

Interwoven

INNOCENCE: PART TWO

10th Day of the Verdant Growths, 8 AoE

“Young master Tobias, please pay attention.”

Tobias’ ears perked as he jerked his gaze from the window. The rain outside and the way it obscured the vastness of the city below faded from his awareness once again as he looked to the front of the room. The rat in scholarly white robes there looked distressed as he folded his arms. “Please not you too, dear boy. I need at least one of you to listen to me.”

“Maybe if you wanted to teach us something fun.” Brett, in his seat to Tobias’ right, rolled his eyes and reclined. Tobias frowned at the way his older brother’s feet rested on top of his desk. Brett never knew how to show respect. “You never want to teach us fun things. That’s why Fredrick stopped coming.”

The rat’s greying brows knitted together as he sighed. “Fredrick stopped coming because your father has assigned him a special tutor in matters of state. Matters that, perhaps unfortunately for you, mean that you remain in my care.” Dark eyes flicked to Tobias as he rested his arms on his portly belly. “And you, Tobias? Do I bore you on this dreary day?”

Brett snorted in restrained laughter, but Tobias shook his head. “Apologies, Master Iannus. I was just looking at the city.” He folded his paws together atop his desk and leaned forward. “You were telling us about the early Lenkis scholars, and how they figured out stuff.”

Again came a groan from Brett. “And it’s a wonder we’re not both asleep. I don’t wanna learn about how some long-dead Lenkis book-reader figured out that one plus one is two!” He kicked his legs off the desk and stood. “I’m gonna find Zane and do some sparring instead.”

Anger crossed Iannus’ face for a moment and Tobias leaned back in his chair. He knew that expression as well as Brett. “You do not get to decide that, young master. Your father has decreed that you, as with both of your brothers, are all to be instructed in matters of history and literacy.”

“Yeah? Well if I learn to fight better, I’ll *make* history.” He grinned and shrugged as he brushed down his outfit. “And the only quill and ink I need is my sword and an enemy’s body.”

“Sociopathic propensities for violence aside, your father – the *king*, young master – has ordered you here as surely as I.” He pointed to the door. “If you would face his wrath rather than my own, then by all means, leave. Seek a sparring partner. Abandon your studies.”

Tobias frowned as he glanced at his brother, but his eyebrows lifted again in surprise as Brett met the challenge with a smirk. The older tiger prince marched to the door, pulled it open, and vanished out into the corridor. The door swung closed behind him.

That left just Tobias and Iannus alone. The old rat's eyes remained fixed on the door for a few long moments before he heaved another deep, tired sigh, and his shoulders slumped. "Foolish boy."

"He should take his lessons more seriously." Tobias' agreement seemed to startle Iannus, who twitched in place and turned toward the young tiger. "I'm sorry if I made you think I didn't care. I do!"

"No, young master, you didn't make me think that." He bowed his head low. "Pray forgive *me*. I should not insult your brother so." His head lifted ever so slightly. His eyes sparkled mischievously as Tobias caught the hint of a smile. "Even if he's an ignorant cretin of a boy."

Tobias bit back a laugh of his own, but allowed himself a smile. He liked the big, strange words that Iannus used. Learning them was taking a while, but they were fun. "I don't think I've ever seen you as happy as the day father said that Fredrick wouldn't be back again."

The rat straightened up again. He gave another quiet groan, and his arms unfolded so that he could press one paw into the small of his back. A series of quiet cracking sounds echoed off the walls – Tobias flinched and tried not to chuckle at the sound – before Iannus sighed. "Would that they were more like you, dear boy. Actually interested in the subjects to which I have been asked to impart my knowledge." He nodded once to himself. "And on that subject, then. The great mathematicians of Lenkis. They were?"

With a frown, Tobias stared past Iannus and to the wall at the rat's back. He knew this one! Iannus had just been talking about them before... some thunder and the intensity of the rain had distracted him... "Keropolous was one... and Antolli... right?"

"Well, two out of three will have to do." The rat's smile slowly returned. "Of course, they are from many, many hundreds of years ago. Antolli may not have even been a real figure. We don't even know his genus, despite all of his alleged exploits. Keropolous however, he was–"

"You don't know his genus?" Tobias blinked. "I thought you said he was a genus."

"I said he was a *genius*, young master. By genus, I refer to our forms." He waved to indicate himself and then Tobias. "That I am rat, that you are tiger, and..." He paused with a frown. "Well, that is not *technically* correct, but for the purpose of your present understanding of biology, it should suffice."

Tobias frowned as he leaned forward in his chair. More new words he could learn with Iannus! "How do you not know his... genus, then?"

At that, Iannus started to chuckle. "Because so much of history, young master, is fragmented. Broken into many, many pieces. Sometimes we are able to find enough pieces to tell a complete story of a person's life, but so many other times we cannot. Antolli is referenced by many of the pieces that we have found, but no pieces of him specifically remain." His smile turned sad for a moment. "So much of my homeland's history has been lost, and so much more has been destroyed over the years. I'm grateful to have such an interested student."

"Yeah, well... I'm sorry my brothers don't care enough. I think it's interesting!" Tobias rubbed at his desk as he glanced out the window again for a moment. "I don't know why they

don't care. Every time I tell William about what you talk to me about, he thinks it's interesting, too!"

Iannus cocked his head to the side and Tobias quickly clamped his muzzle shut. He looked away again and tried to avoid eye contact with Iannus took a step forward. "William, you say? And who is that, then?"

Oops.

Tobias kept his eyes off Iannus and fixed on the city out the window. For a moment he thought that if he just kept his mouth shut and said nothing, the old rat would drop it and let it slide. It was worth a shot, at least!

That hope didn't last very long. He listened as Iannus continued to approach him, robes dragging slowly across the stone floor. In the corner of his eyes, Tobias could see the rat's folded arms. "Well, you speak of this William in positive terms... positively excitedly. Not someone who would do you ill. A friend, perhaps?"

"That would be silly." Tobias finally looked back up and nodded once. "Princes aren't meant to have friends. Right? We gotta focus on our studies so we can be good princes."

The words came by rote, but they only served to make Iannus laugh. "True, true. That is your father's attitude, yes. But there is nothing wrong with having friends, dear boy. Friends are important." The rat smiled. "If you've made a friend somewhere, then it warms my heart greatly. Doubly so, if he should also find my lessons interesting; there might yet be hope for the next generation after all."

Maybe what William had told him wasn't right, Tobias wondered. Maybe, just maybe, he didn't have to keep their friendship a secret after all. Iannus certainly seemed to like the idea. "Well, I'm sure he'd like to hear about Antolli too. Lots more than Fredrick or Brett would."

"Then he would be an ideal student indeed." Iannus chuckled to himself as he reached down to ruffle Tobias' headfur. The tiger giggled and batted the paw away. "But given your brother has already left, there is little point in teaching you the subject alone. I think I'll wait for your father to bring Brett back to heel, and then cover it tomorrow. What do you say?" He winked. "Think your friend could wait to hear you talk about an ancient Lenkis mathematician?"

Tobias just grinned. He could always ask. "I mean, he doesn't have a choice, I guess." He pushed his chair back from the desk and stood up, bounding over to hug at the rat's plush midsection. Both of Iannus' arms fell around him to give a gentle squeeze in turn. "Thank you, Master Iannus. See you tomorrow afternoon!"

"Stars guide your way, young prince." He released Tobias a second later, and the tiger disengaged from him with a grin. He made his way to the door as Iannus returned to his desk, and grinned as he headed out into the hall. Getting out early as a rare treat!

And it was even better than that, too! He broke into a jog as he turned down the hall to head toward the kitchens. William usually finished his work in the kitchens before Tobias was able to escape his lessons. As he nodded to one of the guards in the hall, he couldn't help but smile.

The nod wasn't returned, but Tobias didn't care. He tugged his cloak a little looser around himself as he made his way down; the chills of the Pure Snow were behind, but the area nearest the kitchens was always warmer than the rooms with windows. His cloak billowed out around him as he rounded a corner.

And there, sitting quietly against the wall where he'd stopped that nasty kitchen servant from hurting him, was William. The hyena boy's paws turned a small stone over and over, and every now and then Tobias caught a little glimmer of light from it. He grinned and started over, and the sound of his footsteps must have given him away. William's head shot up and turned toward him, and he grinned wide as he palmed the stone into a pocket. "You're early!"

"Yep! Brett ran off, so Master Iannus decided to let me go, too." He stopped just short of barreling into William, and his arms went out wide. He grinned as the larger boy fell in against him and squeezed him tight. "How are you today? How was laundry?"

The sigh in response was muffled by Tobias' shoulder, and he chuckled in response. "Ugh. I used to think it was *fun*. Now all that mother and the others wanna do is get me to do all their work. I'm happy to help, but I just..." He pulled back from the hug and gave another dramatic sigh. "I wish I could just learn interesting stuff like you do. Sit in those scholar rooms and get taught letters and numbers and things."

"Yeah, well, Iannus would like you more than Fredrick and Brett." He stepped back and offered his paw to William. The hyena boy took it in a gentle grip, and the two started down the hallway together. "You'd actually *want* to learn."

"And it's not like it's hard to be nicer than those two anyway." William shrugged as he looked down the hall. "Whatcha think? Barracks? Stables? I should show you the pretty rock I found there yesterday!"

Tobias grinned. "I think the larder. It's always got better smells than the stables, and the guards get weird whenever they catch us." He giggled as William smiled at him. He liked it when William smiled. "I still don't think they told anyone about us. Father hasn't noticed me sneaking out."

William's grin practically matched his own as they made their way toward the end of the hallway. "Well, you're the prince. They can't argue if you're the prince. He started to frown, but smiled through it anyway. "I wish *I* was a prince, too. Then no one could make me do anything either."

Oh, that was a nice thought. Tobias nodded vigorously as they paused at the end of the corridor. "Then we could *both* live in the fancy rooms together and we wouldn't have to run off, and you wouldn't have to do the servant stuff. You could come to my lessons with me, and..." He paused, and his eyes widened. Why hadn't he thought of that before!? "Hey... why *can't* you come to my lessons?"

William paused in place. He'd been about to reach for the scone on the wall before the question had been asked. "Well, because you said that only the princes get to be taught that stuff. All the, uh..." His ears twitched, tail lashing as he stared off into nothing for a moment as he tried to find the word. "That princes needed to be... uh..."

The tiger tilted his head. "Educated?"

“That’s the word! Such a *big* word.” William’s frown deepened as he reached up to flick the switch under the sconce. The wall rumbled quietly and the boys stepped back as it turned to the side. They watched as it opened up like a door, rotating across the floor and leaving open space to either side. William flicked the switch again and the door began to close.

Tobias let go of the hyena’s hand, and each of them darted down one side of the wall. The tiger had to push in faster; the wall was rotating toward him, and he barely managed to squeeze in before the wall closed again. He giggled anew as William turned to him. “I keep forgetting how fast that closes!”

“It’s gotta be magic. That’s the only way it works.” William shook his head, smiling again as he looked through the dark, dank tunnels to where the door-wall was. “I wish I was *educated*, too. Maybe then I could learn magic! Make new doors in the castle that go everywhere!”

“Aww, but you can’t. No one learns magic anymore.” Tobias began to pout. “It’s so silly. Magic sounds so great! Why wouldn’t you want to learn magic?”

At that, William huffed to himself and kicked at the wall. “At least you get to learn interesting things. I just get to learn what soaps to use in what basins. What pots and pans go where. How to set the dining hall.” He chuckled again. “You use so many spoons!”

Tobias nodded with a grin. “Too many spoons! That’s what *I’d* use magic for. I’d get rid of all the spoons.”

“No! Then you wouldn’t be able to drink soup all fancy!” William shoved at his shoulder with a laugh and started to jog down the passage. “You’d have to drink it from the bowl like a *servant*! And your brothers would get angry and your dad would be so mad!”

Tobias almost gave chase, but he was crippled by howling laughter. William was right! They *would* be so mad! “Maybe one of them would learn magic too, and they’d make even *more* spoons.”

“A castle full of spoons!” William choked the words through laughter as he leaned against the wall.

“A *city* full of spoons!”

“No, a world!”

Tobias fell against William, and together they held each other up as they laughed. This was the best part of his day. Not the sneaking through the secret passages, or the exploring all over the castle, but the company. William was always the best part of his day.

When they finally were able to catch their breath, Tobias sighed and lay his head against William’s shoulder. “I think you’d be great at magic.”

“I think you’d be great at it too.” William nudged him with an elbow and a smile. “As long as you didn’t make any more spoons.”

The prince started to chuckle again, but then he gasped as he remembered. How could he forget? He got distracted with talking about words, and then about magic. And then spoons.

He slapped a paw to his forehead. No wonder he forgot. Those were big things to talk about. “No, you *should* get educated! You can come with me to my lessons!”

William’s head shot up. He turned, suddenly all serious as he looked at Tobias. “Wait, I can? I thought it was just for the princes.”

Tobias shook his head. This was a great idea! “No, but see, Iannus doesn’t *like* teaching Fredrick and Brett! They never want to be there, but I do! And I’d want to be there even more if you were there.”

The hyena smiled back at him. “I like being where you are, too.”

“So if we were both there and both wanted to get educated, he’d be happy too!” The plan was perfect! Everyone would be happy! “He likes to teach things, and you always like hearing them, and he said he’d like to have someone like you learn from him, so if we just go I’m sure he’d like you!”

William’s expression turned suspicious as he perked an ear. “You didn’t tell him about me, did you? Mother said I can’t see you anymore, and if people find me playing with you maybe they’d tell her. Then I *won’t* get to play with you anymore.”

That was a tricky bit. It was exactly why Tobias had been trying not to tell Iannus about William after he made his mistake. “I don’t think he would. I think he’d be so happy to have someone who wants to learn from him that he’d keep it secret too!” Tobias leaned in tighter against William’s side. “He was glad I had a friend, too. He said it was a good thing.”

“Well, he’s very smart, because I think it’s a good thing, too.” William pressed back against him, and the tunnels felt a lot warmer. “Are you sure, though? I don’t wanna get in trouble. If it’s meant to just be a thing for princes, I mean.”

“I’m very sure.” Tobias closed his eyes and nuzzled into William’s shoulder. He almost always smelled like the laundry, and it had quickly become one of Tobias’ favourite smells. “And it means we get to spend more time together. That’s good, right?”

“Mmm.” William nodded, and the tiger could feel his cheek twitch as he smiled. “That sounds good. I’d really like that. Thanks, Tobias.”

“You’re welcome. I’d like it, too.” He turned his head, briefly burying his nose against the hyena’s shoulder to breathe in that laundry smell before he stood up straight again. “Now, c’mon! That’s tomorrow, and this is today! We’ve got a larder to explore!”

William snapped upright with a grin. “Yeah! C’mon!” He jumped up in place and started to run down the passage. “I’ve never been allowed in the larder! This’ll be great!”

Tobias ran after him with a broad grin. It *would* be great, and tomorrow would only be better. He’d be educated, and Tobias would get to spend more time with him, and Iannus would get to teach another student, and everyone would be happy.

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It was with absolute, unfettered excitement that Tobias prepared for lessons the next day. Zane had overseen him and asked why he seemed so eager, and Tobias had just told the

kingsblade that it was going to be a good day. William's father had praised his outlook and wished him luck. Tobias didn't need luck, though. He had a plan, and it was perfect.

His tunic was pressed and proper. His slacks were neat and clean – but they'd been getting tighter lately and he knew he'd have to visit Seamstress to get it fixed – and had endured with giddy anticipation everything that the day would bring. He'd endured his father's forcing him and his brothers to sit in on a meeting with his small council while they talked about war and grain taxes and rebel activity and all manner of *amazingly boring* stuff. It was fine. He was going to lessons with William.

He all but bolted the moment he was given leave to do so. So eager had he been that his mother had scolded him and called him back, and his groan had echoed off the walls. Tobias had apologised for his 'impropriety' whatever that was, and had left much more gracefully the second time. The moment he was out though, he bolted like the proverbial steed.

When he arrived outside Iannus' study, William was already there. His outfit was much less pressed and prim and proper, but then again the servants didn't really have someone like Seamstress to make the clothes for them. He frowned as he started to wonder where they *did* get their clothes from.

"Something wrong?" William looked confused as Tobias approached him.

He looked up and shook his head, then realised that the hyena must have thought he was frowning at *him*. He slapped his forehead and shook his head again. "No! No, I was just thinking about something is all." He grinned wide. "Are you ready for your first lesson?"

"I mean, I guess so?" William looked down at himself and spread his arms out wide. "I don't know. Was I meant to bring anything? I just sorta... came here." He leaned in close and sank his voice to a whisper. "Mother thinks that Ellie asked me to help in the kitchen."

Tobias' eyes went wide. "You lied to your mother? That's bad, William!"

William quickly shook his head and held up both paws. "I had to! You know she'd never let me do lessons and education and stuff with you! She wouldn't let me do *anything* with you if she knew about it." He reached out and gently took hold of both of Tobias' paws, and the tiger squeezed them back. "And I want to! I want to do lessons and education and stuff, and I want to do them with you."

"And I want you to! I just... wish you didn't have to lie about it. I wish she'd let you." Tobias frowned and rubbed at the hyena's paws. William chuckled at the motion of his fingers. "It'd be good if we could do that. Then you could learn with me and we could both know lots of things and be smart like Iannus. And he's not a prince! He learned somewhere, so you don't *have* to be a prince to be educated, right?"

"I mean, I guess." William squeezed his paws again, and it was Tobias' turn to giggle at the touch. The hyena opened his muzzle to say something, but his gaze lifted to look up and past Tobias.

Confused, Tobias turned around. There stood Iannus, slowly making his way down the corridor toward them. "Good afternoon, Master Iannus!" Tobias called out. One of his paws released William's, and he waved to the scholar.

Iannus waved back, his other arm left to clutch an old book to his chest. His eyes weren't on Tobias, though; they fixed firmly on William. He looked surprised, but not angry. That was a good start! "Good day, young master. And who might this be?"

There was a light tug from William's paw, but Tobias gave it a quick, reassuring squeeze. "This is William. Remember, yesterday? I said he liked hearing about all the amazing stories and things you taught me, and you said you'd like to have more people to teach like me. Remember? I brought him along to join the lessons!"

"Oh. I see." Iannus' tone changed as he looked William up and down, and all the surety drained out of Tobias in an instant. Why didn't Iannus seem happy? "That is... very kind of you, my dear boy. Very kind indeed. I just..."

The rat fell silent, and Tobias glanced over at William. He met his stare and shrugged for a moment before he stepped forward. "It's real nice to meet you, uh... Master Innis, sir. I'm sorry if I'm a bother."

Eyebrows raised, Iannus gave a quiet little sigh as he smiled down at William. "Oh, my dear, sweet young lad. You are no bother, I promise you." He glanced over at Tobias as the tiger began to smile again. Maybe it'd be okay after all? "You have a good friend in my student, here. He has a truly good heart, does he not?"

Tobias looked over as William finally started to smile again. He nodded vigorously, and the tiger felt his heart soar. "William's good. And he's fun and smart and nice, and I knew you'd like him!"

"Were it only a question of like." Iannus' gaze lifted as footsteps approached, and the smile vanished from his features in an instant. Tobias frowned; that wasn't a good sign. "Good day, young masters."

The words made Tobias look back over his shoulder. His paw tightened instinctively around William's as he saw not only Brett on approach, but also Fredrick. The oldest prince wore a more martial uniform that Tobias hadn't seen on anyone save for their father, though Fredrick's was decorated with far less markings and medallions. "Uh oh."

Brett came to a stop nearby, arms folded. Fredrick though just kept walking, and he pushed right up between Tobias and William hard enough to break their grip on one another. William grunted and Tobias glared at the elder prince. "Hey!"

Fredrick whirled as he reached Iannus' side. "Mind your tongue, brother. My mood is already fouled for being forced to attend these classes, and it would do you well not to foul it further. And you." His eyes flicked to the side to bring William into sight; the hyena simply glared back at him. "Little servant cub, you ought not be here."

William looked at Tobias for a second, but he turned back to Fredrick before Tobias could shake his head. "I was asked."

The words barely left his muzzle before a swift backhand came from Fredrick. It knocked William flat to the ground with a yelp of pain and surprise. Brett laughed from somewhere behind as Tobias gasped. He thought he heard a similar sound come from Iannus as Fredrick shook his head. "You would dare speak to me? *Stand* in my presence?"

“Leave him alone!” Tobias all but shouted the words at Fredrick, but the older tiger’s baleful stare didn’t leave William. Instead he watched as William rolled onto his front. Tobias gasped as he saw the hyena’s teeth bared; red drool ran from his lips. “He’s bleeding, Fredrick!”

“Good. He’ll have something to clean while he’s down there.” Fredrick turned to Iannus who immediately bowed his head. “Is this your doing, instructor? Our father pays you to teach *us*, not to instruct servant brats who don’t know their place. This is Ratholarin, *not* the backwards collection hovels you crawled out of.”

Iannus cleared his throat and Tobias looked up to him hopefully as William coughed on the ground. “I assure you, young master, I-”

“You *will* use my title when you address me, or I’ll see to it you can’t address anyone ever again.”

“Begging your pardon, Prince Fredrick.” The old rat bowed deeper. Tobias watched his jaw clench. “I only just became aware of this young one’s presence. I had not yet been given an opportunity to dismiss him.”

“How fortunate such an opportunity presents now.” Fredrick stepped back as the rat looked up again, and he waved down toward William. “By all means.”

“No!” Tobias stepped forward and placed himself between Fredrick and William. “I brought him here because *he* wants to learn and *you* don’t! So if you don’t want to learn, why don’t *you* just leave!?”

Brett snorted behind him. “Big words for a little kitten.”

With a nod, Fredrick took another step forward. It put him right up in Tobias’ face, and the smaller tiger tried not to step back; if he wasn’t careful, he’d step right on William. Still, he couldn’t help but look away from Fredrick’s cold, angry stare. “If you think I would not strike my brother, you are wrong.”

When fear froze Tobias up and iced his muzzle shut, Fredrick leaned down and past him to stare at William. “And I trust you have nothing to say? Hmm? Little coward?”

Tobias’ eyes went wide as he turned around. William’s eyes burned with hatred and fury as he stared past Tobias and met Fredrick’s stare. “I am *not* a coward.”

“Oh, but you are. Like everyone from Caris, you were born one and you’ll die one too.” Fredrick’s muzzle curled into a grin as Tobias started to feel sick. It pooled deep in his stomach as tears began to shimmer in his eyes. Why was Fredrick so mean? “You come from weaker stock, cub. Crawl back to the laundry and know your place.”

But William didn’t do that. He started to stand up again as Tobias backed away. Fredrick would hit them both if he got worked up, and he knew it wouldn’t stop there then. “My father’s stronger than you. We’re not weak.”

Even as Brett began to laugh again, Tobias whimpered. That, he was sure, was it. Fredrick wouldn’t accept that back-talk. He’d beat William to a pulp, and then Tobias for bringing him, and then he would *why was Fredrick laughing too?*

The sound was so unexpected it took Tobias a moment to make sure he had heard it right. Both ears perked but yes, unmistakably, Fredrick had fallen into deep, overwhelmed laughter. Tobias wondered if he'd got it wrong. He looked at William, but his friend was just as confused as he was.

When the laughs stopped a few seconds later, Fredrick's smile remained. It wasn't a happy smile though, Tobias knew. He'd seen that smile before. It was small and cruel and nothing good would come from whatever he was thinking. "Oh, your father? You mean Master Zane? Kingsblade?" William nodded back defiantly, and Fredrick's smile widened. "Oh, then I guess your whore of a mother never told you. He is *not* your father."

Tobias frowned. Zane had always told him that William was his son, hadn't he? A glance at William only showed anger there. Brett, meantime, was grinning ear to ear. "Poor little bastard. No one told him."

"Your father was a coward – just like you – who died in Caris." Fredrick tilted his head as Tobias could do little more than listen in horror. "Zane found your mother. Claimed her as a warbride." He grinned down at William. "I can only imagine what *awful* things she had to do to survive the war."

A glance down showed William shuddering. There were tears in his eyes as surely as there were in Tobias' but *unlike* Tobias' they were mixed with something else. There was a raw hatred there, pure and primal and utterly overwhelming. William was about to snap, and Tobias knew that if he did there would be nothing that he could do. Servants had to kneel and drop anything they were doing when the princes entered the room; if William attacked him, who knew what would happen to him?

So Tobias didn't think. Before William could do anything, he swung a fist as hard as he could into Fredrick's gut.

All the air rushed out of him in an instant as the winding blow hit him. He stumbled back into Iannus who barely caught the prince, and Tobias took the opportunity to grab William's paw again. He spun around with his other fist raised just in case Brett tried anything, but the middle brother seemed half impressed and half worried by Tobias' outburst. He didn't move or act as Tobias pushed past him and dragged William along with him.

Brett continued to offer no resistance as Fredrick wheezed for breath, quieter and quieter in the background as they fled. Dimly, Tobias was aware of how William kept looking back over his shoulder. At first he thought it was because he was worried about being pursued. Eventually he caught sight of that untempered fire still in the hyena's eyes. It wasn't fear.

William didn't stop him, though. They'd run together enough that even Tobias' paw in his didn't slow them down. They raced away, faster and further than Fredrick or Brett could reach. They darted down one passage, then another; they cut through quiet rooms and quickly made it to one of the secret passages.

Tobias skidded to a halt and swung William up to hit the switch, and the hyena flicked it with practiced ease. The wall began to rotate before them to open up the hidden accessway, and they were through the moment it was safe to do so. Tobias caught the switch on the way through, and it closed just as they made it into the darkness.

Silence, punctuated only by their panting for breath, filled the air. Puffs of steam curled out around their muzzles. Tobias turned toward William, and couldn't help the tingle that raced down his spine and to his legs. It urged him to run again as William stared straight ahead, still utterly, totally furious. "W... William?"

The hyena ground his teeth hard. "I'm *not* a coward."

"I know you're not. I know." Tobias shook his head as he slipped to the side. It was just a step further away, but it made him feel a little better. "You were gonna hit him."

"And he woulda deserved it. And worse." He growled and shook his head as he turned. William backed against the wall and stared at the ground. "But you beat me to it. Why? Isn't he gonna hurt you later?"

For the first time since he'd swung at Fredrick, that thought sat in Tobias' mind. It rested for a moment, extending tendrils through him as he shivered. William was right. Fredrick would be real angry with him later... "Probably."

"So... why?"

"Because he might just hurt me, but..." Tobias shook his head as he felt himself tearing up again. "But I'm a prince! He can't do too much to me. You're a... I mean, you're-"

"I'm just a servant, yeah. I know. Just a little servant who doesn't matter, and he could make me go away if he wanted to." Again the hyena ground his teeth, and Tobias wondered if he could hear it if he listened close enough. "Still wish I coulda hit him."

Tobias sighed. Part of him wished that William could have, to. "I'm sorry about all those lies about your mother and father. He shouldn't have said them. He was just trying to make you feel bad."

William shrugged and wiped at his muzzle with his sleeve. It came back bloody, and he sighed as the arm fell limp back at his side again. "They're not lies. He's right."

The tiger blinked. "But..."

"They didn't tell me. They don't have to, though." William looked away and sniffled. "Mother's never happy when he's around. She looks at him when he doesn't see her, and she looks so mad." He shook his head again. "And father isn't there. He's gotta be with the king a lot, and he's never really happy to see her. Just sad. And all of mother's friends get upset when he comes around. Like they're protecting her or something."

Every word was like another punch to Tobias' chest. Why didn't William tell him all of that? When did he figure it out? Why didn't *he* figure it out, too, and how did Fredrick know? "I'm sorry, William..."

He shook his head once more and lifted his head to look at Tobias. The poor boy looked tired. "It's okay. You just wanted to do something nice for me. I wanted it, too." He sighed and slid down to the ground. "I could have been good at being educated. Oh. Oh no!" His eyes went wide. "You're not at your lessons! You're gonna get in even more trouble!"

That, Tobias thought, was the last thing in the world he was worried about. "Fredrick's always missing lessons, and Brett tries to do whatever Fredrick's doing. If I miss one, it won't

matter.” He too began to slide down the wall to sit on the floor opposite William. “I don’t really want to go anymore, anyway. Not if you can’t come with me.”

“Well, you heard Fredrick. Your father only pays him for you three.” William lay his head back against the wall. “I wish I could pay him, too. Then Fredrick would have to let me be educated, too.”

“I could ask?” Tobias leaned forward as William tilted his head. “If father can pay him, maybe he can pay for you, too.”

William actually laughed at that, and Tobias began to smile. But when the hyena shook his head, he realised too late that it wasn’t a happy laugh. “Why would he pay for some little servant cub to get educated?”

Tobias blinked. “Because I asked?”

“Nah. ‘specially not after today.” William sighed to himself; he sounded so sad. Tobias wanted to go over and give him a hug – William’s hugs always made him feel better when he was sad – but he didn’t think that the hyena would want a hug right then. “But thanks. For trying. Heh.” He smiled and looked up. “And for punching Fredrick.”

“I didn’t like that. But... you’re welcome.” Tobias couldn’t help but smile back. At least a smile was a step up from looking angry. Maybe he’d feel better enough for a hug soon. “Maybe if you come back tomorrow, Fredrick and Brett won’t be there, and-”

“No, no no no.” The smile disappeared in an instant as William waved his paws up from side to side. “If they’re there, they’ll just...” He gulped. “They’ll hurt me. Or worse, they’ll hurt you.”

The tiger chuckled to himself. “How is that worse?”

William shrugged. “I don’t want you to get hurt?”

“I don’t want *you* to get hurt either.” Tobias frowned. “Maybe we can find a time when they’re not gonna be there. Or maybe Master Iannus would teach us *after* they finish.”

But William’s ears and shoulders drooped. “And what if they come just to see if I’m there? They won’t let me, and I’m not s’posed to be there anyway.”

“Okay, then... what if I do it?” Tobias’ mind raced as he tried to find a solution. Something had to work! He had to do *something* for William! “What if instead of exploring more, I teach you just like Master Iannus teaches me? I could- I could take notes, and bring them along!”

The hyena frowned, but he leaned forward with interest. “But I don’t know letters.”

“I can teach them, too! I know them!” The idea was exciting, and it drove Tobias back to his feet again as he nodded. “Yes! I’ll be a scholar, just like Master Iannus! And I’ll learn how to teach you, and then *you* can be a scholar, too!”

The smile that started to grow across William’s face was still stained with blood, but it was much better than he’d looked since everything had happened. “And then I can teach other

servants, and they can all become scholars too!” He pushed himself up to his feet and stepped closer. “But why? Why would you do that for me?”

That was what William had been waiting for. He just grinned and stepped forward to meet William halfway, and wrapped his arms around the hyena tight. He felt William’s arms come up almost as quickly, squeezing him warmly back. He fought back the urge to purr. “Because you’re my friend. And a better brother than Fredrick and Brett. I like you a lot.”

“I like you a lot, too.” William gave him another little squeeze and Tobias felt the air rush out of him; William was a lot stronger than he was, but he really didn’t mind. “I don’t have any brothers or sisters, but I hope if I had one it’d be you.”

“I’d be happy being your brother too.” He nuzzled into William’s neck and sighed. Everything hadn’t gone the way he’d hoped, but that was okay. Maybe he couldn’t have Master Iannus teach William directly, but if Tobias was good and studied hard, he’d be able to teach William himself. It wasn’t the same, but it would still be good.

And they’d still be able to spend time together. He breathed deeply, inhaling the hyena’s laundry-mixed scent, and rubbed at his back. He giggled as he felt William nuzzle back against him, the hyena’s nose tracing up along one ear. It flicked back against it and William began to shake with chuckles of his own.

Things hadn’t gone well, but it was okay. They’d be okay. Maybe it’d be harder, but they had each other. That was the important thing.

And Tobias wasn’t going to let anything change that.