

Interwoven

NEED: PART TWO

40th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

Ocher wouldn't meet his gaze.

The panther, his fur once a vibrant black, had dulled somewhat in the last few years as the strains of his position became more and more apparent. He still stood tall, but he'd never looked weaker than when he wouldn't – or was it couldn't? – meet Tobias' stare.

The prince didn't blame him, of course. It had been a very pointed question, there in the halls of the castle. Blunt. Direct. As emotionless as Tobias could have managed, but the weight of it was crushing. Ocher probably could feel that selfsame weight.

When the panther held his tongue, Tobias sighed. "I won't hold you accountable, physician. Please just be honest with me."

"With respect, my prince, I cannot." Still the panther couldn't look at Tobias, and he turned a little further away as the tiger frowned. "Your brothers have already sworn me to-"

"Hang what my brothers have said. This is my father we speak of." He thrust a paw out to point down the hallway, and Tobias' voice rose despite his best efforts. "As long as he lives, my brothers and I all are princes, so stop this at once and tell me the *truth*, Ocher. Please."

The physician's shoulders drooped and he clutched his bag of herbs and medicines closer to his chest. Bad news was bad news, but it was worse when that news regarded a monarch. "The end draws near."

Breath caught in Tobias' throat. He knew. He'd known if only from Ocher's body language, and how tired the panther had been in the last few days. The tiger's paw dropped limply back to his side. "How..." He tried to work moisture into his muzzle; it had run dry as he'd waited for the panther to answer him. "How long does he...?"

But Ocher shook his head. "It is... impossible to say. Hours? Days? In older times, I might have suggested that if the gods were with him, he could endure." His head turned slightly, and eyes rose bit by bit until at last he just barely caught the tiger's eye. "There is little I can do, save providing him something for the pain. However, even my strongest medications are losing their effectiveness."

Tobias nodded slowly, but the panther looked confused as his gaze dropped away again. "My prince, you... you should be with him now. If I may, why are you still here?"

Why indeed? Tobias felt himself scowl as he stared down the hall again. "I've yet to be called on. Until I'm summoned, I'm not to enter." He growled quietly. "The order is Fredrick's."

Ocher nodded, but the panther stepped in closer to Tobias and placed a gentle paw on the tiger's shoulder. "You know, King Eric still lives. And I seem to recall being told that as long as he does, all of his sons are equally princes." As Tobias turned his head, he caught a sad little smile on Ocher's muzzle. "Do not let Fredrick ruin this chance for you, my prince."

The physician was right. Tobias sighed and nodded, and he reached up to pat the paw on his shoulder. "You are most wise, Ocher, and have always been a good friend to my family and I. Thank you. I will."

"I wish you well, my prince." The paw slid off Tobias' shoulder as the panther stepped back and bowed low. Tobias nodded back to him, and he turned to start making his way back down the hall.

The tiger watched him go as he clasped his paws together before him. He twisted the silver bands that adorned the middle two fingers of his left paw as he hesitated a moment longer. Ocher was right. It could be his last chance to see his father, and the rest of their immediate family was gathered for just such a possibility. Whatever it would do to irritate Fredrick didn't matter.

From around a corner just a little back from where Tobias stood, a lioness in a black dress peeked her head out. She watched Ocher go before she turned back toward Tobias. Her right paw bore identical silver rings to his. "He is a good soul."

Her voice was soft, and Tobias nodded as the lioness fully emerged from around the corner and made her way to his side. He reached out as she closed, and she offered him her paw. The tiger clasped it gently as he sighed. "Ocher apprenticed under grandfather's physician. I have known him for as long as I can remember. You are more right than you know." He paused a moment. "Are you sure you wish to be here, Sarina?"

She nodded and squeezed at his paw. "He is my father by law, and I know what this means to you. Whatever you need, and wherever you need it, I will support you." She flashed him a small smile. "The question is whether or not you think it wise that I be here."

Tobias ground his teeth. Another reason why his exclusion in these precious hours was so galling. "Brett and Lady Eustace are there. Fredrick and Princess Magriolla are there. I'm certain if Irene could be bothered to show up, she and any husband she might have had would also be allowed."

"That was not the question." She shook her head and turned Tobias to face her. "If it is going to cause problems to have me also present, I can wait outside." Her gaze flicked over Tobias' shoulder to the door behind which his father lay. "I know Fredrick especially looks on me with distaste."

"He's not especially fond of your theories regarding father's health." Tobias turned the idea over in his head. His response had been understatement; if he brought Sarina into the room, it would absolutely cause a scene. Fredrick alone would ensure that. "Perhaps you are right. Would it offend?"

Again she smiled, and let go of Tobias' paw with a gentle parting pat to it. "It would. But the offense is not yours, Tobias. That rests entirely with the rest of your family." She nodded and stepped gracefully back. "Do what you must, husband. I will await you here."

Tobias frowned. "I could be gone for hours."

"Then I will wait hours. This is a matter of family." Sarina nodded again. "You are wasting precious time. Go to him."

"Family or not, it will not end well." He frowned as he looked down at the floor. "I... have been thinking on our situation. Our presence here." Sarina was silent, but when he lifted his head again it was to the sight of her interested stare. "We should have been in Ingsbren years ago."

"Your father wished you to remain close. All of you." She shrugged. "It still confuses me why your sister stays so far from home."

That too was something Tobias couldn't understand at first, but as Fredrick gained more power and Eric slipped further and further toward the veil between the worlds he thought that he was beginning to. "Irene made her choice. I think it may be time that I make the same one. That we make the same one." He took a deep breath. "I think we should leave. Tomorrow."

Sarina frowned. "Do you know something that I do not?"

"No. I just..." Tobias ran his paws over his face. "I'm tired, Sarina. I'm tired of all of this. Everything here is so exhausting, and I endure it for people who inflict it upon me. Who wouldn't care if I were here or not." He shook his head and reached back out to her. She clasped his paw tightly for a moment in turn. "We should prepare and leave tomorrow. Be done with all of this. I don't need to linger here and watch him die and Fredrick ascend to the throne. I definitely don't need to be here after them. Better to spare us both, I think."

"If that is your wish. You know how I feel about our remaining in Ratholarin, and I do dearly miss father." She nodded again and offered a sad little smile in turn. "I am sorry for the circumstances, Tobias. Truly, I am. But if this is what you have decided you want, I am in full agreement. I will prepare tonight for us to leave." He opened his muzzle to thank her, but she raised a paw to ward him off before he could speak. "But if this is to be our course, then this will be the last chance you have to see your parents. Go to them, Tobias. For your own sake, if nothing else."

She was right, of course, but it didn't make it feel better. If only out of familial obligation, he supposed he owed that much. With a little nod, Tobias leaned forward to place a gentle kiss on her cheek. The lioness leaned into it, her eyes closed. "You are as wise and gracious as ever. Thank you, and I will be back... uh, when I am back."

She nodded, and Tobias started toward the door at the end of the hall. Two kingsblades – Rachel and Zane – stood silent vigil outside the royal chambers. They'd been too far away to hear the mostly quiet conversations with Ocher and Sarina, but they no doubt saw him on his approach.

The badger, Rachel, eyed him warily as he drew closer. Her axe, one end resting on the ground, was extended to her side such that the haft blocked the doorway. "You have not been called for, my prince."

"Step aside." Tobias came to a halt right in front of the door and her axe, and he didn't even turned to meet her gaze. "I am going to see my father."

Her axe didn't move, and neither did she. Nor did Zane for that matter, on the other side of the door. "You have not been called for."

Tobias sighed. Of course she'd fight him. "Kingsblade, please remind me. Who am I?"

"You are Prince Tobias of Ratholarin."

"And is not a prince capable of giving orders to a kingsblade?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Insofar as they do not contradict the orders of her king. And the orders of my king are clear. You have not been called for."

"And am I to stand here, idle, while my father lies dying just behind you?" He allowed a growl to thread through his words as he finally turned his head to regard the badger. "Do you expect me to simply *allow* that?"

She met his gaze with absolute dispassion and offered him a single, curt nod in response. "Yes, my prince." Zane, however, seemed convinced. The wolf reached out to grasp the handle of the door, but Rachel's head snapped toward him with a look of surprise. "We can't."

"It's his father." Zane held the handle tight as he nodded to Tobias. The tiger nodded back and sighed with relief. At least he still had one advocate in the castle from his old life. "Fredrick's not king yet. His orders don't overrule one given by Tobias."

The badger frowned as she looked back down at Tobias again. He met her gaze as well as he could manage. "He's not king, but he sits the throne as regent. Surely that's enough."

"Rachel." She looked up as Zane spoke, his tone low but firm. "It's his *father*."

She stared back at him for a moment before her eyes dipped to take Tobias in once more. A flash of sympathy briefly touched her face, and she sighed and drew her axe back from the doorway. "Forgive me, my prince."

Tobias nodded his thanks to Zane. "There is nothing to forgive. You are doing your duty to the best of your ability in difficult circumstances. I thank you for your kindness." He smiled softly up at Zane. "And yours."

"Yes, my prince." The wolf bowed his head and slowly pulled the door open. A short passage lit by a small lantern stretched out a few paces before him, before his view was obstructed by a black curtain. Tobias stepped through the door and just far in enough to allow Zane to close it behind him. He hesitated before parting the curtain, however. He didn't reconsider his presence there, but instead took a few seconds to gather himself once more before he stepped through.

He'd not seen his parents' chambers for many, many years, but not a lot had changed. A grand bed rested in the centre of the room, itself draped in bright blue silk sheets that, when drawn, protected the modesty of those within. They were drawn back for the moment at the sides, so that Eric could be looked in on. From the entrance, the lone offending sheet kept Tobias from his father's sight.

Art in the form of tapestries and paintings adorned the walls, along with a statue that depicted Eric himself at the close of the Age of Chaos. Tobias knew it would be moved to the throne room when he passed. A large dresser was pressed against one wall. Desks with ink and

quill and luxurious chairs and plush furred rugs and... none of it mattered. Not a single bit of it.

What mattered was in and around the bed and in those chairs. In the back right of the room stood Brett, beside a chair filled with a lovely, if bored-looking vixen: Lady Eustace. Brett himself was more subdued than normal, and he didn't even look up as Tobias entered. So much the better, he thought.

Fredrick was much closer. He stood at the right side of the bed, paws clasped behind his back. His tail trembled, and if not for that tell Tobias might have thought him absolutely unmoved by the state of their father. An otter, her middle thick with pregnancy, sat with her webbed paws folded over her belly at the desk. Her chair was rotated toward Fredrick and the regent's father. Princess Magriolla. She offered Tobias a nod of acknowledgement, which he returned. She had been a reasonable, if terse, lady in his experience.

And finally, there was his mother. Queen Veronica sat on the left side of the bed, one of her husband's trembling paws clasped tight in both of her own. The tigress' eyes were reddened. Her fur was unkempt. She was a mess in a way that Tobias had never seen her in his life. His mother had always, *always* made sure to never allow anyone to see anything of weakness or disorder in her appearance or demeanour. Despite the simple black robe that she wore to cover all but her paws and her head, Tobias never thought that he had ever seen her so naked.

He made his way over to her first, and it drew a stony look from Fredrick as he entered the room proper. Veronica didn't lift her head to acknowledge him, her attention fully on her husband as her son reached her side. "Mother."

She didn't reply as Tobias looked down, finally, at King Eric the Fourth of Ratholarin. His face was gaunt. His eyes darted wildly as he panted for breath. Thick blankets wrapped him up and untrimmed headfur stuck out in all directions. His muzzle was damp, whether from spittle or vomit; Tobias suspected the latter from the smell and the stains to his sheets. Tobias thought he himself might be sick. It was no wonder his mother and brothers had warded him off from the pitiable creature before him.

This wasn't his father.

This was a husk.

Shoulders went slack. Ears drooped. Tobias' tail dragged across the floor. There he lay: the most powerful person in all the world, so far as Tobias knew. His father. In that horrifying moment and with that grounding sight, it all faded away. All the pain. All the abuse. All the awful things that had been said or done to him.

It wasn't gone. It couldn't simply vanish into the ether; what had been done was not undone by the frailty that struck Eric. It simply stepped aside for that moment as his father looked at him but didn't seem to really *see* him. It was gutting. Rending. It was awful.

He looked up and across the bed to see Fredrick staring back at him. There was no hate or cruelty or malice behind his older brother's eyes for the first time in as long as Tobias could remember. Reality, perhaps, was more sobering than he'd realised. "How is he?"

“He is *dying*, Tobias. Painfully. How do you think he is?” There was only the hint of an edge in Fredrick’s voice. He sounded hoarse and tired more than anything else.

“T’bias?” The croak came from Eric as he writhed under his sheets, his eyes flicking every which way but at his son. Tobias felt his heart break anew. “Where... Tobias?”

“I am here, father.” He reached down past his mother’s paws as she began to cry once more, gently touching his father’s forearm. “I am here. What do you need?”

“N... I n...” He coughed, spittle shooting every which way as his head whipped about. “I ne... F-Fre... Fredrick!”

Tobias winced at the sudden, clear shout, but Fredrick moved instantly to the bedside. He reached out as their father’s free paw flailed above him to catch it. “I am here, father.”

“N... Brett. Brett!” It was more a grunt than a growl, but the demand was loud enough that Brett’s ears perked up. He too hurried forward from Eustace’s side to stand with Fredrick. He too reached down to touch his father’s paw. “Br... Brett. B-Brett.”

“We are here, father.” Brett patted Eric’s paw and tried to smile as his eyes began to fill with tears. “All of your sons are here for you.”

Eric began to foam at the muzzle for a second as his eyes seemed to sharpen. They drifted to the side to lock on Brett as he spoke, and he grunted once more as his trembling stalled out. “You... s’weak. So... so weak. *Weak!* A joke... it’s a-all jus’... just a joke...”

Brett recoiled hard enough that he almost pulled completely away from Eric, but the ill tiger wasn’t done. “Y’not... no heir. No heir! Foolish... f-foolish b... foolish boy. C-can’t even... can’t!” He motioned with his paw, despite Fredrick’s grip on it.

Brett’s eyes were wide as the tears began to spill. “We’re... trying, father. I promise, we’re tr-”

“Fredrick! *Oooh*, an’ Fredrick...” Tobias watched Fredrick gulp as genuine fear touched his face for a moment. “S-so proud. Why? Y’not... not... n-not done anything! Anything! Was... ‘s all me! Me! M-my work! You l-lazy... s-stupid boy! Stupid! *Stupid!* S... ss...” His words devolved into hisses as his muzzle began to foam again.

Veronica choked off a sob as she let go with one paw to grasp at a small kerchief. She dabbed it across Eric’s muzzle as his head rolled back and forth. Looking for something. Tobias’ heart sank; he was looking for his last son. It was about to be his turn. “I’m here, father. Take your time. Say what you need to say.”

It looked like he was going to launch into another tirade, but then all of a sudden his eyes focused. They zeroed in right on Tobias; locked in on his stare in a way it hadn’t with his brothers. Even his trembling stopped, and as Veronica pulled the damp kerchief back again Tobias could see Eric’s muzzle split in a cruel snarl. “N-noth... I’ve got... *nothing*... to s-say t... to *you*. Tailraiser. Shame.” His eyes went wide as Tobias’ ears drooped. “Nothing. Y... y-you’re *nothing*.”

Time seemed to stop as his father stared at him. It wasn’t delusion. It wasn’t that he was delirious. Eric was, in those moments that felt like they stretched out for eternity to be more

lucid and self-aware than any other moment since Tobias had entered. Like his mind had retuned to him just long enough, and in just barely enough capacity, to strike him one last time.

There weren't tears. If Tobias had any, they too were frozen in place, locked behind his eyes as he drank in the terrible details that lay before him. Every sense was teased with that horror, from the sound of his father's words echoing in his ears to the sight of his teeth, so close to gnashing his own muzzle, to the flex of his failing paws sheathing and unsheathing claws. At that he could even see that his mother's wrists and forearms were all scratched up and her fur matted and bloody; Eric probably didn't even know he'd been doing it. He wondered if his mother knew. He wondered if she cared.

The moment passed. The lucidity went with it. Eric's gaze drifted away from Tobias as delirium once more took a hold of his father, and Tobias stepped back from the bedside. Hollowness expanded to unfill his entire self. Tears still refused to flow in the wake of those cruel, awful words. He didn't feel hurt. Tobias didn't feel anything at all.

His eyes still lingered on Eric for a moment as the king's muzzle worked at the air. He coughed, choking on his own spittle before Veronica could clear it from his face again. Brett had slunk back to stand beside Eustace, who sat with folded arms and the same bored expression she'd worn when he entered.

For her part, Magriolla didn't meet his gaze. She kept her head studiously bowed as she clutched at her middle. Was it maternal warmth or maternal fear, he wondered? Fredrick remained at his father's side, but as he looked up and after Tobias he saw something in his brother's features that he'd never seen before. *Sympathy*. Presumably there at the end, with all three of Eric's sons equally humbled by their father, there was a certain equity to their standings. Perhaps a heart did beat in his chest after all.

Finally, Tobias' eyes fell on his mother. She looked even worse after her husband's outburst, so much so that Tobias began to wonder if perhaps Eric might outlive her at this point. He had never seen Veronica look so utterly defeated. So small. "Do you require anything, mother?"

She didn't even seem to hear him. The tigress betrayed no sign or reaction to his words, even as Tobias lingered in anticipation of a response. He had to wait. He had to give her a chance to speak. He had to be patient. Circumstances demanded it.

But a minute passed, and then a second, and he knew that there was no further point in staying. Eric had been clear. For all his lambasting of Fredrick and Brett, Tobias' had been something special. Almost a disowning in a way; a condemnation of all that his youngest son was. Brett might be weak and Fredrick might be lazy and stupid, but that was no doubt preferable to Tobias' fate as *nothing*. Maybe Fredrick had known. Maybe Fredrick had tried to spare him the abuse and that awful sight. How many times had they had that conversation already?

And so he turned away. Tore his eyes from the sorry state of his father. Looked away from the hurt expressions of his brothers. Shut out the grief pouring from his mother. There was nothing to be gained by staying. His father had been more clear than ever. Tobias gently prised the curtains apart and slunk back through them. The lantern showed the door out clearly, and Tobias didn't waste a second. He gripped the handle and pushed it open.

Rachel and Zane were still standing guard, and neither looked down immediately to note his presence. It wasn't until Tobias turned back to quietly close the door again that he felt Zane's paw on his shoulder. "Are you alright, my prince?"

"No. No, I am not." Tobias took a deep breath, steadied himself, and let it out in a sigh. "I should not have been there. He... he doesn't want me there."

The paw squeezed him as Zane's eyes bored down into the tiger's. "He is gravely ill, Tobias. Sense and reason are not what they once were to him. His mind and his tongue are addled and you shouldn't take to heart whatever he-"

"He said I was nothing, Zane." The words were as quiet as they were firm. The prince's expression was blank as the wolf leaned back. "That I was... *nothing* to him. He looked at me like... like he could see right through me, and there was no value there to him." Tobias closed his eyes and nodded once. "He doesn't want me there. He... has never wanted me here."

The tiger reached up to slowly push Zane's paw off his shoulder. The kingsblade relented as soon as he felt the pressure of Tobias' paw, but his face filled with nothing but sympathy as he bowed his head. "I will keep you informed of his condition. I swear it."

"Thank you, Zane. Rachel." He nodded to the badger as she bowed her head as well, and started away. There was no need to tell them of his plan. More important was that he got as far away from that room and the people within it as he could, as quickly as possible. Every step took him further from that room. From those crazed eyes. From that withered shell of a male. Tobias found his footsteps coming faster and faster. By the time he reached the corner around which Sarina waited, he was practically at a run.

She said something; of that Tobias was sure. The words didn't reach his ears however as the feelings that had been blocked by shock and hollowness broke through. They spilled into the void within him, swallowed up by that emptiness at first but filling it fast. He couldn't stay. He wouldn't stay. He *couldn't* stay.

He couldn't outrun the hollowness or the pain. That didn't mean he wouldn't try.

#

Secret passages existed for a reason. That Tobias had spent the vast majority of his young years mapping the whole castle and all of its little intricacies meant that he, almost alone of anyone in Ratholarin, knew how to move about – and out of – the castle in absolute secrecy.

Some passages were more secret than others. The hidden passages that linked certain rooms and ran behind walls were well known to most of the royal family and a select few kingsblades. Only the king's personal kingsblade and the king himself were meant to know of the secret escape tunnels that led to various parts of Sanwell, or even the one that allowed passage outside the city entirely. Many more had been lost to record until Tobias and William, in their curiosity, had uncovered them.

And whenever Tobias needed to get out, he took great care to use the ones no one else knew about. His clothes had been exchanged for more ragged, commoner attire concealed under a great brown cloak. He tucked it tight around himself and tugged his hood down over his face as he lurked at the edge of one of Sanwell's main roads. People went about the daily

lives, their work complete for the day and the revels of the night about to begin. They didn't know what was going on in the castle. They didn't know what was going on in Tobias. They didn't even know that Tobias was there, amongst them. So much the better.

He joined them, mingling with the flow of people as they moved to and fro; a river of beings of all stripe and hide. His destination wasn't far, but for a moment Tobias simply relaxed into the pull of one of his home city's arteries, pumped like blood through her veins. This was real life, he decided. Not the constrained existence of the castle, but there in the mess of true existence. Among people who found joy where they could, and forged it where they could not. People who endured the hardships of existence without the benefit of massive walls or well-equipped armies or coffers of silver. Real people, real life.

In the heart of the city, nearly every building was large. His destination wasn't the largest, but it stood out considerably from the others around it. Some were homes, most were stores and smithies, and more than a handful were inns and taverns. Signs hung over their doors lit by lanterns and torches, spelling out their names or offering a sigil or emblem to denote its service.

It had taken Tobias a few expeditions to find it. He'd heard word of its existence, but it wasn't until his little affair with Juni had come to its close that he'd sought it out. Eyes brushed across the nearest dive – its sign proudly proclaimed it to be the ignobly-named Dragon's Piss Tavern – and Tobias started to filter his way down through the crowd toward it.

It wasn't his goal, of course. No sooner had he reached the edge of the busy street than he ducked away from the tavern's entrance and down the alley that ran before it. The gap was narrow, almost as suffocating as the crowds had threatened to be, but Tobias was well practiced with negotiating it by that point. He didn't even need to lift his eyes for the stylised bird of prey with pronounced plumage that was painted in bright red on the wall. He knew where the entrance was.

It was easy to miss it. The alley was dark and the door blended in surprisingly well with the stone structures all around Tobias. He didn't hesitate as he gave the door a gentle push with one gloved paw, and it swung inward under his touch as he swept in after it. The passageway was short and it curved around, presumably behind one of the other locations nearby until it opened up to a dimly-lit room.

Its walls were covered completely in rich red drapes that hid the stonework behind them. A couple of sconces contained oil lamps and shed a warm yellow light across the drapes, and the desk that rested in the middle of the room. Behind it was a fox wearing a near-transparent outfit of gold-trimmed red silk. It let his whole body rest on display as he reclined in his chair. Behind him was another door, wooden and arched with a small, barred window at head height. Tobias' destination.

"Good evening." Tobias reached into his pockets, and frowned as he couldn't feel the coin that he knew he'd stashed there.

"Evenin' handsome." The fox smiled and stretched languidly as he looked the hooded prince up and down. He seemed young – of age certainly, but not much past – and his unfamiliarity to Tobias implied that he was new to the place. "And a hearty welcome to you. How may we service you this eve?"

Fingers finally brushed something cold and metal, and Tobias sighed in relief. If he'd lost it or had it filched, who knew how much trouble he could have been in? "My name is Ian. I'll take my usual, if you please." He stepped forward to stand in front of the desk, and lifted his paw.

Clutched between two fingers was a red-tinted coin, but it was not one of the traditional currencies of Ratholarin. It bore not the sigil of the house of Rathin, nor the emblem of the crown itself. One face showed the same stylised bird of prey painted on the wall outside, and the other was covered in little scratches. Old Lenkis script that Tobias had never wound up learning.

The fox whistled as he stood, and Tobias found himself having an easier time than normal in keeping his eyes above the attendant's waistline. Given his day, that wasn't much of a surprise. The attendant took the coin and reached over his shoulder to slide it between the bars of the door. It vanished a moment later, taken by some unseen paw.

Tobias folded his arms into his sleeves and waited patiently as the fox looked him up and down. Despite how new the fox seemed to be, it was clear that he had the right body and attitude to fit in well. "Well, if you ever want to take on a little somethin' more *unusual*, you just let me know." The fox flashed a lurid wink as he leaned back against the door and raked his eyes over Tobias. "It'd be your pleasure, I promise."

Oh yeah; he was going to fit in – or *be* fit in – just fine. Tobias felt his muzzle curl upward ever so slightly as the coin poked back through the bars again. "I'll keep you in mind, don't you worry." He nodded to the coin as the fox reached back to take it in his paw again. "But for now?"

"For now, you're good to go." The fox pushed off the door as it opened behind him, swinging inward to reveal a deep but well-lit stairwell. It sank well down below the streets of Sanwell, and the fox gestured toward it with an effeminate flourish. "The baths are open if you would like to clean up or relax first, as is the bar and the gallery. Otherwise, Soren will be with you in your usual suite shortly." The fox winked again. "Welcome back to the Crimson Crest, and if you need *anything* at all... I'm all yours."

It was all part of the charm. An affectation; a show; a ruse to coax coin and cock both from one's pants. And yet the openness of the fox's lustful language was refreshingly tantalising all the same. The fox didn't know him and likely didn't care to, but that didn't change the rush of blood that reached Tobias' nethers just the same. "That had best be a promise."

The effete chuckle that served as the fox's reply was low and alluring, and it said everything that words couldn't. Tobias swept past him and into the stairwell, dimly aware that whomever had opened the door from the inside was no longer there. Presumably they headed down as soon as they returned the coin to prepare word of the new arrival in those cases. Tobias took his time; the stairs were steep and the stairwell was cramped. Doubtless it had to be in order to avoid the sewer system beneath Sanwell, but it was still the least comfortable part of Tobias' trips.

But finally he reached the bottom, and the double doors that stood before him. Quiet music played from somewhere inside, barely audible through the doors. Tobias took a deep breath to steel himself, and stepped forward to push them open.

The music became louder all at once, as did the brightness. Torches and lanterns both shed their light across the great room, shed from their mounts on walls and pillars hewn from the rock that undercut Sanwell. Tables and chairs were set up nearby a bar. Only a couple of people sat drinking, with one speaking in hushed tones to the female rat that tended the bar. The other was focused on the gallery.

As Tobias understood, there were many places in the world and within the realm that catered to shows that teases the arousal of its viewers, but the gallery was something far more besides. A great stage stood elevated above the room's floor, with mirrors placed at various angles above, behind, and around it. It allowed a viewer unfettered access to what was going on atop the stage from wherever they viewed. That night it seemed to be pair of tigresses, each with their heads between the others' legs. Every lick of their tongues and every squeeze of their paws and every roll of their hips was on display.

Tobias paid them only brief mind, taking in the sight for a few moments as he made his way past the doorway that led to the private baths. Bathing, he knew from experience, was generally a secondary concern when one visited them; it was a place where those who could afford entry but not more 'professional' companionship could meet to relieve one another. Tobias' attention focused on a set of stairs that led further below still.

The hall that the stairs led to wouldn't have looked out of place in an expensive inn, complete with rich wood panelled walls. Door after door lined the walls. The script that marked each one of them was more Old Lenkis, and if Tobias hadn't been by so many times he wouldn't have known just from the names which one he was looking for. Fourth on the right, however, was easy enough to remember. He didn't wait, but pulled the door open.

It moved easily, unlocked for him. The room was surprisingly large for those not used to it. Furs adorned almost a full half of the room, providing a plush place to rest. The bed against the back wall was just as soft – this much he definitely knew from past experience – and would put to shame some of the most comfortable beds in the castle. A washbasin was in another corner, ready for use either before, after, or the far more likely both. And finally, by the door was a rack for patrons to hang their clothes.

As the door closed behind Tobias, he began to peel off his cloak. His tunic. His trousers. Boots. He hesitated, as ever, at his rings. The tiger stared down at his left paw and wriggled those fingers. The metal bands rubbed back and forth against one another, and he sighed. Let his paw drop back to his side. They could, as ever, stay. Was it even indiscretion at this point?

The washbasin was definitely visited first, if only for the tiger's feet and underarms. He thought to use a little more of the water to wash himself in full, but if that was necessary he was sure a short trip to the baths would fix that. Instead, he made his way over to the bed and sat down on the edge. He lasted only a few seconds upright before Tobias sighed and allowed himself to fall back into that soft surface. It embraced him as he sank into it and closed his eyes.

He didn't know how long he was there waiting, but it was long enough for the tiger to begin to drift off. He'd grown so comfortable in those brief moments that everything that had happened that day had begun to melt away. The softness of the bed had helped of course, but it was more than that. He actually smiled as he heard the door open, and didn't bother opening his eyes.

A quiet chuckle reached him from the doorway, and the door closed again. An accented voice reached Tobias' ears, higher in pitch but melodic and sweet. "You might be the only client I have that could be pleased with nothing more than a nap."

"Maybe you should tell your mistress to get into the innkeeping business instead." Tobias rolled his head to the side to take in the entrance to the room. The male that owned that soft voice stood as naked as the tiger was, arms folded across his chest and a smile on his face. He'd mistaken the canid for a hyena when they'd first met, long before he'd learned that his more striking, paint-like fur – among other things – set him well apart from William's lineage. "You could make so many crowns just offering these beds."

"We already offer the beds. We just tend to also be in them." The painted dog unfolded his arms as he made his way over to the bed. Tobias reluctantly sat up as the dog chuckled. "Now now, my prince. Please don't pout. Such a pretty face doesn't deserve to frown so."

He hadn't even realised that he'd been frowning until the dog mentioned it. The tiger sighed and tried a smile instead as he watched his companion take a seat beside him. "You really should call me 'Ian' here, Soren."

The painted dog chuckled and leaned back, stretching as he lifted slender arms up and over his head. "And you should know by now that discretion is at the heart of what we do here. Well, that and especially comfortable beds." He glanced Tobias' way in time to watch his smile twitch just a little wider. "I must say, I wasn't expecting you to call today. You were due to return next week. I don't suppose you were missing me, were you?"

As he spoke, he let his arms drop again. The one closer to Tobias pushed his paw closer, fingers brushing along the tiger's thigh. Tobias felt himself shudder at the touch, but he shook his head. "You're always missed. You're that good at what you do."

"But that's not what brings you to me this evening." His paw began to rub slowly up and down Tobias' thigh, but just a little too firmly for it to be an especially teasing sensation. It was deliberate, of course. Tobias knew from experience that Soren knew how to strum his body like a fine harp if he wanted to.

He thought, for a moment, of just gushing. Of letting everything out and all that came with it. Speaking his mind, letting his pain be unburdened, and damn the consequences. Reality wouldn't let Tobias do that; discretion could be overcome with enough coin, and patrons of the establishment tended to oftentimes be on the wealthier side. "It's not." Best he kept such things to himself, at least to a degree.

"Mmmhmm." Soren shifted, and Tobias blinked as the painted dog rolled over toward him. One of his legs smoothly lifted to land on the tiger's other side, and it left him straddling the prince's lap. His rump settled down until Tobias' sheath nestled neatly up between those pert, perfect cheeks, bumping up against the base of the dog's tail. On any other day, Tobias would have been leaking into Soren's fur by then.

As it was, all he felt was a distant tingle of suppressed interest; his body reacting automatically to the presence of a receptive body and a warm hole. If Soren was disappointed, the smile he offered as he looked down into Tobias' eyes didn't betray it. "So then. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company? Where are my thanks going?"

"You should perhaps hold onto those thanks for the moment." Tobias sighed as he reached up to stroke along the painted dog's sides. His fur was softer than William's and Juni's. Even the carefully cleaned and treated fur of Sarina's body wasn't as plush as Soren's. He took the greatest care of himself, it was clear. "I've come to say goodbye."

"Mmmhmm." Soren leaned down to nuzzle slowly along Tobias' cheek, before he sighed and let his chin come to rest on the tiger's shoulder. His arms wrapped around Tobias as he leaned in close. "I've heard you say that before, yet here you are."

Tobias squeezed him back. He wasn't wrong. "I will be leaving Sanwell soon. Tomorrow, if not the day after. It is unlikely that I will be back." He shook his head even as he nuzzled back against Soren. "I just wanted to come by. To thank you for your... exceptional service."

The painted dog hummed quietly and lifted his head up and away. His face remained close enough that Tobias couldn't see the fullness of his expression, but he could definitely see Soren's eyes. They were wide. Was that fear? "Has something happened? You said that you were meant to leave years ago. What has..."

He watched as the dog closed his eyes and sagged, and Tobias knew that he'd figured it out. The news would make its way through the staff of the establishment like wildfire. It didn't matter to Tobias. He'd be gone by the time it made a difference. "Nothing will keep me here any longer. It will be time for me to leave at last."

"That will be such a shame. You have been a kind and considerate client, and a bright point in my time here." Soren smirked as he opened his eyes again. The concern was gone from his features as those big, round ears perked up again. "My last client for this evening was a brute. So rough." He winked at Tobias. "Not that I mind that, of course, but my jaw is still quite sore."

Tobias lifted his head and his eyebrows both, though he managed to keep a blush from his cheeks and ears. The dog knew that hearing such things was like as not to work him up. "You bear it with grace."

Soren bowed his head until his forehead touched the tiger's. "And, if this is to be the last time we meet, I would express as well my regret and appreciation both." His head tilted ever so slightly, tongue left to drift from his muzzle. It stroked slowly across Tobias' lips, and if there was any trace of the taste of Soren's previous client then Tobias wasn't able to detect it.

While his body was still just shy of actual arousal, the temptation to lean up to meet that tongue proved too much. Soren's body was an oasis of comfort that Tobias had come to know quite well, and the kiss that he shared with the painted dog was a softer thing than he shared with anyone else. It didn't do to kiss one's whore, of course, but that was the furthest thing from Tobias' mind. Soren was no common whore. None of them were.

The painted dog didn't push him. He instead allowed Tobias to deepen the kiss at his own leisure. He let the tiger run his fingers through his fur and across his body as he needed. Maybe it would end with the tiger buried inside Soren. Maybe it would be the other way around. Neither knew for sure.

But as need – both the need for the physical touch and the need for some way to move past the horror of his day – both mounted, it didn't matter how it ended. What mattered was the moment. Forgetting who he was and what he was expected to be. Allowing himself simply *to be*. Not a prince. Not a son. Not a husband.

Not a disgrace.

Free.