

Interwoven

INNOCENCE: PART THREE

56th Day of the Crimson Leaf, 12 AoE

This, William knew, was going to go badly.

Worse, of course, if they found the knife. He stood there, just shy of the doorway. Beyond it he could hear his mother and father talking. The subject wasn't something he could discern with their lowered voices, but if they were both together then it could only be for him. He winced as he brought a finger up to his forehead. It stung at his touch, and the hyena's fingers came back redder than before as he sighed. He'd thought the wound was going to stop bleeding.

Still, it wouldn't do him any favours to wait in the wings any longer. William took a deep breath, closed his eye, and stepped around the corner and through the doorway. His mother looked up instantly at his entrance, and as William cracked open his good eye again he watched her expression turn from irritation to concern in the space of a heartbeat. "Looks worse than it is."

The words didn't reassure her, nor did they stall out her charge. He arms wrapped tight around him and William bit back a grunt of pain. She squeezed, and his chest felt it might crack open. He managed to wheeze out a quiet, "Stop," but she obviously didn't hear him.

"You're hurting him, Catherine." His father's voice was quiet but firm, though William could see the wolf's tail tucked firmly down between his legs. "Let the boy breathe."

She gasped and let him go. William all but gasped in relief as he sagged forward, caught by her paws. "You're a mess... what happened?" She whimpered as she reached up to trade a fingertip across his right cheek. "Your eye..."

"Just swollen over." William's voice cracked; at least, he *hoped* that it was just swollen. He'd not been able to see out of it since everything had happened. Still, his injuries were far from the worst thing he'd seen that day. "I'm okay. Just... hurt bad."

His mother nodded once and quickly stood. She darted off to a basin nearby and began to gather cloth, no doubt to clean his wounds. That left him and his father, and William took full advantage of his injuries to avoid the wolf's gaze.

Zane obviously had no intention of letting that be all there was to it. "I heard you gave as good as you got."

"As good as I could." William couldn't help but growl a little. "Makes sense you heard about it all. Brett run crying back to daddy, did he?"

"You'll watch your tongue." The snapped words came from his mother, and William frowned as he looked over at her. She'd paused her work for a moment to shake a finger at

him. "I raised you smarter than this, didn't I? What've I told you about running around with princes?"

Before William could open his mouth to correct her, Zane raised his paw. He bit his tongue and looked up at his father as the kingsblade shook his head. "As I was saying, he *wasn't*. Prince Brett and the training cadre with him happened across William in the stables." The wolf turned and lifted an eyebrow. "Brett said you assaulted him. I trust there's more to this than he reported?"

William grit his teeth. "What's it matter? He's a prince. He can say or do anything he wants."

In the corner of his restricted vision, he caught his mother's nod. Of course she approved of his answer. She'd drilled it into him enough times, at the least. Zane, however, looked much less impressed. "Truth doesn't care whether one is a king or a slave. Lannius Versarrus, of the Marovan Imperium, spoke those words."

"I didn't know they spoke Rathin in the old Marovan Imperium." William smirked, but Zane simply frowned back at him. Trust his father to not take a joke. "They didn't say Fredrick was there too, did they?" He fought the urge to reach for his belt and the cloth-covered sheath slipped into the back of it.

"They did not." Zane's eyes narrowed. "And he was not to be in the stables today for anything. He and his wife were due to already be out of the city for the rite of new life."

"Nobody here wants to think about that little brat reproducing." His mother bit the words out, but William couldn't help but snicker.

At least for a moment. Zane's disapproving glance shifted to William from his mother as he shook his head. "Nevertheless, he is the heir to the throne. He is to be accorded the respect of that station." He tilted his head up as William's muzzle curled into a silent snarl. "You say Fredrick was there."

William nodded. He knew that the kingsblade was loyal to his charges to the exclusion of all else, and he was honestly kind of curious to see how far that would go. "Well, I was in the stables to muck them. Brett'd brought the cadre in to show off their steeds." He scowled. "Never understood why everyone loves gryphons. So hard to work with."

"Focus, now." Zane shook his head. "What happened?"

Behind him, William's mother looked on with interest. She was still preparing salves, but her efforts slowed as William explained. "Well, they found me there working. Started making fun, calling me names... all the normal stuff they do." He shrugged and looked at his mother. "I didn't say a thing. Just like you told me."

She nodded her approval again as he took a breath and continued. "And when they saw I wasn't going to say anything, I guess Brett thought I was ignoring my prince or something. He had his cadre attack me." William ran his tongue across his teeth. None damaged thankfully, but more than a few were as sore as his jaw. "I never threw the first punch."

Continued to nod, but Zane's ears were suddenly perked with interest. He leaned in, as if studying William closely. He leaned back in turn; every time his father looked at him that way, it meant something bad. "You beat them? All of them?"

"I mean, eventually. There were more of them than me." He shrugged again as he forced himself to meet Zane's stare. "Four cadre members and Brett. But I didn't hit Brett! I know better than that! He'd have my head if I laid a finger on him!" He growled quietly. "So I had to let him beat on me. Then, once his cadre picked themselves up, they left."

Zane held his stare for a few more moments before he nodded to himself. The wolf straightened up and folded his arms. "Interesting. And I believe you, too. But what of Fredrick? You said he was present as well?"

William hesitated. There was already enough trouble bound to follow him today, and if he was right, he didn't want to invoke more of Fredrick's wrath. Not just yet, anyway. "I mean, that was before Brett showed up. He wasn't there when they attacked me."

"Not that he wouldn't have simply sat back and watched." Catherine scowled at Zane. "That is the quality of royalty that you preside over. I am sure your pride overflows."

"You speak as though I am responsible for raising them." Irritation coloured the wolf's tone as William's mother at last made her way over to him and knelt down. A cloth was pressed to the cut above the hyena's eye, and something warm and viscous and *stinging* was pressed to the wound. William hissed, but his mother's other paw lifted to the back of his head and held him in place.

All he could do was squirm as she rubbed the substance into the cut. "I know you aren't. But of all the people in this realm, you are one of barely a *pawful* that they might respect enough to listen to. Or have they outgrown your discipline?"

Zane's eyes narrowed as William was finally released. "Brett is almost of age. Fredrick already *is* of age, and married besides. Tobias has no need of any temperance or kindness I might teach him, and dear Irene takes after her youngest brother far more than anyone else. I beg you, tell me what more I can do."

"Stop it, please." William grunted the words as he pushed his mother back and idly rubbed at the cut. His fingers came back sticky with some sort of creamy goop. "It doesn't matter. None of it matters. They're princes, and they do what they want."

"And Brett is sure to remember this, boy. He may seek more opportunities to exact revenge for this slight, and so you must learn from this." Zane knelt down in front of him and reached out to grip his wrist as he tried to rub harder at the goop on his forehead. "Two lessons. The first?"

William sighed and allowed his arm to go slack. He hated these games. His father always wanted him to know what he was supposed to learn before he could learn it. "Don't get into a fight with a prince or his guards?"

"Avoid Fredrick and Brett as though they were plague. Certainly by now they may as well be for you, for all the trouble they cause you." Zane nodded; William supposed his answer was close enough.

His mother, however, was less pleased. “Oh? And what is he to do when they seek him out, Zane? Allow himself to be beaten to death, in the name of his oh-so-worthy princes?”

The wolf ignored the question even as William grit his teeth. That was his question, too, but he knew it wouldn’t be answered. Instead, Zane waited a moment before he continued. “The second lesson is that you are more capable than you appear... and perhaps more than you know.”

When William looked up in confusion, Zane released his wrist. “Your arms are strong. Legs, too. You labour all day, and your muscles are honed by the work. You may not be trained, but perhaps fighting skill runs in your blood.”

William glanced aside for a moment. His mother looked away from them both. “I don’t want to fight.”

“No one should want to fight, but all should be prepared to defend that which matters most to them. The words of Adreas Jen, a celebrated commander of Caris and a most wise individual.” Zane reached up to gently cup William’s cheek. “I could arrange training, if you would be-”

“Absolutely not.” The snapped interruption came as Catherine stood up suddenly with balled fists. “You will not take my son and turn him into a Ratholarin soldier. I will die before I allow you do that to him!”

“I don’t want to be a soldier anyway!” William stood quickly – too quickly – and stumbled forward a moment before he caught himself. “I don’t want to hurt anyone. I don’t want to kill anyone!”

His mother nodded once, firmly, as if to end the discussion right then and there. “And you will not ever have to. You hear him, Zane? *Never.*”

Even as his mother knelt down to wrap him into another tight, protective hug, William watched as Zane bowed his head. “No offense was meant, Catherine. I only wanted to ensure he could protect himself.”

“Seems like the only things he needs protection from are your damned princes.” She squeezed William a little tighter, and once again he felt that surge of pain and breathlessness. He patted at her arm and she relaxed a little, but still didn’t let him go.

His father didn’t lift his head again. He stood there, silent as a statue as his mother held him. William didn’t know what to do. A thousand different thoughts raged in his head, and more than a few lingered on the stashed blade in his belt.

He forced those ones away as he sighed and leaned into his mother’s hug. It wasn’t just him he had to think about, after all. And he had to think fast, if he was going to avoid Fredrick’s wrath.

Brett’s beatings would be a mercy by comparison.

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If William’s mother fussed over his wounds to an extraordinary degree, that was nothing compared to Tobias’ reaction. He’d waited for the tiger in one of the store rooms that

the castle's secret tunnels led to – their designated meeting-up place – after he'd managed to escape his mother's ministrations. Tobias had been late, but then so had William, so it balanced out somewhat.

It had taken several minutes to calm Tobias down and convince him that he was actually okay, and even then the young prince wasn't inclined to believe him in the least. "I can't believe Brett did this!"

"Sure you can. He's always been mean." William leaned back against one of the crates, propped up behind another, smaller one to serve as a chair. "And besides, he only did it after I beat up his friends. You should have seen the look on his face."

Tobias didn't smile at that. Instead he dragged another crate over to sit roughly at William's side and reached out to gently hold the hyena's paw. "I bet he was scared of you. Brett likes to think he's a great warrior, but he's not. He's a coward. You'd make a much better warrior than he would."

"That's sorta what father said. That I should be a soldier." William frowned as he shifted back against the crate, feeling the sheath rub into his back. He briefly considered showing Tobias, but it would only worry him worse. And besides, Tobias would see soon enough if William was right... "Mother said I never would, but I was thinking about it."

The paw on his fell a little slack for a second. "I... didn't think you'd want to become a soldier." Tobias frowned and stared at the ground. "But now that I think about it, it'd probably be nicer than being a castle servant. Maybe."

William wasn't quite so sure about that, but he shrugged back and gave Tobias' paw a squeeze. The tiger had never quite grown out of being very touchy with him, and William didn't mind. The soft feel of the prince's paw was something he looked forward to every day. It didn't hurt that William had hit a big growth spurt in the last year, and towered over Tobias by a full head. "Maybe. But it'd earn me crowns, and I could spend those on helping mother." He sighed. "I dunno. It'd just be nice to make her stop having to work so hard."

"Mmm. You're nice like that." Tobias shuffled closer and leaned his head against William's arm. The hyena felt himself blush as his paws came to rest on Tobias' thigh, and he leaned back in against the prince. "I just don't want you to have to hurt anyone. Everyone who hurts people seems to be a bad person, and you're the best person I know."

"Yeah, but you're nicer. And you don't have to be." William shook his head a little and closed his eyes. Those quiet little moments with Tobias were the best thing ever. "You could've been just like Fredrick and Brett, but you're nice. And smart, and..." He bit off the word 'pretty' before it could slip out. He didn't know if Tobias would like the word. He'd been holding some words back lately. Big words. *Feeling* words.

But he need not have worried. Before Tobias could say anything, William heard footsteps approaching the store room. He didn't move – he was too sore to do so even if he wanted and Tobias was too comfy – as he tried to gauge the sound. The footsteps weren't hurried, so not a servant. Too light to be a guard.

His answer came as the door opened and fresh light streamed in from the torches outside. William shut his eyes against the glare as Tobias turned his face into the hyena's neck

with a grunt. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, but he recognised the voice before he could see the intruder. “Ah. Figures. A strong prince beats you, and a *tailraising* prince makes you feel better.”

The shadow in the doorway resolved itself into the form of Fredrick as William narrowed his eyes. The prince was better dressed than he had been in the stables, all resplendent in a suit of black and white and silver. William grit his teeth as he sat up a little higher, and Tobias blinked as he looked over at his brother. “Fredrick? Wait... what do you mean, tailr-”

“What do you want?” William made sure he growled each word long and slow. *He* knew what Fredrick meant, but he didn’t want the heir to the throne to start making it sound bad for Tobias.

Fredrick glared at William. “That’s not how you address your prince, *slave*.”

“I’m not your slave and I’ll talk to you however I want.” William met his glare with an equal amount of contempt, and he watched anger and surprise and indignation war across Fredrick’s face. “What do you want?”

“Insolent little cur. I’ll cut the tongue from your muzzle for that!” Beside William, Tobias squeaked as Fredrick reached for his belt. Froze. Fumbled a little. Glanced down.

The evaporation of all of the prince’s confidence and bravado in an instant was worth it alone, but William could only smile as he reached behind his back to the sheath there. A claw deftly tugged the fabric back from around it and his fingers closed around the hilt of the dagger. It swept forward to point at Fredrick, who froze up instantly. “You’re looking for this, right?”

The older prince’s eyes widened even as Tobias glanced up at William and slid away from him. “You stole his knife?”

“Rotten little thief; I’ll see you hanged for this!” Fredrick marched forward, paws outstretched.

But William stepped up and away from Tobias to brandish the reddened, curved blade at the older tiger. Fredrick fell back immediately, his stance shifted to something more defensive. “You’re not gonna do that. You won’t, because if you do, I’ll tell *everyone* what you did today.”

Tobias looked confused, but Fredrick froze up again. It was only for a fraction of a second, but it was more than long enough for William to know he had the prince’s attention. “And what,” he replied, his voice suddenly low and threatening, “is it exactly that I did today?”

“You tell me. I don’t know her name, but she definitely wasn’t Princess Magriolla.” Tobias’ eyes remained wide as saucers as William’s full focus remained on Fredrick. “A princess wouldn’t be working the stables dressed like a servant. And I bet a princess would complain about what you were doing to her.”

Tobias shook his head as Fredrick’s stare turned colder. “I don’t understand. What was he-”

“I’m sure you princes have a big, fancy word for it.” William shook his head but his eyes never left Fredrick and the dagger never wavered. “He forced himself on her, Tobias.

Pushed her down in the stables and he..." William gulped hard as fresh disgust and anger churned in his guts. "You didn't think anyone else was in there to see, did you? Well, *I* was there. *I* saw."

Fredrick snorted. "Your word against mine. A foolish argument to make. No one would believe the words of a servant boy over me."

His younger brother though just looked up at Fredrick in horror. "I would."

"And you saw nothing, and so you have even less credibility." Fredrick tilted his head up and bared his teeth. "You play a game you do not understand, little cub. You don't have the intellect to stand against me."

"No?" William sidestepped slowly toward Tobias and nodded toward the dagger. "You recognise this blade?"

Tobias tore his horrified eyes from Fredrick to look at the weapon. William's eyes remained fixed on Fredrick as he squeezed the hilt tighter. "Yeah. It's the knife father gifted him for his sixteenth birthday. For his coming of age." In the corner of William's field of view, he saw Tobias shaking. "Brett has a couple months to go before he gets his. I've got a few more years."

"And I might not be smart, but I've learned a lot from my father about weapons." He hefted the dagger ever so slightly. "He told me once the royal family has special daggers no one else in the realm has. Like the thicker base to the blade" He curled his lips; his smile was cold and joyless. "I bet there's no other knife in the whole realm that stabs like this one, Fredrick. Isn't that right?"

The anger in the tiger's eyes smouldered, but he held his tongue. On some level, William was surprised – impressed even – at his restraint. "I know she can't speak against you anymore... you made sure of that, didn't you? Well, I can speak good enough."

One of Tobias' paws flew to cover his muzzle. "You... Fredrick, please tell me you... you couldn't have!"

But Fredrick ignored him. The tiger's full attention was locked on William. He didn't even look at the weapon. "What if I take that little knife from you and gut *you* with it?"

The prince's stance hadn't changed, but his arms spread a little wider as if he was ready to pounce. William simply held his ground. He was ready for that. He'd seen a lot of fighting already, and if Fredrick attacked he wouldn't be caught unawares. "Well... you might get it. Turn it around. Kill me." He nodded to Tobias. "But he's heard everything. You gonna kill your brother, too?"

"I'm certain he could be convinced to mind his tongue. Especially if you are already dead." The prince's muzzle split, his teeth bared. "But what if I *don't* get it? Are you really going to kill a prince? Do you know what they do to people who commit regicide?"

William let his smile slip away entirely. "No. Do you want to be the prince who helps me find out?"

Tobias reached up to William's other arm and squeezed it tight. It didn't disrupt William's preparation or focus, but he did lean into the tiger's weight until he settled. "Please... don't kill my brother, William. I know he can be awful, but please..."

"I'm not going to. Not unless he attacks me." William shook his head as Fredrick began to slowly straighten back up again. He wound up over a whole head and a half taller than the hyena, and he stared down his muzzle at William in silence. "Wow, look at that. You princes really *are* smart.

"So this is what you're gonna do. You're gonna turn around, and you're gonna leave right now." Fredrick's eyes blazed to life, but William lifted his eyebrows and shook his head. His ears twitched as Tobias squeezed his arm tighter. "You're gonna leave me alone. You're gonna leave my parents alone. You're going to leave *Tobias* alone, too. No more making fun of him. No more hurting him. You *and* Brett."

The growl that slipped out of Fredrick was deep and guttural, and William felt Tobias start to shake against him. "You presume to order me about?"

"Yep." William nodded once. "I'm gonna hide the dagger. Somewhere no one will find it. That way, no one but me will know you were in the stables with that girl. They won't have to find out what you did." He shook his head again. The idea that Fredrick might just get away with what he did was sickening, but he was going to get away with it anyway. At least this way something good might come of it. "That's the deal. So. What are you gonna do? Gonna try and take it?"

For a long, long moment, Fredrick just stared in furious silence. William watched him with utterly every ounce of attention he had, ready to do whatever he had to do if the tiger pounced. With each second that passed though, William grew more and more certain that the pounce wouldn't come. That he'd got through to Fredrick. That he'd *won*.

He wasn't sure though until Fredrick's shoulders slumped. It did nothing to abate the rage boiling away behind his eyes, and his snarl lost none of its ferocity. "We have a deal. For now." He turned sharply enough to make Tobias jump and made for the door, though he paused before he pulled it open.

William squeezed the dagger tighter, but Fredrick wasn't readying a surprise attack. The tiger instead looked back down at him and bared his teeth. "Best be careful, cub. You play at things you cannot understand."

It took everything in William to bite back a quick reply, but he managed it nonetheless. Fredrick remained still for a few seconds, almost as if he was looking to bait just such a snap back, before he pulled the door open and angrily stomped out through it. He slammed it shut after himself, and Tobias and William were alone again.

Until his receding footsteps faded away, William didn't even dare to breathe. When finally he did, he sagged and slumped back down atop the crate again. The dagger remained in a tight grip; it clattered against the side of the crate. "Wow."

"Wow? That was *insane*, William!" He frowned as he turned his head, and Tobias entered his field of view again. The younger prince looked furious and terrified in equal measure, and William frowned. "Do you know what you just did? The enemy you just made?"

“What, like Fredrick and Brett haven’t had it out from me ever since we met?” William’s frown deepened. Why wasn’t Tobias happy about this? “He’s going to leave you alone now. They both are.”

Tobias just stared back at him, slack-jawed. Worry started to creep back into William. Did the tiger know something he didn’t? He’d spent almost all day thinking up his plan! “Of course he’s not! He’s just going to focus everything he can on getting the knife back! And if you just hide it somewhere, all he has to do is wait for it to turn up!”

Anger had started to overtake the concern on Tobias’ face as the prince stepped away and started to pace nervously. “You only get to see him when he’s being mean to you. *I* get to see him doing all the other things he does. All the other things he knows!” The tiger whirled on him. “What happens to you, or to your mother, or to me when he finds where you’ve hidden it?”

“But he *won’t* find it. We know all the best hiding spots in the castle!” William shook his head. He’d thought of everything already. Why didn’t Tobias trust him? “You said it yourself that you know passages and little hiding spots that he’s never heard of!”

“That’s not the point!” Tobias began to wring his paws as he lowered his voice to a hiss. His eyes darted back and forth, settling occasionally and for no more than a second at a time on William. “What if he doesn’t bother looking for it?”

William cocked his head. “Why wouldn’t he bother looking for it?”

Tobias stopped in place and folded his arms. He stared at the ceiling, silent for a few unnerving seconds. “Because... he doesn’t need to. Does he?” His head lowered again, ears folded back as he stared hard at William. “If you hide it that well, no one’s gonna find it. No one’s gonna find the knife that...” His voice cut off and he gulped. “So he doesn’t worry about it.”

The hyena nodded slowly. He’d thought of that! “Yeah, but if he does anything to hurt you, or mother, or anyone... I can get it and-”

“Not if he comes for *you*!” William’s eyes widened.

... he hadn’t thought of that.

As the words sank in, Tobias shook his head. “If he just... *takes* you somewhere, he could- he could shut you up! Just like that girl you said.” He hugged himself tightly as tears started to shimmer in his eyes. “And even if he stops there; if he just did that to you, I’d...” He sniffled.

William was up in an instant. He dropped the dagger to the floor and wrapped his arms tightly around Tobias. He didn’t wait to think about whether or not Tobias wanted or needed it. He just knew, immediately, and squeezed him tight. He ignored the pain when Tobias’ arms slipped around his middle and pulled him in closer. His chin came to rest on top of Tobias’ head as the tiger began to cry in earnest.

It was enough to break William’s heart, as Tobias sobbed against his chest. “You’re right,” he whispered as Tobias shook against him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think of that, I’m sorry.” He grit his teeth as he looked up and around the room. Something. There had to be *something*

he could think of to fix it. The plan wasn't bad! He'd just made a little mistake. He could fix it.

The problem was him. If something happened to him, Fredrick could do what he wanted. Maybe he'd been too surprised by what had happened to realise it at the time, just like William hadn't thought of it. He rocked back and forth slowly as he held Tobias, his mind racing a mile a minute. So Fredrick hadn't figured it out yet. There was time. Time enough to plan. The problem was *him*. How could he fix that? There had to be a way to make himself not a problem. Or too big a problem for even Fredrick to fix. Think, William! Think!

"William?" The shaky, quiet voice from below made the hyena draw back from his embrace for a moment. Tobias looked up at him, his eyes reddened as he swiped his paw across his muzzle. "You need to... you need to go. To hide."

He blinked. "I can't hide. If I don't work, mother gets in trouble too." He shook his head. "She's only allowed to work in the castle because of father being a kingsblade. I can't do anything that gets them in trouble."

"Like threatening a prince?" Tobias shook his head and rubbed his paw across his nose again. "Like scaring Fredrick so bad he goes after you? He's gonna figure out he can!"

William scowled as he pulled back from Tobias more fully. The tiger wasn't helping; he already knew how messy the situation had become. The hyena knelt down to pick up the dagger again and sheathed it behind his back. "What if I gave it to you? Then if anything happened to me, you could-"

"If he knew *I* had it, he'd beat me up and make me tell him where it was." Tobias shrank back from William and squeezed himself tight. "You know he's done it before."

"So... so I give it to someone who he *can* 't beat up. Father!" William's eyes lit up for a second as the realisation came to him, but he froze up a moment later as his thoughts caught up. "No... he could order father to give it to him, couldn't he? Damn. This is *hard*." He sat back down on the crate and rubbed at his good eye. There had to be something. He *had* to find something!

"Wait." Tobias leaned back until he rested against the wall, still staring at the ground. "Wait, have you... I mean... are you still keeping up with what I've been teaching you? Letters? Numbers?"

William retched at him. "Letters are easy. Numbers are *hard*."

"Good, because you'll only need letters." Tobias lifted his head and started to pace again. William's eyes followed him; did the prince have an idea? "You're right. If Master Zane had the knife and Fredrick knew that, he *could* just order him to give it." He paused in mid-step to look up at William, but there was no smile on his muzzle. "But what if he *didn't* know he had it?"

If the prince had an idea, William couldn't figure out what it was. He simply blinked dumbly at Tobias and tilted his head. "I don't get it."

Tobias turned to him and hurried back over. He reached out to grab a hold of both of William's paws. "If he doesn't *know* he has it, then he can't give it to Fredrick. If he doesn't

have it, but he *could* have it...?" Tobias' eyes widened. His eyebrows lifted almost off his head. His ears twitched excitedly as his tail swept back and forth.

William, however, still wasn't putting it together. Tobias was forced to sigh and squeeze at the hyena's paws. "I tell Fredrick that you hid the knife. I *also* tell him that you gave Master Zane a letter and to only open it if something happens to you, or to me, or to your mother. In the letter, you write everything that happened in the stables, and you tell him where the knife is!"

It was like a torch set alight in William's mind. Every missing piece he could think of fell into place all at once with Tobias' explanation. It worked. It *would* work!

It had to work.

Excitement took over and William pulled his paws free. He wrapped them back around Tobias again, who gasped in surprise and gingerly hugged him back. William felt the tiger's smile against his chest. "I, uh... might need some help with those letters, though."

"I can help." Tobias' voice was muffled as William pulled him in tighter. "You'll have to let me go, though. I can't show you the letters if you're hugging me." William nodded and relaxed his arms, but to his surprise Tobias didn't move. If anything, the tiger pressed in all the harder against him. "But not right now."

William blinked as he leaned back into Tobias and sighed quietly. "Not right now?"

"Mmm-mmm. Comfy." Tobias nuzzled into his chest and William felt heat rise through his cheeks again. He was right. It *was* comfy. "I wish we could just stay like this, here. Just hugs and nice things. No Fredrick and no stables and no work and no princes and no nothing." William started to nod, until Tobias quietly added, "Is that what Fredrick meant? Being a... tailraiser? Because I make you feel better?"

The heat in William's cheeks burned all the hotter at the suggestion, and he quickly shook his head. Tobias was so smart, but he was surprisingly ignorant about a lot of simple things. He was tempted to explain, and explain why Fredrick was being mean about it, but words eluded him. "It's... I mean... sorta. Not really. I dunno."

"Mmm." Tobias shrugged and just nuzzled in again. "Well, if it means being nice to you, I'm okay with it. You deserve to feel nice." He paused and leaned back a little. "You do feel nice, right?"

The question made William laugh. He shook his head slowly as he rested his chin again on Tobias' head. Maybe when *his* parents explained to him what adults did in the privacy of their own quarters, William could talk about it with him.

But in the meantime, for sure. "Yeah. I do feel nice. You do make me feel nice." His jaw tightened as he tilted his head down and planted a little kiss on top of the tiger's head. "Thanks, Tobias. For everything." His paws started to rub up and down the prince's back as he closed his eyes.

The quiet purrs against his chest became his world, and William let everything else fall away.