

Interwoven

RESPONSIBILITY: PART ONE

34th Day of the Pure Snow, 17 AoE

The western villages weren't where William had intended to spend his seventeenth birthday, but it had done wonders to help him acclimate to the brutal realities of his position as a soldier of Ratholarin. Instead of a day he'd intended to take to visit his mother, he'd been pushed alongside his unit to march through some light snowfalls into unfamiliar territory.

Daniel had been a reliable, stable element at his side almost the whole time, and for that William was incredibly grateful. At times the bear scarcely left him alone, but for when he asked specifically for solitude. In those moments he was respectful and gave William the solace that he'd asked for, but he was always there with a smile or a joke otherwise. That he'd become the hyena's closest friend in the entire army was of no surprise to William.

Which was not to say that they were joined at the hip, of course. Daniel had other friends he spent time with when off-duty, more than a few of whom William had been introduced to. Beyond the elements of the small squad he'd been assigned to for training – Victor, their lieutenant, and his charge Lyle – half a dozen soldiers had been introduced to him. None took to him quite the same way Daniel did, even though the bear seemed incredibly popular with his fellows.

In more ways than just the one, as it turned out. He clearly earned the appreciation of his peers for more than just his fighting prowess, if only for the times William had walked in on him servicing those peers. There was the time he'd been looking for him at the edge of camp and seen him suckling on the malehood of one of the captains in the company. Or the time he'd entered their tent while a ferret recruit from the westlands bounced in his lap. The sight of his bare backside all but smothering the face of a fox whose drooling shaft and hungry, noisy lapping had given away his absolute adoration of the situation was one that had stayed with William for many, many awkward and confusing nights.

On some level, William was aware that it was jealousy that he felt with each indecent incident he caught Daniel out in. The bear always apologised, of course, and William always accepted it in turn. It was a colossal tease for the hyena, and almost every time that he caught Daniel out he found himself all the more tempted to trade in that favour he still held onto from the bear. He almost wondered if Daniel was doing it deliberately to tempt him. Such a thing wouldn't be outside Daniel's expected behavioural patterns.

As the hyena walked alongside him, half listening to the conversation of his training squad and focusing instead on his own thoughts and the surroundings, he found himself fighting to control himself. He reminded himself that he was in public – the town square was part of their assigned route that day – and the people of Kurest were apparently not quite as free-minded as was more common in Sanwell. Patrolling with an erection wouldn't present the most

professional image of the Ratholarin army. Patrolling without one required him to organise his thoughts *against* Daniel's various indecencies.

"So what about you, Will?"

William blinked in a moment of panic and glanced back toward the squad. Beside him was Daniel of course, the bear looking down at him with a smile. On Daniel's other side was their lieutenant, Victor; the grizzled coyote's face a mishmash of scars and greying yellow fur. Opposite to William in the formation was Lyle, the young tiger grinning wide at him as he waited for an answer.

William coughed. "Uh..."

Daniel began to chuckle as Victor elbowed his charge in the side. "I told you he wasn't payin' any attention to us."

As Lyle jumped out of the way and laughed, Daniel shook his head. "We were talkin' about what's waitin' for us when we get back home. Been half a season and all, so more'n a few people are missin' life back east."

"As opposed to young Daniel here." Victor turned his eyes on the bear as they rounded a fountain in the heart of the village. Around them, several of the villagers glanced at them briefly before they returned to their toils. "Or haven't you had time yet enough to rut your way through the entire company?"

"Hey! He's making good progress from what I hear!" Lyle's grin only grew wider as he danced forward and turned around, walking backward to watch his companions. "What're you up to now? Nine?"

The smile on Daniel's face slipped as he glanced at William, and the hyena tilted his head to the side in turn. His stare lingered for just long enough for Lyle to begin to laugh again. The keening sound of it had grated on William the day they'd met, and months of proximity to it had done little to improve his taste for it. "Oh, is it ten now? Taken William for a ride, huh?"

"He has not." William scowled at the tiger, but Lyle's demeanour was undamaged. "Not all of us prefer to think with our cocks after all, Lyle. Mind yourself." He almost winced. His mother would whip him good if she heard him using such language. Military life hadn't completely destroyed the manners she'd done her best to teach him.

Daniel just snorted and shrugged as he glanced around them. "Besides, it ain't like Lyle's missin' much at home. Probably spent enough crowns at the Crest to put a couple of his favourites into *very* comfy homes, eh?"

William's eyebrows lifted, but a glance at the tiger's face showed his mood still unburdened. "The Crimson Crest is a damn treasure of the Ratholarin demesne, thanks much, and I'm more than happy to make some *hefty* donations to them. And not just in coin." He waggled his eyebrows and ears both as he chuckled. "I *also* mean my-"

"We all know what you mean, Lyle." Victor shook his head and sighed. "Eyes front and ears up, soldier. Straighten yourself quick-like."

Victor's order was a mercy for William, and Lyle immediately leaped back into the line. He laughed again – William would have covered his ears if he were able to get away with it – as the hyena glanced up at Daniel. “Crimson Crest?”

Lyle's laughter choked off as the bear glanced briefly down at William. “A brothel in the capital. Finest in Sanwell. Finest in all Ratholarin, and it'd probably put some Lenkis pleasure houses to shame. Been there a couple times myself.”

The hyena's face darkened. “Whores. Lyle misses *whores*. Why am I not surprised?”

“You think females'd line up for his affection without being paid for it?” Daniel snorted again, only for Lyle to shift behind Victor and lightly kick the bear in the shins. It earned him a growl from both the bear and the coyote, and that was enough for Lyle's smile to finally slip. “He's not wrong, though. You can't call 'em whores. Artists. That's what they are there.”

“Treasure of the demesne.” Lyle nodded vigorously to himself. “You should go check it out, Will. Get yourself a nice lass or lad. Work yourself ragged in 'em. You'll thank me for the idea, trust me.”

William folded his ears back as best he could to try and hide his blush. It wasn't the first time such a suggestion had been made to him. Nor was it the first time he'd considered it. “Yes, well... maybe I will. We'll see.” He leaned forward to look up at Victor. “And you, sir? Please tell me you're interested in someone back home you don't need to pay.”

That earned a hearty chuckle from the coyote, though his eyes still twitched this way and that as they took in the streets of Kurest. “A wife and children cost more than any whore, boy. Remember that lesson well.” He did break from his surveillance long enough to favour William with a warmer smile than he'd ever seen on the coyote's face. “But I wouldn't trade Patty and the girls for all the whores in Lenkis.” He whirled around as Lyle opened his muzzle but before a single sound could leave it. “And you'll mind your tongue before speakin' those words tickling your mind, or I'll be taking it off of you.”

Lyle's muzzle closed and the tiger began to pout as Daniel turned to the hyena. “You've never said if there's anyone for you back home, though. You hardly talk about home to anyone, really. Not even to me.”

And that was how William would have preferred to keep it. But as he looked past Daniel, he could see both Victor and Lyle stare at him with interest. If he just kept saying nothing, they'd just keep asking. “How about a deal? I know you like those.” Daniel started to smile again. “You go first, then I'll answer.”

Both Victor and Lyle immediately turned to Daniel. The bear's smile grew ever so slightly and he glanced back at them. Lyle nodded toward William, staring expectantly. “Yeah. Seems fair, eh?” He turned back toward William and folded his arms. “No one's waitin' for me back home. No family, no wife, no husband. Had an older brother what moved out to Ingsbren four years ago with his wife, but other than that... nope.” He shrugged. “I don't really get, uh... attached.”

“Depends on if it's a dog railing him, I'd wager.” Lyle's laugh was cut off as Victor jabbed his elbow into the tiger's stomach. His wheeze was far more satisfying to William's ears than his chuckles.

Daniel held his tongue until Lyle had managed to recover his breath, but he did turn briefly back to Victor to say, "Thank you." The older coyote nodded back with a razor thin smirk before the bear returned his gaze to William. "I got all I need. Life's good, and I don't gotta miss anyone when we deploy. So then Will, hows about you?"

William frowned. He'd expected that there would be something there that Daniel would have wanted to talk about. Maybe even enough to talk about to last until the end of the shift, where he could slink away without having been held to his end of the bargain. Not that he'd have shirked his responsibilities... he'd probably just have answered in private with Daniel, rather than in front of anyone else.

That wasn't an option, though. All three of his squadmates watched him intently, waiting with baited breath for him to spill something about himself. And so William sighed and shook his head. "No lover waiting back for me, no. My mother still works as a servant in the castle, and I don't... have anyone else. Not there."

"Aww, that's so cute. Big bad soldier misses his mother." No sooner had William shot a glare at Lyle than Daniel had reached out behind Victor to grab the tiger by his armour. He tugged him around behind their lieutenant and growled in the tiger's face as Lyle raised both paws. "Hey, hey! Easy! I'm just joking!"

"Didn't sound like no joke I've ever heard." Daniel bared his teeth right in Lyle's face, and the tiger cringed back as far as he could. "Little chatter on patrol's one thing. A little banter, fine. But you keep *this* up and I'm fixin' to--"

"And that's enough of that, boy." Victor turned slowly about and placed a paw on Daniel's wrist. The bear immediately released the tiger, and Lyle stumbled back with fear-widened eyes. "He's not yours to discipline. He's mine." He looked up into Daniel's eyes until the bear nodded once, and then turned to Lyle. "Daniel's right, lad. Heed those words well, and now you'll apologise to William. At once."

Lyle nodded instantly and leaned around to bring William into his field of view. "Beggin' your pardon. I meant no offense. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted." William nodded back to him, though his eyes lifted instead to Daniel. The bear had already stepped back into line, expressionless as if nothing had happened. "Bit rough, but thank you."

His head turned ever so slightly, but the corner of his muzzle tugged upwards a little in response. William nodded to him. "Besides, it's not as though I had any time really to meet up with anyone in the store rooms or whatnot. Being a servant's almost as hard work as the training yard. Some days it was worse."

Victor hummed to himself. "Patty used to be a maidservant for a noble house, the Saraventi family. Saraventi taught her the strength and grace that made me fall in love with her in the first place, but always said how hard it was. No wonder you take to a soldier's life so well. And with a silvered tongue, too."

William chuckled to himself as he looked around. The road they were on was almost finished; they were out by the edge of the town and it was almost time to turn back around. "I had a good teacher. I guess Daniel told you who my father is."

“Yeah, but you don’t talk like a kingsblade.” Lyle’s voice was more subdued as the squad paused at the end of the road. It still stretched on, but back into the wilderness that lay north of Kurest. That wasn’t their concern just yet. “You talk more like a noble than any soldier I’ve ever met. Any that wasn’t really a noble playing at being one, anyways.” He took a step to the side, just enough to put him out of Daniel’s not-inconsiderable reach. “You spend much time with the nobles there? The royals?”

“Yeah, I think that’s enough of that sorta talk now, Lyle.” Daniel’s interjection came with a warning glance that William didn’t see, but the hyena still stared down Lyle nonetheless.

Lyle however just adopted a confused expression. “Come on! He lived *in* the castle! Walked the halls of the king! He’s gotta have all kinds of great stories! Has to have seen all the weird, dirty stuff that goes on behind their closed doors! Right?” He leaned forward conspiratorially as his voice dropped. “Like the princes. You gotta know a lot about them, huh?”

Victor had looked like he was about to shut the tiger down, but the question about the princes perked his ears up somewhat. William could only sigh. He’d be lucky to get out of this one. “Not really. Sorry.”

But luck was not on his side, and the tiger wasn’t deterred. As Daniel gave another little warning growl that seemed to go completely unheeded, Lyle just began to grin again. “Come on. They’re all a mess. You mean to say you never caught Princess Irene sneaking out to play swordslady? Or Prince Fredrick; ooh, I bet you know the truth about him. Is it true he’s knocked up half the maidservants in the castle by now?”

Daniel’s growls cut off the moment William’s started. “You know my mother is still a maidservant in the castle, right?”

That shut Lyle up for a moment. He glanced up at Daniel, and William watched him give the barest shake of his head. “Well, uh... what about Prince Tobias, then?” His eyes began to sparkle once more. “You give me a hard time for *my* habits, but I hear he brings in only the best males from the Crest. Sometimes a few at a time!”

Something deep in William’s heart twanged, and he turned quickly away and began to march back into town. Daniel followed him a moment later, and Victor fell into step behind *him* in turn. At William’s silence, Lyle hurried to catch back up as he began to laugh again. “Aww, I *knew* it! I just knew the good prince was a tailraiser! It’s so obvious; he-”

“You’d do well to never speak of such things again.” William’s eyes fixed on the fountain. His steps were even, but in his mind each and every one took him a step further from Lyle. It wasn’t true, but he could imagine it was and that made it a worthy goal. “You want to know about the castle? The people inside? The princes?” His brows knitted together angrily as he felt his heartbeat quicken. Anger bubbled away inside him as his blood ran hot. “Take these words of wisdom from one who knows, then. Prince Tobias is no tailraiser. I can speak to that with absolute certainty.”

“And that will absolutely be the end of the discussion.” Victor’s words came before Lyle could offer any rejoinder, and a plaintive whine came from the tiger instead. “You are a soldier of the king, Lyle. Focus yourself for the love of all that is good, else when we return

from this deployment I'll be forced to report to the commander that you are ill suited for this line of work. Do I make myself clear?"

Lyle's footsteps hurried further, and a glance aside showed the tiger falling into place beside his instructor. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

He huffed and turned to look at William. The hyena averted his eyes and looked ahead again, just in case he was about to find himself in trouble too. Fortunately, it seemed he was to escape unharmed; the lieutenant nodded to him. "Learn well from young William's example, Lyle. He knows to focus on his duty when required."

"I will, sir. Thank you, sir." The tiger then fell silent, his attention not on jovial inter-squad banter but instead on the lookout for trouble. Perhaps as it should have been from the start.

The damage, however, was done. William's blood was boiling away; hot and thick anger flowed in his veins as the deluge of questions and bitter memories and suppressed desires all contested for the most aggravating force on his mind in that moment. That they seemed to declare a truce to torment him in equal measure was, in itself, even more aggravating still. He sighed through clenched teeth, breath left to hiss out near silently.

If he wasn't going to be able to escape questions, he could do something else. He could be an example. A perfect model soldier; something for Victor to point to as an ideal. Lyle might find himself silenced more permanently. That laugh could well be stifled. Such a thing would be the greatest blessing William could hope for right then.

Those hopes could wait for later, though. They had a patrol to complete, and William was damned if he was going to be reprimanded during it.

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"You didn't have to do this." William sighed and shook his head as he cast his gaze around. The tavern was small and the mink behind the bar wore a practiced, warm smile, but it was cozy enough. Empty, but he had no doubt that would change in the next couple of hours.

At his side, Daniel just smiled and clapped him on the back. "My treat. Come on. After a patrol like that, y'could use some proper rest. More relaxation than y'find in jus'a tent, 'specially one shared with me." He pushed William on as he started for the stairs by the back of the tavern.

The hyena didn't argue or push back, instead allowing himself to be guided onward and upward. "And what of camp? We're just to leave it to Victor? To Lyle?" He paused as he made his way up the stairs. "Actually, maybe we *do* leave it to Lyle."

Daniel laughed and shook his head as they reached the hall at the top of the stairs. "Yeah, I'm not too fond of him, neither. Got a gob on him that just won't stop, huh? Ah, here we are." He moved to the second door on the left and slid a key into the lock. A quick turn and the door clicked, and it swung open without a squeak.

William peered inside. The room was cozy; a small but fuzzy rug spread across the floor and a couple of chairs rested around a small table much like those that adorned the tavern downstairs. The bed in the back of the room was sizable and, William distinctly noticed,

singular. It was however more plush and soft-looking than any bed he'd ever seen in his life, not that the servant quarter cots and the garrison bunks made much comparison. "Wow."

"And not even close to a crown for the night." Daniel pushed gently past William to enter the room and immediately dropped down into one of the chairs. "Come on, come in. Close th'door. Get comfy."

The hyena nodded, still looking around as he stepped in and closed the door behind him. When he turned back to Daniel, the bear was already peeling off his boots and shedding his armour. "Oh, great. Now you're going to stink the whole room up."

Daniel just smirked and wriggled his toes. "Not my problem. And hey, the bathhouse out here might not be up to Sanwell standards, but we can pop in 'fore dinner if it really bothers you. Otherwise cloth and a pail of boiled water'll have to do it."

William rolled his eyes as he too began to peel off his armour. While still overpowering, he'd grown quite used to Daniel and his various scents over the months. "You are utterly shameless. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah. It's why y'like me so much, even if you don't like me enough to take me up on that favour." He spread his arms wide as he leaned back in the chair. "Actually, it's somethin' I wanted t'ask about. It's why I got us this place. Bit of privacy."

The words froze William partway through removing his armour. He slowly looked up at Daniel again as he began to frown. "You bought me an inn room so we could...?"

"So we could *talk*. Privately, so you could be comfy enough t'actually talk. You don't gotta be so suspicious of me, you know." The bear smirked as he also started to tug pieces of his armour off and set them down beside the table. "I mean, if y'really fancy a go I wouldn't exactly take much convincin'."

"Yeah, if Lyle's right you need to make it to ten, right?" William sighed and shook his head as he worked his own boots off. It was a relief to expose them to the cooler air after walking in them most of the day, though even he had to admit that his feet were almost as bad as the bear's at that point. Nice and fair, then, even if it made his nose crinkle all the harder. "Can't let you stop without adding another notch to your belt, as it were, right?"

Daniel laughed at that, but the sound died off quickly as he noticed a lack of mirth on William's face. "Yeah, well... hey. Can you look at me a sec, please?" William sighed and glanced over, and the bear's expression was serious. It almost took him aback, what with how rare a sight that was. He could barely remember the last time he'd seen it. "Are we... okay? Like, you're people and I'm real fond of you. You know that, right?"

William nodded slowly back, but his frown lingered as Daniel glanced away. "So, are we alright? I dunno. It's jus' somethin' about the way you been lookin' at me lately. I'm just worried I mighta done somethin' like Lyle did and got you mad or upset or somethin' and I really, really don't want to do that to you. Y'know?"

Some of the lingering tension left in his body and his heart by Lyle's pestering earlier melted away by the earnestness in the bear's voice. It was sweet of Daniel to be so concerned, and that time William's sigh was not born of annoyance. "You're the best friend I've got. You shouldn't be worried. I wouldn't be where I am right now if it wasn't for you."

“Now that ain’t true. You would’ve got here on your own if you decided y’needed to.” The bear smiled again, smaller though no less warm. “But since we deployed out this way, since the marchin’ started, you’ve... I dunno.” He shrugged. “I mean, it’s not the, ah... the thing with Terry, was it?”

William blinked and tried to pin a face to the name. It took him an embarrassingly long time to realise that was the name of the fox he’d walked in on Daniel’s backside smothering. His ears reddened immediately, and he cursed inwardly as he watched the bear’s eyes track up to them. “Uh, no. No, it’s not... I mean, I’m not *upset* about that. Curious, I guess, but...” His eyes went wide as Daniel lifted an eyebrow. “No, I just mean... why he liked that so much. Not to try it.”

“Some folk just like certain things. I like makin’ people feel good, and he sure thinks that feels good.” Daniel chuckled to himself before he shook his head and sighed, leaning back once more. “So, what is it, then? I know you said I shouldn’t be worried, but y’not actin’ yourself around me, so...”

Jaw firmly set, William turned to glance at the bed as much to look away from Daniel as anything else. Trust the bear to have figured out something was different. William had thought he was doing a better job than that, but he’d clearly been very, very wrong. “It’s... hard to explain.”

The bear nodded and leaned back in again, both paws flat on the table. “I’m patient, I’m listening, and I’ve got all night.” He paused, then tried another smile. “Well, ‘cept for dinner. But before an’ after, I got all night.”

William couldn’t help but smile back even as he forced himself to bring his eyes back to Daniel. Maybe he could try being honest and forthright. Maybe talking about it would help. Daniel had been nothing but understanding of him ever since he’d been recruited. This wouldn’t be different, right? “You’re sure?”

When the bear nodded, William nodded back and folded his arms. Alright then. “You... wanted to know about my time in the castle. Everyone always wants to know about my time in the castle. The truth is I just don’t want to think about it too much. I just...” He frowned again as he looked down at the table’s surface. “It hurts. Or it makes me angry. Or sad. I’d just rather not.”

“You don’t have to.” The words were spoken gently, and William knew that Daniel meant them. “I know it left you hurtin’ back then. That someone did it to you. I don’t wanna push you if you don’t want.”

“I know.” But he also knew Daniel wanted to know more. And, whether he liked it or not, not answering hadn’t had the intended effect for William. It hadn’t stopped people from wanting to know more. It hadn’t stopped them prying. “I had one friend there. Only one who wasn’t an adult. Only one I could be a kid around.”

“Prince Tobias.” William’s head snapped up as Daniel shrugged. “Come on. The way he pulled you aside from inspection? How you defended him today against those rumours about him?” William scowled; of course Daniel would figure it out. “Gotta say, I’m a bit surprised. Don’t know much ‘bout him, but you hear ‘bout his brothers all the damn time.”

“Yeah, they’re a lot louder. And crueller.” William closed his eyes. He could almost imagine the giggles that Tobias would meet his jokes with when they were young. He’d missed that sound more and more as time wore on. “But he’s not. Tobias was always kinder. Gentler. He spent time with me. Played with me. We were closer than anyone else I’ve ever known save for my mother.” He paused for a moment and glanced up. “You’re very close, if my telling you this means anything.”

That drew a proud smile from the bear. “Lucky me.”

If only William could believe that; he shook his head quickly. “Hardly. People I get close to don’t exactly have the best time of things. And they wind up hurting me in the end.” He took a deep breath as he looked up into Daniel’s eyes. He didn’t know how to say it. The words were right there, on the tip of his tongue and yet still he couldn’t summon the strength to spit them out.

Thankfully, he didn’t need to. Once again Daniel’s deductions surprised the hyena. “You loved him, but he didn’t love you back.” When William blinked, Daniel just shook his head. “It’s only the biggest damn rumour out there about him. The servant and the prince. Straight out of fairy stories; people lap that up like nothin’ else. I guess it was you they were all about. Didja... tell him how you felt?”

William felt his heart lurch. “That would have made it so much easier. I tried to, a bunch of times.” He swallowed hard as he felt tears threaten to build behind his eyes. It might have been natural, but he didn’t want to break down while explaining everything to Daniel. “I guess I didn’t have to. He’d stop me every time, or he’d find an excuse to leave. We stopped being so close. He stopped letting me touch him the way we always had. No more hugs. No more paw-holding. No more sitting together, even.” He took a deep breath and shuddered. “Soon he stopped showing up at the usual places. I’d see him less and less often.

“And then, eventually... not at all.” He closed his eyes to try and stall out the tears forming there. Fingers curled his paws to fists as he slid them across the table. “And that was that. He avoided me the rest of the time. So no matter what those rumours say and what Lyle wants to laugh about, I’ll say it right. Tobias is no tailraiser. He can’t be, because... because he didn’t-”

Words failed him. Tears hit the table and so did one of his fists. Then his head, as he let it fall to rest on the surface. He became idly aware of one of Daniel’s paws as it came to rest on one of his fists, enveloping it entirely. The other reached across the table to rub at the back of William’s head, and the hyena lost any sense of composure he might have had left. The dam broke, and his body trembled as he launched into a chorus of wracking sobs.

Daniel didn’t seem to mind in the slightest, at least. He remained there, the paw on the back of William’s head stroked back and forth in a smooth, comforting rhythm that did nothing to help with the wave of pain that came along with that admission. Maybe, William thought, it could help later. For the moment there was just that admission. All that it meant. The reality that he’d never wanted to admit.

He’d *never* been good enough for Tobias.

And as he sat there, doubled over and shaking with the force of his feelings bursting out through him, Daniel was silent. The bear simply sat across from him. He held William’s paw.

Stroked his head. He didn't ask any questions or try to relate or change the subject or do anything else to maybe distract or otherwise help the hyena. On some level William kind of wanted Daniel to do exactly that. To give him an excuse; an opening that would let him step away from what he was feeling.

But he didn't do that. What he did was so much worse, and so much better. Even as William rode out the waves of pain and grief and anger and loss that were all tied to his memories of Tobias, Daniel didn't stop it. His gentle touch coaxed it out. It held William together when it seemed like his heart would explode and rip him into pieces.

Whether or not it was down to Daniel's touch or presence or empathy or whatever else it could have been didn't matter to William. The hyena was just glad that he was there. As he started to wrangle the sobs that had overtaken his body, he managed to uncurl the fist that was wrapped up in Daniel's paw and squeezed it. The bear gave a tender squeeze back, but still didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

"Sorry." The single word croaked out of William as he shook his head slowly against the table. His fur came back damp from the tears spilled across it; how many there were and how long he'd shed them were the furthest things from his mind in that moment. "I'm sorry... I'm s-sorry..."

Again Daniel's reply came in silence. He gave another squeeze to William's paw, and that touch alone sent him into another series of heavy sobs. The hyena lifted his head from the table, his face doubtless an absolute mess as he fixed reddened eyes on Daniel once more. The bear simply stared sadly back, taking it all in. "I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be. Nothin' to be sorry for." Again he squeezed at William's paw; the hyena's muzzle trembled as he sniffled loudly. "If anythin' I should be the one to 'pologise to you. I knew it was bad, but if I knew you were carryin' all this around..." He shook his head as he rubbed at the back of William's.

"Well... now you know. Everything that matters, anyway." William tried to breathe a quick deep breath, but wound up choking on it instead and launching into a quick couple of coughs. "I was so stupid, thinking he'd want me. That anyone would."

At that the bear pursed his lips and shook his head hard. He shifted his paw from William's head to his chin, forcing the hyena to lift his eyes to meet his gaze. "That's the first couple stupid things you've said, an' I don't wanna hear 'em again. You aren't stupid. You're smarter than half the people I ever met and at more'n half their age, an' I reckon y'gonna have folk fallin' over themselves to be with you. There ain't nothin' stupid about fallin' in love, whenever an' however it happens, an' you deserve it. You'll find it."

"Yeah, easy enough for you to say." William swiped his sleeve across his face and left it smeared and damp. "Love's probably easy for you. Sharing it around the way you do."

"That ain't love, kid. That's just havin' a good time. Don't you go confusin' the two now, or you'll start makin' some big mistakes." Daniel leaned across the table and stuck William with an intense stare. "You start actin' out on big emotions without thinkin' it through, y'just make things worse. Like your prince back when he ran the inspection."

William shuddered as he thought back to it. “I still can’t believe he did that to me. Like he hadn’t hurt me enough, he had to try and get me in trouble with the commander too?”

Daniel smiled for the first time since William had begun to spill his story. “It’s a good thing you did right by the commander. Anythin’ the prince wanted would’ve got you in it deep.” He paused for a moment as he leaned back in his chair once more. “But I think you missed somethin’. Which, y’know, easy to do after all that. You *were* pretty mad.”

William frowned and wiped at his face again. What was the bear getting at? “I didn’t think I missed anything.”

“Yeah, but you were neck-deep in everythin’ that happened. I got to watch it from outside, y’know?” Daniel shook his head as he drew one paw back. The other stayed tightly gripped by William’s paw; he wasn’t about to let that one go just yet. “If he was just so done with you, why’d he try so hard to get your attention?”

“Cruelty.” The word came out before he could stop it, and guilt followed in its wake. He winced and glanced away. “No. Sorry. That’s just... he wouldn’t have done it just to be cruel.”

Daniel nodded, and his smile widened ever so slightly. “Good. Real good; you’re not just thinkin’ with those feelings.” A thumb rubbed over the back of William’s paw. “So. Why would he do that?”

That was the question though, wasn’t it? Even in the wake of everything he’d just vented to Daniel, there was no clear answer that he could come up with. “I don’t... I mean...”

“It’s ‘cause he *does* care.” William scowled at the words but Daniel continued unperturbed. “What? You think he’s not smart enough t’know he made a mistake? ‘Cause damn, if I’d done that to you I sure couldn’t call it anythin’ else.”

Again William felt his heart lurch, but this time it was absent any pain. The statement warmed him from the inside out and set his cheeks and ears to flushing. “Yeah, but... even if that’s true, what am I supposed to do about it? Good on him if he realized he shouldn’t have done what he did, but what does that *mean*?”

Daniel paused and glanced toward the bed for a moment. “What if it meant he was hopin’ to make amends?”

“Then I’d...” William trailed off. Frowned. What *would* he do? “I... don’t know. It’s not something I ever thought would happen. Never thought about it.”

“Maybe you should. You might get the chance to find out.” The bear smiled and started to pull his paw back.

It had barely slipped an inch away than William extended his arm out to keep his paw pressed into Daniel’s grip. “And maybe I will. And maybe I still don’t know what that would mean. And maybe I don’t care anymore.”

The bear smirked. “Nah. You definitely care.”

“If I know one thing though, it’s that relying on what I thought of Tobias to actually *be* what Tobias is just gets me hurt. I can’t let myself care. Not too much.” He frowned a little as he looked up at Daniel. “Is that bad?”

“That you don’t want him to hurt you again? Nah. That’s not bad at all.” Daniel’s fingers tightened around William’s paw. “No one wants t’get hurt. I can’t ‘magine how much it’s torn y’up inside, keepin’ all that to y’self all this time. If you don’t wanna walk back into that again, I’m sure not gonna tell you t’do it. You got a good heart. It’s not the sorta thing that I’d wanna see broken.”

William nodded and sighed. He looked down along his arm and to Daniel’s paw, still holding his. The same sort of touch he’d once shared with Tobias. The same sort of touch he’d missed for so long. The chances and opportunities with Daniel were obvious; the bear’d made no secret of his sexual interests at any point. It was a chance for him. He could explore, and experiment, and grow. He could even maybe be happy for once, if he was lucky.

But even as the thought came to his mind, William let go of the bear’s paw. He allowed his digits to slide out of Daniel’s grip, and watched as his instructor’s smile faltered. “Then I need to get myself figured out. Find where I stand. What I am. Who I am.”

With that, Daniel’s smile returned in full. He nodded once as he stood from the table. “Y’now, maybe all that time y’spent with a prince did some good. Y’not just smarter than most people I’ve ever met. Wiser, too.”

William quickly scrambled up to his feet as well and looked to the door. “Wait, you’re just... you’re going? After that?”

The bear chuckled and shrugged. “Or what? Stay here? Confuse you some more? Try’n getcha in the mood and bed you?” He shook his head. “Nah. It’s jus’ like you said. Y’need time before anythin’ like that. ‘Sides, still weren’t plannin’ on anythin’ like that tonight.”

“No, it’s... not just that.” William looked around the room and spread his arms wide. “You already paid for this room. I’m not about to take that away from you.”

“Aww. Y’sweet.” Daniel reached into a pocket and tossed William the room key, only to then flash another one. As the hyena looked on in confusion, he began to chuckle. “Got myself a separate one. Just in case you weren’t in the mood for company, or if I was stinkin’ y’out of your own room.” He winked as William began to smile. “Maybe I’m smarter than I look, too.”

“You’ll never catch me doubting it again.” William paused as he stepped around the table and stood before Daniel. “One thing, before you go?” Daniel nodded slowly, and then gasped as William stepped forward and wrapped his arms around the larger male’s middle. Daniel’s arms fell around William in turn, and the hyena sighed as he nuzzled into the bear’s chest.

He still stank from patrol, but then again so did William. He breathed deeply of their mixed scents and shivered, not with disgust but something else. Something nicer. Something comforting. The hyena almost whimpered as Daniel’s head came to rest on top of his, and he felt for all the world like he could just stay there forever. No patrols, no rebels to fight, no training or soldiering or princes. Just the warmth of a kind embrace; the sort that he’d only last

felt when he'd last had a true friend. Before life became so complicated and noisy. "Thank you."

"Hey, you're welcome." Daniel squeezed him closer and rubbed a paw up and down William's back. He shuddered in response; the hyena was absolutely certain then that he didn't want Daniel to leave.

But if he didn't, William didn't know what he would do. He could feel all of his various emotions swirling around inside of him, a cacophonous chorus of sensations and impulses at war that blended together into an incoherent, overwhelming mess. Anything he did would be equally incoherent, and he didn't want to act on impulse. When – *if* – he acted on anything, it would be because he'd chosen it wilfully. He pulled back from the bear's embrace before the closeness sapped away his ability to do so.

Daniel allowed his paws to slip around to William's sides, and there they remained for a moment as he looked down at the hyena. "I'll just be across the hall if y'need anythin' at all. Okay?" When William nodded, Daniel's smile warmed. "Just knock. Anythin' you need, it's yours." His paws finally dropped away. William found that he missed them immediately.

Before he could consider asking for them to return, the bear turned around and pulled the door open. He was through it a second later, though he paused with a smile to look back around William's room. Then he just pulled the door closed, and suddenly William was alone again.

The hyena just stood there for a few moments as he tried to process everything that had just happened. All the history and feelings he'd just poured out. Everything he'd just dumped onto Daniel. How the bear had seemed to take it so gladly. How he felt about it all. How *all* he felt.

He took a deep breath. The air still reeked of their combined smells. William frowned and sniffed at himself. After that hug, some of Daniel's scent had clearly rubbed off on him. His fur bristled as his skin tingled. Took another breath. Sighed. Maybe, he thought, he could get on with the job of figuring himself out. The sooner he could do that, the sooner he could... well. Having something nice to look forward to was a new feeling, but he didn't dislike it.

William turned and made his way back to the table, only to almost trip over himself. He glanced down and saw quickly that it hadn't been his own clumsy feet, but Daniel's boots and armour. The bear had left them there on the floor. He frowned for a second, but then started to smile again. Daniel would be back for them. Or, if he wanted, he could take them across the hall. His heart raced for a second at the thought of what state Daniel could be in if he went over.

Those thoughts ran hot through his body, filling every vein as he sat himself down again. Maybe he could take them over. Maybe he *would* take them over. Maybe his imagination would become reality and maybe it wouldn't. Or maybe he'd just sit back and let that imagination run wild for a few more moments.

A little imagination never hurt anyone, after all.