

Interwoven

REFLECTION: PART FOUR

50th Day of the Pure Snow, 20 AoE

William had been warned.

The advance scouts had reported back their penultimate destination on the road as a potential threat. An old village, they'd said, broken and burned and not rebuilt. William had been told to be careful, as he and other scouting squads were dispatched ahead of the main body of the army to investigate. If it wasn't safe, finding another way around through uncooperative terrain could take them days.

He'd not been prepared, warnings aside, for the devastation that he beheld. The village, if indeed it could still be called that, was a husk. The land had reclaimed much of it, with thick growths wrapped around the gutted, charred remains of homes and stores, and the like. Nothing had been spared. Nothing was left standing unscathed. Under the snow beneath William's feet, the hyena wondered if he would find the bones of the warriors who'd stood to defend it.

He wondered if the bones of his blood-father were down there, too.

"Sir?" William turned his head, forced out of his thoughts by the raccoon boy at his side. He barely fit into his armour as he looked on his lieutenant with concern. "Are you alright?"

William swallowed as he looked around. It had once been a main street, but it was empty now save for the Ratholarin soldiers that once more strode along it. He caught sight down a side road of Daniel. He was in the midst of deploying his own soldiers, but William caught his eye. He waved the rest of them off and began to make his way back to the hyena. "I am. Go join... Varren and Hicker. They could use a decent pair of eyes on their search."

With a smile, the raccoon snapped off a quick salute. "Yes, sir." He turned and marched off down yet another side road, and William sighed. Had he been that young once? Had he been that excited?

Still, his worries eased as Daniel placed a paw on his shoulder and turned him gently around. "Lieutenant."

"Sir." William smiled despite himself, but he had to fight the urge to lean up to kiss the bear. They were on duty, after all. "What can I do for you?"

"Just checkin' in on my favourite subordinate." Daniel smirked back at him as his paw slid smoothly off William's shoulder. "Wasn't expectin' Geoffery to toss you a whole damn squad to look after. Know you're a bit stressed, and it ain't like you've looked too well since they sent us up here."

William winced. Was it that obvious? "The squad part's fine. When I knew it was Jorkun we were coming up on, I knew it wouldn't be great. I... here. Walk with me." He looked

around as he picked a direction. If he'd been told right... "I wanna see if it's still here. Probably is."

Daniel followed along, though he looked considerably more confused. "See if what's still here?"

The hyena sighed. Now that he'd been prompted, it felt like the strangest thing. "The, ah... the place father found my mother." He paused and glanced around the ruins. "Where my blood-father was killed."

For a few moments there was silence, before Daniel broke it with a sigh. "Y'know, that's not really the kinda thing what's gonna make me think you're doin' okay."

"Well, I never said I was okay." William looked up and down the street at the wreckage that had been wrought the last time a Ratholarin army had visited. "I was going to be born here. This could have been my home."

When Daniel didn't say anything, William turned back around. The bear's head was sympathetically lowered; his eyes shone with concern. "It wasn't going to be here originally. Mother had family here, but her home was west. Little village called Riatun. They had to leave when Eric made his way there first." William swallowed hard as he felt a surge of anger run through him. "They wanted to cut off food for the capital. Herovir relied on supplies from Riatun, sent through Jorkun."

"I'm sorry." William looked back at the bear again and catch Daniel's outstretched paw. He took it and have it a gentle squeeze. "I didn't think you'd... y'know. Be so..."

"Affected? Me neither." He rubbed his thumb against the back of the bear's paw before he forced himself to let it go. On duty. They were on duty. "Apparently my bl... *father*, he all but deserted in Riatun to get her out. Made it as far as Jorkun before I made it too hard for her to move much." He grit his teeth.

A second later though, Daniel had grabbed for his paw again. The bear pulled William close and, before the hyena could argue, wrapped him up in a tight hug. He gasped. "No, but... but we're-"

"Don't care." He all but crushed William in his embrace, Daniel's warmth and scent wrapped comfortably all around him. "You need this."

He did. William knew it, and he didn't fight the bear any further. His arms slid around Daniel's middle, across the cold links in his chainmail, and leaned his head into Daniel's arm. "She'd have got out if not for me."

"None of that, now. It weren't your fault." Daniel's paws stroked and rubbed up and down William's back, his voice low. "Couldn't be your fault. Okay? You didn't start no war. You didn't fight in it. Didn't do *anything* wrong. Y'hear me?"

Tears sprang to William's eyes with the affirmation. It hadn't even been something he'd considered before they'd arrived. That maybe if he hadn't existed, things might have been better for his mother. And here he was, marching with her conquerors... "I don't know. I don't know..."

That earned a growl from the bear, but not one of anger. He pulled back slightly from the hug to look down at William, and he brought up a paw to lift his chin. He didn't speak again until William met his gaze. When he did, his voice was gentle. Warm. Soothing. "I do."

"Sir, I- oh." William stiffened as he heard Merinda's familiar tones. "Is, ah... is everything alright?"

No. "Of course." William took a deep breath to steady himself. A glance down showed his tears had spilled against Daniel's arm, and his cheeks were comparatively dry. He let the breath out in a slow sigh as he turned around. "What is it?"

He saw the answer before he heard it. Merinda was there, along with Victor. The old coyote had a paw clamped around the arm of an even older-looking jackal, her fur greyed with age but her eyes sharply focused. She looked at him as if she could see right through him. As if she saw him, more than she saw the others around him. "Captain picked me up westward, sir. Found this one snooping around the edge of town, and wanted us to bring her to you." She paused and looked up at the old jackal. "She doesn't seem to speak Rathin, sir."

Damn. The last thing William wanted to do was to have to start speaking a language he wasn't too confident with. He cleared his throat as he took a step away from Daniel. The jackal's eyes followed him unerringly. <Ma'am? Can you hear me?>

She smiled at that, muzzle peeled back to reveal yellowed teeth. <She's been lazy, hasn't she?>

William blinked. He looked up at Victor and nodded once, and the coyote let her arm go. She clutched it as William shook his head. <Who is lazy?>

<Your mother. Or you. One of you.> She tilted her head to the side as her smile grew. <I knew she wasn't among the dead. Taken by a soldier, then?>

He began to frown. Who was this female? "Sir?" Merinda's voice in the Rathin tongue broke through his focus, but he didn't look away from the jackal. "What are you saying?"

"Just... trying to find out who she is." He nodded again to Merinda. "You can resume your patrol. I'll be alright."

"Yeah you will. Got your big bear to keep an eye on you." Victor smirked and slapped Merinda's back. "C'mon, furtube. We got a whole village to cover."

In the corner of his eye, William caught Merinda's irritated expression. It vanished as she looked back to the hyena and nodded, before she turned to leave. As she did, William leaned in a little closer to the jackal. <Who are you?>

Her grin slipped a little as she looked up at Daniel. <Not in front of an invader. Murderer. Destroyer.>

William frowned. <He is my friend. I trust him with my life, and he does not speak the language. If you know of me, please tell me how.>

<Because I know your blood.> She lifted her head and sniffed at the air. <Old blood of Caris. Some of the oldest. Yours is the blood of Catherine. Of William.>

Breath caught in William's throat at the mention of his parents' names. He stumbled back, and Daniel caught him. One of the bear's paws remained protectively wrapped around William as the other came to rest on his sword. "Don't need t'speak Carisi to know she knows y' name. And your mum's."

"Not my name. It's..." He swallowed against the lump in his throat as he looked the jackal up and down again. There was nothing that gave away how she could possibly know what she knew. <How?>

Her smile vanished entirely. <Not in front of an invader. Murderer. Destroyer.>

The paw around his middle suddenly felt heavy. William brushed it gently away, but the heaviness remained. It settled in his stomach as he nodded. "Daniel? I need to speak to her alone."

"And I need us to get some more alone time so I can get my cock sucked, but I don't see that happenin' anytime soon, neither." He stepped up to stand beside William, and he could see the bear shake his head. "She might know things. What if she's the shaman we're here to stop? What if she's got magic what'll turn y' brains inside out? Make you think whatever she wants?"

"That's not the sort of thing Miarvis gets her followers to do." At the mention of the old goddess' name, the jackal perked an ear. "I don't think I'm in any danger here, Daniel. I'll be okay, and..." He paused, and that heaviness inside him grew. "I think I *need* to do this. Can you... understand?"

The bear's eyes didn't leave the jackal female, but he sighed and gave a nod. "I can. Sure. But the commander ain't gonna be so understandin' if you don't really make it quick." He leaned down, and William finally turned away from her to meet his gaze. "Seriously. We gotta make sure this place's safe for everyone for the night. You got an hour, *maybe* two, 'fore we gotta report back. Is that enough time?"

William didn't know. He couldn't know the answer to that question. A glance at the jackal showed that her smile had returned, though a little muted compared to when she'd first spoke to him. "It'll have to be. Thank you." He turned back to Daniel and, regardless of what the jackal would think or what any soldiers might have seen or said, planted a gentle kiss on Daniel's muzzle.

The bear sighed back as William pulled away, but he nodded. "Tease. Alright, fine. You got y' hour." He turned to look at the jackal, who actually met his gaze with a steely stare of her own. "You hurt him and I'll rip your spine out with my own two paws."

She gave no indication of understanding the words, still just smiling softly as she stared hard back at him. It was an unnerving combination to see, William thought, and he shivered as Daniel turned to leave. A part of him wanted to reach out and grab him; to keep him close. A look at the jackal told him that would just waste more of what little time he had.

When Daniel was out of earshot, she waved for him to follow her as she made her way across the road. <In here.>

William frowned as he looked at the building she led him toward. It was half burned, the roof was long caved in, and snow covered just about every surface inside. She crouched

low under a collapsed support beam, utterly unconcerned with the integrity of the building's remains. The taller hyena followed, albeit more gingerly than she had. <Where are you taking me? Why?>

<Warmth. It's cold out.> She carefully stepped through the snowy interior until she came to a small corner of the room that was still protected from the elements. The roof above was partially intact, but in that corner there was no wind and the snow didn't quite reach her. She crouched down, seated upon a burned hunk of rubble with her paws clasped in her lap. <What did she call you?>

<No, you first. How did you know who I am? How do you know my parents?> William shook his head as her smile twitched wider. <I have never seen you before in my life. I have never been to this place. Who are you? How do you know what you know?>

<I know because I was to bring you into the world.> She leaned her head to the side, resting it against the wall of the burned building as William frowned. <My name is Alia. I was a priestess of the temple to Vicaris here in Jorkun. It was my temple you were to be born into; his blessings you were to receive.> She tilted her head to the other side as she folded her arms. <You look like her, you know. Your mother. But you have your father's eyes. His fire, too. Such strength burns inside you.>

William shivered. It wasn't from the cold. <It was so long ago.>

Her smile disappeared. Ears pinned forward. <It was yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that, and before that, and before that, for twenty years. Do not think that the people of this land forgot who came to destroy them, old blood. And do not think that they will forgive you for standing alongside them.>

<I did not burn this town.> The shivers mounted, feeding one after another into themselves. Waves of icy dread undulated along his muscles. <Do not blame me.>

All at once, Alia's malice drained away. She lay her head back against the corner of the wall and looked down along her muzzle at the hyena. <You will decide. Events must come to pass and you will be there to see them. To take part. To act.>

<What do you expect me to do?> The shock of all that she knew and all that she was had started to fade, and it left William with suspicion and confusion. He wasn't sure he liked the combination any better than what all she was saying. <You want me to turn on my soldiers? Die for a kingdom I never knew?>

She didn't seem angry at the question. Instead her eyes rolled about in their sockets, as if to take in the broken space in which she sat. <My husband did. My sons and daughters did. They fought and died against the invaders because it was right.> Her eyes suddenly locked on his again. <Not because victory was certain. Not because they could win. Because it was *right*.>

William set his jaw as he stood a little taller. <I do not get to decide what is right. Only what I can do to look after my mother.>

That made the jackal's eyes light up all the brighter. <Catherine lives even now? Vicaris be praised. The blessings are manifest, and will yet pass forward.>

A surge of anger. A clenched fist. <And where was this great and powerful Vicaris when illness took her? Where was Vicaris when she almost died? When she became so ill she could not work?>

<In you, of course.> Again she tilted her head. <Working in the shadows and the night, always unseen but felt. In your worry and need to heal her. In your desperation to find help. In what brought you the coin you so badly needed.> Her smile turned lopsided. <In guiding you to *him*, that you might exalt His name in your joinings. Sparking your love to keep you on the path.>

William growled. He couldn't help it; the sound left him before he could stop it. <If you harm him in *any* way->

"You'll rip out my spine with your own hands." The Rathin words were clear, almost completely unaccented, and spoken with a coyness that belied Alia's knowledge.

The hyena gaped. "You understand us."

"More than you will ever know, Vicaris be praised." She lifted her head again, throat bared. "Do you cut me down, son of Catherine? Son of William? Son of old, *old* blood? Betray heritage for usurpers? That is what are expected to do."

She was right. His paw had instinctively gone for his sword, but that might have been more discomfort with the knowledge that she'd understood everything they'd said before than any intent to kill a heretic. Where that instinct had come from and what drove it felt like something outside of himself in that moment, and he forced his paw away again.

It was his duty, but he didn't want to do it. It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be right. She wasn't threatening his life or the lives of those in his charge. It would be murder. Pure. Simple. That wasn't him. That had never been him.

But as her eyes sparkled in the sunlight, there was more to it than that. She knew a part of him that had existed before he even really had. A window to a world that he'd never known. A world that, for all of his mother's efforts, he'd never been able to grasp. This priestess had answers. She knew things. Things that William knew he wanted to know. Had to know. "No. We should talk."

"Should we now?" Her head tilted back the other way again as her smile turned playful. <And why would I do that?>

William crouched down before her and tried to mimic her smile. She needed to be enticed. To be interested. <Because it is a chance to teach me. And a chance for you to do what you *really* want to do.> He nodded back toward the way they'd entered through. <A chance to turn me against Ratholarin.>

She laughed. The sound was rich and deep and it echoed off of burned beams and scorched stone in a way that made it sound for all the world like there were three of her. <Vicaris blesses you even now, old blood. Careful you do not falsely invoke His name and earn His ire.> Her arms drew tighter against her chest as she nodded. <Come then, child. Ask what you will. I shall tell what I can. And then we shall meet in the middle as day turns to night, we will part ways, and you will honour Vicaris.>

The way she said that last part sent a chill through William, but he knew what he had to do. The priestess liked to talk, and he wanted to listen. Whatever she wanted or thought she would get out of their conversation, he didn't doubt that he'd give her nothing close to what she wanted from him. He wasn't about to throw his life away – to throw his mother or Daniel away – for some cause he didn't care about.

And so he brushed aside the snow. Sat.

Listened.

#

Daniel lingered in silence outside William's tent.

He knew the bear was there. His silhouette was unmistakable to William by that point, but he still didn't quite know what to say. What was there to say? What words would come close?

But he still just stood there, waiting in the cold while the hyena sat in the warm, lantern-lit tent. It wasn't right to just leave him out there. "You *can* come in, you know."

"I know." Still the shadow outside hesitated. "I jus' wanted to make sure. You, uh... didn't say much to anyone after y'sent that jackal on her way."

William sighed. He pinched the bridge of his muzzle as he shook his head. He could barely remember doing so. "It was a lot. Would you please just come in? I don't want you to catch cold out there."

That drew a little chuckle, and the flap of his tent was drawn back. Daniel doubled over and crawled awkwardly forward, one paw raised and holding a still-steaming bowl. "Thought you might like some dinner. You didn't show for it, so I--"

"Thanks." William sighed even as he smiled and reached out to the bowl. He didn't deserve the bear, he'd decided. He took a moment to set it down on the ground in as stable a position as he could, before he leaned up to place a soft kiss on Daniel's muzzle. "For everything, really. You're always so good to me."

"What can I say? You give me good incentive." The bear's smile warmed considerably as he closed the flap again and sat down opposite William. "And you look like you need it. Sorry to say, but y'looked somethin' awful after you got back from her."

The hyena nodded as he turned his back to Daniel. He allowed himself to lean back, falling against Daniel's chest and belly before he reached out to grab his bowl. His own belly grumbled with need; the smell of the stew in it reminded him that he probably shouldn't have missed dinner. "It was a lot. She... knew my mother, turns out."

"Huh. Small world." Daniel's paws slid up William's arms to rest on his shoulders, rubbing and squeezing them slowly as the hyena ate. "Did she know anything about the shaman we're after? Where he is, maybe?"

William's head was shaking before he'd even considered his answer. He swallowed the mouthful of stew in his muzzle. "If she did, she'd never tell me. Not a Ratholarin soldier. And

no.” He leaned his head back, half-nuzzling into Daniel’s chest as he looked up at the larger male’s face. “She didn’t see me as Carisi. Just Ratholarin.”

Daniel just sighed. “Prob’ly for the best, really. Commander might’ve wanted her brought in, otherwise. See what she could know.”

“Yeah. She wouldn’t have told him anything anyway.” He leaned back into the warmth of Daniel’s body. “She lost everything last time Ratholarin soldiers marched here. I don’t think she’d have a problem dying just to defy us again.”

One of the bear’s arms snaked around William’s middle. “That bothers you?”

“I don’t know. A little? Maybe.” William frowned as he spooned another mouthful of stew into his muzzle and chewed thoughtfully for a few moments. She’d said much, after all. Nothing that he could present to superiors as credible information for their mission, but a *lot*. “What about you? Doesn’t it bother you?”

When Daniel shrugged in confusion, William set the bowl down between his legs. “They lost everything. *Everything*, when King Eric last came up this way. They knew they couldn’t win, and they fought anyway. What does...” He sighed. “What do you say to that?”

“That they fought for the wrong reasons.” Daniel shrugged again.

“Fighting to protect their home was wrong?” William frowned. It wasn’t like Daniel to be so callous.

It was a relief when he chuckled and squeezed William tight. “Nah. Always right to do that. Look’t you, huh? Anyone or anything threatened you, and I’d cut ‘em down myself. No questions asked. I’d fight an army all alone to keep you safe.”

William felt his cheeks flush as he lowered his head again. There was no hiding from the bear though, as his other paw stroked across his burning cheek. “Heh. You blushin’ there?”

“No.”

“I reckon y’are.”

“Absolutely not.” William smiled as he nuzzled into that paw and kissed it. “So what was the wrong reason, then? If not for their homes and families?”

The smile on Daniel’s face slipped a little before he lowered his head. His chin came to rest between William’s ears as the hyena resumed his dinner. “I mean, Caris was just like Lenkis, really. Not so wild, but damn devoted to the gods. Kings had to have temple approval ‘fore they got their throne.” He tilted his head down to kiss the top of William’s head. “They had their magic, too, an’ magic’s dangerous.”

Magic would sure explain how that priestess had known so much about William’s family. “How’s it any different, though? Maybe some shaman could twist my mind and make me do things. How’s it different to me being here now?” He turned to his side and looked up more fully into Daniel’s face. “I’m not here because I have a choice. If I didn’t have to be a soldier, I wouldn’t. I don’t want to fight for Eric, or Fredrick.”

“Or Prince Tobias?” Daniel cocked an eyebrow and smirked down at him.

“Or Prince Tobias. Maybe the old gods keep putting him in my life, but I’m not fond of whatever joke they’re playing.” Despite his hunger, William pushed the bowl away from himself and chose instead to snuggle into the bear’s body. The arm around him and the heat of Daniel’s body was exactly what he needed. “You know me. I only do this for my mother, and I do it even though she hates it.”

Daniel hummed quietly to himself as he nodded. He continued to silently cradle William for a few moments, as the hyena dreaded a question he expected. Tobias would ask it. Daniel never had, but he’d never had reason to, either. Just a couple of innocently asked words. *Would you fight for me?*

But the question never came. Instead, Daniel just rubbed and stroked at William’s chest and side. “Y’know... I was thinkin’. Just idly today, on the rounds, and... well, what if you *didn’t* stay a soldier?”

William barked a quiet laugh. “Then I couldn’t look after mother.”

“Yeah, but I mean... I could.” William frowned as he lifted his head to meet Daniel’s gaze. The bear stared back at him, his expression for once completely serious. “If y’wanted... I could do that. For you.”

The hyena’s heart skipped a beat as he stared into those brilliant eyes. Daniel was an idiot. A beautiful, stupid idiot... and William was all the more glad to have him. “Then what do I do when you go on deployment without me? Who’s there to watch your filthy backside while I fret at home?”

Daniel’s smile returned, more playful than before. “If it’s filthy, it’s only ‘cause you make a mess of it.”

“Never hear any complaints from you.” Daniel chuckled to himself as William shook his head. The bear was too good to him. He didn’t deserve him. “No, I can’t do that to you. Besides, I want to be here with you. War or no, I’d never want to be anywhere else. You and me, together. Wherever, whatever.”

The bear’s grin softened as he clutched William tight against his chest. He pushed back against the larger male, an arm brought up to hug him just as snugly back. “It’s not just for mother. It’s for me, because this way I get you. I don’t want to ever *not* get you.”

“You just ‘member that in fifty years. See if you ain’t sick of me then.” Daniel leaned down to kiss the hyena’s nose. “Alright, so you don’t quit solderin’. What about all this?” He waved his free paw around the tent.

That was the question. William didn’t really think that he had much of an answer just yet, not after his conversation with Alia. “It’s just... hard. Knowing that my life could’ve been here.”

Again Daniel hummed as his fingers traced slowly up and down William’s spine. “You’d rather that? Pull up, leave Sanwell, live with the Carisi?”

“No, nothing like that. I don’t belong here in Caris. I just...” He sighed and leaned back into the bear’s gentle touch. Those fingers were working a very different kind of magic and he didn’t mind one bit. “I guess I just wish the world weren’t so... mad. That people could just

live. Be happy. Be who they are, with who they want to be with.” His eyes closed. “No armies or soldiers. No war. Just life.”

“Mmm. That’d be nice.” Daniel nodded slowly above him. “If it helps any? I don’t wanna hurt these people. If we can just get the shaman, stop them puttin’ weapons in people’s paws and pointin’ ‘em at Ratholarin in the name of some old gold... I’d be happy with that.”

“Me too, I guess. You don’t really think they might be convinced to...?” He slowly lifted his head again.

Daniel’s eyes were closed as he held William. He was either contemplative or tired, himself. “Nah. We ain’t that lucky. But maybe we *can* keep the losses low, yeah?” He paused for a second, and his voice dropped a little in volume. “I’m almost scared t’ask, and I don’t think anything’s wrong, but... y’know we’re doing the right thing here, don’tcha?”

William allowed himself a little shake of his head. He didn’t lie to Daniel, and had no intention of starting there. “I don’t know. I just hope so.” He glanced away as Daniel nodded again. “Nicer way of asking me, though. Better than when Tobias pulled me out of the march to question my loyalty.”

“I never question your loyalty. I know exactly what matters most to you.” He leaned down to nuzzle gently into the top of William’s head. “And I know what don’t matter, too. I know you don’t care a damn about Ratholarin, and that’s fine. *I* don’t care that *you* don’t care. I trust y’to do the right thing, whatever that is. Hey?” He leaned back and stroked a finger up under William’s chin until the hyena lifted his gaze. “I trust you. Y’know that, right?”

“I know it.” William couldn’t help his smile as he leaned up to lick at the bear’s chin. “Don’t worry. I know it.”

“Good. Didn’t wanna have t’beat your head in.” He smirked as he nosed along William’s cheek. “Now. You gonna finish that stew ‘fore it gets any colder? Don’t know if there’s gonna be any more left out there by now.”

William eyed the bowl, but it was the furthest thing from his mind. He’d regret it come morning. That was a sure thing, but he didn’t really require the food. After the afternoon with Alia, all he’d heard and what he’d seen, it didn’t satisfy his needs. No, what he needed was right there with him.

“It doesn’t matter.” He turned himself around until he fully faced Daniel, his legs carefully albeit awkwardly wrapping around the bear’s waist. He reached up with both arms to drape them over Daniel’s shoulders and lifted himself enough to kiss the larger male. “I just need you right now. Just need you here.” He smiled as he stroked at the side of Daniel’s neck. “Think you’re up for spending the night again?”

The bear grinned back at him and immediately allowed himself to fall backward. He landed with a huff of displaced air, William atop his belly and chest. One arm slid under his head, propping it up as William sprawled out on top of him. “What, that jackal teach you magic or somethin’ there? Lookin’ into my head and readin’ my thoughts?”

“Don’t need magic to know what you’re thinking.” William sighed as he stretched out, wriggling his whole body against Daniel’s. “Just let me... stay like this with you. Just for a little while.”

“Sure.” The bear’s other arm lifted to rub down William’s spine. The hyena shivered with delight. “How long you want?”

William smiled. What a question that was. He wriggled up until he could nuzzle his way into the side of the bear’s neck. Nostrils filled with the scent of his lover, and everything else didn’t matter. Not war, not rebels, not Alia, not his mother, not the whole damn world. “Mmm. How about forever?”

“Heh. Now that’d sure be somethin’ wouldn’t it?” Daniel held him tight and sighed as he closed his own eyes. “How about we start with tonight? See where we go from there?”

The hyena nodded once and let his head come down to rest on Daniel’s shoulder. That was it, he realised. No questions of culture or identity. No questions of right or wrong. No questions of kings or gods. Just a simple understanding filled William right there, right then. *This* was where he belonged. With his lover.

Whatever had happened in the past was long done. Whatever the future held was beyond his capacity to know. Priestesses and princes and kingdoms would come and go. He could count on what *they* had. He could count on Daniel, and William knew that Daniel could count on him. The bear would do anything for him. He’d do anything for the bear. “Yeah. That sounds good.

“Let’s start with tonight.”