Bread

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Bread

by Subspace_Adventurer

Summary

Whumptober 2026 prompt - Haircut

Being a street rat is hard.

Happens before Small Comforts chapter 1

Notes

I couldn't find a way to weave this into the story, but Morro is 7 years old and the older boys are 12-13 years old.

"Hey look, it's the twig!"

Morro startled and jumped to his feet. He knew that voice, and it was never good news. A quick turnaround revealed what he suspected: one of the older street kids and his two buddies, looking down at him like vultures over a carcass.

"What are you doing, hiding back here and hogging all that food to yourself? Gluttony is a sin, y'know."

They saw that? They weren't supposed to see it!

He had successfully (finally) managed to snag a whole loaf of bread from an old man's market basket without his notice, and now his hard work was about to be preyed on by a bunch of lazy thugs. A rumble came from his stomach, and against his better judgment he opened his mouth. "Back off, Brad. I got to it first." He started backing deeper into the alley, scanning for ways of escape while keeping an eye on the troublemakers in front of him.

Instead of lashing out immediately, Brad let out a single laugh. "You hear that, guys? Twiggy's gotten bolder. 'I got to it first' my foot." His tone turned dark fast and he took a step forward. "Sounds like the little runt needs a reminder of his place."

That was Morro's cue to run.

Slipping down a narrow walkway between shops, he sprinted away as fast as his legs would carry him. The sound of bare feet slapping the cobblestones echoed behind him all the way to the main village street where he hesitated. Main roads were never a good place to be, be it for zealous shopkeepers with a grudge against thieves or panicked mothers worried about their children being influenced by street urchins. The unwanted were never welcomed by normal people, and it was always a gamble trying to step into that world—even for a few moments. But as the older boys got closer, he took a chance and turned onto the road.

He wove through the crowds, through market stalls and passing customers, using the angry yells as fuel to his fire. A familiar alley came up and he practically dove into it, almost losing the precious loaf as he fumbled with a manhole cover. He quickly slipped inside and let the cover fall back into place above him before jumping off the ladder and onto the small walkway he had briefly seen below. In the dark tunnel, sounds were amplified to his ears and he could hear every crunch of the bread in his hands, every rustle of fabric his clothes made, every clink of glass against stone and exhale of breath, and he froze.

There was a reason why kids like him didn't hide in the sewers very often.

Eventually the sound of the older boys' voices filtered through the entrance in the ceiling, and he heard their confused shouts for a bit before they faded into the distance. He waited a few extra minutes just to be safe, but not wanting to get beaten within an inch of his life by some drunk grown-up, he climbed back up as soon as he thought the coast was clear.

Cautiously looking around, he didn't see anyone in the immediate vicinity so he took a chance and ran.

…right into someone.

"Going somewhere?"

He stared up at one of Brad's lackeys and ducked in an attempt to escape around him, but someone behind him grabbed the collar of his shirt and lifted him off the ground, causing the fabric to dig into his throat. "I t-told you, I grabbed it first! Put me down!" At this point, escaping with his life was more important than escaping with the whole loaf, so he took a bite from the bread and threw it as hard as he could into the air. As he had hoped, the hand holding him up let go to chase after it, but another hand managed to grab a fistful of his hair instead.

"Nuh uh uh, you're not getting out of this that easily." Brad himself was staring down at him like a hawk with an eerie glint in his eyes, one that Morro had never seen before on the older boy but had seen many times on the adults that roamed around at night. An attempt at biting Brad landed him face first onto the pavement, and a knee was pressed into his back as he heard the sound of a switchblade flipping open.

He stopped squirming.

The lackeys apparently were not expecting this, as the one who had gone after the bread sounded confused. "W-wait, what are you doing? We were just grabbing the food!"

The boy above him gave a short, hollow laugh. "I watched one of the old guys do this, then stole his knife afterwards. Just a little mark to remind him where he belongs." Morro felt the cold of the metal press against his cheek, the hand tangled in his hair holding his head down so it wouldn't move.

"But Brad, he's just a kid!"

"WELL, SO AM I!"

"Boys."

There was a yank on his hair as the blade left his skin, and the weight on his back disappeared as the older boy lost his balance. A clump of black and green hair landed on the ground in front of him as Brad spoke with a slight tremor in his voice. "C'mon guys, let's get out of here." Their footsteps disappeared into the distance and Morro picked himself up off the ground, rubbing at his head where it collided with the cobblestones.

"Are you okay, young one?" The new voice was much closer now and he flinched back when he saw the long white robes of the old man from the market whose bread had started this whole thing. Being unable to answer due to his mouth still being full, he opted to run instead. He wasn't going to take the chance that he would be recognized and punished.

Warily, he made his way back to the shelter he had found the night before. A couple of birds had decided to take a rest there, but otherwise it was undisturbed and safe for the time being. He shooed the birds away and crawled into the box, finally swallowing the lump of bread that had long since become mush from his saliva. Gently touching his face to feel where the sore spots would be, his hands soon roamed up to survey the damage to his hair. There was a pretty big chunk of it in the area around his unique green streak that was now much shorter. It would grow back, like it always did, but the sensation of the knife scared him. He'd been pushed and shoved and punched before, but he'd never had someone threaten him like that.

Curling up into a corner, Morro hugged his knees to his chest and silently watched a trail of ants just a short distance away.

So much for a meal today.

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