I know you don’t care to listen to the reports of rebel activity, but they’re getting bolder. And it’s worse even than that.”

“There’s a cell in the north that we believe is headed by a shaman.” Fredrick’s words were even and cool, but his eyes flicked briefly to Iannus. “A Lenkis shaman, channelling magic. Such deviancy cannot stand.”

Tobias couldn’t help but also, however briefly, look at Iannus. The rat fidgeted, paws wrung as he directed his gaze firmly to the floor. He wondered what it must have felt like to have his native culture called deviancy. Perhaps he was used to such language from Fredrick. “Are we certain the shaman is a threat?”

“The existence of any shaman to the old gods is a threat.” Eric’s voice was coarse, but stronger. He set the cup of water back in Veronica’s paw and brushed a finger across his lips. “Especially one channelling magic. It is a violation of everything that we have become. Not just here in Ratholarin, but in the greater world as a whole. This is the Age of Enlightenment, Tobias. We must be beyond the whims of capricious gods and the mortal wielders of their power.”

Again Eric coughed, and Tobias bowed his head to try and hide his frown. “Father, forgive me, but... you do not plan to lead the campaign yourself, do you?”

When he glanced up again, it was to a fierce glare that projected nothing but strength and irritation. “You think me invalid? Unfit?”

The tiger knew he’d crossed a line before the first word had left his father’s muzzle. He caught the flash of Fredrick’s teeth as the heir smirked at Tobias’ humiliation. Typical. “Of course not, father. Please forgive me. I meant only to express concern, not offend.”

“Then you chose your words poorly.” He snapped his jaws at Tobias before he slumped back into his chair again. Even that expression of authority had drained him somewhat. Such things had only grown more common in recent weeks. “You are here because the campaign will need your knowledge.”

Tobias’ eyes narrowed. That didn’t make any sense; this was the first conversation like this he’d ever experienced. “I don’t understand.”

“That follows, naturally.” Fredrick rolled his eyes as Tobias narrowed his. “You and Iannus are here because of your studies into the history of our region. Iannus as an expert. You, to clarify anything that you remember.” He smirked. “Brett and I were too busy with more important matters to bother ourselves with the history of lesser peoples.”

The younger prince didn’t rise to the bait, but he felt his teeth grind regardless. “Then I will defer to the knowledge of the esteemed Master Iannus in this matter.” He nodded to the rat, who smiled at the compliment. “All that I know came from him. I would be of little help in this conversation, I fear, and my time would be better spent elsewhere.”

Again Fredrick snorted. “Doubtless looking to leave your whore waddling.”

Veronica sighed and pressed both of her paws to her face. “Fredrick, dear, a little respect for decorum if you will.”

“Of course, mother, I would be most happy to do so. Doubly so, if Tobias could keep his cock in his pants and not fill this chamber with the heat-stink of his-”

“That is *enough!*” She all but roared the word, teeth bared as she gripped the arms of her throne tightly. She didn’t turn toward him but shouted straight ahead, her eyes ablaze with fury. Tobias took an involuntary step backward. That tone meant trouble.

Clearly Fredrick knew the same. He fell silent in an instant and, though he didn’t exactly look put in his place, his muzzle remained very distinctly closed. Tobias watched him for a few moments longer, just hoping to make sure Fredrick knew he was relishing this new silence before he turned back to his father again. “Planning my wedding, as I was *going* to say.”

Again Eric cleared his throat, but the shake of his head sent a spike of confusion through Tobias’ thoughts. “There will not be a wedding. Not yet.”

He blinked. What in the world did *that* mean? “Father?”

“We have traced the line of the shaman we believe is at the head of this rebel cell, and believe they are of... especially auspicious blood.” The king lifted his good arm to trace a pair of fingers once more across his lips. “That means a high shaman. And that means knowledge of their ways could be necessary to dredge them out.”

“I cannot go.” Iannus’ words broke into the silence that followed Eric’s; the king’s muzzle remained open, working at the air without any sound coming out. “I am far too old for a military march, I am afraid.”

“And your brothers, as you have heard, focused their efforts on studies more to their strengths.” Veronica finished for her husband, and she reached across between their thrones to gently grasp his good paw. He squeezed it back, muzzle closed at last as he nodded to her.

“And before you can ask, no. I am not sending Irene on a military march.” She shuddered in place. “Weeks of marching with all those males? I shudder to think what they might do to her.”

Brett choked back a laugh. He didn’t say it as Tobias’ eyes fixed him with a fierce glare, but the joke didn’t need to be said in order to be funny to probably everyone there save for the younger prince. Even Eric cracked a little smile. Iannus, to his credit, simply closed his eyes and sighed. “I wouldn’t wish warfare on her, her enthusiasm notwithstanding. But my engagement with Sarina-”

“Is something I care about less than securing our northern provinces.” Eric’s smile slipped as he shook his head. “This is not a request, Tobias. Nor is it a favour. It is not a vacation or a research expedition. It is war, and it is an order from your king.” He frowned. “Torvin and Sarina will deal with it. If they do not like it, they can try to find a better match for her. They will not.”

The youngest tiger worked his jaw slowly. “And am I to perhaps be assigned a kingsblade for this endeavour? For my protection against these dangerous rebels?” He looked up at once again Eric’s muzzle worked at the empty air.

Veronica sighed as she once again picked up where Eric could not. “You will not be in any danger, dear. Two companies have been prepared to journey north with you. The campaign will take no more than a season or two, and most of that ought to be the journey there and back.” She shook her head. “Be grateful that you will likely be fighting in the Verdant Growths. The plainslands are discomfiting in the Shining Light.”

“I’m quite certain my gratitude will overflow.” Tobias couldn’t help but frown as he looked at her. “Surely this is a task that can be assigned to another. Another scholar, perhaps.” He glanced at Iannus. “You must have colleagues who have the knowledge required to be of assistance in this matter. Can we not send for them?”

“Such a thing would delay our counteroffensive.” Fredrick’s eyes narrowed as he leaned forward in his chair. “If knowledge does not draw out the shaman, then suitable bait will do. This is why you will go, and not some random scholar.”

Tobias felt his breath catch in his throat. “Excuse me? *Bait*?” He glanced at his parents, but they both nodded along. They were *in favour* of this madness?

Fredrick, naturally, had a grin on his face that ran almost ear to ear. Typical. “This is not a negotiation, brother. Father has made his decision, and he was quite adamant about it. You are to go. You. No one else. Knowledgeable enough to draw the shaman out... and just barely valuable enough to justify their exposure.”

Tobias held his eldest brother’s stare for a moment before he turned back to Eric. The king nodded once, but he leaned forward and stroked his chin as he regarded Tobias. “You are more than bait. The knowledge you possess will be invaluable to this campaign, and to the soldiers who heed it. There is no one else I would trust with this task, my son. You *can* do this, for me. I have faith in your abilities.” Despite himself, Tobias felt his pride swell. Praise was such a rare thing.

It faded away a moment later as Eric nodded to Fredrick. “I would not send you into such danger if I could avoid it. But Fredrick is my heir, and he cannot be risked. Brett has

matters of the utmost importance in Ratholarin that I must send him on.” He nodded once. “And of course, you *do* serve as a fine lure if that knowledge becomes unnecessary. You are perfect for this role.”

Of course.

Tobias drew himself upright and folded his arms. The decision had already been made to risk his life and he didn’t have a choice in the matter. Again. When would the day come? When would it arrive, that wonderful day when he was finally about to decide what he wanted to do with his life? Not to simply be sent goodness knew where on the whims of his family, perhaps even to die so very far from home?

He thought about arguing, but he thought about it in the same way as he’d thought about remaining in bed with Juni. A flight of fantasy, and little more. No choice. Never a choice. “When am I to leave?”

“As soon as possible.” Veronica nodded once as she folded her arms. “Commanders are being organised to determine the best companies for the deployment. If not tomorrow, then the day after you will meet with them, and with any luck whatsoever, leave within the day.”

Fredrick muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like *never to return* but Tobias couldn’t be quite certain. He still rolled his eyes at his eldest brother, but sighed and nodded to their mother. What more was there that he could say? No argument would sway them. “Then if you will excuse me, I will prepare what I can to be of most assistance in this endeavour.”

Eric nodded and grunted wordlessly in turn. He waved his good paw at Tobias, who bowed immediately and turned to leave. He did catch Iannus do the same, and he could hear the rat shuffle along behind him. Tobias held the door to the stairwell open for him as the rest of his family began to speak amongst themselves. “Oh, thank you my boy.”

Tobias nodded back to him and followed him into the stairwell. He waited until the door closed before he sighed. “And here I am again.”

“You are surprised?” Iannus frowned as he looked back over his shoulder at the tiger. “Come now, Tobias. You’re smarter than that. You know who they are. What they are.”

He blinked. All those years seemed to have weighed on Iannus since he’d last seen the rat. “They’re still my family.”

“Of course, of course. Pray forgive me, my prince. This old muzzle just doesn’t know when to shut itself anymore.” He made his way carefully down the stairs as Tobias followed along. “I would go myself if I could, dear boy.”

Tobias nodded slowly to himself. That made sense. “Yeah, if you were a valuable enough target to serve as bait.” The rat gave a quiet little chuckle, but there wasn’t even a hint of joy in the sound. “You’re from near there, aren’t you?”

He chuckled in response. “Not quite, but it’s much closer to Lenkis than most of Ratholarin’s demesne. I’ve not been back to the plainslands for a great many years, but that’s not the reason I would go if I could.” He paused in the stairwell to turn toward Tobias. “And why I’m glad it will be you. Perhaps a tragedy can be averted this way.”

The tiger frowned. “I don’t-”

“Your father, your brothers... they see the world only in black and white. In the rule brought about through conquest, and the service of the conquered.” He shook his head as he clasped his paws before him. “They seek to destroy the rebels, but the rebels are fighting back to preserve themselves, I have no doubt.”

Tobias swallowed. Hard. The words were treason and there was no doubt. Sympathy for rebels – rebels drawing power from shamanistic magic no less – was dangerous at best. “You recognise what you just said to me.”

“And I would say it again a hundred times more to be certain you hear me.” The rat twitched his big ears and shook his head again. “Master Tobias, I am not asking you to betray your lands and your home and your family. I would never do that. You know me better than that.”

“But?” He pursed his lips.

“But.” Iannus sighed as his shoulders and tail drooped. “But so much has already been lost, under your father and under his father before him. So much more will be lost when Fredrick ascends to the throne because they can only see threats to their perfect order.” He sighed low and deep. “War brings suffering, dear boy. That is all that it *can* bring, and the only difference in sides is the degree inflicted.”

Tobias folded his arms. The old scholar had a point, but that was the last thing he wanted to admit. Not so long as he was within the walls of the castle. “Lenkis maintained one of the greatest armies of the ancient world. Conquered its neighbours.”

Iannus nodded as he leaned back against the wall. There was a sparkle in his eye; the rat had always loved a good debate. “And then abandoned those ways in our own era of enlightenment. Guided by the light of the gods and their Aspects to create a society that endured without bloodshed for hundreds of years. Taken, and then liberated, all without a drop spilled, over and over again. Enduring.”

“Until Ratholarin.” The reminder tasted poor in Tobias’ muzzle, but the words needed to be spoken. Iannus had to remember.

And remember he did. The rat’s eyes fell again. Darkened. “Until Ratholarin. Yes.” He sighed. And started back down the stairs again. “War begets war, young master. If I have taught you nothing else, please promise that you will remember that alone.”

Tobias gave a nod of his own, even though the rat’s attention was on the stairs again. He’d always respected Iannus. He was intelligent and wise, and had always given Tobias the fair treatment that had been so rare for him as a child. His words were worth heeding.

But he had plenty of time to do so. Weeks. Months. And with a wedding no longer his responsibility to plan, he had little else to ponder. Merely what he would need, what he would do, and what the future held for him. Shamans, apparently. Shamans and war.

Or, at least for the moment, Juni. Bed with an insatiable hyena in heat was always an alluring prospect. Right then, for Tobias and with all that he’d learned about what awaited him, he’d take that gladly over just about anything else. Packing could wait, and research could be

done later. The day was yet young, and who knew? He could be dead in a few weeks time. He could never meet Sarina again. Never consummate their marriage and sire an heir.

If his whole future was at risk, he was going to spend the next few hours giving Juni more of a send-off than she could handle. At least he could enjoy *something* before he went.