

Interwoven

CHOICES: PART THREE

15th Day of the Verdant Growths, 16 AoE

Daniel was big. Daniel was strong. And, as much as William hated to admit it, Daniel was *fast*. So much faster than his size or their initial duels suggested.

But as the ground of the training yard turned to muddy slush in the rapid thawing of the Pure Snow, William found himself flicking damp locks of headfur from his eyes and falling back from the more experienced warrior's advance. Daniel's training sword whooshed through the air, clacking against William's where he could parry and singing in the wind when all he could do was dodge.

He ducked low under one such blow, only to have to dirty himself as he rolled aside through the mud. It clung to the thin leathers he'd taken to wearing, sliming up his grip on his weapon as he raised it to block. The bear's strength was too great for his arms to handle though, and William's weapon bounced back to crack himself in the chin. He cried out in pain as he was knocked down into the mud again.

Dazed, unfocused eyes took a moment to settle, but when they did it was to the sight of Daniel smiling down at him from what felt like a mile above. "Better, kid. Much better." He bear tucked his training sword under one arm and reached down to offer William his other paw.

"Easy for you to say." William grunted as he reached up to take the paw, gasping as he was hauled upright a moment later. He brushed himself down carefully and reached into the mud for his sword. "Alright. Give me a second and we'll go again."

Daniel laughed as he stepped back, shaking his head. He watched as William doubled over and spat down into the mud. "Gotta say, I've seen plenty of strays join up and put in not half the effort y'do. Either you got somethin' to prove, or you're enjoyin' this."

The suggestion earned a chuckle from William too, as the hyena flicked his sword and sent a spray of mud down into the ground. "Is it strange that I... think I *do* enjoy this?" When Daniel shrugged, William could only smile. "When I was in that castle, it was bowed heads and total service. Here? Well, at least out here I can earn a little respect." He lowered himself into his combat stance and nodded to the bear. "Or I would, if I could actually take you down."

"Trust me, you're well on the way t'that." Daniel pointed toward William's legs with his sword. "Widen that stance a little. You're gonna need y'speed, not to jus' square up on me. Gimme a wider target to hit, and give y'self a sharper leap when I take my swing. Got it?"

"Got it." William let his boots slide further apart in the mud, steadying himself as best he was able on the unstable terrain. "Gotta say, I like your instruction better than the commander's."

Daniel smirked as he brought his sword back up and nodded. He moved the moment William nodded back, swinging his sword down in a vertical slice. William danced to the left and swept his own weapon up toward the bear. One of Daniel's paws closed around his wrist before it could land however, and Daniel promptly pitched the hyena right back down into the mud with his superior strength.

William grunted through the cool mess and spat it out of his muzzle. He rolled to his back and didn't even try to fight it when Daniel's sword tip tapped at his chest. "Nope. I take it back. I *hate* your instruction."

"Nah." Once more the bear reached down to help William haul himself out of the mud. "I'm just givin' you a hard time. I've got a good six more years of this on you, don't forget. You'll get there, and a lot faster if I'm seein' right."

"Now you're just being kind to make me feel better." William brushed himself down again as he scowled at the training sword in his grasp. He'd grown used to the weight of it in his paw, and had even begun to feel it more as an extension of his arm than a separate weapon. Fast as William might have been, Daniel was a surprisingly hard target to hit.

A surprisingly nice one too, which only continued to surprise William. The soldier grinned back at him and shrugged. "Well, what can I say? You're workin' hard. I ain't no commander; I don't gotta threaten or order you about. I like encouraging you." His grin grew. "You jus' light up when I do. It's damned adorable."

William narrowed his eyes as Daniel stepped back, and he lifted his sword to point it at the bear. "And *now* you're making fun of me."

Daniel affected an exaggerated expression of shock, his free paw pressed tight to his chest. "I am offended and hurt, sir! I would *never* seek to dishonour you in such a manner!" His offended expression melted into a smirk as he lifted his own sword to tap lightly against William's. "But I bet you got a lot of people makin' fun of you in the castle, huh? Those high-borns and all that shit."

The hyena didn't answer. Instead he focused on the fighter before him and the need to actually land a single blow that morning. He moved, feinting to the side and drawing a swing of Daniel's sword. He slipped around the bear's other side and ducked low as Daniel's return swing passed by overhead, and William's heart sang as he brought his sword up against his partner's ungarded flank.

Only to that time take the bear's fist across his face. William's sword flailed about wildly as he spun and hit the ground. He gashed his lip on his teeth as he headed to the ground; blood filled his muzzle and streaked across the mud. "Ugh."

There was a hiss above him, and as he turned to look up at Daniel he could see the bear cringe back from him. "Sorry 'bout that, kid. Closer, though! Lots closer!"

"My *arse* it was!" Irritation bubbled up inside William, popping out through his muzzle as he slapped the mud and pushed himself up and onto his feet again. He whirled toward Daniel who frowned back at him, and William smeared mud across his muzzle as he tried to wipe away the blood that drooled from his new cut. "Ugh! Why can't I hit you?"

He glared at Daniel, but the bear offered no response. Instead he planted the tip of his sword in the mud and folded both of his paws over the pommel. He stared back in silence as William blinked. "Well?"

The bear continued to stare at him, until he shook his head. "Hey, I'll answer. I jus' wanna make sure you're done with y'little tantrum first."

A new surge of anger struck William as he narrowed his eyes. "Tantrum?"

"What, that not it? You got a better, fancier word for it?" The bear sighed. "You're frustrated, yeah. I get it. I was, too. But you're not gonna learn a damn thing when you're furious, so get that anger out of your system. Scream it out, rut it out, run it out; whatever you gotta do to get it out of you so I can fill that space with some learnin' instead."

William took a deep breath. He held his anger at bay for a moment as he stared right back into Daniel's eyes. The bear had a point, and worse besides. William had signed on for this. He'd signed on to getting his backside tanned by Geoffery or Daniel or any number of other training instructors until he'd learned to fight as well as they needed. "I don't... need any of that. I just need a moment."

The bear nodded back at him and fell silent. William sighed and shook his head; the sounds of combat from other training pairs around them was distracting and certainly wasn't helping his mood. "You said it was frustrating for you, too?"

"Well, yeah. Not as much as it is for you, I reckon." Daniel shook his head as he arched and cracked his back. "Moment I got here, I started gettin' to know everyone. Outside Vic, the commander and me, I don't think I've seen you say more than two words to anyone." He paused. "Somethin' to do with life in the castle?"

"I really don't wanna talk about it." William stretched his arms out and rolled his shoulders again. "I don't know why you'd want to know about it so much. There's nothing to tell, really."

That drew an amused snort from the bear, and he grinned wide. "C'mon. You don't talk like a servant boy, and you'd have to've spent every day around Master Zane to speak like him. You've got stories. You've got *history*. History I bet's why you're here."

"I never really bothered learning much history." William sighed. Daniel was insufferably persistent. It'd be endearing if he was any sort of interested in entertaining it. "Look, I just don't think it's a good idea making friends. Who knows when someone's gonna get cut down in a fight, right?"

The warrior hummed and nodded again as one paw reached up to scratch around the collar of his undershirt. "Mmm. Makes sense, I guess. But I'd say you're wrong anyways." He kicked his sword up out of the mud and squeezed the hilt, stalling its ascent when it pointed at William. "If everyone at y'side is already dead to you, what're you fighting for?"

"My family." William nodded sharply to himself as he plucked up his own sword. He didn't feel entirely ready, but Daniel was giving him the distinct impression that the break was over.

“That ain’t a good enough reason, kid.” The bear swung his sword the moment William brought his own weapon up, and with enough force to knock it out of the unsuspecting hyena’s paws. It spun through the air and clattered across some exposed cobblestone.

William watched the sword sail away for a second before he turned back to Daniel with a glare. “Hey!” He wasn’t prepared for the bear to rush forward, arms wide. He fell backward, only to be smothered; utterly enveloped by Daniel. The bear caught him. Held him. He... well.

He *stank*.

Even as William gagged on that overwhelming thick and earthy scent, the warmth that wrapped around him instantly brought memories of Tobias to the fore. He could do little but stand in place, paralysed and confused in equal measure. Outside his father, Tobias had been the last one to hold him like that...

He continued to just stand there, arms trapped at his side under the larger male’s embrace as Daniel lowered his head to press his muzzle against one of William’s ears. “Thinkin’ about family’s all well and good. Gotta remember where you came from. But out there when you’re bein’ charged down by rebels and bandits and who knows what else, it’s trust in the friends beside you. That’s what’ll getcha through.”

He squeezed at William once more and then stepped back. Fresh, cool air flooded William’s nostrils as he gasped, but without the bear’s overwhelming smell the only thing to assault his senses it was an almost pleasant thing. Almost. “I... but...”

“I don’t know what happened to you in there. You don’t gotta tell me if you don’t wanna.” Daniel shook his head as he took another step back and picked his sword up again. “But you don’t have to go through this alone. You don’t wanna. Trust me.”

William’s jaw locked up as he glanced aside. Those were pretty words, but just words in the end. “Maybe it’s better to go through things alone. You don’t have to hurt anyone that way.” He didn’t bother to look at Daniel as he marched off to his sword. Mud squelched underfoot as he looked up into the cloudy sky. More rain wouldn’t be far.

Daniel remained silent until William had recovered his weapon. As he made his way back over again, he gave a single nod. “I ain’t gonna tell you you’re wrong. I *am* gonna tell you that you’re a damn dedicated recruit and a more driven person than any male I’ve seen just come’f age in a long time.” He shook his head. “I’d reckon comin’ t’know someone like that’s worth getting’ hurt over.”

The hyena frowned. “You don’t wanna be my friend, Daniel. That doesn’t go well.”

“Shit, well I won’t, then.” The big bear shrugged again and folded his arms. “Big ol’ sour sack, you can go’n be miserable if that’s what y’really want.” His eyebrows lifted as he lowered his head again. “But you best find *someone* you can open up to, or whatever’s goin’ on in your head and heart’ll just eat you alive from the inside out. Seen it enough times.”

For all the crudeness of Daniel’s speech, there was a wisdom in his words that almost but not quite reminded William of his father. Maybe he had a point. And maybe he could do a lot worse than a bear who could probably bludgeon enemy soldiers to death with their own bodies. “Maybe I’d find you more agreeable if you weren’t constantly trying to dig information about my past out of me.”

“Then maybe I’ll stop. Or maybe I’ll make it worth your while.” A fresh smile split the bear’s muzzle as he glanced upward. As if on cue, the air began to fill with renewed, if light, rain. “A wager, huh? Simple deal. We go another round. I kill you again, and you tell me something about life in the castle. You kill *me*, even once, and I’ll not only stop... I’ll owe you a favour.”

“A favour?” William’s ears perked with interest. The favour was less important to him than getting the bear to just stop asking questions. “What sort of favour?”

“The best kind.” He winked back at the hyena as his smile grew. “I’ll do anything you ask. Anythin’ at all.” He began to chuckle as William frowned. “Well, almost anythin’. Assumin’ it won’t get me thrown in the gaol, that is. No crimes. All else’s fair game. One big ol’ chance to get me to any reasonable thing you can think up. Maybe even some unreasonable ones, if’n you ask right.” He thrust a paw forward. “We got a deal?”

William might not have been out in the world all that long and his only real experiences were with the subtle invitations he’d presented to Tobias, but even he could tell that the bear was making an overt invitation there. He cleared his throat – was that really how such matters were brought up outside the ‘polite society’ of the castle? – and cocked his head. “Anything, you say?”

“Anything *you* say. If you fancy, that is.” The bear waggled his paw again. “C’mon, kid. It’s gonna get slippery soon and that’s not gonna do you any favours. Or earn you any, heh heh.”

Well, William thought, he wasn’t obligated to anything... uncomfortable. And if he earned the favour, he’d also earn Daniel’s silence on those damnable questions about the castle. He could give up little things in the meantime, but the prize of blessed silence was too tempting to pass up. “Fine. Deal.” William clasped the bear’s paw tight.

Daniel shook it firmly twice before he disengaged, both paws brought back to the hilt of his sword. “Alright then. Now we’re playin’ with fire! C’mon now, kid. Show me you got it, eh?”

He swung again before William could even nod, and the hyena ducked low to avoid the blow. His weapon lingered above his head to try and deflect Daniel’s swig as he braced against the ground. The bear’s sword bounced upward, and William darted forward before it could come down again.

Even as the bear turned to swing a fist about again, William turned inward and shifted his momentum. He winced as he bounced bodily off Daniel’s side, but he still managed to slide in on the inside of the bear’s arm as it swung past him. It caught William’s weapon as he brought it up and around, and Daniel cried out at the impact.

A moment’s triumph washed over William until one of Daniel’s legs swept out and tripped him up again. His sword, raised to prepare for a blow to the bear’s chest, left his grip as he tumbled to the ground. The mud cushioned his fall as raindrops pattered against his face. As he scrambled to rise, Daniel’s swordtip came to rest on his chest. “And that’s a kill. You owe me somethin’.”

William sighed. He’d been so sure...! “Ugh, what’d you wanna know?”

Daniel just grinned as he reached down to help William back up again. "I'll start off easy. I heard the throne room's *paved* with silver bricks from the Varluvian mines. That true?"

Of all the questions he could have asked, that was what he cared about? William blinked in confusion and shook his head. "Uh... no. Sorry. Marble floor... I think they were stripped from some Lenkis town's temple after we conquered the region?" He frowned for a second and shrugged. "Thrones are all Ratholarin silver, though, and probably from the Varlivian mines. Bright and shining. There were two servants whose whole job it was to just keep them perfectly polished every day."

"Ha! Bet Eric'd have them executed if there was a smudge when he went to sit." Daniel shook his head as he backed up a couple of steps. "Alright, then. Next round. C'mon!"

William breathed in through gritted teeth, hissing as he plucked up his sword again. The bear didn't fight fair. He didn't hold back. That was what he'd wanted, of course, but actually facing him over and over again was exhausting. It-

Wait. That was it. William leaned forward, panting quietly for breath as he nodded to Daniel. His breathing was heavier than it needed to be, of course; that was the point. He brought his sword up in a looser grip than he was capable and shifted to a guarding stance. Daniel frowned at him and paused for a moment, before the bear stepped forward for a sharp swing with both paws to dislodge William's sword.

It wasn't there. The hyena held his breath as he waited for the swing, only to dip his sword out of the way just in time. Daniel's overpowering attack went right over the weapon and passed right before William's face. He couldn't help but grin as he brought his tip back up to tap against the bear's chest. "Boop."

Daniel, still half twisted from his swing, stared back at him with wide eyes. He glanced down at the sword resting against his chest, and William tapped him twice more as he began the chuckle. "You rotten little liar."

"I believe that counts as a kill, doesn't it?" William let his sword drop back again and gave it a quick flourish.

"I believe I was going to disarm you because you seemed tired." Daniel narrowed his eyes, before he too broke into a wide grin. "You arse. You actually had me! Son of a... you know that won't work in an actual fight, right?"

"If it worked on you, it might well work on others. And right now that's good enough, as far as I'm concerned." William shrugged and rested his training sword up over one shoulder. "I believe it's you who owes me something."

Daniel smirked. "Steady on there, big boy; training isn't done for the day yet. You can collect your favour later." He shook his head as he lowered himself back into a combat stance. "But you're not wrong; I'll shut up about the castle. Anythin' you wanna talk about from back there, that's yours to talk about. I won't pry."

William's grin faded, but a soft smile still remained. It seemed Daniel was a bear of his word. "Tell you what. That was a cheap hit. I'll give you one more question, if you really want."

“Aww, such a good sport.” The bear straightened up again as he stroked his chin. “One question, one question... damn, there’s so many I wanna ask. I...” He paused as his eyes tracked behind William, and promptly stood to attention. “Sir.”

William turned, and quickly mirrored the bear’s stance. Geoffery was on approach, marching in their general direction with what seemed like purpose. He glanced aside as William nodded to him. “Sir.”

“As you were, boys.” He didn’t stop moving, even as he was passing by Daniel. “Storm’s rolling in. Go get yourselves cleaned up.” He paused a moment. “You think he’s ready for a patrol with the watch yet?”

William fought the urge to glance back, but Daniel’s silence spoke volumes. He began to frown as he waited and waited for Daniel to finally reply. “In-city? Yes, sir, if we keep it central. If you want him seein’ serious action in the future, maybe keep him from the Riverrun and the merchant quarter another little bit.”

Disappointment fell across William’s face. His gaze dropped to the muddy ground as Geoffery turned back to him. It wasn’t just the hyena who looked disappointed. “Still? Hmm. Alright then. Take the afternoon and get inside so you don’t catch cold. Clean up. Rest up. I’ll speak to the watch captain tonight about inserting you both in the morning.” With that, the fox turned and marched on.

Both William and Daniel remained at attention for a few moments more, before William could take it no longer and whirled on his trainer. “Am I not ready?”

Daniel blinked and shook his head. “Uh... no? Not really?”

William frowned. “I just hit you.”

“And the last time y’managed that was two weeks ago, and this time was ‘cause you tricked me.” Daniel shook his head again. “Whatcha want me t’say? Your stance is sloppy and you ain’t leaning into your swordplay. You think jus’ ‘cause I like you that I’m gonna go easy on you? Make you look good for the commander?” He smirked. “It’s ‘cause I like you that I’m *not* gonna do that, kid. If he thinks you’re ready for combat, he’ll stick you *in* combat to test what you can do. I don’t want you gettin’ knifed in some dirty alley here in Sanwell.”

Even as the frown deepened on William’s brow, the hyena had to admit he had a point. If he wasn’t ready and going out there would just get him killed... “Then maybe you should stop going easy on me.”

“It’s not about going easy. It’s about you learning.” Daniel sighed as he hooked a thumb toward the barracks. “Look. Let’s get cleaned up, and maybe get a hot meal in us. I’m not gonna be able to explain on an empty stomach. Okay?”

“I... yeah. Okay, I guess.” William sighed as he followed Daniel back toward the barracks. Above, the skies began to open up in earnest. Several of the soldiers and recruits in the yard scrambled to move for cover. Daniel didn’t hurry himself, and neither did William. It was just rain.

What truly worried him was what Daniel had said. What was wrong with his learning? Was he just not that good? Was he failing? He shuddered. What would it mean if he failed?

Would he just be tossed out of the army, left with no money on the street somewhere, begging for coin to help his mother? The thought turned his stomach.

He'd fill it with food instead. And get cleaned up. And when both of those matters were taken care of, he'd not let Daniel go until the bear explained *exactly* what he'd meant. William couldn't afford to fail. He couldn't afford to mess up his training. For his mother. For his father. He could not fail.

William *would* not fail.

#

The cleaning up had been relatively quick. The barracks for soldiers stationed in the capital enjoyed the luxury of a neighbouring bathhouse. It had taken William more than a few visits to get comfortable with it; bathing in the castle was a generally private affair, with the exception of certain servants which were expected to tend to the royal family. He was still not certain how much he liked the idea of being naked and surrounded by a slew of other people, and consequently his trips tended toward the short and the late.

Daniel was all too familiar with the bathhouse by comparison. The bear had no sense of shame whatsoever, and William was certain that he'd caught his instructor ogling some of the other soldiers and townspeople who'd come to bathe. The rule had been taught very early on: looking was acceptable, but *acting* required one to leave the bathhouse proper if one was to ever return. That there was a whole school of etiquette to leering at one's fellow soldiers had been surprising at first, too.

William never really partook; the hyena was far too self-conscious to spend any of his time admiring the bodies – some definitely not unappealing – around him. While there, he'd tried to coax Daniel into explaining his comments in the training yard. He'd instead chuckled and told him to take the moment to rest and relax. That William found it hard to relax with open questions dangling over his head didn't rate a comment in return. For all Daniel's quips and jokes and his constant laughter, the sound of it began to irritate for just how little it helped the hyena.

The water had at least been pleasant, and it had done wonders for Daniel's scent. By the time they'd dried off, redressed in cleaner attire and returned to the barracks, Daniel smelled entirely pleasant by comparison. As they sat down to eat, William finally couldn't take it anymore. "Do I have to use my favour to make you talk?"

"You could use your favour to make me do a lot of things." The bear grinned as he shovelled a spoonful of stew into his muzzle.

William rolled his eyes as he turned his own spoon over in his meal. Daniel's flirtiness was fun, but unhelpful. "Come on. How long do you want to keep me waiting?"

The bear shrugged as he chewed. "I dunno. It's pretty funny, and if y'used your favour to get an answer you'd have to earn another for anything else you wanted." He chuckled to himself as he filled his muzzle again. "Mmm? Eat. 's good."

With a sigh, William followed Daniel's lead. The bear wasn't wrong, of course; the food provided by the barracks commissary was leagues beyond what was offered to most

servants in the castle. The kitchen staff were the exception, but that was only because they kept the best leftovers for themselves. “Mmm.”

“Right? Good stuff.” Daniel dunked a piece of bread into the stew and began to stir it around. “Alright. You keep getting’ that in you, and I’ll answer. Sound good?” When William nodded – his full mouth kept him from politely replying – Daniel smirked. “Well damn. Just gotta get your muzz stuffed to end the questions. How ‘bout that.”

Again William rolled his eyes, but Daniel’s smile was almost infectious. Almost. “Alright. First off, I gotta ask the question, ‘cause that’s what’s gonna decide how the rest of this goes. You want me to be gentle, or do you jus’ want it straight up?” He shrugged as he leaned forward and chomped down on his broth-soaked bread. “Y’might not like it straight up.”

William chewed slower. His spoon tapped lightly against the rim of his bowl as he frowned. What was Daniel worried about? His reaction? He swallowed a few moments later. “Straight up. I can take it.”

The bear’s expression hardened as he nodded back. “Right, then. Straight up.” He leaned back in his chair and paused long enough to take another bite of his bread. “Kid, you’ve got some great skills, but you’re a damn mess. You’re not learning.”

Spoon halfway to his muzzle, William froze. He opened his mouth to speak, but a glance from Daniel shut him right up. He’d asked for it straight up, after all. He wasn’t about to interrupt his instructor. Instead, William silently, slowly, deliberately forced the spoon to move again.

When the stew and spoon had cleared the hyena’s muzzle, Daniel continued. “I don’t know what it is, but if you were with anyone else? Kid, they’d have thrown you out by now. You just ain’t learnin’, and I don’t know why that is.” He shook his head again. “You keep tryin’ to do things your way. That ain’t how it works here.

“And I know y’just gotta be itchin’ to say something’ and I promise we’ll get to that, but you gotta understand.” Daniel waved his arms around to indicate the commissary around them and the soldiers in it. “Every single one of these people has to fight, knowin’ that everyone else in their colours’ got their backs. Gotta know that they fight the same way.”

His arms fell back to his side as William watched intently. His eating became more automatic as he focused instead on what Daniel was saying. “Whole reason you got stuck with Vic’s band is ‘cause Vic likes it when new recruits come in what don’t fight the same way. It lets us be a bit more flexible, he says, and the commander lets it ‘cause we make it work.” He stirred through his stew for a moment. “But we still had to learn to fight right. And you aren’t. *That’s* the trouble.”

William nodded along. He disagreed, of course, but he wasn’t about to say anything until Daniel was done. When the bear started to eat again though, he was fairly certain that moment had come. The hyena let his spoon come to rest in his bowl as he sat back. “So what have I been doing instead?”

“Your own thing. And hey, I get it. This is hard.” Daniel sighed as he lifted his bowl to his muzzle and noisily slurped up some leftover broth from it. “When you first arrived, I said

you were quick. And you went'n ditched your armour to stay quick. Got me good." He peered at William around the bowl. "But it's not like you've got me too many more times since then, fast or no."

The hyena frowned. But that had been what had got him in, hadn't it? Without doing that, he'd have failed. "So what am I meant to do then?"

The question drew a smile from Daniel. He slowly set his bowl back down and licked the broth from his lips. "Thank you."

William blinked. "Huh?"

"You asked what you were meant to do. First thing you said after I told you what was what." He chuckled and leaned back. "Kid, you know how rare that is? Someone just comes up, gets told they've made a mess of things, and just asks how to fix it? Damn, you gotta stop gettin' my expectations up."

It was all that William could do to just stare blankly back at Daniel. "I... didn't do or say anything special, though. But if I'm gonna stay, I've gotta do something different. I just need to know what it is."

"And that's just it. Love it. I *love* it." Daniel folded his arms. "What you've gotta do, Willie-boy, is listen to me." He held up a paw as if expecting William to argue, but the hyena was silent as he processed the bear's words. "Y'been hearin' but not listenin' if that makes sense. I tell you how to stand and swing, and you try. Then y'fail, and you go back to doin' it your way."

"But I do that because it failed." William cocked his head to the side. "If it's not working, why not do it my way?"

"Because your way ain't workin' neither." Daniel smirked. "Look at it like this, yeah? Y'keep doing things your way instead of mine 'cause you're reckonin' if you mess up doing it my way, it means my way is wrong. But y'keep doing it your way even though you mess *that* up too. Your way's jus' comfier. What's that say to you, then?"

When William just shook his head and shrugged, Daniel's smirk slipped into a soft, warm smile. "It says that you aren't learnin'. You aren't practicin' what I'm showin' you because you already think it's jus' another dead end. Not goin' anywhere. You think you can jus' do your own thing and it'll work out fine, but that ain't workin' neither. That make sense?"

"I... actually think it does. Yeah." William frowned down at his bowl and took a second for another mouthful as he thought it through. The bear, irritatingly, had a point. That was exactly what William had been doing for the whole time he'd been there. "You're not wrong, I guess. I just thought if it wasn't working, I'd figure something out."

"And just wound up throwin' out good training for more'n a season now. Fun, ain't it?" Daniel chuckled to himself as he reclined in his chair. "So here's how you can go about fixin' it, right? When we go back out to train tomorrow, I'm gonna beat you down. Disarm you. Keep killin' you, and you're gonna keep trying to stick to my lessons while I do. Okay?"

William nodded slowly. It didn't sound good when Daniel put it that way, but everything else he'd said made sense. "Yeah. Okay."

The bear nodded back. “Good. And what you’ll find is if you stop fightin’ it and actually *practice* what I’m showin’ you, there’s a reason for it. It works.” He waggled his spoon toward the hyena. “You got strength and you got speed, and we’re gonna figure out how to use both. But to start, I gotta make sure you can fight and not just get killed a whole lot.”

“I think I can do that.” William lifted his own bowl and tilted it up to his muzzle. The flavourful broth cascaded across his tongue and he sighed as he set it back on the table. “And... thanks. For sticking with me, being honest... helping me, instead of just throwing me out. I appreciate it.”

“Well, you’re welcome. Like I said, it’s important to have friends here, you know?” Daniel shrugged and grinned. “So, with that out of the way, what about your favour? Still lookin’ to use it to shut me up?”

“Can’t do that and expect you to keep teaching me, can I?” William smiled back at him as he tapped a clawtip across the top of the table. “Do I have to decide now? Or would you mind if I held onto it for a little bit?”

The bear arched an eyebrow as he stared hard at William. The smile never left his face. “Can’t say I’ve had anyone keep me in suspense before. What’s the matter, can’t imagine what you might like to get me to do?”

In turn, William narrowed his eyes. Finally, a chance to ask the question that had been bugging him for days. *Weeks*. “You’re flirting with me, aren’t you?”

“Don’t take it personal. I flirt with a lot of people.” Daniel folded his paws behind his head as he leaned into his chair. “Do you got a problem with it? You rather I stop? Jus’ say the word, and I’m done.”

That was a question. The immediate answer that jumped to William’s mind was a fierce yes. The bear was six years his senior and William was barely of age himself, and he’d not even had time to get to grips with how he felt about Tobias before all of that went awry. Having someone this direct and forward was more than he knew what to do with, and Daniel had just said he was that flirty with everyone. Does that mean he was... *more*, as well, with everyone?

But it was also an opportunity. William glanced down at his bowl again as Daniel’s grin began to fade away. The bear shuffled forward in his chair. “I’m sorry, did... I say something wrong?”

“Y... no. No, it’s not... I just...” William sighed. It was like he was back in the bathhouse again, covering himself as best he could against the glances and stares and whatnot. His muzzle opened to speak; he felt more naked than he had in the bathhouse. “Aren’t you... worried? You know. About what people think? What they’d call you?”

Daniel’s expression turned sad as the bear’s shoulders drooped. “Did someone make you think you were less ‘cause of it? Did... oh.” His eyes closed as he hung his head. “Ah, shit. Here I was pryin’ about y’time in the castle and... never crossed my mind someone mighta hurt you there. I’m sorry, Will.”

The bear reached out an arm, his paw turned over so the back of it slid across the table. William eyed it for a moment before he gently placed one of his own much smaller paws in it. “Look, I dunno what goes on in the castle. Some soldiers go there from time to time... me, I’m

happy enough out here. But out here, no one gives a damn. People want what they want, yeah?" He tried a little smile. "I mean, Ratholarin ain't Lenkis. No worship-orgies in the streets, fun as that might sound."

William's head jerked upward. Tobias never told him about *that* Lenkis custom! "Worship-orgies?" Maybe he should have paid more attention to the histories.

"Point is, it don't matter. You are who you are, and it don't hurt none to be like that." He patted his chest with his free paw. "Gone my whole life without settin' foot in a castle, and neither knowin' nor carin' to know the tender 'ffections of a female, and I'm just fine with both. Ain't nothin' to be ashamed of, and there ain't no one who's got the right to make you ashamed." He nodded once and closed his paw gently around William's.

It was a surprisingly delicate touch, but enough to make the hyena's eyes well up with tears. He nodded back, unable to speak as he struggled in vain to hold on to some semblance of his composure. It was a losing battle, and he knew it. He also didn't care. Maybe, just maybe, Daniel was right about it all. Maybe there was nothing wrong with him. Maybe Tobias *had* overreacted. Maybe he didn't deserve what had happened to him and all the pain that the tiger had put him through.

Maybe he *could* just be himself. "Thank you."

"Well, you're welcome. Again." Another squeeze, and the bear's paw withdrew. "But hey, new rule with that favour, huh?" William looked up in confusion to see Daniel's expression had turned serious. "Nothin' naughty-like. Alright? When I was suggestin' that... I didn't know. Had no idea." His paw slipped off the table and came to rest with its brother in his lap. "With how smart you are and the way y'talk, I guess I jus' thought you were... uh, whole."

When William frowned, Daniel started to smile again. "It's what we called it back in my village. You got two parts to comin' of age. There's the day itself... and there's the day you *know* yourself. For some it's the same day. Mine was backwards t'you; a buddy and me'd been foolin' around for a couple years before we were of age proper. For others like you... it takes time. Effort. Come of age before they know themselves. Whole." He nodded, still smiling at William. "But they do get there. They always get there in the end, and they're okay when they do."

The hyena nodded. They were words that felt like they could have come from his father, speaking the wisdom of some ancient scholar or something. That they came instead from a scruffy bear warrior who didn't visit the bathhouse nearly as often as he probably ought to have didn't diminish them in the least. They bore weight. Experience. William was barely able to keep his eyes from misting over entirely as he nodded again. "I... look forward to being okay too, then."

Daniel's smile broadened again, wide enough to practically split his face in two. William shook his head as he rubbed up at his eyes in a desperate attempt to clear them. "But hey... don't add that new rule, okay? I like the rules of that favour the way they were at the start." The bear's smile faltered a moment as he lifted an eyebrow. "I don't want anything. Not right now."

“But you might?” Daniel began to chuckle again. The sound grated far less than it had before.

“But I might. And depending on what I want... it might be useful to have a friend owe me a favour.” He tried a little smile of his own. “If he really does mean *anything*.”

Daniel nodded. William felt his smile grow. The spectre of Tobias’ rejection still lurked in the back of his mind behind everything, but there, right then, was the acceptance that he’d sought. Everything that Tobias had denied him, laid out in the open in Daniel. Not the love he’d felt for his friend, no. Not even the lust that had driven the young hyena’s mind wild.

No, this was something more. It was a chance at coming to terms with himself. It was a chance to learn. To *be*. To become himself, whatever that was, whole and true. William hadn’t thought life outside the castle walls could offer him all that much outside of an existence of blood and battle, but maybe Daniel had found something else. Something good. Maybe he could share that with William.

‘Maybe’ had never seemed so promising before, but right then William thought that he liked the way it sounded.