

Interwoven

RESPONSIBILITY: PART THREE

41st Day of the Verdant Growths, 17 AoE

William blinked blood out of his eyes and snarled.

The display did little to ward off the wolf and his raised sword. He charged through the undergrowth at William, blade bared and rage in his eyes. He couldn't have been more than sixteen. He *wouldn't* be more than sixteen.

They didn't provide much protection, but the snug, light leathers that covered William from neck to ankle were flexible, light, and sturdy in equal measure. They gave him the lightness to pirouette from the swing, the freedom of movement to bring his own weapon tightly around, and protection from the young wolf's blood as his slice loosed another spray of the hot stuff across him. The branded symbol of Ratholarin on his breast was so soaked in it that it couldn't even be seen anymore.

He turned as an oversized horse moved on Daniel. The bear parried the first blow before he grabbed the horse's swordpaw and squeezed it tight enough for William to hear the splintering of bone. The horse's scream of agony only lasted until Daniel wrenched his weapon free and jammed it into his throat. Daniel's much heavier armour was just as soaked as William's. As Victor's. As Lyle's.

It had been a short skirmish by their standards, but William still sucked in deep breaths of air. He didn't want to get winded, or prematurely tired. "That looks like the last of them here."

"Weren't meant to be any of 'em here." Daniel shook his head as he glanced through the trees. The forest was still alight with the sounds of fighting. "Don't sound like it's just us, neither."

"The other scouts. Vic and Lyle." William frowned as he swiped his off-paw across his face. The blood that coated his face was cleared from his eyes, at least somewhat. "They don't look like mercenaries."

"Don't fight like 'em, neither. They- *back!*" The moment the shout went up, William spun around behind Daniel. The bear lurched forward and his sword swept up to parry a sword strike that came from some soldier in the bushes.

William's weapon rose as well, as two more young rat males raced in toward him. The hyena grit his teeth as he took a single step forward from Daniel to meet them, his sword raised to catch the blow from one of them even as he kicked out against the other. His boot landed in the rat's stomach and launched him backward. A punch to the jaw of the rat he'd parried disoriented him, and the same motion that drove back the enemy's sword brought William's down across his face. He screeched in pain, and dropped his weapon to the ground.

He'd grown used to that sound faster than he'd expected.

There was no time to dwell; the other rat was back up on his feet. His blade stabbed forward once, twice. Just as Daniel had taught him, William kept his movements tight in against his body. The rat's blows were wider. Sloppier. Just like the hyena's had been, once. It was almost effortless to knock his attacks aside, until at last there was an opening. William leaned into the attacking swing and shoulder-checked the rat before he could react. His strike faltered, he stumbled back, and was left open for a flick of William's blade. It opened a crimson line in his chest, cleft right through his leathers. William's armour received a fresh coat of red.

He whirled at the scream from the rat he'd wounded but not dispatched. As his compatriot hit the ground, the bloody-faced creature snatched up his sword and charged William. The undisciplined strike didn't land as the hyena twisted to the side and swept his sword up as hard as he could. Once more the rat's weapon hit the ground, but that time half of his arm went with it. The rat's second scream of pain was more pronounced, and it almost felt like mercy when William brought his weapon back up and cut deep into the rat's throat. Certainly it was a mercy for William's ears, and his heart.

William spared Daniel a quick glance and found himself just in time to watch the bear deliver a vicious punch to a tall badger. Dazed, the enemy soldier stumbled forward ever so slightly. Daniel's reverse blow hit all the harder; blood spilled from the badger's muzzle as the pommel of Daniel's sword crashed into the side of his head. The badger's eyes crossed even as his head snapped at an unnatural angle. The bear panted heavily, his breath steaming in the cool morning air.

He stepped in until he was back to back with Daniel once more. "We can't stay here."

"No kidding." Daniel glanced back of his shoulder at William even as the hyena kept his eyes glued to the forest around them. "I got north-east my way, sun's any judge."

William nodded. Victor and Lyle had been west of their location. "Got my back?"

"It's y'front I'm worried 'bout." A meaty paw reached around to pat at William's hip. "Go. I gotcha."

With that, William started off. He fought the urge to bolt as fast as his legs would carry him; even in flat, open terrain, he'd learned that he could easily outpace Daniel. His backside wouldn't stay safe if he got too far ahead of the bear. Instead his pace was measured, one foot in front of the other as he turned to the west at a brisk pace.

Even as adrenaline pumped and threatened to make him jump at every breeze-brushed branch, William tried to keep his breathing even. The smell of spilled blood filled every single breath and carried with it the urge to vomit. That too he'd grown very used to very quickly, but the sheer volume that day was overwhelming. It was as though the smell of it infected every breath.

As the bushes and trees swept to either side of him and Daniel backpedalled to keep pace, William grit his teeth. The sounds of battle ahead didn't sound particularly promising. "They've gotta be moving on the main camp."

“Didn’t expect us out patrollin’ I wager.” Daniel’s words came a little more breathlessly than William’s had. For all his stamina, the bear had taken on the larger, stronger enemies that threatened them. It had clearly taken a toll.

Not that William wasn’t tired. Real life hadn’t been like the swordfighting in stories. Great and grand duels that lasted minutes at a time weren’t the norm. A quick riposte ended fights much faster. An errant blade could catch your throat at any time. A lapse in concentration could end you just as easily. The focus and the exertion had been more than the training yard had prepared him for.

And yet he held to both as he charged between a pair of bushes and locked eyes at last on Victor and Lyle. They stood back to back as well, fending off three more attackers. The nearest, a burly bear roughly Daniel’s size, turned toward William’s intrusion and caught Victor’s sword in his side for his trouble. The coyote ducked under the vicious backhand that came for him in turn and wedged his sword firmly in his enemy’s gut. He kicked out and knocked the bear back as his insides began to spill out.

The other assailant was a wiry weasel whose sword was much thinner than those of the Ratholarin soldiers. He took advantage of Victor’s opening to leap forward in a quick stab before William could close the gap, and he cringed as he heard the old coyote gasp in pain. The blade came free again a moment later, bloody for the first few inches before the weasel thrust forward once more.

That time William was close enough, and he brought his own weapon down in an overhead swing with all his might. The thin, almost flimsy blade it met was severed completely under his blow, the weasel left with a short stump and the elaborate hilt in his paw. He cursed in some foreign language William didn’t know and reached to his belt for a dagger there. A thrust from the hyena’s sword sliced into the weasel’s paw and made him think better of the idea.

Discretion was obviously the better part of valour in the weasel’s mind. He turned tail and fled back the way he must have come, disappearing into the undergrowth as Victor slumped against Lyle’s back. Despite the concern for his commanding officer, William turned his back to the coyote. Lyle and Daniel could handle the other enemy. “Sir! Are you alright?”

“I’ve been stabbed, William; what do you think?” The words were laced with a growl of pain rather than malice. There was a cough and William chanced a look back over his shoulder. No blood in Victor’s muzzle, but that could be a matter of time. “Damn rapiers. Always the damn way.”

William filed the word away for later questions as he glanced around. The bushes were rustling. More were coming. “Daniel...?”

“Got it. Sorry, sir; this’s gonna sting.” As William looked around his field of view, he could see more than a few shadowy forms on approach. They didn’t have long, but he was grateful to hear a most undignified yelp from Victor as Daniel hoisted the lieutenant over a shoulder. “Lyle! Support William until I’m back!”

Even as the tiger grunted his agreement, William glanced back over his shoulder. Victor looked sour even as he bled across Daniel’s side. Daniel seemed resolute. “Take Lyle. I’ve got

this.” He shook his head as the bear opened his muzzle. “You can’t fight carrying him. Lyle can cover you both and I can keep them busy.”

Daniel grit his teeth and William could see indecision take a hold for the first time they’d been in battle together. His heart skipped a beat. The bear didn’t want to leave him. It was plain on his face that he knew that. Also that he knew what he had to do. What was *meant* to happen.

That won out as a panther leaped out of the bush with a shrieking battle cry. William growled back as he ducked under the wild swing and swept his sword up and across the feline’s chest. He kicked the corpse back and whirled on Daniel. “Faster you go, the faster you get back and help me!”

That snapped him out of it, and Daniel nodded once. “With me, Lyle!” The shout immediately pulled the tiger off the line, and he turned to glance at William one last time.

By that point William had already turned back to the approaching enemy forces. It was gratifying to hear Daniel’s tromping footsteps as he rushed off back toward camp, even if they drowned out Lyle’s. This was what they’d trained for. This was what he’d been forged to do. What they trusted him to do.

And so William shifted into a defensive crouch and brought his sword up and at the ready. He cast his gaze around one more time. Another weasel. Rat. Fox. Another fox. Skunk. And there, in the middle of them all, a towering horse with a wicked looking mace. The iron ball dripped with gore and William frowned. Suddenly, sending Lyle away didn’t look like the right idea. “Well. *That’s* going to be a problem.”

“Drop it, puppy.” The horse’s voice was coarse but not hateful. Nor was it winded, which only made William scowl all the harder. “You look dead on your feet. Don’t make us put you down in the dirt.” He turned to the nearest of the two foxes. “Get after his captain.”

“He’s a lieutenant, actually.” The fox stepped forward anyway and made to just brush past William. As soon as he was in range to strike, William feinted quickly in and back. It earned him the taunted swing of the fox’s sword, almost faster than he was ready for. The bait worked however, and allowed William to thrust his blade to the side and right up into the fox’s chest. His opponent grunted and gripped at the blade, but only for a moment before William shoved him off.

He hit the ground as William settled back into his stance. The horse fixed him with a wrathful glare. “On second thought, we’ll kill the smartarsed pup first.”

Four on one weren’t odds William was comfortable with. His mind raced. He couldn’t take them in a straight fight, and that horse’s mace looked like it’d seen too many heads for William to want to add to them. He grit his teeth as the horse’s soldiers charged. He couldn’t hold them alone.

And so he ran, but not back toward camp. He turned back in the direction he’d just come from with a grin. “If you can catch me first!” He bolted, and to a mixture of joy and terror, all four of the horse’s soldiers followed him. “Damn!”

They weren’t faster than he was, of course, but they also weren’t wearing the heavy armour of most Ratholarin troops. As William vaulted over a thick, half-rotted log in his way,

he knew he wouldn't be able to exhaust them. That wasn't the point, at least. Daniel and Lyle would be back. He just had to distract them until then.

But if he wasn't careful, they'd turn and make for the camp before they were ready to fight. He whirled in place, leaning against the trunk of a tree as the skunk drew nearer. "Come on! You gonna let me cut down your buddy and *not* avenge him?" He ducked under the blow that chopped toward his head, but his own return blow was parried quickly. "No honour, huh?"

"Gonna cut yer ruttin' tongue out m'self!" The skunk roared as William danced back again from his next blow, his sword burying itself in the tree. There was no chance to counterattack though, as the fox and the rat swarmed out from behind the skunk to cut William off. He bit back a curse as he turned and darted back into the undergrowth.

"Don't make this hard, pup!" The horse's shout carried well through the forest even as William ducked under a low-hanging branch. He frowned as an arrow thudded into the trunk of the tree, and a glance back showed the weasel had produced a short bow from somewhere and began to nock another arrow. "You ain't getting' out of this alive!"

He barked a quick laugh as he ducked behind another tree for cover. "I've heard that before!" Footsteps rushed up to the side of the tree nearest him, and the hyena swung his blade around as hard as he could. It slammed into the prepared block of the rat, but with such ferocity that it knocked the rat's sword into his own legs. He cried out in pain and stumbled backward, all but knocking over the fox behind him. That'd buy some time!

William cut around the other side of the tree and made for another selection of bushes. An arrow whizzed over his head, and his ears splayed instinctively as he ducked his head low. A glance aside showed the weasel glaring at him as he drew another arrow, and William quickly turned on a paw and shifted his trajectory. The weasel's eyes widened as William charged right at him. His bow lifted to fire off a panicked arrow.

That one too went wide, but William never reached him. Instead the skunk, sword obviously cleared from the trunk of that tree, interposed himself between the two. William thought fast, feinting to the left before darting right. It put the skunk just barely off balance; the swing that came his way delayed barely enough to be stepped aside. The effort left William's sword out of position however, and he had to settle for charging down and shoving the weasel into the dirt instead of striking him.

The weasel did tumble down, but William found himself stumbling in response. He caught himself against a branch, but yelped and pulled his paw back as the fox emerged from his other side. The branch was lopped clean off, and William's paw would have joined it if he'd been any slower. His counter thrust was sloppy, but it was enough to ward the fox off for the moment as he broke back into a run.

A rustling behind him was almost missed as he tried to put more distance between himself and the squad he'd baited into chasing him. He might have put it out of his mind entirely, but for the fact that it had to be the weasel on the leafy ground. He looked over his shoulder to see the weasel rolled onto one knee, bow raised and arrow nocked. He loosed.

The pain that pierced William's thigh was beyond anything he'd ever felt before. Nothing in the castle nor in the training yard prepared him for the burning agony that ripped through his flesh. He stumbled and cried out, pitching himself down into the dirt in a way that

felt almost pleasant by comparison. His leg splayed out, protected from the worst of the impact as he felt his heartbeat's pulse more strongly than ever before. It thudded in his ears and throbbed in his thigh. Blood gushed around the shaft of the arrow. "Ugh!"

William rolled onto his back, sword carefully raised to ward off the approaching figures. He could make out the fox and the skunk most clearly, but the weasel and the rat still lingered just behind them. He grit his teeth at them and offered a wordless snarl. He didn't need to give them any last words. His life was all they'd get. A glance behind them showed a broad figure on approach, mace dripping as it swung idly. William looked up at the figure and smiled. "Took your time."

Both the fox and the skunk smirked, but the rat and the weasel didn't get the chance. The figure swung the mace up sharply into the side of the rat's head, caving it in a single vicious blow. He then jammed a sword deep in the weasel's chest, causing him to screech in pain and surprise. That turned the fox and the skunk around just in time to see that it wasn't the horse that carried the mace toward them.

It was *Daniel*.

The bear looked like a goliath god of war, caked in blood and grime and rage as he ripped the mace head and sword from the rat and weasel's bodies. No sooner had the fox and skunk noticed him than he was upon them, weapons a blur of violent motion. The skunk's sword was caught in a swing from the mace as Daniel parried the fox's blow.

As he fought them off, William forced himself back to his feet. He buckled again almost instantly, but still managed to stumble forward just far enough to drive his sword into the back of the distracted skunk. He hitched the blade up and toward the warrior's heart, and the skunk gasped before he fell limp. His body took William with him as the strength gave out of his wounded leg.

No sooner did he hit the ground than the fox joined him, his blocked blade left out of position as Daniel swung the mace about. The head careened into the fox's face, and there he left it as he bent down to scoop William up and out of the dirt. "Dammit, Will! Don't go running off when I'm comin' back for ya!"

"Not... gettin' far now." William gulped as he looked down at his leg. Blood still drooled out from the wound, but not as much as he would have expected. "Damn archers... least it took three shots to pin me down."

Daniel chuckled as Lyle raced up to join them. His blooded sword was held at the ready as he scanned the area for any threats. "You're mad, Will. You know that, right?"

"Guard me on the way back." Daniel hefted William up as Lyle nodded, but the bear's eyes were only on the hyena. "You up for the trip?"

William could only smile as he lay back in Daniel's arms. The pain in his leg seemed more and more distant. "Not how I *wanted* you to carry me off, but it'll do."

He giggled, though Daniel's eyes were wide with concern. The canopy of trees above William seemed to be growing brighter, and his eyelids fluttered closed to shield himself from the glare. "Hey, none of that, Will! Eyes open, soldier!"

The order was clear, but it didn't really reach him. Instead he nuzzled himself into the bear's big arm and sighed. He smelled better than the blood. Sounded better, too, even if his voice was only growing more faint. William's whole body felt light.

And then he felt nothing at all.

#

The first thing that he noticed was that his muzzle and throat were absolutely *parched*. The second was that his whole body was stiff. The third didn't come until William tried to open his eyes, when he realised that the world outside his eyelids was far too bright.

He groaned and recoiled from it, rolling his head slowly to the side. His arm lifted to shield his face somewhat, but the hyena only succeeded in smacking his muzzle with his digits. "Ugh."

"Well damn. You're actually awake!" It took a moment for William to recognise the voice as Daniel's. He rolled his head back the other way – apparently he was laying on some cot or other and draped in a thin sheet that barely covered his otherwise naked body – and opened his eyes with a little more trepidation.

His vision was blurry as his eyes tried to focus up, and it took a few seconds more to make out the details of the bear's concerned expression. He tried to say, "Hi," but the sound only came out as a dry rasp.

Daniel's eyes went wide and he turned to a small table by the side of William's bed; it was far more than a cot in an army tent, far larger and more plush by a wide margin. He grasped at a wooden cup that was absolutely dwarfed by his paw and guided it over toward the hyena's face. "Don't try'n talk too much, now. You need water, the physician says." He winced as he gently tipped the cup up, and a cool trickle of water splashed partly into and partly across William's muzzle. What made its way inside was a relief, and he worked it around his muzzle and swallowed.

And then he coughed violently enough to make Daniel recoil and almost spill the rest of the water. A twist of William's body saw his leg graze the sheet, and a spark of pain went up from where the arrow had pierced him. "Ah! Damn..."

"Here, lemme help y'with that." Daniel set the cup down again and reached out, lifting William by the shoulders with surprising delicacy. Again came the sparks of pain, but they were lessened as Daniel helped William up into a sitting position. The hyena's bare chest was on display as the sheet dropped away, but William wasn't really in much of a position to care. "There y'go. Should be up'n about in no time. You, ah... really scared me there, y'know."

William swallowed dryly as he glanced back at the water cup. Daniel followed his gaze and brought it back around, and William nodded his thanks as it was brought again to his lips. His arm lifted to try and take a hold of it, but it just flopped back down before he could get a grip. Daniel didn't shift away, instead focusing on just helping William to drink without drowning him in the process. If anything, he was a little too reserved with the water for William's taste.

Over the course of a couple of otherwise silent minutes, William proceeded to drain the cup in its entirety and take in the room. Daniel's weapon and armour were nearby, as were

William's. All had been cleaned of the viscera and grime of the battle, and the bear was dressed much more casually than William would have expected. The area had to have been secured; that was the only reason such a potent warrior would have been left to help a wounded boy drink. Only when the cup was empty did William lean back against the bed's headboard and close his eyes again. "Thanks."

"Don't you worry about it. I'm just glad to see you awake." He winced as he sat back down in a small chair beside William's bed. "Seems that arrow nicked somethin' important in y'leg. You lost a lot of blood, 'n I was scared that you mightn't wake up."

William frowned, eyes still closed as he shifted both of his legs. He could feel where the wound was and winced as the bandages rubbed against it, but they seemed to both work just fine. At least in that very slight test. "Sorry. Didn't mean to cause worry."

Daniel smiled at that, and the hyena cast his eyes about. He looked to be settled in a bedroom from some decently appointed home, but it sure wasn't one he recognized. "I don't... where are we? What happened?"

"Ah, yeah. That." Daniel reached to the bedside table again to a small pitcher there and began to pour some more water into the cup. "Oh, and the physician said you gotta drink as much as y'can stand, so... this place." He set the pitcher back down and offered the cup to William again. That time the hyena was able to take a better hold of it, and he brought it gingerly to his muzzle and began to sip. "Just an abandoned house. Edge of the village. Kurest."

The hyena tilted his head a little and lowered the cup to his lap. "Wouldn't have thought this'd make a good place to treat wounds."

"Well, ain't anyone else usin' it. Not anymore." Daniel shook his head and sighed. "Those folks what attacked us? It was Kurest. The villagers, all of 'em. Didn't know what came over 'em at first, but every single one of 'em just started stalkin' the forest to make for our camp. Few mercenaries stopped off in town too, hired t'cause some damage; they're the ones what messed y'up."

A shudder ran through William. He could see the faces of the foxes and the skunk and the rat and the weasel. "If they were mercenaries, they weren't that good... not if I could take 'em down."

That drew a snort from Daniel. "Think I brought down most of 'em, actually." He watched and waited for William to smile before he continued. "Anyway, there was some shaman to one of the old gods, Guavi, there. She was the one what twisted the villager's minds and sent 'em all after us." Daniel frowned and shook his head. "Heard the commander's the one who got the killin' blow, but he lost a fair few of us in the process. Lots've dead. Lots've wounded."

At the mention of the name *Guavi*, a shiver rolled its way through William's body. His head began to throb and he shook it slowly from side to side. Water. He needed more water. "At least we stopped her." He began to sip at the cup again.

Daniel nodded, but glanced down. "Yeah, but not before we wiped out most the village. It's all... empty now. Only a dozen souls left, probably, pickin' up the pieces'n tryin' to get things workin' right again. We offered to help, but... well, they don't want us 'round no more.

Can't say I blame 'em." He reached out for the cup as William finished it off, and brought it back to the bedside table to refill it. "Been a rough week for all of us."

William blinked. A week? "That's impossible."

"Nope. Lyle actually holdin' up in a fight and savin' Vic's arse, your arse, *and* my arse. That's what's impossible. And hey, that really happened too." The bear smiled as he set the cup down and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. William shuffled awkwardly aside, but there was more than enough room for even the large bear to sit. "I'm surprised you don't remember. Physician said you were in'n out a bit when I was on patrol."

The hyena eyed Daniel. Just how long had he been there? "And... when you weren't?"

"On patrol?" He reached down to gently squeeze the nearest of William's paws. "Right here. In that chair. All day, all night." He smiled as William felt himself begin to blush in spite of all the lost blood. There was no way that was true. "Wasn't so bad. Talked to you a bit. Didn't have you tellin' me how much I stank. And the commander'n Vic let me be y'guard while you recover. That was nice."

"Sweet of you. And you smell fine now." William shook his head and smiled. "Or, at least as fine as you ever smell."

The bear smirked. "Watch it, kid. I don't gotta look out for you *this* much."

"No. But you did." William, rubbed his paw back limply against Daniel's, and the bear squeezed it again. "And you're right. You didn't have to."

Daniel shook his head as his expression sobered up somewhat. "Ah, sure I did. Vic's wound weren't nearly as bad as yours; that little stab missed all the nasty stuff. You only got it 'cause we was draggin' him outta there. He owes you. *I* owe you for sendin' Lyle with me. He helped me get Vic out nice'n quick. And safe."

William leaned his head back as Daniel glanced aside. There was a hint of red in the bear's ears. He smiled. "Is that all?"

The larger male turned back to him, an eyebrow perked as he gave those ears a little flick. "No. 'Cause I've got pretty fond of you and I wouldn't have forgiven m'self if anythin' happened t'you on my watch." He squeezed William's paw again. "You're too young and y'got too big a heart t'die like that. What you deserve's a nice, long, comfy life. Happy."

"Mmm. That sounds nice." William let his eyes close again with a sigh. What even was that to him? What sort of life would that be? It occurred to him all at once that he'd never really given any thought to what his own happiness would be. It used to be running with Tobias, making fun out of nothing in the castle. Ever since those days, there was nothing that had ever compared. Nothing that had just been for him.

Something must have gave him away. Daniel shifted on the bed, and William opened his eyes to see the bear staring at him with concern. "What's wrong?"

Nothing, of course. It was just strange for William to think about himself. After everything he'd seen of life outside the castle, it was the norm for people to think about themselves first. Well ahead of others. He'd never been like that and couldn't begin to imagine

it, but did that mean he couldn't do things for himself? Did it mean he couldn't be happy, and if he could... what form would that take?

William rather suspected it would take the form of the bear before him.

It was a terrifying thought as he considered it, given the last time he'd thought that of anyone. But whether it was the brush from death, the blood loss, or some realisation or revelation that had come to him didn't matter. He leaned up, pulling himself as best he can with the leverage of Daniel's arm, until he could press up into an awkward hug.

Daniel's other arm came down around him, and William sighed – he might have gasped really instead – as he leaned in close. The bear's scent filled him, absent the sweat and grime of a hard day's work, but cleaned and dressed and *good*. "I'm happy here, I think."

That earned him a sigh in turn from Daniel, not of concern but of contentment. As William pulled back from the hug, Daniel slid a little more fully onto the bed. He loomed somewhat over William, and the hyena began to blush as his thoughts raced. Where was Daniel going? What was he doing? Was he- "Don't go getting' any ideas, now." Oh. Was he disappointed? On some level, William wondered if that's what he felt.

Instead, he simply allowed Daniel to shift him as he pleased, easing him further over on the bed as Daniel slipped down alongside him. The bear lay down as he drew William against his side, the difference in their size never more clearly apparent to the hyena than right then. He found his head resting on Daniel's shoulder, his body clutched in the crook of the bear's arm and shivered. "I'm... I'm naked."

"I know. I'm not." Daniel tugged the hyena closer and William nuzzled into the bear's chest. "Don't know if you're feelin' up to me changin' that. Physician said you need rest, not any hard activities."

William gulped. As he snuggled into Daniel's side, anything at all was starting to feel like a 'hard' activity. "Not looking to use that favour. Not here. Not like this."

"Like this?" Daniel cocked his head as he nuzzled down against the top of William's.

"Mmm. Me, wounded. In a stranger's bed. On deployment in a dead village." Despite the horror of any of those individual elements, none of them conveyed the disgust that William was certain he'd otherwise feel. That, he supposed, was the power of Daniel's body pressed tight against his own. The comfort that radiated from his touch was exhilarating. If he hadn't been at death's door, William would have probably felt more alive than he ever had.

Still, it wouldn't have been Daniel without a coy tease. The bear chuckled to himself as he nosed down between William's ears. "I mean, I dunno. Ain't no one else around, and I've been told this muzzle's got some powerful medicinal properties."

"Is that so?" William couldn't help but chuckle. Between their bodies, he felt his sheath throb and thicken. No panic came with it, nor did a desire to hide it. If Daniel noticed, he noticed. William wasn't about to hide anything from the bear anymore.

"Oh yeah. Been told I could suck the life right outta someone if I needed." William shivered as he heard Daniel licking his chops. "But in your case, I'd promise to be real gentle

and leave the life in you, at least. If y'wanted, of course. Be a right pleasure to help you recover. Absolute pleasure, really."

Those throbs intensified, and William felt his tip starting to peek out. At least some part of him was eager for what the bear was offering. Still he shook his head and closed his eyes as he nestled into Daniel's shoulder. "Trust me when I say I'd like nothing more right now. But," he added as Daniel began to draw the sheet back, "this isn't the time. Or the place. Is that... okay? With you?"

He looked up, on some level worried that he'd said something that would only upset the bear. But when his eyes met Daniel's, it was only a smile and a warmth that shone in the bear's eyes. William felt his heart skip a beat. "Yeah. 'Course that's okay with me. Whatever you need."

"Whatever?" Daniel nodded back to him, and William lowered his head to rest on the bear's shoulder again. He nuzzled against his tunic and sighed once more as his eyelids fell once more. The excitement and the emotional rush that filled him had made them all the heavier. Clearly it was too much excitement so soon after waking. "I need this. You. Here. Now."

A low hum of assent rumbled out of Daniel as he leaned back a little harder against the headboard. The paw around William rubbed and stroked at his hip and his side in a way that didn't let his malehood relax, but didn't coax it much further either. It was a delicious sort of 'almost' state that the exhausted William found almost hypnotically pleasing. "You got me, Will. Long as you like. I ain't goin' nowhere."

That, the hyena thought as sleep rose up to take him once more, was the most beautiful series of words he thought anyone had ever said to him.