

"Ah, Royal Knight Taurus, welcome!"

A kind looking fox man welcomed the bull with a smile, walking from behind his counter to meet him with a handshake.

Likewise, Taurus held his hand and shook it, a small smile on his face as he finally arrived at the hot springs.

The castle town was known not just for its defenses, power and size as the capital of the kingdom, but also due to the amount of establishments all over it, from theaters to hot springs like this, taking advantage of the thermal waters at the southern edge of the city.

It was a popular place, as the hot springs were always said to be rejuvenating and relaxing for any who could soak in them. Being able to even enter the place at all, however, was a luxury many couldn't afford. Private hot spring rooms were a thing, needing to be reserved, and just 30 minutes on the water could cost thousands in gold.

As the king's personal guard, however, the Royal Knights had certain perks in places like this.

"I hope you've been well. Is the room ready?" The bull speaks in a casual tone, far more casual than what many would usually hear from him. He wasn't wearing his armor, instead adorning a breathable shirt and comfortable pants that fit his battle worn body perfectly. Even a strong body like his needed a way to relax and let the stress go, and hot springs like these were usually the best at that.

"...Um...o-oh, yes! It's all ready for you to use whenever. The towels are ready in the room next to it, along with some refreshments and snacks." The man looked oddly out of it, for a second, just to reply in a chirp, excited tone.

"Great. Thank you. I'll be going then." With those words, he begins walking away. Before he can walk too many steps towards the hallway, however, he turns around to look at the man, the owner of the establishment, looking to the floor and mumbling to himself with a clearly nervous expression.

"...Is something the matter?" As simple of a question as it was, the fox jumped in place as if he had been shocked with lightning.

"N-no, no! Nothing at all, don't you worry! Um...e-enjoy your stay!" With those last words, the fox walks away as the bull stays in place, frowning.

The host was clearly hiding something, that much was obvious...however, he was too exhausted to care about it too much.

Maybe there was a leak in one of the rooms, or maybe he was hungry. Whatever it was, he wasn't gonna let it ruin his chance to relax.

With a shrug, Taurus keeps moving, walking deeper into the establishment to the room with the private hot spring he was going to use.

It was something he chose to do, from time to time. To just soak in the hot water and let all of his worries slowly melt away, a small break from the stress, tension, and adrenaline he felt day by day.

Getting inside the private room, the bull undresses himself, holding his clothes neatly in a corner as he covers himself with the towel, walking to the sliding door leading to the water and holding the handle.

...But he doesn't open it.

Instead, he turns his eyes to his feet, noticing a few clothes sloppily thrown to the floor without much care.

Someone was already here, in the room he had reserved.

With a deep, annoyed groan, the bull was already beginning to wave goodbye to the stress relief he had come for in the first place.

Preparing himself to drag this person out of the water by force, he opens the sliding door with a little too much force, getting a view of the sunset sky, the rocks covered in foliage, and the hot spring water itself.

And of course, the person who has come in before him.

“...”

For some reason, however, the sight didn't make him as angry as he would have expected. He thought he would be furious, really, at the stranger coming in and taking a spot he reserved.

But it wasn't a stranger. It was someone he knew, the sight making at least some of the rage in his body evaporate.

The rays of the sun fell on a lion man's body. He was standing on the water, it only reaching slightly above his hips as his long, fluffy tail waved in the air, moving the water around.

He simply stood there, seemingly taking deep breaths, all while sometimes taking some of the warm water to cover his arms, his armpits, and his back, as if showering with it. Each movement made his muscular back flex, and each time the water touched his lower back, his tail would shake a little, as if not used to the heat.

He couldn't see his face too clearly from where he was standing, but he could still see a relaxed, if not serious expression on the lion.

Before he could realize it, the bull's rage was already gone.

Sighing in annoyance, Taurus brings his hands to his mouth and whistles, clearly startling the lion as he turns around with speed too fast for how much his body was submerged. His look of surprise quickly turns into one of his usual smirks, though, waving his hand.

"Hey there, big guy! Took you long enough to arrive. Were you getting ready for a fun time?"

His tone was playful, not an ounce of shame as he turned to face the approaching bull.

His pecs and abs were covered in water, glistening under the sunlight. Right below that, the water stopped just below his pelvis, hiding anything indecent from view.

Even then, it was like the lion tried day after day to be the living embodiment of the word "indecent."

"...What are you doing here? This was supposed to be a private hot spring. You shouldn't have even known I was coming." Taurus spoke with a loud enough voice for the lion to hear, Solaris dramatically tilting his head as he spoke.

"Hm. That's true...really, you'd be surprised about how loose that owner's lips can be when the heat turns up. I wasn't even trying to find out about your schedule, really, I just thought he was cute."

The lion's words made the bull dizzy, picturing the hot spring's owner babbling about his customers all because he got flustered due to the lion.

*What*, exactly, the lion was doing with the host, he didn't know or even tried to care. Knowing about what had happened, Taurus wouldn't be blamed if he simply decided to leave...

But he doesn't, rolling his eyes as he walks inside the hot spring with firm steps, the towel still tightly held against his body as he lets the water rise around him. As he walked, he spoke without taking his eyes away from Solaris.

"So...what, you wanted to steal my hot spring and rub it on my face? You seem a bit too old for petty things like that." While his tone wasn't playful, and felt almost like he was admonishing him, it didn't have any actual rage or anger. Realizing that, the lion simply chuckles.

"Pfft. Nah. I just wanted to see your face once you saw me here. Honestly? Not too bad." The lion moved closer to some rocks, sitting down as he let his smile paint his face. Taurus follows suit, sitting a bit lower than Solaris to let the water cover more of him, right up to his chest.

And just like that...they were resting, enjoying the hot spring's hot water in silence. Taurus had fully taken his towel off, putting it to the side on one of the rocks, and had let the heat of the water relax his body from head to toe. All that stress from his daily knight activities. All those worries at the forefront of his mind. Slowly, yet surely, he felt them fading away to nothing. Letting the relaxation get to him, he asks something out loud.

"What are your thoughts, so far?"

"Eh?" Solaris turns his head around, seeing Taurus with his eyes closed and arms crossed. Even with some of his body submerged in water, it was still clear that the bull was a solid brick of muscle, his biceps and arms bigger than most of the Lesser Knights. The scars adorning his body made it clear that he was a big deal, especially with how imposing he always tried to be.

Now, however, the energy he was giving off was different. Instead of simply imposing, he looked like someone who was genuinely trying to relax.

"Honestly? I haven't tried that many hot springs in the past. We didn't have one in my village, but there *were* some in nearby towns...hell, I think I have more memories of showering in waterfalls than in hot springs, heh." He laughs as he finishes his sentence, raising his arms behind his neck as he leans against the wall behind him.

“But...huff, yeah, deeeefinitely one of the greatest yet. Been coming over from time to time, but boy, does it not get old. I swear I'll be walking out of here a few years younger.” His smile didn't falter as he spoke, letting the hot water tingle all over his body as he spoke about his fun time. However, Taurus frowns slightly as he corrects himself.

“That's not what I meant. I meant...your time at the castle. As a knight in training.”

“Ah...”

Suddenly, the playful energy he was exuding came to a halt, the hot water around him quickly going from pleasant to mildly annoying.

He turned his eyes to look at the bull, his eyes still closed with a softer expression. Turning to the sunset sky, he begins to speak.

“I guess...it's been fine. Training with you is kinda fun, really. Though I still hate having to use a sword.”

“You need a weapon. You can't-”

“‘can't solve everything with my fists, I need some range against demons’. I know, I know, you say it everytime.”

“...Sorry, continue.”

Solaris's ears twitch as he hears the bull apologize, something he was sure he had never heard him do. Obediently, however, he continues speaking.

“Libra isn't too boring of a guy. Quiet, but I love playing around with him. I suck at chess, but at the very least it's fun.”

Libra owned a few games in his room, but chess was the one he would constantly play and challenge the other knights to. Solaris wasn't one for games of strategy, making him lose every time, but he could still admit it was fun.

“Sagittarius...she's quite strict whenever I train with her, but outside of that, she's honestly pretty chill...she tells me stories about the kingdom from time to time. Stuff I've never heard before.”

Sagittarius would often walk him all over the castle to help him memorize it, all while telling him stories about the king and queen that most citizens barely knew.

It wasn't anything groundbreaking. If anything, it was all boring. A part of Solaris felt it would be useful later, though.

“Honestly, the food's not so bad. And my room is definitely way bigger than any I've had before. It's honestly baffling how nice it all is...but...” His words go unsaid, not finishing his sentence.

Instead, Taurus is the one who continues it.

"You can't leave town. You know why that is. Arguing about it is pointless, so just let it be."

Solaris frowns as the bull says that...but he doesn't respond, simply clicking his tongue.

A free spirit in a gilded cage, all to serve someone else's purpose. It felt like something out of his nightmares.

But he knew. He already knew there was nothing he could do about it now. The moment would come, and he would be ready to go back to his old life.

Until then...

"...Hehe." Solaris laughs to himself, getting off the rock to sink deep beneath the water.

Taurus didn't move, instead simply rolling his eyes, as if knowing what to expect.

A few seconds later, Solaris emerges right in front of him, mere inches away from their bodies touching.

"Hey there. Come here often?" His smirk was the biggest it's been the whole afternoon, chuckling to himself. Taurus, meanwhile, didn't even change his expression as he looked at him, slightly taller than he was. Even so, he replied.

"Guess I do. Usually alone, but...guess it's not too bad with company."

His reply just made the lion's smirk wider, his rainbow eyes staring at the bull's crimson and violet.

...Thoughts ran through his head. Thoughts that would be so, so easy to give in to, seeing the position they were in.

Before he could let his indulgent side take control, however, Solaris felt a sudden wave of dizziness wash over him, so strong that Taurus noticed how he began to wobble, his expression growing cloudy.

"W-woah..." Before anything bad could happen, Taurus quickly holds onto his hand, not letting him float away as a look of concern flashes on his face.

It quickly returns to a softer, yet still focused expression.

"How long have you been in here?"

"Huh? O-oh, uh...like...30 minutes?"

"...You idiot. You're overheating. Let's get out of here."

"Fineeeee..."

And with those words, Solaris begins to get out of the hot spring on his own...almost on his own, as Taurus walked right behind him to make sure he could get out without issue.

And he did, standing in full nakedness as water dripped down, sliding down every curve of his body.

The lion grabbed a towel almost as soon as he left...but the bull still saw a lot of him. Much more than when he first stepped in.

Covered in a towel, however, Solaris turns around with a smile on his face.

“Enjoy your hot spring, big guy! I swear I’ll ask next time, haha!...ugh.” With a loud, cheery voice, yet still getting hit with dizziness right at the end, Solaris leaves the hot spring laughing.

Taurus, meanwhile, stays, deciding to keep to himself for a few minutes.

“ ... ”

For some reason, even though he’s been here countless times. Even though he’s enjoying the hot springs like this month after month...

He didn't feel as relaxed, now on his own.

The sunset light had finally set, and now it was only him and a starless sky.

Without thinking too hard about it, he lets out a sigh, enjoying the few minutes he had left.