

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART FIVE

54th Day of the Pure Snow, 20 AoE

Tobias hadn't been many places in his life. So much of his short existence had been spent within the confines of the castle in Sanwell. Even when his parents and brothers had attended events in nearby Sylaria or Ingsbren, he and his sister had often been left behind to 'keep an eye' on things. Which had been ridiculous in and of itself; when the king and his heir weren't present, his father had always turned administration of Ratholarin to his small council. Never to Tobias.

Which was fine by the prince, but that had left him woefully unprepared for Herovir. He had expected some dilapidated, broken down ruin of a once-great city; the razed capital of a formerly glorious kingdom. The expectation had been reinforced by the villages they'd encountered along the way; the further they drifted from Ratholarin, the less effort seemed to have gone into their restoration.

Herovir, it seemed, was where all the resources had gone.

Two great walls ringed the city, the inner taller than the outer. Guards wearing the Ratholarin crest patrolled the walkways on high, bows at the ready as they warily eyed the approaching army. Behind the gates – lowered though they were – Tobias could spot some of the tips of the glittering spires that had once represented the temples to the old gods. Briefly, he'd wondered what had happened to them and if they were still attended.

The great keep of Herovir was a shadow of its former self and barely rose higher than the walls after the siege of more than two decades prior. Even from a distance though, Tobias was able to make out the exquisite Lenkis-style stonemasonry, the Carisi work second only to the legendary masons of Lenkis. Their outer walls were utilitarian and spare, but the great keep itself was dripping with detail and history. It made Tobias' home seem bland by comparison. Part of him was excited for the chance to see it in person.

The host had stopped its advance just shy of what Commander Geoffery estimated to be the maximum range of the archers on the battlements. Tobias caught up to him in short order, a little out of breath as he stood at the commander's side. The fox glanced at him for a moment before he turned his eyes forward again. "My prince."

"Commander." He straightened himself up as he looked toward the gates. Even without them opening, he could see a small group of people assembled outside the city. Soldiers? Representatives? The shaman, perhaps? "Are we intending to stop here? Establish camp outside the city?"

The fox grunted noncommittally as he looked around the fortress city. "Not if we can help it, your majesty. I'd say a ways back. Something to allow us a fair position to fall back to if the siege line is broken."

Tobias blinked. What siege line? “I wasn’t sent here to oversee a siege of a Ratholarin city, Commander.”

“No, your majesty. But I need to be prepared for whatever situation may present.” He nodded to the group of people before the city. Tobias squinted; were they moving closer? “If we can accomplish this mission without having to lay siege to Herovir, I would prefer it. I don’t doubt my troops would, too.”

The tiger grit his teeth and nodded. “The last siege of Herovir lasted months, and my father brought to bear a force four times as great as this just for it. If this is even half the city it once was, we will not break in by force.”

“Not without starving them out first, my prince.” He nodded again to the small group, and Tobias was certain. They were definitely coming toward them. Traders, perhaps? Traveling south to Ratholarin’s central regions? No, that made no sense; most of the trade caravans in the Pure Snow were northbound, toward warmer climes. “How would you have me proceed?”

That was a loaded question. It depended entirely on the people before them and what their intentions are. Tobias growled to himself in thought for a second. “You and I will speak to them.”

Geoffery frowned. “With respect, I’m a commander. Not an ambassador.”

“And you and a couple of your most respectable warriors will accompany me as I handle that particular matter, thank you very much.” Tobias allowed himself a little smile. “Though I don’t doubt your capacity to be diplomatic should the situation call for it.”

The fox might have scoffed, but the half of his muzzle that Tobias could see still curled up in a smirk. “Let’s hope my brand of diplomacy isn’t what you need.” He turned back toward the formation behind him. “Ames, Barrett, Raoul. You’re with me. Jamis! Tell Victor, Daniel and Fogarty I want them coordinating a backstop in case things get messy.” He paused, and Tobias watched his eyes flick briefly toward him. “And tell Matris and William I want them on flanks, just in case.”

That explained the look. “If I may, Commander, William’s command of the Carisi tongue could be useful. My own skills are more than merely conversational, but I believe he is far more capable than I.”

“Raoul’s fully fluent in Carisi and William’s one of the best scouts we’ve got.” He shook his head as Tobias began to frown. “All due respect, your highness. Overrule me if you feel the need, but I know my soldiers. I know where best to place them. I’m sorry.”

It was a fair argument and not one that Tobias was interested in testing. Not with the greeting party drawing ever closer. “The apology isn’t necessary, Commander. I defer to your experience and wisdom.” He nodded once as three more soldiers – a goat, a wolf and a panther, all bearing the crests of lieutenants – arrived at their side. “Our escort appears ready. Shall we?”

“Yes, sir.” Geoffery nodded to the goat. “Raoul, on point. Barrett, Ames, on flanks. The prince is your charge.”

A reply of, “Sir,” went up from the three simultaneously, and they moved swiftly into the designated positions. The goat, Raoul, started off immediately at a relatively sedate pace. It was clear that he didn’t want to go too fast for Tobias. The tiger tried not to take it personally.

He did, however, manage to keep pace with the commander and the lieutenants as they escorted him closer. The nearer they drew, the clearer it was that this was in fact a greeting party. Two of them were soldiers; the halberds that they carried harkened back to those once wielded by the Carisi royal guard. One was a little mouse in simple garb, with an armful of parchment and a quill stuck in what had to be an inkpot strapped to his upper arm. The central figure though was a lean jackal.

His purple robes flowed like water around him as he moved, head held high with a sort of grace and poise that immediately made Tobias straighten up. The robes themselves were emblazoned with the Rathin sigil, but the pins that bound the robes by his neck shoulders depicted a blazing sun crossed by two stylised halberds. The mark of the kingdom of Caris.

Worn openly.

Tobias’ mind raced. He’d expected a city of people generally loyal to the Ratholarin cause. Begrudging, perhaps, but loyal. He’d expected grumbles and groans, but compliance in their efforts to find the shaman. Perhaps not at first, but eventually. He’d expected cooperation.

But there, faced with the jackal striding toward him with such confidence and purpose and with the emblem of his own fallen and subsumed kingdom pinned quite literally to his chest, Tobias knew he’d been wrong. A moment’s fear took hold. What if he was an assassin? What if they struck quickly to take him out, and then the commander of their army? What if Caris sought to strike there, now, and move to reclaim their glory?

The tiger forced those thoughts down. They wouldn’t help him in what he had to do, and they would only agitate him more than he already was. It was a blatant display. A proud display. Violence couldn’t be the answer, even if they struck first. Goading. It had to be designed to goad a response from the Ratholarin. It was too obvious to be anything else.

A glance aside showed that Geoffery had also noticed. His ears had tipped forward, hackles bristled. Around Tobias, the other soldiers seemed more on edge the closer they drew despite how they outnumbered the welcoming party. It wouldn’t take much. They’d react poorly if the wrong word was spoken, and who knew how that would turn out in the long term?

Tobias had to get ahead of it. He reached forward as he increased his pace and tapped Raoul’s shoulder. The goat immediately paused as Geoffery reached out toward the prince, but Tobias was already out of reach. He coolly slid before the goat just as they were about to meet their hosts. The prince swallowed hard as he produced the warmest smile he could.

The jackal came to a smooth halt before Tobias, just barely more than an arm’s length away. The prince tried to put out of his mind the reality that he wasn’t out of the range of the *halberds* as he bowed his head and fought to remember the words. He’d tried to so hard to learn them... <I bid you honourable greetings in the name of King Eric the Fourth of Ratholarin. I am Prince Tobias, and I am very pleased to meet you.>

A glance upward showed the mouse and the two armoured soldiers looked surprised. The soldiers shared a look between them, and the mouse’s eyes widened before they fixed on

the jackal. He simply bowed his head, apparently taking the language in stride. <I am Paulos, consul to Magistrate Allain, son of Nathaniel. The honour is mine.> The jackal swept his arms out wide and leaned forward in a deep bow. When his head rose again, it was to sweep his gaze across Tobias' escort as if looking for something. When it fell on the tiger again, the jackal actually gave the slightest of smiles. "Your Carisi is terrible."

"Your Rathin is excellent. Do you mind?" Tobias retuned the smile – the jackal's forwardness made the gesture all the more legitimate – as his counterpart shook his head. "Most grateful. This is Commander Geoffery, son of Landry. Lieutenants Raoul, Ames, and Barrett. I pray they forgive me; I know not the name of their sires to accord the appropriate respect."

"The forgiveness of the Ratholarin is legendary. I am certain you will be fine." Paulos' eyes flicked to Geoffery for a moment, and his smile turned a little cooler before his attention returned to Tobias. "Word has reached our esteemed magistrate of your northward march. We sincerely hope that it is not to repeat the atrocities of our fair city's recent past."

Geoffery growled under his breath, but Tobias raised a paw to silence him. Paulos was definitely getting the reaction from the soldiers that he intended. Now that Tobias knew what game the consul was playing, though? He smiled. "If that were the case, would we not have brought more soldiers? Force enough to assert our will and crush your fair city? Again?"

The little mouse scribe – for he had certainly been scribbling notes since the first words had been uttered – gasped audibly at Tobias' words. Even the jackal's smile slipped for a moment. "Were it my father's will, do you think that any of the remnants of your army would be able to stand against the might we would bring to bear? Do you not think he might have sent one of my brothers instead, with sword and spitted bile? Let us not toy with one another any more than is necessary, Paulos. Such things are exhausting." Tobias tilted his head up as the jackal's smile returned in full. <You know why we have come. This does not need to lead us to pain. Caris and Ratholarin can work together.>

Paulos looked Tobias up and down for a long moment, but his smile refused to flag. Eventually, he nodded. <Your father is a fool and a coward. But, perhaps in this instance, the wisdom of the gods touches him in sending you.> Tobias swallowed, but he offered a nod in turn. The insult was lingering bait. He wouldn't rise to it. <Very well. If you would have your army follow us, we would house and keep them within the walls. For their own protection, of course. The Carisi wilds are more dangerous than those you hail from.>

<Of course. Your hospitality is most welcome. We will be worthy of it, I swear on my father's name.> Again Tobias bowed his head, and the jackal returned the bow much deeper in turn. When the tiger lifted his head, Paulos had already begun to turn away. He watched the consul's robes flutter as he marched back toward the city's gate. The mouse scrambled to finish his script and plant his quill back into the inkpot before he turned and hurried along in turn.

The two halberd-wielding soldiers lingered a few moments more. Finally they took a step backward, turned toward one another on the heels, and then made back for the city as well. Tobias watched them go as Geoffery strode forward to stand beside him. "I didn't understand all too much of that, but I guess it's good?"

"I should hope so." Tobias turned toward the goat. Raoul stared back at him with a curious expression. "What do you make of it, Lieutenant?"

Raoul paused before he turned toward Geoffery. His voice was a low, surprisingly baritone thing that Tobias could almost feel in his bones. “Never seen a diplomat trade insults like that, sir. You caught the worst of it.” He paused as his eyes flicked to Tobias. “They want us in the city.”

“Unacceptable.” Geoffery shook his head sharply. “Once we’re inside, they surround us. I don’t care if we outnumber them two to one, it’s unfamiliar terrain and a local advantage. It’s not safe.”

“It would only be disrespectful and harm our chances of success if we don’t accept the invitation.” Tobias frowned at the fox as Geoffery stared at the backs of the Herovir delegation. “Their consul is Carisi. He wouldn’t have respected me if I had rolled over for his barbs. And we would have been in much deeper trouble if we had been nakedly aggressive.” He turned to Raoul. “Correct?”

The goat seemed surprised, but he nodded. Tobias’s eyes fell on Geoffery again. “Whatever happens now will give us the best chance of finding and stopping the shaman. There will be nowhere in that city they can hide, and we will have the time to learn the terrain. Ingratiate ourselves with the locals. Make allies. Gain information... if we put our best foot forward, of course. Sir.”

Geoffery’s frown deepened, but the fox started to nod regardless. “Alright. I don’t like it, but you make a fair point. We’ll play this game.” He turned his whole body to face Tobias and the tiger stiffened under the scrutiny. “But there’s no way I’m letting you go into that city without constant armed guard, your majesty. That is not negotiable.”

“The thought never entered my mind, Commander.” Tobias stroked his chin. Who to take? William came to mind instantly, but that was a terrible idea. Even if he was the best single fighter in all of Geoffery’s company, the hyena wouldn’t want the assignment. Better that he stay as far away from Tobias as he could manage.

His bear, though. Since he’d heard Daniel’s name, Tobias had asked around. He apparently commanded a small squad of exceptionally capable warriors. And, perhaps, Tobias could learn how to undo some of the damage he’d done with William if he learned from one who held the hyena’s favour. Well... that, or he would only dig himself into a deeper pit in William’s mind. One or the other.

Still, it was a practical decision as much as an emotional one and it wasn’t as though he could dig much deeper anyway. “A captain would be most suitable. One whose charges could rotate through the detail, the better to ensure there is always someone rested for duty.”

“Heh. Never had you pegged for a military mind, my prince. Good call.” Geoffery nodded. “I’ll assemble a list of my best for you.”

“There’s no need.” Tobias let his eyes roam the walls of Herovir again. Soon he’d see them from the inside. The city at the heart of a culture his father had worked so hard to stamp out, fighting to keep a spark of it alive through shamanism and sorcery. Home of an existential threat to Ratholarin sovereignty. Home to William’s people.

“I have just the one in mind.”

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It took more than the afternoon to begin organising the Ratholarin forces to enter Herovir. Too many of the rank and file began to react exactly as Tobias had feared at the recognition of the old Caris capital's retention of their old ways. He'd instructed Geoffery to keep his people in line, but the longer they stayed in the city the more Tobias was certain it would eventually come to blows.

Paulos seemed to welcome it. Why eluded the tiger, but he'd followed the consul through the streets of Herovir to the great keep and watched him every step of the way. Daniel had walked alongside him, with a dozen of the soldiers under his command. Every grumble and every mutter of discontent that reached the jackal's ears only seemed to feed the smile on his muzzle. The more Tobias saw that coy grin, the less comfortable he was in his company.

By contrast, the portly skunk that he'd introduced Tobias to as Magistrate Allain behaved irritatingly as though absolutely nothing was wrong. In fact, he'd been entirely enthusiastic at the prospect of the city's people having the chance to be around true Ratholarin warriors. Tobias wished he could be as positive in his assessment.

One of the skunk's paws rested on his protruding stomach as he led Tobias through the corridors of the keep. "No, no, my prince. I assure you, the Carisi have been most hospitable indeed. Absolutely model citizens. I don't doubt that they will give your forces what aid they need in finding this shaman, if they exist."

Tobias nodded to himself, but glanced at Paulos as he frowned. The jackal stared ahead, his own expression utterly, frustratingly opaque. It had been the same runaround since he'd entered the great keep, and Paulos didn't seem bothered by the way Allain kept saying the problem didn't exist. "You doubt that a shaman operates in Herovir?"

"Forgive me, my prince, but I have doubt that a shaman operates *anywhere* within the Ratholarin demesne." He chortled to himself, his voluminous mass shuddering with the effort. "I fear you may have come a long way for nothing. And yet, we intend to make you as comfortable as we can after your long journey. You will remain as honoured guests for as long as you would please."

There was the tiniest flicker of irritation on Paulos' muzzle for only a second, before it was carefully concealed again. Tobias couldn't blame him; Allain had been speaking almost nonstop for ten straight minutes at that point, and not a single word of it had convinced the prince that the skunk was in any way qualified for his post. "That is most kind, but I really must stay with our forces. I am, after all, here to advise them, and-"

"Nonsense!" The skunk turned back toward him with a broad and all-too-friendly grin plastered on his face. "I wouldn't dream of letting the son of my king rot in a camp, or in some run-down inn! No, that simply wouldn't do. Paulos!"

The jackal stiffened and bowed. "At your service, Magistrate."

"Do please see to it that Prince Tobias and his personal guard are provided comfortable rooms here in the keep, and instruct the kitchens to prepare a feast for his majesty and his commanders. Your highest priority, understood?"

There was a huff of breath that might have constituted a growl carefully suppressed as Paulos raised his head and gave a quick nod. "It will be done, Magistrate."

Allain grinned broadly back at Tobias. “He will take you to the royal wing of the keep, just up ahead. As magistrate I have been afforded the use of the old royal chambers and would gladly surrender them to you for the duration of your stay, but word of your graciousness has reached me even so far from Sanwell. I know you wouldn’t dream of such an inconvenience.”

Tobias’ smile turned forced as he kept his ears jovially perked. It was within his rights. He *could* demand the royal chambers. The thought hadn’t even entered his head until Allain had diplomatically backed him into the corner. On some level, Tobias wanted to do it. Just to spite the skunk, of course. But no, there were better ways of making his feelings known. “Of course not. I know no magistrate would shirk his duties to his liege, and I would hate to inconvenience you.”

Once more the skunk clapped his paws together. “Wonderful! It’s settled, then. We-”

“However,” Tobias added, and he let the word hang there for a moment as the magistrate lifted an eyebrow. His expression was worth the blowback he’d doubtless receive at home for what he was about to do. “It warrants mention that these soldiers attending me are serving in the position of kingsblades. You know the respect and service that is to be accorded them then, yes?”

Allain actually frowned for a moment, his jovial façade broken briefly before his smile returned. “My prince, if you would indulge me for a moment, the provisions for kingsblades are... well, they are *for* kingsblades, and as fine as these young warriors are? They are... uh, *not* kingsblades.” He straightened up again. “I am quite certain that we can find quarters suitable to their needs. All people in their proper place, yes? Yes.”

In the corner of his eye, Tobias could see Daniel standing up a little straighter. Had he intrigued the bear? “And that is why you will accord them the respect and service worthy of their duty. This will not be a problem for you.” As Tobias clasped his paws behind his back, he caught Paulos’ smirk. “This is also not a negotiation, or a preference, or an idle musing. This is an instruction. You do not require assistance in carrying out your duties, do you *Magistrate?*”

The skunk’s eyes flicked briefly to Daniel, and Tobias watched as the bear slowly smiled down at the smaller magistrate. There was even a hint of teeth to the gesture; he really should reprimand the soldier for that, but Allain was an irritation at best and an obstruction at worst. Tobias didn’t feel especially bad about what he ‘d said. “N-no. Of course not, my prince!”

“Good. I’ve no doubt you have a great many things to see to. Your consul can take us the rest of the way while you attend to that.” The tiger smiled and gave the barest bow of his head. “Thank you for your time, Magistrate. We will speak later.”

“Ah, yes, but I-” was all Allain managed to mumble before Tobias swept past him. Paulos didn’t miss a beat, following the tiger and Daniel around the thick-set skunk. “Uh, u-until later, my prince!”

It was a few more steps before an amused snort broke through Daniel’s mask of professional composure. As Tobias turned toward him, he caught Paulos’ eyes pointed right in his direction. His smile was still there, as enigmatic as ever. “You disapprove.”

“Far be it for a lowly consul to tell a prince what he should or should not be approved of.” The jackal gave a smooth shrug as he clasped his paws behind his back. “Magistrate Allain is a fine enough administrator. Whether or not that is enough for your majesty is entirely up to your majesty. I’ll not dare to comment.”

“A pity.” Tobias brushed down his tunic as he looked around the castle. “You are from here originally, are you not?”

“As original as any Carisi. If you have questions about the keep, the city or their respective history, you need but ask. I would be pleased to make myself available to your majesty whenever he would require.” There was a brief flicker of something else in Paulos’ eye as he directed his attention forward again. A peculiar curl of his muzzle. Twitch of the tail.

Tobias put thoughts of what that could be well out of his mind for the moment as he turned instead to Daniel. “Thoughts?”

The bear’s attention was still on Paulos, the consul fixed with such a stare that Daniel’s eyes could almost have burned clear through him. “Magistrate’s hidin’ somethin’.”

That much Tobias himself had reasoned. Why else would the person in charge of the entire city lack such knowledge about what was going on inside it? How could news of the high shaman have reached the heart of Ratholarin but not the ears of the master of the city in which the shaman resided? “And what do you suspect that is?”

“Dunno. He’s hidin’ it.” A choked-off chuckle sounded from Paulos, but by the time Tobias turned his head the jackal’s composure was restored. “And *he*’s too friendly. I never trust anyone what’s always smilin’.”

Tobias had no doubt that last was directed at Paulos, but he’d figured that out by himself as well. Still, it was good to know Daniel was focused on the task before him. Maybe his selfish interest in the bear and his knowledge could have some pleasant side-effects for their mission as well. “Suspicious by nature, are you?”

He shrugged. “Shouldn’t I be? Got a prince to protect.”

Couldn’t argue with that, but it wasn’t exactly the answer Tobias had expected. Maybe it’d take longer than he thought to earn his way into the bear’s good graces. “Most prudent. Thank you, Captain.” He turned to Paulos. “What should-”

“I beg your pardon, majesty, but we’ve arrived.” The jackal’s smooth interruption came with a flourish of his paw toward a large wooden door. “This would be the suite in which Magistrate Allain would intend you to stay.”

“And is it the suite in which I ought be staying?” Tobias allowed an eyebrow to lift slightly.

At that, the consul’s smile turned considerably more coy. “That depends. By right of your standing? Probably not. By Carisi opinion? The stables would fit better.” As Daniel began to growl, the jackal chuckled quietly to himself. “But once our scouts determined a prince was on the way, I instructed our servants to prepare the room. It will not meet the standards you may be accustomed to in Sanwell, but I do sincerely hope you find it to your liking.”

He opened the door, and Tobias nodded slowly to himself. Rich tapestries adorned the walls, depicting not Ratholarin history but the times and glories of Caris. The bed that rested in the heart of the room was tall, curtains of white-trimmed violet concealing the bed proper from prying eyes. A vanity rested against one wall, a trio of mirrors set up to catch all of one's most important angles. Against the other, a luxurious couch and set of chairs. Plush rugs softened the wooden floor as the tiger stepped inside. "I am grateful for your efforts, Paulos. Thank you, and please convey my appreciation also to the servants who took the time."

"Most gracious of you, your majesty." He bowed his head and stepped back into the corridor. "I will escort your protectors to nearby quarters. They will not be quite so extravagant, but I am certain it will come as a delightful surprise nonetheless." He smiled and began to close the door.

Until Tobias held up a paw, that was. "If you don't mind, please? I would speak with my captain privately for a moment. Matters of protection and whatnot; I am certain you understand."

"Of course." Paulos stepped aside and looked up, waving Daniel inside. The bear appeared in the doorway a moment later, looking a little confused. When he stepped inside and the door was closed behind him, that confusion mounted.

It was almost funny. The massive bear, despite his arms and armour looked utterly uncomfortable with the situation he found himself in. Tobias couldn't blame him; it occurred to the tiger as he made his way to the couch and sat down that given what they held in common, it would have been potentially odder if he were at ease. "My prince?"

"Please. Sit." Tobias folded his paws in his lap as he watched Daniel approach. His eyes were everywhere but on the tiger. "If you're uneasy, let me put those concerns to rest. You may speak freely with me, and know that I will take all that you say sincerely to heart." He cocked his head as Daniel still refused to make eye contact. Was there something else wrong?

But the bear eventually let his attention drift toward the prince. He frowned and drew himself up straight; it seemed he had no interest in sitting. "What do you need?"

Well, he sure was direct. Tobias leaned forward; if that was the way of it, he could play along. "I'd like your assessment of where we stand. Militarily, here on this mission."

Daniel blinked. "That's really more a question for the commander, sir."

"Yet I am asking you. Commander Geoffery sees things in grand scale. You, I imagine, see things more clearly. Or perhaps did, before you were assigned to me."

"Before you *requested* me." Daniel's eyes narrowed as Tobias lifted his head. There was something unusual about the bear's tone. Fear? No, that didn't sound right. Anger? That wasn't it either. It took a second for Tobias to realise that it was concern. "And no. Commander didn't tell me."

Tobias folded his arms as he studied the bear closely. What was he worried about? "You seem awfully sure about that. Might I ask what leads you to think I might single you out?"

"William." The name made Tobias recoil ever so slightly. As the bear said it, dragging both syllables out across his tongue, he slowly turned one of the chairs around and straddled it

backwards. His arms rested on the headrest as he watched Tobias just as closely as the tiger watched him.

Suddenly, all too quickly, Tobias knew he'd lost control of the situation. His heart jumped as he struggled to maintain his calm demeanour. "That's very forward of you."

The bear shrugged. "You said I could speak freely. I hear tell you're a lot of things but not a liar, so let's test that." He leaned forward, rocking the chair a little. On some level, Tobias was astounded it took his weight so well. "You needed protection here. Given a chance to put yourself in a room alone with William, there's no reason you'd not choose him." He smirked. "Cept you already spoke to him a bit back, and he wants nothin' to do with you."

Tobias shivered as he squeezed his arms a bit tighter around himself. "You make many assumptions."

"Nope. 'Cause he told me." Daniel waggled two fingers back and forth against one another. "He'n I don't keep secrets. Tell each other everything. Which don't bode well for either of us, does it?" He shook his head as he leaned back again. "So you wanted to learn more about what's goin' on, but he won't tell you a damn thing. You got me assigned to you so you could interrogate me instead. How'm I doin' so far?"

Loaded question, there. Tobias thought for a second about how to reply, but Daniel was perceptive enough that he doubted he could effectively lie to the bear. The truth, then. "Spot on. Absolutely spot on. I'd be impressed if I weren't so insulted. I can see why he likes you."

"Yeah? Well, I can see why he don't like you." Daniel's eyes narrowed. "An' sayin' that'd be enough to get m'head cut off. But you ain't gonna do that."

"No. I'm not. But I admit to being curious. Why?" When the bear cocked his head – did he pick up that tic from William, he wondered? – Tobias smiled. "You didn't have to take the assignment. You could have refused it. I suspect Geoffery might have allowed someone else to take the job if you and your squad didn't want it."

At that, Daniel gave another of those broad, toothy grins. "So I could threaten you."

... come again? "Excuse me?"

"It's so I could threaten you." He swung one massive leg back around the chair and stood once more, and he'd never seemed so much more massive than Tobias as in that one moment. "You wanna talk to William? You talk to William. You try and get information about him from me? Good luck." He growled as Tobias sank slowly back into the couch. "But if you hurt him again? Prince or not, I will *end* you. Right there."

"Hurt him?" Tobias felt his fur fluff out and his claws poke free. "Hurt h... William tore me to shreds when last we spoke, and I deserved it. I felt *awful* afterward, and I could not even offer him an apology. Hurt- do *not* stand there, arrogant and cocksure and self-righteous, and speak to me of hurt." His words were quiet, but they came out in a breathy tumble. The tiger's claws scraped against his paws as he glared back at Daniel. How dare he. How *dare* he!

But then, of all things, the bear smiled. Not coldly, not cruelly. Warmly. Almost sympathetically. "Good."

Tobias could only stare at him, jaw agape. “*Excuse me?*”

“Good. It *should* hurt. Gives you’n idea what you did to him all those years ago, don’t it?” The bear’s smile slipped as he folded his arms. “Y’know, I thought once that y’were the worst one of the three. Of all the princes, you were the *worst* for what you did to him. For how deep you cut him.”

Anger and sadness and fear all vied for control of Tobias. His attempt to maintain proper decorum was long since past. What was the point with Daniel, anyway? The bear didn’t see him as a prince. Just as the boy who hurt his lover. “You thought once? Not now?”

Daniel bared his teeth, but he shook his head. “Not now. ‘Cause you actually look hurt. Bleed red like a real person would. Maybe I think that’s kinda admirable. Maybe I think that’s good.” Any hint of a smile that may have been left on his face was gone by the time his teeth were covered again. “But that ain’t good enough for William. He deserves better’n someone who’d hurt him.” He shrugged. “Might be me. Might be someone else if I cock up the way you did. I don’t plan to find out.”

Tobias found his jaw clamped shut. What was there to say? What could he say? He could only lean back on the couch as his claws retracted again. “I...” His muzzle was dry. The tiger forced moisture back into it and took a slow breath. “I can definitely see why he likes you so. You are very dedicated to him, aren’t you?”

“Funny the difference that makes, isn’t it? What happens when trust gets rewarded?” Daniel sighed. “Look. I’m just being honest, like you said. You wanna take m’rank away? Go for it. Punish me for speakin’ like that t’you? Your call. Not gonna change the fact that whatever you might’ve had with him once is gone. Y’killed it.”

That, there, was at the crux of it as Tobias sighed. A tingle of jealousy ran through him. Who was this bear? Who was this soldier, come from nothing, to just sweep in and pick up the pieces? To swipe William away before Tobias could-

What was he thinking!? The tiger squeezed his eyes shut. *No*, he reminded himself. There was never going to be a future for him and William. That had been the point, all those years ago. It was never possible. *They* weren’t possible. He and Daniel... was. That jealousy surged inside Tobias again as he closed his eyes. “You’re lucky, you know.”

“Every day, he reminds me. Yeah.” As Tobias opened his eyes again, Daniel’s head was a little lower. His shoulders just a little slumped. “An’ I don’t envy you. Not a bit.”

“You’re right not to. I just wish...” Again he sighed. “I don’t even know how to put it into words. I don’t even know what I want now. Even if I could get it, whatever ‘it’ is.”

“Best you get to figurin’ that out. Won’t do you no good to sit there, miserable.” The bear nodded once. “If it ain’t too forward, you need to decide. Just decide, an’ commit to it. Don’t matter what anyone else thinks. Just matters if you’re comfy with it.”

Tobias nodded and bit back yet another sigh. If only it were that simple. To be Daniel; to have the freedom to just decide and work for it; to just be who he was without the encumbrance of royalty... what a blessing. “Wise words.”

“Yeah, I get told I spit out a few of them every now’n again.” He straightened up once more and gave a nod. “Don’t know what you hoped to get outta this, but my boys are out there in this keep somewhere. I gotta find them and make sure we’re prepared for your security here. If that’s all...?”

The tiger nodded before he’d even contemplated Daniel’s departure. He needed time to think anyway, and dinner wouldn’t be too far off. He wasn’t certain that he was ready to face Allain again, but Tobias *was* sure he wasn’t ready to face Daniel any further. Not right then, anyway. “It is, and thank you. For your candour.” Tobias couldn’t help but smile as the bear frowned at the word. “For your honesty.”

“Ah. Well, you’re welcome. Uh, your majesty.” With that, Daniel gave an awkward little bow and turned away. His trip to the door was hurried; Tobias could only imagine how uncomfortable that all had to be for him. He did catch sight of a guard outside his door as the bear pulled it open and the blood drained from the tiger’s head. Had he listened in? Had he heard anything? Tobias hadn’t been trying to be quiet.

He forced his mind to calm, rather than to replay the entire conversation to check for any shouts or outbursts that might have been heard. He closed his eyes and steadied his breathing as the door closed once more. What did it matter? What did anything matter, anyway? Third in line for the throne, behind two far more qualified – if cruel – candidates. Why couldn’t he do whatever he wanted? Why not just be himself? Why not just *be*?

Tantalising. Enticing. But that still left the question of what Tobias even was. Clearly the years he’d spent with Juni had proved to him beyond a shadow of a doubt that his interests didn’t lie only in males. While their initial dalliances had seen William’s memory and fantasies thereof overlaid on top of her, more recent years had seen Tobias appreciate the maidservant and her sex on their own merits.

Yet since the night he’d caught William and Daniel together, it had dominated the tiger’s private moments. His concerns about the mission faded before it. When all his duties were accounted for, it played out in his mind again. Clearly there was desire there. What for, he could only guess. That he didn’t know – *couldn’t* know – was the madness.

And yet, still, there was no solution. There was only what Tobias had long ago learned to deal with. Longing. Unrequited and unrequitable longing. Something had to give eventually. He couldn’t stay like that forever. Eventually things would break one way or another, he figured, and there’d be release. There had to be.

Or, at least, so he told himself. Perhaps, he mused, the next time he might believe it.