

Interwoven

INNOCENCE: PART FOUR

16th Day of the Shining Light, 14 AoE

The upper spires were Tobias' least favourite places to be in the whole castle, but they became so, so much worse during the days of the Shining Light. Long days and high temperatures sent heat rising all through the castle, and those rooms that filled the spires became some of the warmest of all.

That he had been summoned was no uncommon thing; when father wanted an audience, father was sure to get one. That he had sent Master Zane to collect him *had* been unusual – most of the time, one of his siblings or a maidservant would do – but Tobias simply marched the corridors of the castle with the large wolf at his side. His gait was as slow as he dared; the spires weren't far.

Zane had been characteristically quiet since he'd found Tobias, but the silence had only grated at the prince ever since. Finally, he could take it no more. "And you cannot tell me what father requires of me?"

"He only issued the summons, my prince. I am as uncertain as you." The wolf stood a little taller as he clasped his paws behind his back. "It is an interesting time that we live in. The Age of Enlightenment is not proving to be quite so peaceful as your father had hoped when he decreed it following the surrender of Caris."

Tobias could only snort at that. Of course the kingsblade would think only of war. "If he's looking for a new commander to add to our military might, I scarcely believe that I would be the best candidate."

Even Zane chuckled at that. "Give your father some credit, my prince. He bears the weight of responsibility for his kingdom better than many others could." As Tobias glanced up, he caught the wolf's gaze, if not his head, turn toward him. "And it is a responsibility you have not known. Many believe themselves capable of the challenge-"

"-Until such a time as the challenge comes to them. Rochella DeVirran of Sainsburry, if memory serves." Tobias quirked an eyebrow even as Zane's tail began to wag. "I *do* heed your counsel, Master Zane."

"You are almost of age, dear boy. But a year shy now, and you know you need not call me 'master' any longer." He bowed his head slightly as he turned his gaze forward once more. "I serve you, and your siblings, and your parents."

"Mmm." Tobias opened his muzzle to make comment, but found himself distracted as he stared down the hall. Ahead knelt a figure, frothing brush in one paw and pail in the other as he scrubbed fiercely at a stain on the wall near the floor. Oh no. Not him. Not now.

His eyes went wide as he glanced to the side. The door to the spires. If he could reach it before- “Tobias?”

The call drew the prince’s eyes back, and he forced himself to smile as the servant rose and turned toward him. He could see William’s face more clearly then; the hyena dropped his scrubbing brush into the pail and started toward him. Tobias opened his muzzle to say something to Zane, but the wolf stepped out of the way. He might have glared. “Good morning, William.”

The smile on the hyena’s face was much more genuine as he raced up and skidded to a halt right in front of Tobias. He panted softly and brought a soaking paw up to brush back wet strands of fur that clumped on his brow. “I was starting to wonder you’d run off somewhere again. I’ve not seen you in *weeks* now!” His arms spread wide as he moved in toward Tobias.

The tiger cringed back instinctively, and Tobias felt his breath catch in his throat. He opened his mouth again to speak, but William started to frown. “Oh, right. I’m all... yeah. I’m a mess. Heh, sorry about that.” He pulled back and let his paws slap wetly back to his side again with a grin. Tobias felt his heart flutter a little at the sight of that broad, lopsided smile. “You’re looking good. New shirt?”

He forced it firmly back down where it belonged. “I don’t mean to be rude, but we are on our way to a meeting with my father. I’m afraid I mustn’t tarry.”

And there it was: the very moment he’d hoped to avoid. That bright smile slipped all at once. It smoothly faded into nothingness, and William was left with a surprised, stunned – and a painfully saddened – look on his face. “Oh. No, of course. I won’t keep you.” He paused and bowed his head, but looked up again a moment later. “Maybe we could... talk? Later? I mean, if you like.”

Tobias gulped even as he nodded. “Yes, perhaps. Later. If I have time. Ah... if you would excuse me, then...?”

“Oh, uh... of course.” William hesitated for a moment before he sank down to his knees and lowered his head. “Forgive the interruption, my prince.”

There is nothing to forgive. The words echoed in Tobias’ mind, and he quickly swept himself around William and made hurriedly for the door before he could allow himself to speak them. The door fell open under his weight as he all but crashed into it. He was distantly aware of Zane’s heavier bootfalls behind him. The wolf’s longer legs made it all too easy for him to catch up to the undersized tiger.

Both of Tobias’ paws rose to rub at his face as he sighed in relief. That relief turned to dread as he heard Zane clear his throat behind him. “Y-yes? What is it?”

Tobias’ stride didn’t break as he began to mount the spiralling stairs that led up the spire. Nor did Zane’s, as the kingsblade easily kept pace with him. “I remember a time when the two of you were inseparable, despite his mother’s wishes and your brothers’ combined cruelty.”

“People grow up, Zane.” Tobias rubbed a little harder at his eyes. They’d started to mist up, and the last thing he wanted was to go into a meeting with his father looking as though he

were about to cry. Such a thing was most unbecoming a prince of Ratholarin. “They grow... different, sometimes.”

The quiet hum behind him however showed that Zane was unconvinced by the words as Tobias himself. “He adores you, you know. Absolutely adores you.”

“Yes, I’m quite aware of that, thank you.” Tobias groaned as he stopped mid ascent and turned toward Zane. He was almost at eye level with the taller wolf thanks to those extra steps, and he found himself suddenly very grateful for them. “And what? What am I supposed to do about it? My brothers already spread rumour and gossip about me throughout the whole castle. For all I know, it’s breached the walls and escaped into the wider city. The realm!” He spread his arms wide. “Prince Tobias, glorious tailraiser of the Ratholarin Kingdom!”

Zane’s ears flattened for a moment before one of them perked back up. “The only shame for such things lies in the minds of those who believe the practice unclean or unholy. Ratholarin has moved beyond the latter and you know as well as I that William takes the greatest of care with his cleanliness when around you.” Zane tilted his head to the side; Tobias reasoned it must be where William got it from. “I suspect he is in love with you.”

“And I can’t hear that!” Tobias all but shouted the words at Zane and quickly covered his muzzle with both paws as they echoed up the stairwell. A glance upward showed nothing but stone stairs, but in the quiet that followed he could hear that no one else was in the spire’s stairway. “I *can*’t hear that,” he hissed again as he turned his glare back on Zane. “It... it does not matter.”

The wolf’s jaw tightened as he lifted an eyebrow with painful slowness. “It doesn’t?”

Tobias set his own jaw and squared himself up. “No. It doesn’t. He is a servant boy and I am a prince. That we were friends once doesn’t matter anymore, nor does it matter what feelings w- he may have for me. I have...” He grit his teeth and looked up again. The top of the spire beckoned, but it was the last place the tiger wanted to be. “I have to accept my station; my role and my duty, as you have always told me. He must now also accept his. We are not children any longer, and to entertain the thought that we could maintain some private affair is fantasy. Nothing more.”

“Then he deserves to hear this.” Zane nodded to him as he narrowed his eyes. “He deserves to hear it from you. And yet you obviously are avoiding him... he speaks to me of you, and there is such longing.”

The tiger glared back at him. “Keep the poetics to yourself, Zane. I told you, it doesn’t matter. There’s just...” The words choked off in his throat. Tobias fought to speak, but they wouldn’t come. It was as though his own body rebelled against the declaration. His heart pounded in his chest.

Zane reached out and placed one massive, gentle paw on Tobias’ shoulder. “If you care for him as I know that you do, he must know and you must be the one to tell him. But before you do, be certain as to why you speak the words you do.” The wolf shook his head and reached out with his other paw to tilt Tobias’ face toward his. “Do not hurt yourself – *or* him – out of fear for what others may say of you.”

Tobias swallowed hard as he held the wolf's stare. His whole body trembled, though whether his feeling was to fight or flee even Tobias wasn't quite certain. It took everything in him to reach up to the paw on his shoulder and gently, firmly, push it off. "You... are of course most wise, Master Zane. And I appreciate your counsel, as ever." He inhaled slow and deep and held that breath a moment as he met the kingsblade's stare as evenly as he could manage. "But I do *not* remember asking for it."

There was a moment of silence that seemed like it would stretch out to eternity. Tobias almost felt himself trapped in it, stuck staring into the eyes of the father whose son's heart he knew he was breaking. It was torture. Exquisite, soul-wrenching torture. Tobias knew he deserved it.

The moment finally passed as Zane bowed his head low. His paws fell smoothly back to his side as he stood up tall once more. "It is as you say, my prince. Forgive me for speaking out of turn."

And just as suddenly, Zane was no longer William's father and his friend. He was a kingsblade; a member of his and his father's royal guard, and a soldier under his command. Tobias nodded to himself once as he forced himself to renew his ascent. A soldier, and a prince. It was improper to have been addressed by him so. A reprimand would be in order, but Tobias already knew he could never issue it.

The rest of the climb came in relative silence, broken only by footsteps on the stairs. When at last they reached the top, Tobias took a few moments to steady his breathing and adjust his state of dress. A glance back showed Zane's breathing completely unchanged, and he felt a pang of jealousy at the wolf's stamina. Another couple of seconds were taken to steel himself, before he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Of the three spires in the castle, Tobias hated this one the most. As he stepped through the door and out into a large, round room, the walls were draped in thick crimson curtains broken only by the flicker of flaming torchlight. The only relief from the heat were the slits near the top of the room, before the ceiling tapered with the spire to a point. Opulent chairs sat scattered around the room, all empty and all pointed toward a raised platform on the other side of the room.

There, in a smaller form of the thrones that resided in the castle below, sat King Eric and Queen Veronica of Ratholarin. The tigers sat side by side, heads turned inward as they spoke between themselves on some doubtless thrilling matter. To Eric's side stood Fredrick and Brett, the two older princes also conversing amongst themselves. Tobias felt his teeth grind. Excluded again.

All eyes turned on him as soon as he and Zane entered. Conversation ceased in that moment, and Eric nodded once. "Ah, very good. Thank you, Zane. You may wait in the stairwell until we are finished here."

Tobias glanced back in time to catch the confused lift of the kingsblade's eyebrow, but he bowed his head nonetheless and silent stepped back into the stairwell. The door started to close behind Tobias as he made his way forward and nodded once to his parents. "Mother. Father."

Eric barely acknowledged him, but his mother smiled warmly and nodded back. “Good morning, dear. This is quite the auspicious day.”

Fredrick snorted once – the sound drew a glare from Eric for a moment – before Tobias shook his head. “Forgive me, mother. I’m not quite certain what makes today so special.”

“Today is the day you learn your place in the future of our kingdom.” Eric rose from his seat and stepped forward, but not off the dais. Both Fredrick and Brett followed suit, only to step down themselves as Eric waved for them to do so. Tobias approached, and stood alongside his two brothers before their parents. Suddenly, Tobias was struck with the knowledge that this was going to be even less pleasant than he’d imagined.

Eric clasped his paws behind his back as he looked across his arrayed sons. “I am immensely proud of all three of you. I could not ask for finer sons, and I know you will do me, and Ratholarin, all the more proud in the years to come.” His eyes fell on Tobias as the youngest prince began to frown. “I know you are not yet of age, but you are fifteen now; just shy of a year away from it. I need you to know now precisely what your future will hold... what your mother and I have worked for years to secure for you.”

Dread suffused Tobias as his father straightened up tall and looked across his sons. “Fredrick’s marriage to Princess Magriolla has already borne fruit most succulent, however it is but the first stage of our family’s plans. It is time for you, Tobias, and Brett to join him in securing the future of our kingdom.”

Tobias felt his blood run cold as Eric’s eyes fixed on Brett, whose expression all but beamed. At least one of them was pleased. “You have asked, at length, to whom you will be wedded. A second-born prince must project the strength of our people, and grant us leave to take more besides. To that end, you have been betrothed to the first-born daughter of Lord Ankarren of Sylaria, Eustace.”

Brett’s grin only broadened as he nudged Fredrick with an elbow. “Isn’t that the gorgeous fox at that ball last year in Ingsbren?”

Fredrick just shrugged back as Eric continued. “She is indeed a most beautiful vixen, my son, but more besides; Lord Ankarren’s wife is thought to have become barren, his only other heir is sickly, and his lands are among the most populated in all Sylaria. These lands will belong to our family, when you sire an heir to them. And, of course, if ill fate should befall his dear boy.” His smile turned cooler as Tobias shuddered. He no longer had any doubt as to why he was present.

Even as Brett returned the smile and gave a nod of understanding, Eric’s eyes fell at last on Tobias. His smile faded somewhat at the sight of him, and Tobias stiffened immediately. He hoped his disappointment and concern weren’t as obvious as they felt, but there didn’t seem to be much chance of his father missing it. “And you, my son. An equally important match.”

“I don’t want it.” The words were blurted before Tobias could stop them. Four pairs of eyes locked on him in an instant, with three of those pairs indignantly irritated. Only his mother looked at him with any sympathy. Tobias lowered his head and fixed his own gaze firmly on the ground. “I... apologise, father. I should not have interrupted.”

“Not should you dismiss this gift out of turn, and you ought to know that it *is* indeed a gift.” The tiger caught sight of his father’s waving paw, and he quickly lifted his head again to meet Eric’s gaze. “Your mother and I thought long and hard about how we would best solve your... *particular* problem. The solution would not turn out to be as easy as we had anticipated.”

Tobias’ eyes narrowed but he bit back the first retort that came to mind. Instead he took a moment to steady and centre himself. “My... problem, sir? I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“He speaks of your propensity for gagging on servant cock, brother; do try to keep up.” Fredrick’s words earned a sharp snicker from Brett, but the baleful glare of both Tobias and Eric.

Eric was faster with a response than Tobias was, and it came in the form of a sharp, open-palmed slap that echoed off the walls. Fredrick gasped in pain and surprise as his father stared him down, and for a brief second it seemed as though Fredrick was about to violently strike back. But the second passed without an escalation, and Fredrick instead dropped to a knee. “Pray forgive my outburst.”

“Get up, you fool.” Eric shook his head and rolled his eyes as Fredrick followed the command. “And kindly keep such filth out of your muzzle in future, be it in the eyes of others or in the privacy of our own chambers. You slander our family, and you will *not* do so in future. Do you understand me?”

Even as Fredrick mumbled a meek apology, Tobias held his breath. His chest burned not from the lack of air, but from a wound much deeper. It only made what he knew he had to say to William ring all the truer, and all the more painful. When Eric turned back to Tobias, the younger tiger opened his muzzle. “I assure you father, such rumours are baseless.”

“Silence.” Tobias snapped his muzzle shut with nary another sound. There was a hint of frustration in his tone that Tobias had long since associated with trouble if he dared speak out over it. “The truth is, son, that these rumours have some basis in fact. I do *not*,” he quickly added as Tobias wordlessly opened his muzzle again in reflex, “believe them in their entirety. Whether I believe them or not, however, matters little.”

“It *is* known that you fraternise with the servants more than is healthy, dear.” The words came from his mother, and Tobias’ gaze shifted to her as she leaned back. Both of her paws lifted, fingers steepled as she balanced her elbows on the arms of the chair. “It is a most unbecoming look. You accord them respect that is not due their station. This too must end.”

There were only about a hundred things that Tobias wished he could have said, but the warning glance from his father was proof enough that any outbursts would not be tolerated. Instead, he was forced to impotent silence as he nodded once to his mother. She returned the gesture, but any maternal warmth that might have comforted him was not there. Veronica was not sitting before him as his mother, but as his queen. The last thing he wanted to do was incur *her* wrath.

As he turned his eyes back on his father though, Eric tilted his head up. “I have been in communication with King Torvin of Ingsbren, as have many others on the continent who have a vested interest in his daughter.” He stared down his muzzle at Tobias as he waved toward

Brett. “Unlike like Lord Ankarren, Torvin has but a single daughter. His son was killed recently in skirmishes with Lenkis rebels, his queen bore him no other heir before her own death, and bereavement keeps him from taking a new wife.”

“His sentimentality could deliver our family an entire kingdom.” Veronica’s words were even, but she wore the same cold smile on her muzzle that Eric and Brett had earlier shared. “You could erase these troublesome rumours about your alleged unseemly behaviour and bring all of Ingsbren under our sway.”

Eric nodded along as Tobias’ insides twisted into sickened knots. “Outside of Ratholarin, Ingsbren holds the greatest army on the continent. To align them with us would be a coup in itself, but to take their lands, their fighters, their resources, and to do it all with little more than a wedding would be *grand*.”

Tobias was forced to stand in place, silent as he drank in his father’s intentions. He wanted to shout, to scream, to storm off or something; *anything* other than simply remain there. There’d been no warning. No consultation. No asking him what he thought. He’d not even known there were negotiations!

“And there is one other matter that bears mentioning as regards this arrangement, and it’s one I believe will make this all the better for you.” Veronica’s smile softened slightly as she waved a paw toward Tobias. “You’ve spoken often about feeling... out of place, here. This will not be an issue for you moving forward.”

Fresh confusion mixed with the dread that continued to pool in Tobias’ gut as his father nodded. “When Princess Sarina comes of age, you will leave the castle, Sanwell, and Ratholarin altogether. You will move east to Ingsbren, and will reside with the royal family there in their palace in Ciroven.”

If his heart turned to stone and was cast into the sea, Tobias wasn’t certain it could sink lower. If not for the tears that started to form in his eyes – started only, of course; if his father saw them it would only be worse – he might have looked a perfect statue of acceptance. “You’re... sending me away.”

“Not immediately, of course; Sarina is still several years from marital age. But once the ceremony is confirmed, yes.” Eric frowned at him. “I thought you would be more pleased at this.”

Tobias had to physically bite his tongue to prevent an outburst. He held his breath for a couple of moments as his tail began to whip back and forth behind him. It caught his mother’s eye, and she gave him the barest shake of her head. It was, however, far too late for that. If they’d wanted him calm, then they would not have done this to him! “And is Brett also to leave for Sylaria?”

“Your brother has never expressed a desire to be anywhere else.” Eric’s brow furrowed all the sharper as he folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Magriolla resides here with Fredrick. Eustace will also remain here with Brett, as he continues his martial training.” Brett nodded to his father, and Tobias’ stomach churned as he watched his father favour the middle brother with a smile in turn.

Veronica leaned forward. “But you don’t want to be here. You’ve never appreciated this castle. You care little for the capital. You cavort about with servants and give the people reason to doubt your own malehood, let alone your authority.”

“I do no such thing.” Tobias glared at his mother in turn as her expression soured all at once. “This castle is my home; this *city* is my home. If you had paid me any mind whatsoever you would know precisely what elements of it drive me to madness, and yet those same elements are constantly, predictably ignored in favour of lending credence to hearsay and malicious slander!”

“Watch your tongue, boy.” Eric all but snarled the words, and Tobias felt the fire drain out of him all at once. He shrank back from his father’s bared teeth and bowed his head. “You will not speak to your mother that way. Not after all she has done for you. You will apologise this instant.”

For a moment, Tobias hesitated. If he said nothing, perhaps he would be punished. A blow would hurt, but it would heal. Ridicule he had become quite accustomed to, thanks to his brothers. But if they *truly* thought this arranged marriage was a gift, then perhaps they might rescind it.

But in the end, he heaved a quiet sigh. “I beg forgiveness for my outburst, mother. I was out of line.” Of course they wouldn’t rescind it. Why would they? It would benefit the kingdom. The throne. His father and Fredrick. Even if he suffered, why should that make any difference? Why should that matter?

Eric’s expression relaxed somewhat, but it never quite lost all of its edge. “You have time to grow accustomed to the idea. It will be at least six years until you can be wedded to Sarina, but the betrothal is already arranged.” His eyes narrowed. “When you are next given the chance to meet her in person, I expect you to make the best possible impression on her. *And* on her father.”

“Yes, sir. Of course.” Tobias bowed his head again. He squeezed his eyes shut. That was that. There was nothing more to say. Nothing more could be said. His father had laid down the law as it were, and it would be madness to argue.

The rest of the meeting faded from his awareness, as Eric began to discuss Fredrick’s yet-unborn child. Tobias had no stomach, nor mind, for such considerations. Instead he was consumed with thoughts of his own future; of what it meant, and who he had no choice but to be. Perhaps he’d spoken more truly to Zane than he’d even thought. His station. His role. His duty. They had to come first.

And whether he liked it or not, they would. His father had seen to that.

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The rest of the meeting passed without incident. Tobias had been able to hold it together remarkably well until they’d been dismissed. Fredrick had sent Zane back in to meet with their parents, and he and Brett had proceeded to ridicule him on the walk down the spire. Tobias held his tongue. Any response would only have made things worse.

Even so, the silence did little to improve matters. He almost snapped entirely when a nudge from Fredrick almost sent him tumbling down the stairs, but he held that too back with

a venomous glare and a snarl that wouldn't have looked out of place on their father. Fredrick and Brett had laughed anyway, but they'd not touched him again all the way down.

At least they'd gone their separate ways at the bottom. Tobias had waited for them all to vanish from his line of sight before he broke into a full sprint. Terror and rage and despair all vied for the emotion he was about to spiral down into, but he needed to be alone for that. He didn't want to let anyone see. After all the rumours already going around and how far they'd already spread, the last thing he needed was more perceived weakness.

He found that solace in one of the small storerooms that the hidden passages linked to. There in the dark he could crawl behind stacked crates and sacks, hug his knees up against his chest, and allow himself to feel everything. All that he'd held back crashed down on him in overwhelming waves; pelted him like icy rain. Shame left him, and the only concern he allowed himself to have was to keep his sobbing as quiet as he possibly could.

Otherwise, he held nothing back. He struck the wall with his fists. Punctured his paws with his own claws, so tightly he clutched them. Kicked out at the nearest crates. Tears streamed down his face as he sat alone, flowing like a bank-bursting river for what felt like hours.

It wasn't, of course. However long he was there was certainly long enough for his eyes to run dry and his paws to grow bloody from his strikes. They shook, trembling before him and throbbing in pain as he slumped back into the corner. Tobias panted quietly to himself, too worked up to stop and too exhausted to move. He wouldn't have moved even he'd wanted to. Briefly, he wondered if he could just stay there in the storeroom. Sit in the shadows until they consumed him. Will himself away.

His breath caught in his throat as he heard the storeroom door open. In the new silence, he could make out quiet footsteps as someone – some servant or other, probably – investigated the contents of the room. Tobias huddled up tighter, as quietly as he could. For a moment he thought he was going to manage to avoid detection, but perhaps he'd made more sound than he thought. The footsteps approached, and he braced himself to stand and demand the servant kneel. He didn't want to be seen like that.

But when the shadowed face that peered around the crates turned out to be that of William, the words left him. He simply looked up, cheekfur matted and eyes red with irritation, as the hyena gazed back down at him. Damn. Of all the people... "Go away."

William didn't leave. He recoiled slightly at the instruction, but instead of moving away he instead crawled over the boxes and perched himself on one. His eyes fell on the tiger's bloody paws. "What happened, Tobias?"

"I said go away." He squeezed himself tighter into the corner. William was the *worst* person for him to speak to about all of that. It was the last thing he wanted. "You can't understand. Just leave me alone."

"Yeah. That's gonna happen." William leaned forward, but didn't otherwise move. Tobias glared at him, but that didn't drive him off either. Why did he have to care so much? "Who hurt you? What'd they do, and where are they now?"

“Why, so you can beat on them? You think that will simply solve any problem?” The words were growled out in a shuddering wave as he bared his teeth at the hyena. He couldn’t understand. Little *servant* boy playing above his station...! Tobias sighed as soon as the thought entered his head. That wasn’t him. That was his brothers; his father talking. “I’m... sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know you’re hurting.” William reached out his paw toward Tobias. The tiger eyed it. Every instinct in him told him to take it, to squeeze it tight, and to pull William down into the corner with him. He wanted so, so badly to just be close to the hyena. To be close to someone who actually cared about him.

He had to fight that urge with everything he had. If he didn’t, it’d only make what he knew he had to do so, so much harder. His paw twitched, but he kept it from reaching back. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“You shouldn’t either. So what?” William let his arm slowly drop, but when his paw came to rest on his leg it remained turned over, just in case. The temptation was almost painful in its intensity. “You used to trust me with everything. Why can’t you just tell me what’s wrong? Why can’t I help?”

Tobias huffed through gritted teeth. As much as he wanted to reach out to William, the question just brought all his impotent anger to bear. “Because you’re a *servant*. You don’t have the power to do a thing to help me.” He stared up at William even as the hyena flinched. “I’m a prince, and apparently I can’t do anything either, so what hope would *you* have?”

“I don’t... I mean, I...” William stuttered and stammered as he glanced down at the floor, his eyes for the first time not on Tobias. The tiger almost sighed in relief. “Maybe I... can’t make things better. I’m sorry that something’s gone bad for you. I wish I could help, but even if I can’t... can I do anything? Anything that would make you feel better? Please?”

The earnestness in William’s voice tugged at Tobias’ heart, but he squeezed his eyes shut. No. He couldn’t. Station. Role. Duty. “Oh, what? Like maybe hike up my tail for you?” When he looked up again, it was to a shocked, wide-eyed expression on the servant’s face. His jaw was slack, as if he couldn’t believe what he’d heard. For his part, Tobias could barely believe he’d said it.

But after those words came out, the rest just tumbled on in their wake. The dam burst wide open; the flood was loose. “It’s because of you, you know! Everyone in the castle keeps joking about me! The little tailraising prince! The kitten who takes it like a female! Eric’s *older* daughter! It’s your fault!”

William fell away for a second, overwhelmed by the force of the tiger’s words, but Tobias wasn’t done. Sudden new energy was in his body. Now, all his impotent anger and frustration and sadness had a target. “It’s you! You, chasing me around and acting like a... like a lovesick little pet! It’s degrading! It’s demeaning! It’s *not* your place and it wouldn’t even matter if it was, since father’s betrothed me to some *princess* somewhere and I-” A sob choked out the rest of his words.

Hurt was spread across William’s face, though some of it faded before shock at the word ‘betrothed.’ He had no time to dwell though, because Tobias was up on his feet and his eyes were alight with his own pain. “And *I*... come here to be alone... and here you come,

forcing yourself into the situation, and haven't you done enough? Haven't you hurt me enough, William?"

He heaved; his whole body shuddered with each hissed breath he took, fur all a-bristle as he stared down the shrinking hyena. Of course it was William's fault. It'd all been William's fault. If he hadn't made Tobias be around him, and if he hadn't made Tobias like him, and if he hadn't made Tobias lo-

"I'm sorry."

William's voice was so much smaller than he was. He'd all but gathered himself up on top of the crate, clutching himself tighter than even Tobias had. His head was still raised, but his voice was muffled by a muzzle concealed by his knees and his eyes wouldn't meet the tiger's. "I'm... sorry. I'm sorry."

Guilt crashed in around Tobias, but the rest of his feelings shunted it aside. Guilt hurt, and the anger didn't. The anger was better than the hurt. "You're sorry? After everything, you're... you're *sorry*? You're sorry, are you, that the whole castle thinks I want every male servant here to rut me? Sorry that no one respects me? That no one cares about me?"

"I mean, I..." William swallowed hard as he dared to lift his head a little higher. "I... *I* respect you. I care about you. And I thought..." He glanced away, but not before Tobias caught sight of a shimmer in the servant's eyes. "I didn't... I didn't think it mattered. You always told me that you didn't care, and-"

"And then I grew up, William! You didn't! I mean... ugh!" He waved a paw toward the hyena as he forced down another heaped helping of that guilt. "What'd you think? That we'd come of age and I'd marry *you*? That even if I wanted that, my father would *let* me?" He shuddered again; Tobias felt like he was going to be sick, but he'd gone too far to back down. "We never had a future. We never could have. And all you've done is made things so much worse for me. You're the..." He bit back the words; stalled them as the horribleness of them shielded the hyena one last time.

The blame was good. The blame was *right*. If he'd never met William, everything would be better. Everything would have been so, so much better. He straightened up as tall as he could and looked down at the all but cowering servant boy. "I told you to go away. Are you going to ignore an order from your prince?"

William's head lifted again and slowly turned back toward him. His ears were drooped. The light had left his eyes, save for the shine of torchlight reflected in unspilled tears. His nose twitched; his lips trembled. "You don't have to do this, Tobias. Please. Please don't."

It was all the tiger could do to scoff. William didn't understand at all. He didn't understand a *thing*. "Get. Out."

He quaked, barely in control of his own body as he watched and waited for William to make up his mind. If the hyena stayed, Tobias didn't know what he'd do. He'd thrown everything at him. Hurt him. Made him feel bad. Like he *should* have felt bad, after all he'd done to ruin Tobias' life.

But, it seemed, the damage had been done and it was enough. William slowly slid back off the crate and sank down to both knees. He lowered his head far enough to nearly touch the

ground, his voice ragged. “Beg your pardon, my prince.” When his head rose again, it was with tears breaking free of his eyes to run down his face. Streaks in his fur were left in their wake as he pushed himself up to his feet again.

Then he turned, pulled the door open, and left.

It swung closed after him, but not so quick Tobias couldn’t hear William running away from him. Once more Tobias was left alone in the dark. No sooner was he than the guilt closed fully in around him. The anger that had all felt so right and so justified and so deliciously *targeted* was gone, and it left a hollowness inside him in its place so vast he thought he might trip into himself and fall forever.

He didn’t feel better anymore.

He felt *worse*, if anything. It swallowed him up from the inside; it ate away at his heart like acid. Tobias clutched at his chest. It was as though his heart had been gouged out. He slumped back against the wall, and his head cracked against it lightly. The brief surge of physical pain was almost pleasant by comparison. He held back the urge to beat his head against it harder.

Alone again though, all he could think about was how much he didn’t *want* to be alone. He’d not wanted William to find him, sure. He’d not really wanted *anyone* to find him. But surely someone could have tried, couldn’t they? Someone could have sought him out. Someone could have worried about him, but no. No one did. Just William.

Only ever William.

The same William he’d bitterly, angrily cut up with his words and pushed away from him. The same William who’d found him in a hiding place they’d shared many, many times. The same William who had always been there for him, no matter what his brothers or his parents or anyone else had ever said. The same William who didn’t care about princes and servants. The only one who’d ever cared about him for *him*.

If Tobias had any tears left in him, they might have spilled anew. As it was all he could do was sob, dry-eyed as he sank back down to the floor again. All too late he realised his mistake. All too late he realised what the hyena was. All too late he knew that he’d just hurt his friend – his *only* friend in the whole world – worse than anyone else could have. “I’m sorry, William,” he croaked, but his voice only echoed off the walls and the crates and the darkness. He didn’t feel better anymore.

Tobias wondered if he would ever feel better again.