

Interwoven

NEED: PART TEN

89th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 24 AoE

Once, the king's small council chambers had been an ornate thing. Beautiful but infinitely vain, as Tobias had once described it to Juni. Portraits of the sitting members of the council, bejewelled and framed in gold smelted from across the Southern Sea. A grand central table that bore a map of the region drafted from the time of Vargor Rathin himself beneath a thick sheet of glass. Yet another version of the Ratholarin throne in miniature at the head of the table, with smaller, plush-cushioned wooden chairs around it. Rich rugs. Vibrant curtains.

Tobias sat in his assigned chair and found himself wishing for those times.

The modern council chamber bore little resemblance. Gone were the drapes and rugs. The chairs and the table remained, but the portraits had vanished. Everything was cold stone and armoured kingsblades standing silent vigil. It was not a place to discuss the operation of a kingdom anymore. Fredrick had turned it into a war room.

As the youngest prince sat there, he fought again the urge to run his tongue across the inside of his muzzle. More than one tooth had been chipped in the beating he'd received weeks earlier, and breathing still hurt from time to time. The cooling weather had only exasperated the problem. He ached less than he used to and the bruises under his fur had mostly healed. The chipped teeth were the best reminder he had. His tongue flicked one and he growled.

He reached up to rub at his chin as the door opened. He didn't bother to turn to see who it was, and indeed didn't need to; a few moments later Brett stepped into view. The middle brother looked uncomfortable in a suit of guardian armour; if anything it was just a little too big for him. He unceremoniously dropped into the chair opposite Tobias, though he frowned and his ears drooped as he watched the younger feline rub at his chin. "Still sore?"

"I'm still only drinking *soup*, Brett." Tobias allowed himself the minor catharsis of glaring at his brother. Brett nodded and averted his gaze. "So yes. I would daresay, yes, I am still sore."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I've been sorry to hear that. I am *still* sorry to hear it." When his head lifted again, his frown had deepened. "I don't know what more you want from me. I had Sarina released as soon as I heard. I cannot change what they did."

Tobias grit his teeth, but a surge of pain in his jaw relaxed them quickly. He'd barely seen her since then; his wife had all but vanished after he showed her one of the castle's secret tunnels out. The tiger had figured he would not see her again, but still... "They should never have done that in the first place."

"Well, they were following their king's orders. Just the same as all of us." Brett rolled his eyes as he leaned back. "And honestly, I can't keep telling you I'm sorry, Tobias. It's getting more than a little old at this point."

“So is a broken jaw. Funny how that works, is it not?” Tobias shook his head, but he closed his eyes and forced himself to calm. Brett was right. His brother *had* apologised for his guardians’ behaviour every time he’d seen him since then. There was only so long he could hold a grudge, but then on the other paw, his jaw and his chest did still hurt. “I didn’t want to ask since I don’t know what’s been going on, but... Eustace?”

Brett swallowed. Any lingering irritation slipped from his face as he turned toward the throne. “Left just under a week ago. Carriage to the coast, and she’s expecting to be picked up by a Sylarian ship to take her the rest of the way there.” His voice wavered and began to break by the last word.

Before Tobias could offer him any reassurance, the door to the room opened again. Both he and Brett turned, only to be greeted by a broad and shining smile from Fredrick. Their elder brother swept into the room, his cloak fastened about his shoulders and crown atop his head each as bright as his mood. “Good morning, brothers. I trust you slept well?”

Fredrick’s smile only widened further as neither of his siblings responded. He tapped the back of Tobias’ chair as he swept past it, only to hop up onto his throne and sigh as he leaned back into it. “Oh, do go on. Continue to look so dour, the both of you. This is a good time we find ourselves in. We are thriving since I have taken my place as king.”

“Perhaps you are, but I can’t say the same.” Tobias frowned at Fredrick, but if anything his dissent only further brightened the king’s mood. “You summoned us. We are here. What do you want?”

“Can I not simply wish to spend some time with my dear, dear brothers? Duty has taken so much of my time that I have barely seen you since my coronation.” His smile chilled somewhat as he nodded to Tobias. “Well, and since your wounding. I trust you’re feeling better now. The Institute sorely misses you.”

“I’m sure Davan told you that himself.” Again there was that cool flicker in Fredrick’s smile. Good, Tobias hadn’t been wrong. His brother’s jovial attitude was all to throw them off. The cruelty was still there beneath. “I have received my reports from them on their latest work.”

“And we will get to that. That information is for your ears and mine alone.” He turned to Brett, who continued to keep his eyes as far off Fredrick as they could. “And you. You look well. You seem lighter today, Brett. Are you perhaps feeling the freedom of being severed from such dead weight as you were carrying around?”

Brett offered no response save for a throaty growl, and Fredrick simply chuckled in response. “Oh, there’s no need to be like that. I have a small list of potential replacements for Eustace, and I think you will be quite pleased with the one I eventually choose for you.”

That certainly lifted the middle brother’s gaze. “I am not even to choose for myself my wife?”

Fredrick laughed as Tobias’ stomach churned. He *laughed*. “Of course not. Your place is not to choose a wife. Your place is to marry for the realm’s advantage. It was how Eustace was first gifted to you, after all.” He laughed again, but the sound was quieter. “And look how it turned out. Perhaps you will come to appreciate her as much. Perhaps even moreso. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Again, Brett simply sat in angry silence. It was what Fredrick wanted, and Tobias was absolutely sure of that. Why not take the opportunity to rub his brothers' noses in his authority? Why not make them confront their misery? Why not force them to impotently dissent or soullessly acquiesce?

It wasn't the only reason for the meeting clearly, as the king leaned forward. "The Pure Snow approaches. I would like an update on the status of the Guardians. How do they fare in their duties?"

Brett's ears twitched. "They fare well. They believe that the rebel cell that was located in Sanwell has been successfully eradicated. Traces of connections to founding elements have been discovered, linking them to efforts in the northern villages and old Lenkis territories since retaken by the Marovani. It's believed the smugglers were using the river to ferry resources and people in and out of Sanwell."

Tobias' stomach churned. Is that where Sarina had gone? The fact that the princess hadn't been brought up was a good sign, but maybe that, like the Institute's work, was only for select ears. Fredrick nodded along, happy with the news. "Any more contraband material?"

"Holy texts. Propaganda. Iconography, of course." Brett shook his head. He seemed more comfortable, now that he was talking about his work. "All of the usual offenses. None of the cell in Sanwell were captured alive; they fought to their last. Their leader seemed to be a foreigner. Ghavaan."

As Tobias' eyes flicked to Fredrick, he caught the king's scowl. It only lasted moments before he composed his face back into that façade of cheerfulness. "Ghavaa is either an ocean or a score of kingdoms away, depending on the route to get there. They are no threat to us here in the south." His smile slipped a little as Brett nodded back. "*Unless* there were multiple. Were any more Ghavaan found among the rebels?"

"No. Just the one. The others were either Ratholarin sympathisers loyal to the cause, or Carisi insurrectionists." Brett laid his paws on the table and clasped them together. "The work the Institute has been putting out has been very helpful with the efforts to round up individuals who have not yet come forward about their..." He trailed off as he glanced at Tobias.

That sick feeling in the pit of his guts returned as Brett grimaced. "... their neighbours' split loyalties. In the last week, we have identified and banished another two dozen non-Ratholarin just in Sanwell alone. Guardians are being dispatched across the realm to... expand the effort."

"Good. Very good. I trust you will keep the finest of them here." Fredrick's smile was back as he lifted his head. "And they have taken to their tasks with enthusiasm, I take it?"

Brett's muzzle twisted. "They have, for the most part. Exceptions are few, and what there are tend to be quiet."

Again Fredrick chuckled as he glanced over to Tobias. "You see, brother? The hearts of the Ratholarin people beat in line with my own. They know the truth that you seem unwilling to accept. That this land is for *us*, and not for lesser peoples who cling to ancient, arcane sensibilities."

Tobias held his tongue as long as he could, but the breath that hissed out between his teeth provided a swift escape for a couple. "If you say so."

"I do say so, and the Guardians of Ratholarin prove it. We will discuss the Institute's role in that in a moment, but first..." The king's smile faded as he fixed Brett with a blank stare. "My brother is still recovering from the wounds your Guardians inflicted upon him. Do you think this acceptable behaviour?"

Brett recoiled at the question, and he glanced over at Tobias before he frowned at Fredrick. "The Guardians that day were not following my commands. They were following yours."

"And you are responsible for them, are you not?" Fredrick thrust a finger toward Tobias. "I did not order them to beat a *prince*. I did not order them to break his bones! Do you think this is acceptable? Guardians who believe that *we* are their prey?"

"Of course not, I..." Brett stammered as he looked back and forth between his brothers. Tobias sighed to himself. He already knew how it would end. His assumption proved right a moment later when Brett's eyes hardened. "Tobias wasn't completely innocent in this encounter. He could have chosen not to resist them as they carried out their duties."

"Oh, if only I could believe you. Disappointing." Fredrick narrowed his eyes as he stared down his muzzle at Brett. The middle brother's fur bristled in response. "You did, after all, decide they had overstepped in their imprisonment of his wife, did you not? Released her?"

Brett growled again. "She was uncooperative. I believed a softer approach would have earned us-"

"Nothing. It earned us *nothing*." Fredrick scoffed as Brett leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "And where are your Guardians on finding her? Any progress on that front, or are they too busy beating on the royal family?"

A shudder ran through Tobias, but he relaxed ever so slightly as Brett shook his head. "The... pursuit is ongoing. I have the best of our Guardians on it."

With a growl of his own, Fredrick shook his head. The king lifted a paw and waved it toward Brett. "Then perhaps you had better attend to the matter personally. Prove to me that your incompetence is well and truly in the past. Ratholarin cannot tolerate such... such *weakness*." His eyes narrowed. "You are dismissed."

"Thank you." Brett rose almost faster than Tobias could imagine possible. He didn't even bother to push his chair back in under the table before he stormed out. Tobias kept his eyes on the table, looking over the map beneath the glass until the door to the chamber slammed shut again. He winced at the sound, ears tilting back.

Silence lingered for only a few seconds more before a clap from Fredrick's paws brought Tobias' attention back to his king. "I'm so sorry you had to witness that. This job requires much, and to be gentle is often to be too weak. I cannot afford such softness."

"Of course." Tobias flicked a tongue across his chipped teeth again. Sorry that he had to bear witness, not sorry that he had ordered Guardians to turn his chambers inside out and imprison Tobias' wife. "You wanted to discuss the Institute."

“Yes. Yes! Oh, very much so.” Again Fredrick clapped his paws together, and he leaned forward to stare intently at Tobias. “I’ve not even seen you since you met them. What did you think of the Triumvirate? I trust that Davan isn’t being too exacting?”

“I think he’s being just as exacting as you intend him to be.” Fredrick’s muzzle curled slightly. “Enough games, Fredrick. Please. I just want to know what you want.”

Again there was that brief flash of malice that touched the king’s face. When it was subsumed beneath Fredrick’s cheerful expression again, it left just a hint of its presence in his eyes. They stared, almost unblinkingly, right into Tobias’ own like they were trying to dig inside him. “What. I. Want. I would think that obvious by now, brother. Wouldn’t you?”

Tobias lifted his head a little higher to try to meet that stare. It was harder than he’d thought. “You’ve got your crown and your throne. You have your power and your dominion. You even have servants using *magic* for you.”

“And yet there is defiance at every turn.” The stare broke, and Fredrick frowned as he looked at Brett’s empty council seat. “Once my staunchest ally, Brett now spits insults behind my back. Subverts my work.” He nodded at the seat and glanced aside to Tobias once more. “You would never subvert my work, would you?”

“You’d have me killed before I could even consider it. So no.” Tobias narrowed his eyes. “If you seek approval, you could stand to apply a softer touch.”

“I seek respect. The respect I am owed as king.” He worked his jaw side to side and folded his arms. It seemed as though he was waiting for something, and he didn’t speak again until Tobias perked an ear. “Where is your wife, brother?”

That wasn’t the question Tobias had expected. He frowned and flicked the ear he’d perked. “If I knew, do you think I would be here with you? I would be out there, looking for her.”

Fredrick rolled his eyes and brought a paw up to rub at the side of his face. He sighed as he looked down at Tobias. “Of course. Of course you would. Good and faithful husband, aren’t you? Except that for a couple of questions as to her whereabouts, you have been rather silent on her disappearance.”

Tobias sighed. “She had spoken at length about wishing to return to Ingsbren. For her and I both to go, as father planned; as father *promised*.” Fredrick’s bored expression flashed angry at that for the barest moment. “Your guardians wouldn’t tell me if they had her locked away somewhere, nor would they take me to her but to chain me up at her side. And me...” He tried a quick shrug. “I never wanted the marriage in the first place. If she has decided to flee Ratholarin, why should I be upset?”

“You should not. But I know you, brother; I know your heart.” Fredrick’s paw dropped away as he shook his head. “And your heart drips with perversion; has it ever stopped? You only despised the wedding because you were so enamoured with the Carisi bastard.” He perked an ear. “I have spared him thus far. Left him in his service to this kingdom when I could *easily* cast him down.”

The younger tiger trembled, but he forced himself to stillness. Sparing William? Fredrick wouldn’t be so kind. Not, at least, without advantage. “Such is your right as king. I

haven't seen William in years, and he has rejected me at every turn. Why would I care about his fate?"

"Because you are weak and sentimental. The same qualities that tell me without a shred of doubt that you care about dear Sarina's well-being." His eyes raked over Tobias, and he shuddered again. "If I think you are hiding her from me, it makes you a traitor, Tobias. I would kill you myself, and then I would hunt down your precious soldier and gut him, too. Spare the realm the spread of his sickness."

And there it was. William was spared in order to be useful as leverage. Typical. "Threats don't change the truth, Fredrick." Tobias stood from his chair and held the king's stare, but his fingers twitched away as fear quickened his heart. Fredrick would do it, too. That he didn't accept what was the truth wouldn't matter; if Fredrick wanted to make good on the threat, there was nothing Tobias could do. "If you think I'm hiding her, then go ahead. Do whatever you want. You're just going to anyway, so why should I bother fighting you?"

The bored irritation that had been clear on Fredrick's face vanished all at once, and he favoured Tobias with a smile that set a shiver through him. "Good... very, very, *very* good. You understand your position quite well. I was afraid the beating you'd suffered might have caused you to forget yourself."

Pain or not, Tobias' jaw tightened. He bit back his reply as Fredrick laughed once more to himself. Of course it had just been a test. Just another game, to see if Tobias would serve at his brother's whim. Why would it have been anything else? "Do you know what the Institute has been up to in your absence, brother? Have you had a chance to review Mattias' most recent work?"

Tobias didn't nod. He didn't react at all. Of course he'd been provided a preliminary draft of the tome, and he'd had nothing but time with which to read it. "It is inspired fiction, but it is fiction nonetheless."

"It is *truth*, Tobias. It is the truth that will be taught to young minds across all of Ratholarin." Fredrick stood, descending from his throne as Tobias sat himself back down again. The king placed both paws on the table and splayed his fingers out wide. "And it will be *all* that the children of this realm learn from. Our history will be known far and wide. The people will learn it. Know it. Believe it."

His fingers brushed across the glass over the Ratholarin territories. "Imagine it, Tobias. In the space of a generation, we can wipe the Carisi culture from the world. Yaroveni culture. Lenkis culture. We can spread this word of Ratholarin across the whole southern reach."

"The whole..." Tobias sniffed as he shook his head. "Fredrick, the book was full of lies. The history, the figures, the acts in its pages were all fabrications. You intend for us to teach falsehood to children?"

"Not falsehood. Ratholarin glory." Fredrick patted the glass-topped table as he smiled down at it. "The truth doesn't matter, and it will be what we teach it to be. Think about it! Most children of the realm only learn the trades of their families, or they become servants and soldiers. The Institute will change *everything*, Tobias. Knowledge will no longer be words from random muzzles, but instructed. Instructed by scholars who will go forth, exalt the Ratholarin way, and teach only of its supremacy."

Tobias' eyes fell to the map in the centre of the table. Fredrick's fingers had smudged the glass somewhat, but he could see clearly the full expanse of the southern reach. It depicted no borders, and as his gaze took it in he realised why it was so appealing to Fredrick; why the older tiger's eyes glittered with ambition as they took in the painted lines of mountain and river and sea. There were no borders. No delineation between the kingdoms and peoples of the southern sea. No towns and no separation between one demesne and the next.

No rivals. One land.

His land.

"You will raise a generation of zealots this way." The words were almost breathlessly uttered as the scope of Fredrick's goals finally began to sink in. His brother had thought what he wanted would be obvious, but even Tobias had failed to grasp the fullness of his greed.

Far from accepting the words as they were intended, Fredrick instead smiled up at Tobias and nodded. "Yes, we will. There will be no gods to split loyalties when we are done, and allegiance will belong only to the crown. It will forge a force of every male and female, every adult and every child, with the glory of our kingdom instilled indelibly in their hearts. And then we go out beyond our holdings and spread that supremacy far and wide." His fingers brushed across and tapped the glass. "Ingsbren. Sylaria. Marovan. We are of these lands all, and all these lands *will* belong to us."

He might have said 'us' but Tobias knew what Fredrick really meant. The king nodded to himself, lost to his own thoughts as he looked at the geography of that land over which he imagined himself supreme. "All would be Ratholarin."

"And you will make it happen." As Tobias turned, his brother was staring at him once more. The smile was gone. A snarl rested in its place, menacing and unyielding. "Through the Institute, by overseeing this grand education of our people. *This* has been the dream of the kings before me, but it is by your efforts with the Institute and my will as king together that it will finally be made manifest! No collection of rivalling kingdoms fighting over this demesne or that. One kingdom. One ruler. One people." He bared his teeth, but it was not with a smile. "Ratholarin. An empire eternal."

Unable to stand to look into those power-hungry eyes even a second longer, Tobias dropped his gaze to look across the map again. The gentle fields of Ingsbren. The craggy Lenkis. The dunes of the far west and the rugged Sylarian coastline. Fredrick wouldn't stop at usurping the varied people of Ratholarin who might have come from elsewhere. He wouldn't stop until only the Ratholarin were *left*.

And worse, Tobias was to be a part of it. A glance up at Fredrick again was meant to come with dissent. It was supposed to come with a rejection, firm and round, of everything that his elder brother wanted to accomplish. A denouncement so powerful that Fredrick would snap out of whatever insane fugue state he must have entered to believe such a dream not only achievable, but *ideal*.

But there was no room in Fredrick's eyes for dissent. There was no room in that snarl for rejection. There was no room in his mind for any such denouncement. He would accept nothing less than absolute, total submission. The alternative he had already laid out in no uncertain terms. If Tobias stood in the way, Fredrick would kill him. He didn't doubt the threat.

And so he forced a smile to his muzzle. Stared back through strained eyes as he swallowed his pride and his morals both. “An empire eternal.” He thought he might be sick.

The snarl faded away. An intense look came over the king’s face as he placed a paw on Tobias’ shoulder and squeezed. “I knew you’d see it my way if I just gave you the right... encouragement. This is for the best. You’ll see.” He let go and turned back to the map again. “You’ll see.”

Tobias nodded and swallowed. He stepped back from the table again, but Fredrick didn’t summon him back. He didn’t even seem to care as his younger brother turned and made his way out of the chamber. He’d made his task clear, after all. He’d given Tobias his orders; what he was to set out and do.

No sooner had he cleared the room and shut the door behind him however than Tobias’ mind began to turn. What Fredrick proposed was madness. It was more than just war for ideology or justice or to free people from the yoke of gods and their doctrines. This was to be a war of conquest. A war of eradication. A war that would sweep from one end of the southern sea to the other, if he should have his way. And then, perhaps, on to shores further afield.

It could not stand. *He* could not stand. Tobias felt his claws sheath and unsheathe as he flexed his fingers. He could not help Fredrick in his sickening goals. He could not stop Fredrick from achieving them. Stuck in the middle, Tobias was at a loss for what to do. For the moment, at least, he seemed to have the king’s faith. Davan had yet to discover opportunity to see the prince’s insides ripped out. He could look like the faithful servant of the crown he was expected to be, and maybe if he smiled hard enough it would keep people from seeing what he was really doing.

Tobias didn’t know what that would be yet, but it for sure wouldn’t be what Fredrick wanted.

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Even though he knew well that Soren had other clients, the painted dog’s chambers in the Crimson Crest never gave away even the barest hint of it. He could never smell any other clients of any gender, and Soren himself was immaculate for every moment he was present. Well, immaculate until such a time as they worked together to remedy that fact. That was a whole other matter. The room, like the canine, were the picture of peerless comfort.

Tobias had been surprised when he saw the first dagger. It had been surreptitiously strapped to one of the legs of the bed, sheathed but ready to be drawn at a moment’s notice. That there was another on the other side was less surprising, but his concern had returned at the discovery of a third by the washbasin. Soren’s room was still comfortable and inviting, but there was an edge to it that hadn’t been there before. Only one thing had changed since the last visit that Tobias knew about: Fredrick had taken the throne.

He’d opted to stand rather than sit as he waited for Soren to arrive. Certainly the tiger knew it could be a while. If Soren had been out or with other clients or otherwise helping with the operation of the Crest – not to mention whatever else one got up to when one wasn’t plying one’s trade – then he could have been gone for an hour or more. Tobias would sit when he needed to, but he wasn’t expecting the painted dog to be quite that long.

Indeed, after no more than ten minutes he watched the door open. Briefly he heard the trill of music from the gallery down the hall as the naked canine stepped into the room. It faded into silence again as Tobias' eyes struggled to stay respectfully fixed on Soren's smiling face. "It is good to see you."

"And you, though I'll say it's definitely a surprise. It's been far too many weeks." Soren's tail swished brightly as he strode right up to Tobias. His arms encircled the tiger's waist as he leaned in for a kiss, but a grunt of pain as their chests bumped together stalled the canine's advance. When he leaned back again, it was with a wince. "I'm sorry. Are you hurt?"

Tobias tried a little smile, though his jaw ached with the effort. "Lingering injuries. Nothing you need worry yourself over." He stepped forward and coaxed Soren more gently against him as he nuzzled along the painted dog's cheek. "I was just as surprised that you're here after all. Glad, but I thought you'd have left."

"Oh?" The canine chuckled as he nosed back at Tobias' cheek and planted a little kiss there. It was especially soft, and Tobias smiled. Soren was always so considerate. "My father might have been Yarovenni, but my mother was true-born Ratholarin. I have never known anywhere else. And besides, if our illustrious king wishes me banished? He would have to come down here and *find* me first."

The tiger shivered. He didn't doubt that Fredrick would be willing to do such a thing, if only due to the painted dog's willingness to engage male clients. "I am grateful that such a thing hasn't come to pass. I would rather Fredrick not be tested, if it is all the same."

As Soren drew back, it was with a quiet laugh. "That sounds most unlike you, my prince. But you are in need of more than intimate company. Come." He stepped back and offered Tobias his paw. "I can feel how tense you are. You *must* relax."

The dog wasn't wrong, but that didn't mean that Tobias was certain he wanted to be drawn off. The chambers were safe. Wherever else he wanted to take the prince could be considerably less so. "I don't know that I--"

"You trust me, do you not?" The canine's other paw lifted to tenderly run down Tobias' cheek. It lifted away before it reached his jaw and muzzle as the tiger nodded. "Then trust me now. Your heart is heavy and it too must be tended." He perked an eyebrow and tossed in a quick wink. "However heavy your balls may be, they will have to wait. You need something more than just to empty them."

Tobias swallowed hard. Tending to himself had been difficult during his recovery, it was true, but once again Soren understood him to a degree he'd not expected. And he had been right: Tobias *did*, for whatever reason, trust him. "Very well. I... defer to your wisdom."

Again Soren chuckled, and Tobias placed his paw in the painted dog's. He was led to and through the door, and Soren only turned briefly to close it again before he started to lead Tobias down the hall. Not back toward the gallery, but toward the curved, downward staircase at their end. That the prince was absolutely nude didn't concern him the way it used to, but it might well have done if they'd turned the other way. "I do mean to ask, however... I noticed a couple of new additions to your room. Do you have a new client who is fond of those blades?"

The paw holding Tobias' tightened slightly, but it was the only thing to give away the dog's unease. He tossed his head back with another laugh and flashed an entirely convincing smile at his client. "Goodness, no. The mistress would have a client's head if they so much as insinuated an interest in hurting any of us. No, they are there in the event of any unforeseen circumstances. Merely precautionary."

Tobias didn't doubt that, as he was led down the stairs. Partway down was a door that he had only ever seen locked, but they swiftly passed by it. "I understand. A smart thing, in these uncertain times." On some level he longed to let Soren know just how messy their times truly were, but he held his tongue as ever. It was less for what could happen to Tobias, and more what would happen to Soren if word escaped that the painted dog had learned or even spread the crown's secrets.

That was unacceptable. Still, Soren just nodded along as he brought Tobias down the rest of the way. The stairway opened up into a small room with three doors to it, and Soren stepped before the rightmost of them without a moment's hesitation. He pulled it open, and Tobias was immediately assaulted by the thick, damp air of the baths. "I smell that bad, do I?"

"Nothing a little soap, perfume, and my paws can't fix." Soren looked back over his shoulder and smiled warmly at Tobias. "Trust me. You, my prince, are the sweetest smelling of all my clients. Most of them expect to get dirty here and take... well, absolutely no care of themselves before they arrive. Why wash up when you expect to get filthy, right?" He waved down toward the water. "But this is not about cleanliness today."

Tobias nodded and looked about. The water was barely waist deep for the most part; a broad, roughly square-shaped pool hewn from the rock beneath Sanwell. It trickled in through a couple of spouts in the wall, steaming as it splashed into the bath proper. Whatever method they used to heat the baths, it certainly worked well. Tobias let go of Soren's paw as the painted dog slipped behind a column. "The baths are not open to clients for a few hours yet, but I don't think anyone would mind if I made a special exception for you." He peeked out around the column and flashed one of his brightest smiles for Tobias. "No one will bother us here."

"Oh, won't they now? How convenient." The painted dog's smile grew toothier as Tobias shook his head and started down to the edge of the pool. A set of wide, shallow stairs allowed him to step gradually down into the warm water, and no sooner did it flow around his toes than Tobias felt any resistance to the idea leave him. He flexed those toes and moved deeper, sighing as the water rose along his legs. "Nevermind. I take it back; this was a great idea."

"I pride myself on knowing what my clients need." As Tobias settled deeper into the water, he heard it shift as Soren began to slide in. He glanced over; the canine had set down some towels near to the edge of the bath, and was in the process of making his way over toward the tiger. "And *you* need to relax some. I can see the stress curling you in on yourself."

It didn't surprise Tobias for a moment that Soren could see that, but it did dishearten him on some level. He'd honestly thought he was handling things better, especially given his recovery had spared him most of the realities of Fredrick's plans. Face with it as he had been that day, however? Tobias sighed and settled against the other end of the bath, where a raised section allowed him to sit without submerging his shoulders in the water. "That obvious?"

He did perk up somewhat as Soren followed him over and shook his head. "It isn't. I can't imagine what's been going on, but you bear it with grace. I wish I was as good at it as you seem to be." He must have pulled a face though, because Soren frowned as he sat down next to him. "What?"

"Nothing. Just..." He shook his head as he lay back in the water. The warmth of it flowed through his fur as he spread his arms and legs wide, allowing it to soak him right through. "You always have it together. I know it's an act for your clients and that I am no different, but you never have a single strand of fur out of place. You could have been ravaged by goodness knows how many males before I arrive and I would never know it." He smiled and closed his eyes. "Would that I could learn such skill."

"Well first of all, my record at once was six, and it was a very special occasion." That admission made Tobias' eyes shoot open again; when he turned to face Soren, the painted dog had similarly relaxed into the water. "Second of all, I don't think of it as an act. I enjoy what I do, my prince. I enjoy bringing a little joy into the lives of people who truly need it. You are one such."

His head rolled to the side as he looked the tiger up and down. His smile was positively predatory and Tobias shivered at the sight of it. "And finally, it takes work to maintain the appearance. Practice. Presentation is so important in this line of work, after all. It wouldn't do to look like six needy males had spent as many hours spending themselves on and in me when you arrived, would it?" His eyes gaze slipped down Tobias body and lingered between the prince's legs. "Dishevelled and panting and leaking from each end... most undignified, wouldn't you agree? Better to look clean and respectable for you."

Tobias had to look away and sit up a little higher as he felt the blood in his body begin its southward diversion. He cleared his throat as he cast his gaze across the tiles and columns and walls of the baths. "You are baiting a reaction from me."

"I am. It's working, too." He shuffled closer, the water shifting in a shallow wave as he leaned against Tobias' side. Under the water, a delicate paw was stroking through the fur of his legs as it flowed with the water's currents. "And do you know why I am doing that?"

"Besides trying to tease me into bending you over the edge of the bath?" Tobias perked an eyebrow, but he still couldn't bring himself to look the painted dog in the eye.

Soren just chuckled again. "Or the other way around. But yes, besides that." His other paw came up, but when it rose from the water it slid around behind Tobias' shoulders and drew him in tighter. "I told you before, didn't I? Your heart is heavy. You need a chance to let go. To relax. To allow yourself simply to feel."

Tobias winced, but still allowed himself to lean back against Soren. "Trust me when I say that I am not able to. I don't think that I have been for many, many years now."

"Not even when you're here, with me?" The painted dog clicked his tongue as he nuzzled lightly against Tobias' forehead. "If I didn't know your burdens, I might be offended, you know. And after I've put so much work into you, too." He gave an exaggerated sigh, and Tobias couldn't help but smile.

He closed his eyes again as the heat that had flooded his nethers began to subside. Soren was right. He did need to relax. The question was how; outside of the Crest, there was ever scrutiny. Zane was with him almost every waking moment he was recovering from his beating. The Triumvirate, as soon as he returned to the Institute upon his full recovery, would be there the rest of the time. Always watched. Never truly able to be alone. Never able to truly settle. “You provide a valuable service, Soren. More than just what you can do with what’s between your legs.”

“Of course more than that. You know what this muzzle is capable of, too.” He laughed as Tobias rolled his eyes, but the tiger couldn’t help but smile. He did, in fact, know very well. “I don’t know what’s different for you in that castle, but I know whatever it is it’s very hard on you.” His fingers tightened, squeezing both at Tobias’ shoulder and thigh. “My role here is pleasure. Pleasure takes many forms, my prince, but comfort is among them. Sometimes it’s taking my time milking you dry. Sometimes it’s a warm, if pokey, body laying alongside yours. Sometimes it is little more than a safe place to relax. To *be*, with one who can at least try to understand.”

He sighed as he lay his head on Tobias’ shoulder, and the tiger felt his muzzle tremble with Soren’s words. “And sometimes it is just the knowledge that, whatever your circumstances and whatever my profession, you are not alone. That I am here for you.”

“And you aren’t wrong. That muzzle is something special.” The words were almost a whisper, but had they been any louder they might have betrayed the tears that were forming in Tobias’ eyes. Why was he crying? Why was he crying over a whore? Why was he crying, sitting in the baths at the most exclusive and well-regarded brothel in the kingdom?

That time there was no laughter from Soren. He instead nodded, nuzzling in closer and laying his head down with just a touch more weight as he made himself comfortable. Juni had been an outlet for repressed physical needs, but he’d been too young to emotionally connect with her after their whirlwind lust. Sarina had been intellectually stimulating, but too coldly logical for Tobias’ emotional needs. William had constantly represented the emotional and physical intimacy that Tobias had wanted, but he was completely out of reach.

He knew why he cried. Tears sent small ripples through the water as he clutched Soren all the closer. He cried because this painted dog – this *whore* – was the closest thing to a true companion that Tobias had. A friend and a lover that he paid a not insignificant number of crowns to enjoy. A friend and lover whose every word and action was predicated on the need to satisfy him. Everything he’d ever wanted, but bought and paid for like a tool or implement. Or slave.

No bath would lighten his heart. No spilled seed would satisfy his soul. The tears came to ease the burden; to provide a release of pressure from a heart sinking with the weight of Tobias’ reality. He cried because he couldn’t scream. He cried because he couldn’t speak.

He cried because there was nothing else he could do. Soren held him close, and Tobias could only cry all the harder.