

TEA AND TANTRUMS

As far as eleven-year-old Prince William of the Kingdom of Clovers was concerned, there was a proper way to make tea.

Of course his mother would argue with him about what that proper way was, and how poorly he went about it—but she was dead now, and because of that, he alone was the scholar when it came to the art of making tea, and her commonly repeated and well educated opinions on the matter would just have to lie in rest with the rest of her.

Because the proper way to make tea was this: boil the kettle as high as it can possibly go for as long as you can possibly stand, plop the good old teapot on the counter, throw in a fistful of tea leaves, pour in too much water, forget about what you were doing for a proper hour, and then come back and drink moderately lukewarm tea. Don't add anything, don't think twice about anything, and most certainly do not measure anything regardless of

whether it be time, temperature, or teaspoons. Measuring was a waste of time and energy, as were rules and other commonly held understandings; any fool could tell you that.

Any fool could also tell you that William did not make the best cup of tea.

Which was why, though it hurt him greatly and tested his patience to new bounds, William followed the rules and regulations when it came to Fitz. Or at least Fitz's cup of tea.

Which he most certainly would not be making if Fitz himself were not crying.

"He called me... a chubby bunny!" Fitz continued to wail from his seat at the counter, as if the rabbit-eared six-year-old did not understand the golden rule of living in the Union of Cards, which was to never properly listen to anything Cornelius, the King of Cards, had to say; lest you end up getting hurt.

But Fitz was still young and stupid, and Cornelius had treated him well, so he was still prone to far less intelligent things, such as listening to Cornelius and even forgiving him. Believing the older man when he said that he loved him, and even loved his mother.

William scoffed, rolling his eyes as he used his impressive height to reach for the mishmash of mugs that sat in the cupboard, having not wanted to trouble a maid or any other member of the help to brew the tea for him —William knew for a fact that Cornelius did not love Fitz's mother. Just as he did not love William's mother, or the jovial, charming woman who raised his brother Claude.

Cornelius did not love anyone. But he liked to pretend to if it suited him..

“He said that this baby would not change anything, that he would go back to my mother, and we would have a proper family,” Fitz complained, and William just knew that Fitz was tugging on his ears, the little kid always tugged on his ears. “But now he’s going to have a big old castle, and Uncle Reginald is mad!”

Because what he has done is wrong, William wanted to say, but of course he didn’t. He would never say anything that would paint Cornelius in a negative light, not in front of Fitz. It was only through doing that that he could avoid the worst of punishments... his father’s hand.

William flinched at the memory, finally deciding that it was time to pull the kettle off the stove and painting on his trademarked ‘everything is okay’ grin. He had long learned that if you acted like everything was okay, like it was simply teatime and you were just having a little, childish spat all of the time, then everything truly did become okay.

This method worked about thirty percent of the time. The other seventy it most certainly did not.

“I just don’t know why Uncle Reginald has to be mad,” Fitz sniffled, “or why Claude’s mother had to come in the other day shouting. It’s for the good of the Kingdom, dad said.”

“And then he called you a chubby bunny when you puffed out your cheeks and started crying,” William added with an amused grin, choosing the most bright and inviting of the patterned teacups to pour Fitz’s tea into.

Fitz needed little hints of interesting in his day,

William had decided, because otherwise he would become quite boring.

“It is not my fault that I am prone to cry, or that I have a little puff on me. My mother says that it’s normal for young rabbits to carry a little extra weight,” Fitz pouted, kicking his stubby little legs against the long stretch of cupboards down the middle of the kitchen. “It was very rude of him to point it out.”

“Perhaps he thought it was cute, little brother,” William said, sliding Fitz his cup of tea and plopping in not one or two sugar cubes, but three. Fitz loved sweet things. “I think you are quite cute,” he said, and he meant it. But William doubted that Cornelius thought of Fitz the same way.

Cornelius did not give out compliments, at least not like that. Cornelius only gave out compliments one of two ways; by using a word that was meant to be an insult implying a common defect of character that others might find disdainful, or by nodding his head. Not one, but twice. Two nods and you were a good boy, one who did as he was told; William wanted desperately to never be a good boy.

William wanted desperately to never see his father, but his mother’s untimely death sort of put the kaboose on that.

Asphyxiation, the doctor—a tortoise with a rather magnificent shell—had said. Her lungs simply collapsed.

William had a different theory, and it was that his mother was so shocked at the things that her husband said that she took one big gasp and... that was it. She was dead. Cornelius had claimed he’d had the idea to marry all of the

Princesses of Cards after that, but William did not put it past him to have had the idea before that. That seemed like a perfectly Cornelius thing to do.

Speaking of Cornelius.

“I’m serious this time, Cornelius, I can not believe what you have done,” Reginald said, and his loud, aggressive voice carried in from the dining room and lingered in the air between the boys, as did the violent, furious thump of his fist on the table. He was mad, far too mad. Cornelius and him were hashing it out again in one of their weekly bouts. It figured.

“The woman is not all there,” Reginald proclaimed, and there was a criticism that hung tightly onto the corners of his words, like he was not only repulsed but humiliated to even have to say such a thing. “Your search for supremacy has led you far against the grains of society. You have done something unforgivable; you have played with her heart—”

“Better than losing my will and my sanity,” Cornelius said. “And to a stupid little thing too—what is her name, your little tart? Eleanor—”

“—She is my wife, and you do not call her—”

“—She was only meant to be a fling,” Cornelius howled. “A random happenstance, one that would not be repeated. You were to be a scholar, until you met her, you just wanted to know how it feels, and then suddenly you’re running back from Wonderland trying to catch a plane because the damn woman has it in her head to go to America—”

“I would have lost her—”

“You should have just brought her here, locked her up,

and threw away the key!” Cornelius screamed, and William’s hands came down harshly upon Fitz’s floppy ears, plastering them to the little rabbit’s head.

It was best that he did not know this kind of thing. It was best that Fitz did not hear the kind of muck that their father dug up. His father’s affairs weren’t exactly proper for a young boy to learn about.

“I mean it this time,” Reginald proclaimed in the other room, and his voice was bitingly unkind and barbed with criticisms. “I am leaving, and I am not coming back. Eleanor is pregnant again anyway, and I need to be a proper father—”

“Bring the girl here then,” Cornelius spat, and William frowned, watching the way that Fitzgerald’s droopy little ears perked up, the way that he straightened and beamed, his eyes growing wide at the opportunity. “That and the little brat once it’s born, whatever it is. They can live here, they grow up in Wonderland, they can be amongst your friends—”

“—And do what, I might ask?” Reginald said indignantly, and Fitzgerald’s ears fell, his face with it. “What on earth will they do in Wonderland? What on earth will Mary and Alice—” he said, and that was the mistake.

The grandest, most infuriating mistake.

Because William could practically hear the grin spread across his father’s face, and he didn’t need to open the door and look out to know it was there—it was on Fitz’s face as well.

A girl. Actually, not one girl, two. Cornelius was practically convinced that Eleanor was a great fortune teller,

seeing as how she had predicted the first one, right down to the day of birth and the sex.

And now Reginald had said two girls. And Cornelius would have four boys. Because simply no one in Cornelius's lineage had ever had a girl.

"They can marry my sons," Cornelius said and his voice was so bright and charming that you would have thought he had been presented with a plate full of golden bars, or some other great fortune. There was nothing more that Cornelius wanted than to tie his family to Reginald's, than to be connected to Reginald. Afterall, the older man was Cornelius's greatest friend. He had been for decades, ever since he fell through that hole and came to Wonderland. And now... Well, to have Reginald's two daughters marry his sons? Well, that was a great way to tie himself to Reginald. "You promised to fix the clock tower anyway," Cornelius said, and it was just like him to remind Reginald of his failed promises, especially at moments like those. "If your daughters come here, you'll have that much more time to do so."

"And you'll make the world so lush and beautiful that they will never want to leave," Reginald spat bitterly. William's shoulders rose. His hands dropped from his brother's ears, and he swallowed as he looked up and out at the door, wishing beyond rationality that his father would convince Reginald not to walk out.

William liked Reginald. William liked Reginald a lot.

He was not like his father. He did not see the boy with a book in his hands and then slap it out of them. He did not mock William's grand ideas of inventions, of testing

the limits of things and seeing how they worked, with malice and anger like William's father did.

Why, once William had gone to his father and said, *I should like to be a librarian for I think they know a little bit of everything*, and the man had laughed. Actually, not only that, because it would have been fine if the man would have just laughed. No, Cornelius did not do just that.

Instead, Cornelius stooped down and he proclaimed, *I do not think you will be anything*, and William remembered that.

Just as he remembered the sound of the dining room door slamming, and the furious growl of his father. Just as he remembered his brother sitting cross legged, and the short, soft smile upon the boy's lips at the thought of another—of a girl running about, a girl to fall in love with, one destined for him. Just as William remembered the fear that Reginald would not come back again.

That there would be no books, no science, no clock work pieces sitting around ever again. That he would choose Mary and that unnamed child, the one that he would learn to be Alice, and not return.

What would he become then? He would much rather Reginald returned. That he brought the girls with, that he brought them all, really, if only so that William needn't be alone. Not with a father like Cornelius.

“—Your tea's gotten cold, William,” Fitz informed him, kicking the sides of the cupboards again, and William snapped back to reality, to Wonderland, once more.

“That's fine,” he said, frowning down at the cup, feeling selfish in a way for wanting Uncle Reginald to stay, for wishing for something that the man would likely

detest. He couldn't help it but, "I always like my cups just a little stronger," he said, pouring the tea back into the pot and starting the stove up again, his shaking hand taking another large, empty teapot and shoveling more leaves in, not even bothering to measure them.

As unconventional and irregular as it was, William preferred his version of the perfect cup.

