

Interwoven

NECESSITY: PART ONE

79th Day of the Verdant Growths, 27 AoE

That the first Tobias had heard of the new law was the sight of a guardian beating a helpless vixen in the streets was not nearly as terrible as the act itself, but it churned in his guts all the same.

He stormed his way down the castle halls toward where he knew Fredrick to be. The king had a lot to answer for, after all that Tobias had seen. More than a few guardians and kingsblades in the castle glanced at him as he passed them by, but none of them stopped him. It would almost have been amusing to see them try, he'd told himself. Then he remembered his last attempt at interfering in the affairs of guardians acting on Fredrick's orders, and shivered. Perhaps it wouldn't be so amusing after all.

The room was one of the smaller meeting rooms in the castle, designed to accept minor dignitaries that didn't warrant special consideration and weren't inclined to be awed by the throne room. It was there that Fredrick often would address the guardians he had specific orders for, or the Triumvirate if he was meeting them outside the Institute itself. Tobias had been there many times over the years to meet with Fredrick. Today would be no different, he told himself.

As he approached however, he noticed Zane in front of the door. The tiger frowned at the sight of the elder kingsblade. Age was catching up to William's father, but he still dutifully carried out his role as kingsblade and as Tobias' assigned protector. Why he had been pulled to protect the door to the meeting room was a curiosity, but not one Tobias was interested in lingering on for long.

Clearly, whatever it was that was going on inside wasn't for his eyes. Zane held up a paw and shook his head as Tobias drew closer. "You do not wish to disturb him, my prince."

"This is a matter that cannot wait." Tobias attempted to step around Zane, but the wolf smoothly moved to block him with his larger frame. "Stand aside, Zane. Please."

The wolf looked down at him, but his eyes for whatever reason didn't meet Tobias'. "Trust me, my prince. You do not wish to go in there."

Tobias frowned deeper. Oh, didn't he now? "Do you mean that? Or do you mean that *he* does not wish me to go in there?"

"I am quite certain he would welcome your arrival." The wolf's ears splayed as he closed his eyes. "Do not go inside. I beg you, Tobias. Please."

This, Tobias realised at last, was something very different. Zane wouldn't have begged him if it were simply Fredrick's order that he not be disturbed. More, that his brother would somehow *welcome* Tobias' arrival. What was going on? "Zane? Explain."

The kingsblade swallowed. His eyes still would not meet Tobias' as he shook his head. "I am not to speak of it. Nor am I to disallow you entry if you demand it. His words." The wolf paused. "If you've a matter to discuss with him, you should come back later."

Tobias grit his teeth. Whatever was going on, it was clear Fredrick wanted him to interrupt it. So why was Zane so eager to drive him off? What in the world was happening? "I thank you for your concern. Now stand aside."

Zane's eyes finally met Tobias' and the kingsblade nodded. He sighed and stepped away to reveal the door to Tobias. "And know by my deeds who I am, and by that which I conceal the truth I try to live. See me now and hear what is not; heed what is."

"The Tragedy of Celarrhi. Act four." Tobias' muzzle curled as Zane nodded again. Anger bubbled up; Fredrick was definitely up to something, and if it were not a matter of such importance Tobias was all but certain he would turn away. Heed the wolf's warnings and wisdom. That time though, he reached to the door. Grasped the handle. Pushed it open and stepped inside.

All of Zane's warnings sharpened into focus as the room's occupants did. Tobias felt his throat constrict, breath caught in it. Disgust, pain and shock all vied for dominance in his heart at the sights and sounds before him.

The sight was clear. It was Fredrick, his elder brother seated at the table and facing to Tobias' right. His arms were splayed across the surface of the table as he turned toward the intrusion, the king's tongue left to loll out of his muzzle as he flashed Tobias a wide, cool smile.

The sounds came from below the table where, kneeling in the king's shed trousers, was *Juni*.

"Well don't just stand there, brother." Fredrick's tones were strained as the slurping from below the table intensified. Tobias shuddered in disgust as he found himself unable to tear his eyes away from Juni's bobbing head. His brother's shaft vanished between her lips, sinking into that muzzle he'd known so well, only to reappear as she drew back for another go. There was no spark of arousal nor hint of interest that rose from the hungry suckling below the table. There was only confusion.

Fredrick, however, seemed to grow only more irritated and he raised his voice to snap Tobias out of it. "Zane! Close the door, you mongrel!" The insult to one of their greatest warriors caused Tobias to blink and lift his head back to his brother's face. He was faintly aware of the door being pulled closed behind him, and once it clicked back in place Fredrick began to smile once more. "Good. Now we can talk."

"We can... talk?" Tobias' stomach twisted itself in knots as he glanced back down at Juni again. She didn't seem to have even remotely noticed him, despite the clear words that had been exchanged already. "I don't... what is-"

"Hold on... just a... a moment." Tobias' eyes went wide as Fredrick knocked twice on the top of the table, and his eyes rolled back as Juni sank her muzzle all the way down to the root of his shaft. The king's length disappeared into her muzzle as he let out a ragged moan of pleasure, and Tobias could do little more than watch in shock as he emptied himself down into the throat of the hyena who had been Tobias' own first. Who had shared his bed for years. Who

had helped him truly become who he was. Who had been his friend, his confidant, and his lover.

Her moan was muffled by the vigorous gulping of her throat, and Tobias almost threw up.

Of course that was what Fredrick had wanted him to see. It was no wonder that he had wanted Tobias to interrupt; it was all another little game to see how much he could torment his little brother. The younger tiger turned and reached for the door, but another sharp knock to the table froze him in place. “Don’t you- *hnnng*... don’t you *dare* leave. You will face your king.”

Tobias hesitated. He knew what was going on at his back, and he had no interest in facing it again. It had been some time since he’d seen Juni; as far as he’d known, she had left the castle to raise their son. She’d told him that she’d found work as a barmaid. She had told him that life was good.

She had lied to him.

As he reluctantly turned around, the truth was evident on her face. She wore the dregs of Fredrick’s seed shamefully across her muzzle, thick ropes of the stuff left to soak into her fur as she grimaced and licked at her lips. She lay her head down between his legs again, lapping idly at his balls as Fredrick glared at Tobias. Juni didn’t look at him at all.

Fredrick’s breathing steadily eased back to normal as he leaned back in his chair. One paw drifted down under the table to rub at Juni’s head with something that might have resembled affection if Tobias didn’t know better. “Don’t you dare look away, Tobias. Not for a second.”

So it was to be a game. It was always a game with Fredrick, and he’d already gotten what he wanted. Tobias was dedicated to not giving him an inch more than that, and so he drew himself up tall and stared the king down. “Who’s looking away, Fredrick?”

“Good. I guess she’s not the only one good at taking orders.” He shivered, and Tobias’ gaze dipped not quite of his own volition to take in the sight of Juni’s tongue slowly and dutifully cleaning off Fredrick’s shaft. “What are you doing here?”

“Watching my brother emptying the royal coffers, as it were.” Tobias folded his arms even as Fredrick gave what seemed to be a legitimate, hearty laugh in response. “I suppose you were expecting me. Wanted to give me a show, did you? Eager to get a male to watch you be pleased? Bare your cock for him?”

Tobias had to hide his smile as the words earned the reaction he had hoped. Fredrick swiftly pulled back from Juni, to such a degree and with such speed that she bumped her head on the underside of the table with an audible yelp. Fredrick quickly stood and growled, pulling up his trousers and refastening them in place as the hyena rubbed at her head. “Funny, brother. Very funny.”

“Hey, don’t take it out on me. You’re the one who chose to do this.” He looked down at the servant girl under the table. Juni’s eyes, much like Zane’s, refused to meet his gaze. “Good morning, Juni. Having fun down there?”

“You don’t speak to him.” Fredrick’s voice boomed through the small room, and Juni winced even though she couldn’t see the fire in the king’s eyes. The order was clear, and she simply bowed her head and sat back in place. Tobias frowned. She was trembling as she cowered. Clearly this hadn’t been her idea at all, and perhaps the moans had been staged for Tobias’ discomfort... Fredrick was just the sort of person to enforce that sort of torment. “And *you*. Not another word unless I ask for it. Do you understand?”

“Of course, my king.” Tobias bowed his head. The sick feeling in his stomach was replaced by some level of vindication. Fredrick had his cruelties, but his wit had always been slow and simple.

His surrender seemed to only irritate Fredrick further as he growled again. “Sit down.” He pointed at the seat opposite him as he settled into his own again. Tobias followed the instruction right away, and it was almost a blessing when he could no longer see Juni between Fredrick’s legs. “Now. Do I need to guess why you’re looking for me?”

Tobias felt his anger return, amplified somewhat by what he had just experienced. Still, petulance demanded that he mess with Fredrick as much as he could for what he’d done. “No, my king.”

Fredrick glared at him and waved his paw silently, inviting Tobias to continue. But he’d not *asked* for it specifically, and so Tobias kept his muzzle firmly shut until Fredrick gave an exasperated sigh and flattened his ears. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“To express my absolute revulsion with a scene I saw in town.” Tobias clasped his paws together atop the table and leaned forward. “One of the guardians, beating a Ratholarin vixen in the street. Bones broken. Blood everywhere. They claimed it was on your order”

Fredrick sniffed and waved a dismissive paw. “I issue many orders, brother. You must be more specific.”

Tobias allowed his eyes to narrow. “They spoke of a new law that would punish those who would lay with their own sex. I informed them that there was of course no such law, and that I would know as all such laws are discussed with the Ratholarin Magi, and I am *one* of the Ratholarin Magi. By your grace and beneficence.” He bowed his head again, but his glare never left Fredrick’s amused expression. “So there could be no such law.”

“Oh, but there is.” Fredrick leaned back and folded his arms as Tobias scowled. “The guardians have been provided specific instructions ahead of time. The edict has been proclaimed within the castle just this morning, brother; you really should come back from your whoring sooner rather than later.” He laughed as his arm jostled; presumably he was petting Juni’s head.

Whether or not the hyena between Fredrick’s legs was truly a whore or not, Tobias felt his fur bristle at the implication. “Given you’ve yet to find me a new wife and my *old* wife is goodness knows where, I don’t know who else you expect me to rut. Or are you inclined to share Juni there?”

Fredrick’s face brightened all the further. “Oh, she and I have been very well acquainted for a very long time. Longer than you, certainly.” He leaned over the table and smiled, speaking in a whisper loud enough to not allow any doubt that Juni herself was clearly able to hear it.

“If you’ve not had the pleasure, you ought to try her mother. Exceptional quality for her age. Vast, *vast* experience.”

It wouldn’t have surprised Tobias if Fredrick was merely making that up to further mess with his brother, and since there was no way to prove it Tobias instead just shook his head. “I have no doubt; if she is half the measure of Juni then you’d have been a very happy male. However, *this* matter-”

“Is the next stage of my consolidation of Ratholarin.” Fredrick’s smile returned as he stroked at his chin. “The cultural revolution continues. Now, the time has come for us to cast off the unclean and the vile. The practices of which you speak were celebrated by the barbaric Lenkis. Such depravity will not be sustained in Ratholarin as long as I draw breath.”

Tobias kept the growl out of his words even as his anger ignited. Fredrick and their father shaming his own proclivities into the shadows was one thing, but this was to be an edict that would affect thousands of lives within the realm. “Such practices *predate* Ratholarin as a kingdom, Fredrick. Whether you find it palatable or not is not a matter for law.”

Fredrick snorted. “I am king. The law is what I decide it to be.” As Tobias rolled his eyes, Fredrick’s stare sharpened. “Your bias is understandable, *tailraiser*, but make no mistake that this is not to punish you. This is to ensure the future of Ratholarin. New generations cannot believe that such things are acceptable.”

“And where is the harm? What does it do to hurt you, Fredrick?” Tobias slammed his fist down atop the table. “The vixen I saw today? She was beaten to within an inch of her life! And when I tried to intervene, the watch guard pushed me back!”

The king nodded. “As he should have.”

“And what of the badger who did interfere?” Tobias allowed himself to growl deep and low as he leaned over the table. “He was given a single warning. And when he tried still to help the poor girl, your guardian ran him through. One stab to the gut and he was left to bleed out in the street!”

“Then he should not have interfered with my will!” Fredrick’s chair squeaked back as he rose and thrust a finger toward Tobias. “And neither should you have! They were carrying out *my* orders to ensure the future of this kingdom!”

Tobias’ muzzle twitched into a snarl. “Yes. You’re right, Fredrick. A few tailraising males will absolutely be the death of our realm. The blood of Vargor will fall to the might of tailtucking females when they march on us. Oh, *woe* is such as we.”

Fredrick’s snarl roared to life with such vigour that Tobias recoiled and all but fell into his seat again. “And for each of them that pairs up, there will be less to breed the next generation. This is not some religious instruction, Tobias! This isn’t a god coming down from on high to decree seed and womb be sacred. This is a king recognising a simple truth: that our numbers must grow. We must have more warriors.”

The younger tiger wondered just how many tailraisers and tailtuckers Fredrick had ever met in his time. He was all but certain it was less than Tobias had, and he could count them on only two paws. “Yes. Because they damage the population growth of our realm so much.”

“They do not contribute.” Fredrick brushed himself down and adjusted his cape as he forced himself visibly to calm. That Tobias had him so riled would have been enjoyable if not for the conversational topic... or the presence of Juni still under the table, not yet permitted to leave. “Further edicts will be issued. That if a female is not wed by twenty, an available and unwed male will be assigned to her. That by their twenty-fifth year, any female who has not borne at least two children for her husband will be put to the sword.”

Tobias might have retched. “So in the hopes of growing our number, you will *kill* the females of our nation?”

“Only the ones who do not add to that number.” He settled slowly back down into his chair again as he regarded Tobias with a cold glare. “I do not see how you cannot understand the simple mathematics at play here, Tobias. Ingsbren grows far faster than we do. More Marovan territory slips to their control by the day, giving them more room to house those people. Their army in a generation’s time may be unmanageable if we do not act.”

That Ingsbren had not adopted any such draconian laws on breeding or the sex of one’s partner wasn’t something Tobias was about to bring up with Fredrick, but he doubted that the king didn’t know it already. He probably, in all likelihood, just didn’t care. This was his path, he would stick to it, and he would have things his way. Proud fool. “And I am certain the Strategist and the Blade are standing beside you, telling you what glory that would be.” Tobias met the king’s glare with the absolute contempt that roiled inside his heart. “Or perhaps do they counsel against such things *still*? Do they not still warn you that our *current* growth almost outpaces the capacity of our farms?”

Fredrick’s eyes rolled once more, as if the very subject bored him. “This will not matter once we take Ingsbren for ourselves. The weak and the useless will be culled from our lands, leaving a leaner, more war-ready Ratholarin in its place.”

“Which is it, Fredrick?” Tobias shook his head and sighed. “Is it a lean Ratholarin you wish, or is it a Ratholarin fat with people to fight for you? You cannot have it both ways.”

“I can, and I will. I will have whatever I desire, and you shall see it. Everyone shall see it!” Again he pointed at Tobias, the gesture more threatening than before. “You *will* accept this ruling, brother. The magistrates are sending missives across the realm as we speak. You will speak to the Triumvirate, adjust your materials accordingly, and ensure that we are ready to instruct the people of Ratholarin of the true purpose of their bodies. This will come alongside further instructions from me as regards the laws of our realm, and the purpose behind them. All will know what is right, and good.”

“According to you.” Tobias sniffed and shook his head. This was madness, pure and simple.

But Fredrick shook his head. “According to *them*. You don’t have a problem with this, do you? Giving the people of our realm that which they so badly desire?”

Of course he did. Tobias had every problem in the world with the course of action that his king had proposed. Fredrick had lost his mind, and that didn’t even begin to go into the idea that the people of Ratholarin wanted what he was about to do. “I live to serve, of course. But why not take it slow? Ease the changes onto the people so that they are not overwh-”

“I will not be undermined. Not by anyone, and least of all by you.” Fredrick’s fingers curled atop the table, digging his claws into its surface. His face had calmed considerably, and he even smiled as he spoke in lower tones. “I have taken things too slowly already. Mattias’ reports have indicated that the people push back on certain things when the changes I make seem too drastic for their little minds to comprehend.”

Tobias frowned. “Perhaps their minds are not so little as you imagine. Or perhaps they comprehend just fine.”

“It is no matter. He has reported that if several changes are made all at once, they find themselves... *split*, on how to react. Few are affected by every change, and so they focus on their own battles and leave other causes to falter. In their weakness and division, *our* cause — the *Ratholarin* cause — advances.” Fredrick’s smile turned icy. “What small unrest exists now will not exist in the generations to come; in those who have forgotten the old ways. And has that not always been the purpose of the Age of Enlightenment? To cast off the old in favour of the new?”

That was hardly what Fredrick was doing, or why. And yet, as madness and powerlust sparkled in his brother’s eyes, Tobias found himself unwilling to argue any further. If anything, the entire conversation had left him drained, as if Fredrick’s enthusiasm for his own tyranny had sucked the energy from Tobias’ body. “If you say so.”

Fredrick nodded and waved a paw in a wide arc toward him. “Now I would have you leave. I have further matters to attend to with Juni, here.” He knocked on the table again, and Tobias was dimly aware of the sound of rustling cloth and movement beneath the table. He stood, but not before Fredrick’s smile turned cruel. “Perhaps I will give her son a little brother. I am certain he would appreciate the company, would he not?”

Tobias froze. Fredrick had known about Juni’s son; it’d been impossible to keep his bastard away from him and the rest of the family, and in order to protect the hyena Tobias hadn’t even tried. But for Fredrick to bring him up right then sparked a nugget of doubt in the younger tiger’s mind. He frowned at Fredrick even as the king shuffled in his seat, doubtless to aid Juni in shedding his trousers again. “It took me a few tries. Perhaps you’ll be luckier.”

“Oh, it took you no tries whatsoever, brother.” His voice hitched at the last word, and he began to purr quietly as he slid a paw under the table once more. “Ahh, yes... she’s exceptional, is she not? I knew she would be the perfect set of warm holes to sort you out when I hired her.”

The prince stood stock still as he stared at Fredrick, almost without seeing him. The words bounced around inside his mind, muting all else. It dulled the slurping sounds from beneath the table. Blocked the twisted chuckle from Fredrick. It took them more than a few seconds to settle as Tobias’ tail kinked behind him. “Father hired her. To serve the castle.”

Again Fredrick laughed, and the sound faded back into Tobias’ awareness along with, unfortunately, everything else. “Father told you that. *I* proposed a whore instead, to break you of your tailraising habits.” Fredrick bit his lip as his eyelids fluttered a moment, and Tobias felt that sick churning return to his stomach. “That didn’t mean I couldn’t enjoy my purchase in my own time. And why not?”

Tobias' mind flashed to his son. *Her* son. His smiling face, his bright eyes and playful demeanour; he had been certain that he'd taken after both Juni and himself. That seed of doubt sprouted quickly within the tiger's mind as he glared at Fredrick. "I do not believe you."

"Your belief doesn't matter. I quenched her heat when you left to frolic to Herovir with the army." His other paw joined his first beneath the table as he began to shift in his seat. Clearly, tormenting Tobias was doing *something* for him. "And then I did it again and again in your absence. And... Juni, would you tell him *why* I did that?"

Eyes wide, Tobias turned away from the table and clenched his jaw. The slurping sounds beneath the table stopped, and there was a moment's pause before the hyena's voice slowly rose. "I... my king, I would prefer not t- *aah!*"

When Tobias turned back, he could see that Fredrick's arms had flexed. Whatever he had a grip on had been tugged hard; painfully, based on the hyena's cry. "You will answer the question."

At first there was only a quiet whimper from beneath the table, and Tobias felt something pure and true begin to rise up through him. It wasn't anger, though that was certainly present. It wasn't disgust, though that always seemed to follow Fredrick around. It wasn't even sadness, or pity, or anything of the sort. It cut through them cleanly as Juni finally said, "T-to make him... look after *your* son. And to... to see his face one day, when he learned how I... how I..." She whimpered again and sighed. "H-how I betrayed him."

Tobias grit his teeth. That feeling solidified. It had always been there, lurking in the darkest part of his heart. In the back of his mind; a shadow that he nodded to in passing but had never given any credence to. It was something that he had felt as a child, before he had dismissed it. Deemed it beneath him; that he could be better than something so juvenile.

The feeling was hatred. Cold, pure, and complete.

He *hated* Fredrick.

He felt it, but Tobias would not be ruled by it. He took a hold of that hate. Squeezed it. Allowed it to still his rage and focus his mind solely on Fredrick. The king's smile was broad, twitching as Juni returned to her task. "Well, brother? Have you anything to say before I put another child in her belly?"

"No. Nothing at all." He stood up slowly, straight and tall as he clasped his paws behind his back and stared right into Fredrick's eyes. His rage froze into an icy calm with a clear target. He had made it clear that Juni wouldn't be there by choice. She might not have been blameless for lying to him for so long, but right then? Right then, at least, she was a victim as much as Tobias. "By your leave, my king, I will leave you to your breeding."

"A shame. I thought you might have preferred to watch how a *real* male does it." Fredrick sighed and waved a paw toward him again. "Very well. Leave. Close the door on your way out and tell Zane not to disturb us for the next ten minutes."

"As you wish." Tobias' steps were measured and even as he turned to leave. He made it to the door without any incident, though he did pause for a second as he heard Juni gasp and whimper anew. There was the sound of a chair squeaking against the floor; doubtless Fredrick

too had risen to make good on his threat. The prince hardened his heart and pulled the door open.

The air outside the corridor didn't reek of sex the same way the room inside had. Tobias had missed it upon his entry, so surprised was he by what he had seen. The moment the door closed through, he sucked in deep lungfuls of the stuff as though he could wash the filth of his brother out of them if he just drank deeply enough of the air. His eyes and his memories, unfortunately, would be another matter.

When he stood tall again and glanced to the side, it was to see Zane. The old wolf's head was bowed, eyes closed and ears drooped. He had known. He had known full well what Fredrick had intended. His warnings had been as clear as he had been allowed, and not one whit more. "Thank you, kingsblade, for trying to stop me. I appreciate your heart all the more."

"And I beg forgiveness, my prince, that I was not more convincing." He sounded so very tired.

"The fault is Fredrick's, not yours." Tobias reached up to grasp gently at Zane's arm. He squeezed it and nodded to the kingsblade as Zane looked down at him at last. "Fredrick wishes not to be disturbed for the next ten minutes."

The wolf nodded, though he flashed Tobias a tiny smile as the tiger drew back. "Truth be told, he will not need more than two."

Even Tobias couldn't help but smile at that. He shook his head and lifted a paw to cover his muzzle as he felt himself start to relax. Kingsblade Zane, son of Jakob. Wise old warrior, and the smartest arse this side of the southern sea. "You always know just what to say."

"I am gladdened by your smile, my prince." He nodded to Tobias and bowed his head. "Let your day be more pleasant from this point forward. If there is anything I can do—"

"Thank you, but I think I know just what I need to do." Tobias frowned again as his smile slipped. If word had not reached the greater whole of the city yet, there was definitely something he had to do before too much longer. "I will return by evening. Carry out your duties to me as you see fit in the meantime."

"As soon as I am released from my liege's direct command." Zane smiled again. "Be well, my prince."

Tobias patted his arm again as he started to make his way back down the hall again. Being well wasn't something he thought he was particularly capable of right then; the good humour Zane had brought to bear was already faded, and the hatred that burned inside him continued to smoulder. It would take little more than a spark to see it reignited.

That, Tobias realised, was right. He hated Fredrick, and it finally dawned on him that such hatred was not a failing of his own. It was not that Tobias was weak and that he had given in to his anger. It wasn't that he was flawed and failing to rise above it all. No. The tiger had simply, finally, come to an understanding of the truth: Fredrick was a terrible person, a cruel king, and a monster who wore the form and flesh of a tiger. Tobias' hatred was not a weakness. It was *right*.

And so, he decided, he would carry that hate. He would accept it. There was no redemption for his brother. There was no sympathy or pity for him, and no faith in him or his goals. Tobias wasn't certain what grand thing he could do to limit the damage Fredrick was looking to cause. He doubted such a thing was possible.

There were small things, however, and *those* he could do.

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It was not time for his normal appointment at the Crest when Tobias made his way down those dark stairs and into the gallery. It was much earlier in fact, and a rare daylight visit to the establishment would normally have run the risk of drawing identifying gazes from the townspeople. Fredrick had been right however, in that the spate of rapid-fire edicts he had issued seemed to have confused and cowed the population. What, after all, were they allowed to do? What would earn them a flogging in the street? Where was the line? It *seemed* clear, but what if they were wrong? A mistake could be fatal.

In such a fearful, wary environment, everyone seemed to keep their heads down. It had allowed a cloaked Tobias to easily and surreptitiously make his way into the Crest. At such an early time of the day, he could see that several of the Crest's courtesans – he had discontinued the use of the word *whore* when speaking of them a couple of years prior – were seated together at a large table set up in the midst of the gallery. They spoke and eat, laughed and joked, as if they were all members of a large family taking their meal together. The rat female he almost always saw behind the bar was attending them, smiling as she watched over them all. Why she didn't join the scene and just kept working he didn't know, but Tobias supposed someone had to.

That none of the courtesans were clothed was something of a surprise, but Tobias supposed that there was no need for clothing when they were all so often attending their clients various carnal needs. More than a few of them turned toward Tobias as he stepped into the room, but it was Soren's face that he sought out in the crowd. The painted dog smiled at him as he stood, resting a paw on a neighbouring stag's shoulder as he stood from the table and made his way over.

Tobias lingered in the doorway until Soren reached him, though his eyes lingered on the rat. She eyed Tobias sharply, almost fearfully as she carried plates and glasses back to the bar. Soren's arrival broke Tobias' focus on her though, and the dog smiled more wide still. "When the runner said you were coming down, I didn't really believe it. You know we're closed in the middle of the day, yes?"

"I do, and I'm... sorry." Tobias swallowed as he looked back at the table. The courtesans were still eating and drinking, but the mood had changed now that an outsider was present. They tried not to look and listen, but more than a few of them were less skilled in deception than the others. "I do not mean to interrupt your meal. You all looked to be having a wonderful time, but I didn't think I should wait and this isn't about business so much as-"

"Sshhh." Soren's fingertip brushed Tobias' lips, and the tiger shut up immediately as the insides of his ears began to burn red. "It's quite alright. I know you wouldn't be here like this – and in such a state, no less – if it were not important." Tobias blinked and looked down

himself as Soren chuckled; was he really so scruffy and unkempt? “If you need to speak, we can find a private place. My room?”

The tiger nodded. A glance across at the table showed Soren’s plate still half-full, though. “I don’t want to interrupt you.” Guilt filled him. The one time of the day the workers of the Crest could relax, and he’d blundered in and ruined it for them. Noble intent aside, it still struck him hard.

Soren, by contrast, didn’t seem too bothered. “They will save me something if I miss it, and you wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t important.” He winked as he reached down to take a hold of Tobias’ paw. “So come. Speak with me. Tell me what is the matter, and I will see what I can do to help.”

He began to lead Tobias toward the suites, and the tiger just sighed and let himself be pulled along. As he passed by the table, he bowed his head to them. “I’m so sorry. I promise to have him back in a moment.”

More than a few of them exchanged quiet chuckles, and one otter male just shrugged. “If it only takes a moment, then Soren’s definitely losing his touch!” The laughs intensified around the table, and Tobias felt his ears burn hotter. He turned forward to Soren, but the painted dog was also joining in the laughter. Despite the embarrassment, the sound of it did wonders for Tobias as well. He felt the tenseness in his shoulders melting away; his tail relaxed as he sighed.

The other courtesans resumed their meal and conversation with the dark mood broken. Tobias envied them as he was led down to the suites and quickly to Soren’s. The painted dog ushered him inside and closed the door behind them, and then gestured to his bed. “Please. Disrobe and sit.”

The tiger’s eyes widened as he glanced at the bed. It looked to have been just cleaned to make ready for the night to come. “I... would probably rather stand. I don’t want you to think that-”

“My prince, I am already wearing nothing. You would not be alone in this.” The painted dog smirked as he sat down on the edge of the bed and beckoned him over. “And besides, you’ve already said you’re not here to have those needs met. So please, do me the respect of speaking to me plainly.” He nodded again to Tobias. “Please, disrobe. Sit.”

Still Tobias hesitated, but the bed was clean and his cloak rather wasn’t. He sighed and started to strip himself down to the bare fur once again. The last thing he wanted was to think about being naked with Soren right then, but he needed to be told about what Fredrick was doing. They all needed to be told.

When at last his clothing had pooled on the floor, Tobias made his way to Soren’s side. He sat delicately on the edge of the bed, and the painted dog slid further back and onto the bed in turn. His legs curled up underneath him, and his new position forced Tobias to similarly rotate and sit fully atop the covers if he was to face Soren. “You are in danger.”

The painted dog chuckled. “I am a whore. I am always in danger.”

His blatant admission of his position came as a surprise, but then Tobias reasoned that he must be used to his lot by then. Why try to sweeten the profession? “Not like this. The king has issued a new edict... there will be more to follow very soon.”

The smile fell right off Soren’s face. “If you refer to his order regarding pairing males and pairing females, we are already aware. Already there have been several beatings on behalf of the crown. They...” Soren’s eyes closed for a moment.

Tobias watched him with new, rapt attention. This was the first time the professional mask had slipped, as far as he could recall. Soren was ever on his stage, performing without missing a beat. But there, absent that coy smile and curled tail and come-hither pout, Tobias could see something else. He saw fear. “For me, it was a vixen. In the street, near the smithies.”

“Our first report was a hyena out in the backstreets near the Riverrun. The next, an otter out in the merchant quarter.” Tobias stiffened as Soren shook his head. The faintest licks of his accent suddenly seemed stronger, as if he wasn’t trying so hard to hide them from Tobias. “I believe we heard about this vixen you saw as well. It is horrific.”

“It is. And it places you, among others, in danger.” Tobias shook his head. “Suspicion alone seems to be cause for these beatings. And the Crimson Crest is too well known for what it offers the realm. The whole region knows it.”

“And even now, our patrons include several members of the illustrious guardian command structure.” Soren smirked as the tiger frowned. He’d heard that the guardians had a very strict regiment to uphold, with celibacy almost forced upon its members. “And not a small number of them are catered to by their own sex. They will know better than to come for us.”

Tobias grit his teeth. The tiger was less than certain of that. “If it were this alone, it would be bad enough. I come here straight from a...” His stomach churned; he could almost hear the suckling and slurping noises of Juni’s muzzle in the back of his mind. “A *meeting* with Fredrick.”

Soren leaned in closer to him. “You have been reluctant to speak about royal affairs in the past. It’s not my place to pry, should you wish to keep to your secrets. I know you are expected to keep such information to yourself.”

“And that is kind of you, but you need to know what to expect.” Tobias took a slow breath as Soren nodded. The painted dog reached out to take Tobias’ in a gentle grip. “There will be more than this. Many more edicts in the days to come. Horrific ones, forcing breeding rules upon females and expectations that new cubs be sired for all.”

The painted dog chuckled again. “Then I ought to have nothing to worry about. I’ve serviced female folk before, and a couple of them were *quite* insistent that I do for them what their husbands could not.” He paused, and his smile broadened. “Well, a couple of things their husbands could not.”

The implication was left to hang in the air, but Tobias didn’t muse on it more than a moment. Even then, it was only to wonder at who would come to a brothel to be bred? “I didn’t even know you took female clients.”

“Many of us are... *flexible* in our preferences.” The smile faded away as Soren began to nod. “But a few of us are less so. There are males and females both in this place who would

decidedly find the prospect of bending their bodies to breeding pairs alone distasteful at best.” He sighed. Paws tightened around Tobias’ as he glanced toward the door. “Poor Marie. Poor Nathaniel.”

“Many of you may be able to pass yourselves off as not being tailraisers or tailtuckers then.” Tobias sighed in relief, though he still felt a pang of guilt. He’d come to know his tastes drifted across the full spectrum of sex and gender, but he couldn’t help his mind flashing to William. He hoped that his old friend had not been the hyena beaten so brutally in the street.

“Such ridiculous terms. Fine enough when used playfully, but…” Soren sighed again and let go of Tobias’ paws. “You fear that they will come for us.”

That wasn’t something that the tiger could be certain of, but he nodded. “I am. Fredrick seems bent on seeing Ratholarin’s population explode. He expects everyone to be breeding, on pain of death.” He spread his arms out wide. “Even if we ignore the tailraising for a moment, the existence of a brothel itself is opposed to that. He could shut you down.”

“He could try. And he could even succeed, I admit.” Soren smiled as he leaned back and allowed himself to flop into the embrace of the plush bed. “And do you know what would happen if he managed to shut down the Crest, and every other brothel in Sanwell? Oh, there would be *riots*. Unrest for years without counting.”

“Which he could deploy the watch, the guardians, or even the army to clean up.” Tobias frowned. How in the world was Soren so calm about this all?

Indeed, the painted dog just sighed as he folded his paws over his chest. “My dear prince. Fredrick is a lot of things, it’s true. And you are not wrong in that he is most definitely a monstrous ruler if ever Ratholarin has had one.” He turned his head to bring Tobias back into view and smiled up at the tiger. “But even a king could not withstand the unrest that he would unleash unto himself with these plans. He is not a fool.”

“He is convinced he is righteous in his cause, though.” Tobias sighed as he settled down onto the bed further, sprawling out on his side to face Soren. “And he has surrounded himself with people who he either is certain he can force to do his bidding like me, and people who are wholeheartedly eager to see the vision that he imagines brought to life.”

“That’s a dangerous combination.” Soren nodded as he shuffled a little closer to Tobias. One of his arms draped over the tiger’s middle, the muzzles close to touching. “And why do you come to me with all of this, hmm? Growing a little attached to your whore?”

Tobias blinked and recoiled. He was fond of Soren, certainly, but he knew well what they were. “Not that I am not attached to you as it is, but… no. I come to you because you are the one I know here. I come to you because I do not wish to see anything happen to you, or to those others here who you call friend.” He looked into Soren’s eyes as he nodded once. “You are not my bonded. I am under no illusions of that. You are, however, a male in your own standing. I would not see you hurt.”

For the first time ever, Soren had to tip his own ears back to hide the blush that started to creep up through it. He wasn’t able to keep it completely from Tobias, even as he chuckled and waved those words off. “You are not the same male you were when Sarina first brought you before me. You have grown so much.”

“And I have you to thank for giving me the solace and strength of conviction to do so.” He smirked back at Soren as his ears grew all the redder. “Not to mention the relief you provide. But given the state of things, I would understand if such things are not to continue.”

At that suggestion, Soren only wriggled in closer still. He pulled the tiger flush to him and nuzzled up and along Tobias’ muzzle. “I enjoy what I do, my prince. And if my raising my tail – or tugging yours up, as the mood takes – is going to be a foul act that will earn your brother’s ire, then I take to it *gladly*. I choose to defy him, and it will feel all the sweeter for the spite.” His tongue flicked out to slide across Tobias’ lips.

The tiger shuddered and whimpered quietly. He felt himself stiffening between their bodies. It was more than just the closeness of a naked body he had become intimately familiar with, and it was more than just the teasing words. It was the implication that lay behind them that excited Tobias so. That for as little as he could do, he had right there a chance. Privately, with Soren, his discontent could be expressed not in wrath or in rage or in hatred. He could defy Fredrick with pleasure and comfort. Soren had already made that decision, and Tobias reasoned that perhaps he should do the same. “You... still have your meal. And the Crest’s closed.”

“Then I’ll just make a meal of you instead.” The painted dog winked as Tobias whimpered and shivered. His fingers delicately stroked up along Tobias’ side. “And yes, the Crest *is* closed. Do you know what that means?”

“That... you aren’t taking on clients?” The urge to lean in closer instead of speak was strong, but Soren was going somewhere with this. A kiss to interrupt him wouldn’t do.

He needn’t have bothered; the dog smiled wider and licked again at Tobias’ lips, and that time the tiger lapped lightly back. “It means that no one will interrupt us. No clients. No guardians. No kings or watch or army. Just you. Just me.” He winked again. “I’m done talking. Wanna do something that’d make your brother angry?”

Tobias didn’t need to be told twice. Their muzzles met as the tiger leaned into a deep, sharp kiss. Soren clutched him and pressed back into it in turn. He had been right.

Defiance never tasted so sweet.