

Interwoven

INNOCENCE: PART ONE

64th Day of the Pure Snow, 5 AoE

William had two armfuls of bubbles, and that was *great*.

Of course they weren't bubbles yet, but they would be. The box clutched tight against the hyena boy's chest was full of stuff that made them. Somehow. He didn't know how and no matter how many times he asked his mother and father, they didn't have an answer for him. And that wasn't very fun, but at the same time it didn't matter nearly so much. The important thing was that it *did* make them, and it made a *lot* of them, and that was good because bubbles were really, really fun. They also made his tunic and his pants and his fur smell pretty, and that was nice too.

Keen green eyes scanned the stone halls, looking for his turn. Servants and guards were deftly sprinted around, and the hyena had to fight to keep his muzzle closed and tongue inside with each bounding step. He idly caught a chuckle from one elderly sheep lady – Dorthy, or Darrity, or something – and an angry shout from a guard who he almost bumped into. “Oi! Careful, William!”

“I’m okay!” he shouted back. He’d have used the guard’s name if he’d caught who it was, but their sigh of exasperation was already fading away as William ran on. His eyes widened as his mother’s words filtered almost too late through his mind, and he skidded to a halt as he turned back around again. “Uh, I’m sorry! Beggin’ your pardons!” He shook the box. “Gotta get all this to mama!”

The older bear just sighed again, and as far as William was concerned that was forgiveness enough. He grinned again and spun back about to launch into his run. The boy had bubbles in a box; obviously there was no time to lose.

All too soon, the turn was upon him. William looked down at the floor his bare feet pounded across. Polished. Speed was easy, but stopping he knew was *hard*. His grin broadened; it was a good thing he knew how to not-stop. With practiced ease, the hyena aimed for the wall opposite the corridor he wanted. Just before he bumped into it, he jumped up and planted both feet against the wooden skirting. He kicked off it, airborne all of a sudden with a happy whoop. Running and jumping was fun. Running and jumping with bubbles in a box? Life was *good*.

It became a grunt as he hit the wall of the hallway he’d aimed for, and a sting went up from his arm as he bounced off it. The box crinkled in his grasp and a puff of aromatic powder rose out of the hole in the tip, tickling William’s nose. He managed to hold off a sneeze until he’d landed properly and settled back into his run. Eyes squeezed tightly shut as his sneeze echoed off the walls. He didn’t know why bubbles smelt itchy, but they did.

William’s eyes had barely opened again when he saw the boys in front of him. They’d come from a room just ahead, but there wasn’t enough time to avoid them. William yipped in

surprise as he bowled right into the nearest of them, knocking his victim to the ground and topping the other two beside him. The box crumpled. Bubble powder erupted all over William and whomever he'd hit. He groaned. Shook his head. Sneezed.

"Ugh, idiot! Get *off* me!" Before William had a chance to collect himself, strong arms shoved back at him and dumped the hyena ignobly to the floor. He yipped again as the box spilled out of his grasp, more of the powder pooling out of a new tear.

When William was able to clear his vision, the first thing he saw was the angry glare of a tiger boy not quite as young as he. Furious yellow eyes blazed like the sun as he dusted down a much more colourful and fancy shirt than the raggedy thing William wore. It didn't help him at all; it only smeared the bubble powder into the fabric. "I'm sorry!" he said again. Mama had told him what to say and why to say it, and it always made people less angry with him. "Beggin' your pardons!" He reached out to try and help dust off the tiger boy's clothes.

Pain shot through his wrist as his paw was slapped away, and William whimpered as he cradled it against his own dirty chest. "Don't touch me!" the tiger boy growled. He looked down at his shirt and growled wordlessly again, and William immediately scrabbled back against the wall.

That wasn't right. When he said the 'sorry' word, people were meant to know he didn't mean what he did. "But... I s-said sorry..." He glanced up at the other boys, also both tigers. One seemed almost as old as the one he'd hit, and he was trying not to laugh. The other was still picking himself up, but he looked worried more than anything.

"Yeah Fredrick, he *said* sorry." The tiger who was trying not to laugh nudged the still-downed and still-angry boy with his foot, and got another growl for his trouble. "You think he's sorry, Tobias?"

When the tiger William had hit didn't reply, William looked to the other two. The youngest of the trio was staring at him as he picked himself up. "Uh, I mean... he *looks* sorry to me?"

"Yeah, well he's gonna be sorry in a second!" The boy named Fredrick quickly stood up and marched forward. He towered over William, paws balled into fists.

Heart pounding in his ears, William tried to push himself back further into the wall. He tried to push through the cracks. Tried to push himself away. "But I'm sorry now!"

The tiger leered down at him. "Not yet. But don't worry; you will be." The cocked fist descended. William cried out and cringed back.

A chorus of gasps and one yip of surprise came in place of the punch. William continued to cower against the wall, trembling and awaiting the blow that didn't come. It wasn't until Fredrick shouted, "What are you doing? Release me at once!" that William dared to open his eyes.

Relief unwound all the fear-tightened muscles in his little body at the sight. Fredrick was off the ground by a good couple of feet, suspended by his raised arm. It had been captured in the meaty paw of a familiar wolf, armour gleaming in the torchlight. "Da!"

The wolf looked down at William for a moment, but only for a moment. His expression was unreadable, but William was so glad to see him he didn't care if he was in trouble. His attention turned to Fredrick – the other two tigers had flattened themselves to the wall much like William had – as he frowned. “What are you doing?”

For his part, Fredrick writhed and struggled as he was held aloft. “What am *I* doing? He hit me! Ran straight into me!” He swung the claws of his free paw toward the wolf's face, but his arms were too short compared to the size of the full-grown adult and his captor didn't even flinch. “Unhand me, Zane! That's an order!”

William's eyes widened. How did the tiger know his father? “I am a kingsblade, not a princesblade.” He lifted Fredrick a little higher and glared at him. “I do not take orders from you, or your brothers. And you, little prince, are acting in a manner most unbecoming one of your station.” He turned Fredrick toward William. “You will apologise.”

Confusion cocked William's head. “I did, da! I said sorry, and I beggin's his pardons, just like you and mama said.” And did his father say ‘prince’ just then? He played the words back through his head. Mama had always told him to stay away from them. Who were they?

“Not you, boy.” He jangled Fredrick for a moment, and the boy grunted. Was it painful to be held up like that? “Well, my prince? Are you going to apologise, or am I going to have to speak with your father about this?”

Fredrick only squirmed all the harder. “Do it! He'll *punish* you for mishandling your future king!”

William frowned up at Fredrick. He was gonna be king someday? The hyena didn't like that idea. Fredrick seemed mean. Zane, however, looked like he found it all funny; he had the same smile on his face that he wore whenever William was telling him about what he'd done since he'd last seen him. “Very well. Perhaps I will inform your *mother*, instead.”

All of the struggle left Fredrick in an instant. His ears tipped back flat and his jaw fell slack for a second. When he snapped his muzzle shut, William flinched at the sound of his teeth chomping together. “Sorry.” The word was a growl.

Zane shook him again. “Sorry for what? Speak up, lad.”

A long, sharp hiss escaped Fredrick's muzzle, and William shuddered as the tiger's hateful eyes fixed on him. “I'm sorry... I tried to hit you.”

William wasn't really sure, but he didn't think Fredrick meant that at all.

However, it seemed to be enough for Zane. He slowly lowered Fredrick back to the ground, and there the tiger boy immediately rubbed at his shoulder and then his wrist. He didn't stop glaring at William, but at least he didn't look like he wanted to pummel the hyena. “C'mon, Brett.” He shoved the tiger who'd been trying not to laugh, and he was still smiling as Fredrick pushed past him.

He followed suit soon after, but the tiger boy about William's age stepped closer. He knelt down under Zane's watchful eye and gingerly picked up the box-no-longer-full-of-bubble-powder. “I, uh... I think your box is broken.”

“Oh! Oh no!” William whimpered as he reached out for it. The other boy held it out to him, and a small cloud of bubble powder dust fell out of it. A glance down showed the floor absolutely covered in the powder. “No! Now mama won’t be able to make bubbles...”

“It’s okay!” The tiger smiled as he looked up at Zane. “If he just needs soap, I know where the laundry is! And the stores! I know the way.”

The hyena frowned, but the tiger was beaming bright. Even if Fredrick had been mean, this boy was much nicer. Maybe he’d be a better king. “I mean... if you *want* to come too, sure?”

But before the tiger could reply, Zane shook his head. “No, Tobias. It is good that you wish to help young William here, but he has his tasks and so do you.” He nodded down the hallway toward where Fredrick and Brett had fled. “I must take you to your lessons. Iannus will be waiting.”

Tobias blew a raspberry in response and William couldn’t help but smile. “You don’t *have* to. I know the way there, too! I can go as soon as I help Willi’m.” He jammed a thumb against his chest and grinned. “I’m six now, Zane! I’m a big boy and I can do it myself.”

William’s eyes widened. Tobias was *six*? That was practically grown up! “Yeah, da. Six is old! He’s almost a ‘dult like you!” As Tobias smiled at him, the hyena just shrugged. “I jus’ turned five a few weeks back. I wish *I* was six and a big boy, too.”

The tiger shrugged back and smiled wide. “You’ll be six soon! Then we can both go around the castle wherever we like!”

“And that, I am afraid, is enough of that.” Zane’s tone wasn’t scolding, but it didn’t sound amused anymore either. “Young prince, your lessons must come first. William, your mother will be needing that soap. You both have duties. You must get to them.”

“I will! But what if Willi’m was hurt?” Tobias shook his head. “Iannus says we gotta look out for all our people, right? And Willi’m’s one of them.” He smiled at William, and William couldn’t help but smile back. Tobias was nice, but it was also funny the way he messed up the hyena’s name. He had to fight back a giggle every time he heard it. “*Please*, Master Zane? I can take Willi’m back to the laundry. I promise I’ll go straight to Iannus after.”

Zane’s brow furrowed, but he sighed and nodded far faster than William had ever seen his father give up before. Maybe Tobias could teach him how to do that! “Alright. Far be it from me to stop at least one of you three from showing kindness, after all.” He turned to William and smiled softly. “I will go get another box of soap and meet you there. Alright?”

“Alright!” He smiled as Tobias took his paw and squeezed it tight. Before the tiger could lead him off though, he stepped forward and wrapped his other arm around the wolf’s waist. “Thank you, da.”

With a quiet chuckle, Zane patted William’s head and ruffled his fur. “You are welcome. Now hurry along. The laundry will not wait forever.” With that he nodded to Tobias and turned to head back the way William had come.

He watched him go for a moment before he turned back to Tobias and nodded. The tiger had a wide grin on his face. “I didn’t know Master Zane had any kids.”

“Just me!” William allowed Tobias to lead him by the paw, tugging him gently along. “Mama says they met like *forever* ago while he was fighting in a war.”

Tobias blew another raspberry at that. “Ugh, I hate war. It’s all they talk about in the castle. War this, war that, war him, war her.” He paused for a second and scratched at his muzzle. “I guess war’s important.”

William shrugged as he looked up the corridor. They weren’t far from the laundry; he’d almost made it back before he’d run into the princes. “Mama always says to me, ‘War is a waste of life.’” He shrugged and looked down. “It makes her sad.”

The tiger prince nodded along. “Well, if it makes people sad, we shouldn’t do it. Hey, careful here.” He pulled William closer to him as one of the maidservants of the castle emerged from a side room much like the tigers had.

She barely spared William a glance, but when she caught sight of Tobias she immediately sank to one knee and bowed her head. William frowned at her before he turned to Tobias. “Why did she do that?”

“Iunno.” Tobias shrugged as he wriggled his fingers against William’s paw. The feeling tickled, but nicely. “Fredrick says they have to because we’re princes.” He pouted as he shook his head. “I once tried to tell Gertie that – oh, Gertie’s the maid for the princes; she’s really nice but she’s so old – I once tried to tell her that she didn’t have to, and father almost brought out the switch. He made me promise never to say it again.”

William winced and almost pulled away from Tobias. “That doesn’t sound nice.”

Tobias, eyes wide, grinned back at William. “I said that too! It’s like you think like me!”

The hyena could only smile in return. That was good. “You’re a lot nicer than your brothers are. I’m glad you’re nice.”

“I’m glad you’re nice too.” The paw holding William’s squeezed gently, and he squeezed it back as Tobias smiled. “They’re the only kids I’m able to talk to. There’s not many in the castle. I asked father if we could meet some of the kids in the city and he said no because it was dang’rous for princes, but he didn’t tell me why it was so bad if all the other kids are out there. Oh! Hey, the laundry!”

His exclamation drew William’s attention from the tiger’s eager storytelling, just as it drew the attention of the servants inside. They were all female, all dressed much like William was, and they almost all looked surprised to see William and Tobias walk in.

The one exception was another hyena, whose eyes sparkled with fear. She rushed forward as the other servants knelt down, and immediately prostrated herself before Tobias. “William, get down now.”

Before he could say a word, Tobias shook his head and smiled down at her. “It’s okay! I’m just bringing Willi’m back after he bumped into me and my brothers.” He laughed and glanced at William. “Well, you ran into Freddy, and *he* fell into Brett, and-”

Concern overtook propriety as William's mother reached out to grab him and pull him close. She wrapped him up in a tight hug, yanking him hard enough to dislodge Tobias' paw from his. "I'm so glad you're safe," she whispered in his ear. She was shaking as she held him.

William tried to struggle free, but she wasn't having any of it. He settled for looking back over his shoulder at Tobias, but the tiger simply stood there smiling like he'd done a good job. As far as William was concerned, he'd done the best job. "Tobias made sure I got back 'kay."

"Thank you, my lord." His mother shifted William to her side and then pushed him down until he too was kneeling before Tobias. "You are too kind. We are not worthy."

William blinked. "Yes we are."

"Hush now."

"But you always say-"

"*Hush now.*" She coughed and bowed her head deeper. "How may we repay you for this kindness, my lord? Pray tell."

"Oh, I just wanted to help's all!" Tobias smiled, and William did the same as he lifted his head. "Master Zane's gonna get the soap and meet me back here before I have to go to my lessons. Master Iannus doesn't mind if I'm late, but Master Zane doesn't want me to be, and I think it's 'cause I ask him too many questions and don't let him teach us the things he wants to teach us, and..." He trailed off with a frown and looked around. "Is something wrong?"

William followed his gaze. All of the servants who'd been hard at work when they arrived were still and silent, prostrate in the presence of the prince. "I think it's you."

His mother's arm once more wrapped around his middle and squeezed him tight. "Hush! You don't speak to a prince!"

"Why not?" William squirmed against her hold as Tobias looked on, confused. "I don't get it."

"It's okay." Tobias' smile had slipped, and he took a step back as William looked up again. "They gotta work, and they gotta bow and kneel, and they can't do both. Mother tells me not to get in the way of the servants so they can keep working." He took another step away. "I don't want to make everything slow."

As he took another step back, he bumped right into one of Zane's legs. He looked like he almost blurted out an apology, but fell silent when he saw who it was. William smiled, though. "Oh, Master Zane. I was just gonna go."

"I heard." Zane crouched down and slid a new box of bubble powder over to rest in front of William. He snatched it up and smiled up at his father. "You must tell them to rise, young prince. Else they will stay as they are."

William caught the sparkle of understanding in Tobias' eyes at the words. He watched the tiger excitedly turn to the room and in a voice much louder than his normal, he said, "Okay, everyone! Rise!"

All around William, the servants rose from their positions and stood in place. William almost did, but as he saw everyone move he grinned and kept himself on the ground. He saw Tobias grin too as he pointed at William. “You didn’t rise!”

“I don’t wanna now.” William laughed and Tobias joined in, but William found the breath knocked out of him as his mother swiftly pulled him back upright. He wheezed in response as Tobias laughed harder.

Zane patted at the prince’s shoulder. “Now, tell them they may return to work. We have work of our own to attend to.”

“Right, right.” Tobias nodded and looked to the servants once more. “You can return to work now. Uh, please.”

With practiced ease – and a few strange looks between themselves – they did as instructed. Tobias glanced around for a moment before he smiled at Tobias. “They have to do *everything* you say?”

The tiger beamed back at him as Zane cleared his throat above them. “As do you, boy. Do not forget yourself.” He squeezed at Tobias’ shoulder. “Come, my prince. Iannus will be missing you.”

“Iannus is *always* missing me.” Tobias sighed, but smiled anew as he met William’s gaze. “It was very nice to meet you, Willi’m. Hope I can see you again!”

“Yeah, me too!” William chuckled. “Just make sure your brothers don’t come, too.”

“Deal!” Tobias laughed and nodded, and he waved at William as Zane turned him about and marched him back down the hall. The wolf glanced back and nodded to someone behind William.

He followed his father’s gaze to his mother, who nodded back to him. Her eyes fell on William, and he thrust the box of bubble powder toward her. “Look, mama! I got the bubbles!”

Her stern expression melted for a moment as she sighed and shook her head. Instead of reaching for the box, she wrapped her arms around him once again. “Dear, dear William... please be careful out in the castle. Those princes are...”

“Mean.” She recoiled at the word, and pulled back from the embrace as William cocked his head. “The other two were really mean.”

“Princes are not to be trusted. Not *any* of them.” She leaned in to touch her forehead to Williams and nuzzled softly into his cheek. “They are not like us. They do not care about us. We serve them, but do not make the mistake of thinking that they are our friends.”

William frowned. Fredrick and Brett seemed mean, sure, but that wasn’t what they were all like. “Tobias was nice to me. He wasn’t mean.”

She sighed as she pulled back from her son. One paw gripped the box and tugged it from his grasp as she stood again. “Give him time, dear one. Now, let us hear no more of this.” She shook the box and smiled down at him. “Are you ready for some bubbles?”

Any and all thoughts of his mother's warnings and concerns about the princes vanished from William's mind at the question. Those other things didn't matter right then. What mattered was that there was about to be *bubbles*, and bubbles were good. And yet, as she shook the box and poured some of the powder into her basin so they could wash the clothes nearby, all William could think was that he would like to share those bubbles with Tobias. He seemed like he'd have enjoyed them, too.

After all, who didn't love bubbles?

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Laundry time was nice because the bubbles were fun, but it wasn't William's favourite part of the day. Or, at least, it wasn't his only favourite part of the day. He had a lot of favourite parts.

It became more of a favourite though, because laundry time didn't just mean bubbles anymore. Each day he hoped they had run out of the bubble powder and he'd be asked to go get more. That meant that maybe he would run into Tobias again – but *hopefully* not run into Fredrick – and they could talk some more. It didn't happen for many days though, and eventually his mother noticed him sulk when he'd returned.

Not that he was sulking, of course. She just said that. He didn't sulk. Big boys didn't sulk.

When he'd explained that he was just sad he didn't get to see Tobias again, she'd reminded him that he shouldn't try; that princes were dangerous to people like them; that they needed to keep their distance. She'd not just seemed scared but angry too, and William had been worried that she was angry with him. He felt better when she smiled and hugged him and told him that he was a good boy and had done nothing wrong.

Still though, he couldn't shake the disappointment. Some of the other maidservants had kids of their own – some of them had *lots* even though William never met their fathers – but most of them had been sent to something called an orphanage out in the city. The only kids around the castle were the princes, babies who didn't do anything except cry and sleep and eat, and some much, much older boys who came in to fight with the guards.

William didn't know the word 'lonely' but he'd become very familiar with the feeling in the week or two that followed. Helping his mother and the other maids with their work kept him busy, and they were mostly nice to him, but it wasn't like Tobias. He found himself wandering off more and more.

But then, one day as William struggled to carry some pots and pans back to the kitchens, it happened. He heard footsteps behind him, but couldn't turn around to see who followed. When he heard the words, "Good afternoon, Willi'm!" though, the hyena recognised the voice instantly.

He turned all at once, almost sharply enough to spill all the pots and pans out of his arms. "Oh! Hi, Tobias! Uh..." He tried to shift the pots about so that he could see the prince, but there were just too many and they were stacked too high. "Um, sorry, I can't-"

"Oh! Of course; let me... here!" Two orange-furred paws came out from around the stack of pans, and a moment later some of the weight in William's arms eased back. The

topmost of the pans were lifted away, and Tobias grunted as he cradled them against his chest. His grin split his face almost in two. "That's better! Now I can see you and you can see me!"

William couldn't help but smile back. "Much better!" He tilted his head to the side and glanced past Tobias. There was no Fredrick or Brett or Zane or anyone else there to pull Tobias away. "What're you doing?"

"Just exploring. When I don't have anything that father says I have to do, I like to just walk around the castle. There's so many secret places all over that the grown-ups don't know about." He hefted the pans in his arms. "How about you?"

The young prince's paws gripped tightly at the pans, but William could clearly see his arms straining to hold them. Did princes not carry things? "Oh, I've gotta take these to the kitchens." He smiled. "Do you wanna come? You can put those back if they're too heavy."

Tobias' eyes widened as if the idea had never even occurred to him. "No, no! You can't even see where you're going if I put them back. You need help." He smiled again, but William could see it was almost too heavy for the tiger.

"Yeah, but so do you..." He frowned as he looked at the pans. There was still a bit of room on top of his stack. "Hey, see if you can put the top one back on here! I can see, and it'll not be so heavy for you."

"No, it's okay." He tried another smile as he squeezed the pans harder. "But let's go quick. I don't wanna drop 'em or nothing." He started off at a brisk walk in the direction of the kitchen. The pans rattled against one another in his grip.

William turned immediately to give chase, his own larger stack rattling louder. He supposed if they got there quickly, maybe it'd be okay and Tobias wouldn't drop them. "Thanks for helping me, too. You din't have to."

"Maybe. But I wanted to!" Tobias smiled back at him, even as he almost swayed into a wall. William watched him carefully as the prince fell silent, focusing instead entirely on helping to carry the pans to the kitchens. At least, he thought, it was good the kitchens weren't far.

He tried to think of something to say, but didn't want to distract Tobias. The tiger was panting a little, grunting with his steps as he fought to carry even a few of the big, iron pans along. William decided it would be better to wait, as he sidestepped a guard patrolling down the hall. For a moment he wondered if the guard would recognise Tobias, but with the pans pulled up and his head down, the tiger boy's face was almost entirely hidden.

The hyena hurried ahead to push open the kitchen door with a foot before Tobias could reach it. He quickly shifted out of the way so that he didn't trip the poor prince, and grunted as he bumped into the doorframe. A quiet, "Thank you," huffed out of Tobias as he passed through the doorway, and William leaped in before the door could close after them.

All at once the smell of the kitchens assaulted his nostrils, and William felt himself start to drool. Meats and breads and all sorts of yummy treats filled his nose, nostrils twitching as he sighed. The kitchens were the best-smelling place in the whole castle. "El-lie!" he called out over the bustle of servants at their posts. "I got those pans you wanted!"

“Aw, bless yer lil ‘art, William. Youse my fav’rit lil helper, you are.” He looked up as a positively towering goat came into view from around one of the benches. Her smile was warm and kindly as she reached down to take the stack of pots and pans out of his arms. “An’ lookit that! Gettin’ all big’n strong now ain’cha, carryin’ all that for me!”

William swelled with pride even as he shook his head. “Oh, it wasn’t just me, Ellie! I got some help; look!” He reached out toward Tobias and gently pried the pans out of the tiger’s arms. He watched, still smiling as Tobias sagged in relief and wiped his brow. The poor boy’s tunic was smeared with grease and fat and gravy, and his fur was all matted where the pans had come to rest on it. “Thanks so much, Tobias!”

Tobias’ smile was so big that William almost didn’t hear the collective gasp of the kitchen servants. When he turned to offer the pans to Ellie, her smile was gone. Her warmth was gone. Her kindness was gone. All of a sudden, all he could see on her face was fear. It didn’t take more than a moment’s glance for that fear to start to fill William as well. Had he done something wrong? “Ellie?”

“What in the bloody ‘ells d’ya think y’doing?” She all but roared the words, her eyes bright and focused as she glared down at William. “That’s Prince Tobias! ‘e ain’t meant to do this kinda work, boy!”

William blinked in confusion. “He isn’t?”

The other kitchen staff emerged and began to approach Tobias, who backed away from them while looking at William. The pots and pans Ellie had been given were swiftly dumped onto a countertop as she grabbed William by the shoulder and forced him into a kneel alongside her. “Ow! Hey!”

“Quiet!” All around Tobias the kitchen servants were prostrating themselves before the young tiger even as they cooed over him and tried to clean his clothes. “You lookin’ to get us all whipped, boy? Forcin’ the king’s son t’ lug pots and pans ‘cross the castle?”

“He didn’t force me to do nothing!” Tobias’ shout forced all the servants away from him, and William flinched back from the sound. “I wanted to help him!”

But Ellie shook her head even as she hung it low. “We’ll teach ‘im better, milord, I promise. I swear it, I’ll beat it into him meself.” Her fingers dug into William’s shoulder, and he cried out as a spike of pain drove down his arm. “I promise, ‘e will get a right floggin’ for this.”

“Ow! Ellie, you’re hurting me!” William tried to pull himself free of the goat’s fierce grip, but she was massive and strong and he was neither of those things. He whimpered as her grip tightened further, amplifying the pain. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry, *I’m sorry!*”

Tobias trembled. “Wait, wait! Stop!”

“I promise ‘is mother’ll hear about this, milord, don’t you worry.” She lifted her head. “If’n you want, we could do it here and now for you. I got a nice, thick spoon what’ll beat his behind so red y’ might think his daddy were a fox.”

William crumpled as Ellie forced him down harder against the floor. His knees ground into the stone tiles and he cried out again. Tears began to spill down his face. He didn’t

understand. What was going on? What did he do? Why wouldn't she stop? Why did they need to hurt him? Why-

"*I said stop it!*" Tobias' shout picked up volume. His paws were clenched into fists at his side as he screamed the words at Ellie, and she recoiled in an instant from the boy's sudden ferocity. Tobias breathed heavily as William looked up at him through tearful eyes.

He gasped as Ellie's fingers relaxed a little bit, but not enough for him to get free. Tobias trembled in front of him, teeth bared as he glared at the goat. "Stop it now! You hear me? Stop hurting my friend!"

Friend? Even as William sniffled and whimpered through the pain, warmth bloomed inside his chest. His friend? He'd never had a friend before. Not another kid, anyway. Grownups didn't count.

Ellie seemed as surprised as William. She looked down at him, almost in disbelief. "M... milord?"

"Let him go! Let him go right now!" Tobias pointed at her, his eyes narrowed and angry and his fur bristling. "I want you to let him go! *Now!*"

The goat's paw released William, and he slumped down to the ground with a grunt. His shoulder throbbed where she'd squeezed him, and he curled up as more tears began to flow. He still didn't know what was going on or why Ellie suddenly had to hurt him, but his heart pounded faster and harder than it ever had before in his short life. William fell into deep, quiet sobs.

He didn't hear Tobias push past the other servants to get to him, but he definitely felt the tiger's arms wrap down around him and pull him into a hug. He all but fell into the prince's embrace, crying against his greasy chest and squeezing Tobias tight. His fear faded in those warm arms, but he couldn't stop crying.

William didn't move, but he knew on some level that he didn't have to. When his mother held him, he could just stay there as long as he wanted. Tobias didn't make him move either; the tiger just held him tight and let him cry. He couldn't see anything other than the prince's tunic and the back of his own eyelids, but William didn't need to see anything else.

When he finally managed to stop sobbing, he looked up. Tobias was still staring angrily at Ellie, but that anger evaporated when he noticed William was looking at him. He smiled down at him instead and reached in with one paw to gently wipe at the hyena's cheek. "Are you okay?"

No, he wasn't, but William didn't want to say that. He forced himself to nod, sniffing sharply. He watched as Tobias looked back up at Ellie and glanced around the kitchen. Some of the anger returned as well. "Two of those biscuits."

Ellie recoiled ever so slightly. "Milord?" Her voice shook. "Th-those are... they're for after supper, milord, and-"

"I don't care." Tobias' glare was hotter than any hearth in the castle, and William looked up with a mixture of awe and concern. "You hurt my friend. He needs a biscuit. One for both of us." He lifted his head a little. "Or should I go ask my father?"

“No! No, milord! Of course not!” Ellie scrambled to rise and all but rushed to the other end of the counter. “Right away, milord. Right here, milord!” She hurriedly returned with a large plate filled with biscuits, still warm. The smell of them so close made William’s muzzle water. They didn’t look like the ones that the servants got! “H-here, milord. One for you, one for y’ friend. If’n you want more, jus’-”

“No, thank you. We don’t wanna be greedy.” Tobias gently coaxed William up with one arm, and the hyena nodded and eased back up to his feet. He looked around as the servants remained prostrate except for Ellie while Tobias picked up two of the biscuits. She stood straight up, but kept her head down. He’d never seen her look so scared. He’d also never been hurt by her before, though. “Come on, Willi’m. Let’s go.”

He nodded to Tobias as the tiger put one arm around him. The hyena glanced back over his shoulder at Ellie. He thought he might have seen tears on her cheeks and almost said something, but then Tobias guided him through the door and back out into the corridor. “I’m sorry...”

William was almost surprised when Tobias paused in the middle of the corridor. He looked over at the hyena and shook his head. “You don’t have to be sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I mean, if you aren’t meant to work like we do then I did.” William looked down at the floor and fixed his stare there. Maybe his mother was right. Maybe he should have just stayed away from Tobias. He got hurt this time, and almost got beat on the first time. Bad things happened whenever he met princes. “Beggin’ your pardons.”

There was silence for a second, before Tobias began to giggle quietly to himself. The sound was nice, and it helped William relax a little. “What’s funny?”

“No, it’s just... ‘pardons.’ You say pardons.” He shook his head as he gently let go of the hyena and stepped back against the wall. The tiger pressed his back to it and slid down to the ground, patting the floor beside him. “That’s not how you say it. Mother taught it different.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” William sat down roughly beside Tobias and rubbed at his sore shoulder. “No one said it was wrong.”

Tobias’ expression changed to a worried one as William lay his head against the wall. “Not wrong! Just funny. I like it.” He offered one of the biscuits to the hyena, and William hesitated before he accepted it. If his mother knew he ate something before supper she might be upset at him. On the other hand, could he say no to a prince?

... and since saying no meant no biscuit, William smiled and took it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Tobias lifted his biscuit to his muzzle and nibbled on the edge of it. “And it’s just ‘pardon’ if you wanna know. You say, ‘I beg your pardon, sir.’” He giggled. “Unless it’s a lady, then you say, ‘I beg your pardon, ma’am.’”

William turned the words over in his head for a moment as he sniffed at the biscuit. The smell of fresh-baked sweetness all but begged him to stuff the whole thing into his muzzle. “I beg your pardon, sir?”

Tobias' eyes lit up. He held his biscuit between his teeth and clapped his paws quickly. "Erry goog! Erry goog, 'illm!"

The attempt at speech broke whatever lingering concerns were still left in William after what had happened in the kitchen. He began to laugh deep, clutching his biscuit tight. Tobias joined him as soon as he was able to get his biscuit out of his mouth. "You try! You try!"

William grinned and put the edge of the biscuit into his muzzle. "Oo mnn 'ike dis? Mmm..." Even as Tobias started laughing, William's tongue brushed across the biscuit. Sweetness came back with it. "Mmm... dis's n'ce!"

With another giggle, Tobias stuck half of his biscuit back into his muzzle. "Mmm, erry n'ce, 'illm!" The pair began to laugh harder, William almost choking on his biscuit in the process. He coughed as he chewed at it and tried to clear his muzzle, half of his treat falling into his lap.

He chewed hard at it, feeling the biscuit fall to pieces between his jaws. He swallowed the mouthful as he smiled over at Tobias. "Did you mean it?"

Tobias looked up at him, biscuit dust covering his muzzle as he tilted his head. "Mmm?"

Despite the urge to laugh, William shrugged. "You said I was your friend. I mean, I've never had a friend before. Not another kid, so..."

"Well... I dunno. I guess so?" Tobias began to frown, but not because he seemed angry. He stared at his lap as he folded his paws atop it. He seemed to be thinking hard. "I don't have any friends. And I like you. You're good."

It was William's turn to cock his head. "I am?"

"I think so. You're nice." Tobias began to smile anew as he met William's gaze again. "Everyone looks at me like a prince. They think I should be like Freddy and Brett and father." His lips pursed and ears tipped back. "But I'm not. They like making people do things. And you don't kneel and get scared." The tiger's smile warmed. "You don't look at me like a prince. You look at me like... I dunno."

"A kid?" William shrugged. "That's what you are."

At that Tobias pouted, but his smile kept sneaking through. "I'm older than you!"

"Only a year and a bit!" William chuckled to himself as Tobias laughed along. "Mama said I couldn't go looking for princes, though."

"Oh." Sadness crossed Tobias' features; his shoulders drooped as he looked around for a moment. Then his ears perked back up and he whirled on William. "Well, hey! What if you *don't* go looking for princes?" He glanced around once more. "What if you just... come here? If you do, I will too! Then you aren't looking for princes. We're just both here!"

William's eyes went wide as saucers. "You are so smart! If we're both just here, I'm not looking!"

“Yeah! And then we can explore together!” Tobias’ grin lit up the hallway and William instantly felt better after everything. Hope flooded him. Was that what friends felt like? “And no one’ll get upset at you because I won’t let them!”

He didn’t know why he did, but an overwhelming urge struck William all at once. He leaned in and wrapped his arms back around Tobias again, and that warmth inside blossomed as the tiger held him back. Yeah, maybe princes might have got him hurt, but maybe that was okay. Maybe it was okay because they – or one at least – was so much nicer than anything else. Nicer than bubbles. Nicer than kitchen smells.

Better than biscuits.

Friends.