

A Lesson In Form

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“Don’t get too comfortable,” Sensei D’Spiros advised. The Lioness smirked as her students headed away from the sparring mats. “This is a break, not a dismissal.”

The ‘dojo’ wasn’t exactly a cozy place, anyway. It occupied one corner of a large warehouse that had been converted to a makeshift gym. The space outside its walls had been cleared out for a race track. Inside, it was partitioned with an area for weightlifting, half-court basketball, and a number of other sections that were too dark to see because energy was too precious to waste on lighting up things that weren’t being used. Here at the section reserved for martial arts and self-defense instruction, a number of woven mats were set out on the floor, bathed in the glow of portable lights stands. One wall was decorated with rough chalk drawings of kata positions. Which were presumably going to be replaced by proper illustrations, hung across proper dojo walls, when that became possible.

Young Keesha took to the far end of a bench set against the other wall. Sipping a canteen of water right next her friend, Yasmeen, the instructor’s daughter. The eleven-year Lioness boasted a coat of dark grey of fur with a huge puff of black at the end of her tail. A far contrast from the pale golds of her pride-mother’s fur. The young Ferret was curious as to whether or not Sensei was Yasmeen’s birth-mother, but knew not to ask. Among Lions it was considered rude.

This mother of hers was actually something of a celebrity. Effamy D’Spiros had once been a prize-fighter under the name “Jungle Effie.” At her peak, shed been third-ranked in her weight class! Yasmeen had shown Keesha crysvids of some of her fights, and Keesha had been amazed by her skill and all the punishment she could take. But there were no trophies of the athlete’s past victories here. *“This isn’t about [u]me[/u],”* She told her class on the first day. *“It’s about [u]you[/u]. How hard you’re willing to work. What you want to get out of this.”*

‘Class’ had gone from mother teaching daughter, to teaching daughter and a persistent friend, to a whole cluster of students. Once the parents of Camille’s Crossing learned that a bona fide sports star was teaching someone else’s child, she became inundated by curious children and parents of children both. All of which had been dutifully reported from Lioness to Ferret.

The row of lockers that made up a partition wall now had several units labels with the names of Keesha’s classmates. Over from them to the bench came Tyler, the Sun Bear. Stout and jovial, with two huge paws that reminded Keesha of boat paddles. Two year’s Keesha’s senior, they’d met on the ship had delivered both their families to Planet Dirt. Next, Lawrence the Alligator Lizard (never call him Larry!). Ten years old, like Keesha, and the kind of kid who would specify that he was *ten and a half*. Followed by Maggie the Savannah Cat. Fourteen, and by far the tallest of the mixed-age group. And also the one who’d been planetside the longest, having come over on the first ship. She was the unofficial leader of her clique of friends in school.

And finally, Christoph the Warthog. Who sat by himself, as much as he could, at the edge of the second bench. He was the oddball of the group, and he knew it. Having joined what had been strictly a Claw Fu class up until the moment he brought hooved feet and semi-hooved fingers into the courses.

Everyone was dressed in loose shorts and all the kids but Tyler wore some kind of sleeveless shirt. Keesha's own was holed in some places and patched in others. Expendable. This colony of refugees was a long way off from getting real practice gis. Maybe there'd be extra fabric when the next starship came to deliver more Furies and Scaries and supplies. Maybe not.

After a bit of comparing thoughts on the warm-up they'd just finished and general chatting between the youngers, the Sensei again addressed her students. "Alright, time to pair up for sparring." Stubby fingers picked out the matchups. Tyler and Yasmeen. Lawrence and Maggie. Keesha and... Christoph.

The Ferret stepped slowly into place on a mat. The Boar was OK, she guessed, but Sensei D'Spiros was teaching him a different style from the rest of her students. One that took advantage of the power he could bring to his punches and kicks. Keesha understood that. She really did! But that didn't change the fact that he moved differently. He attacked differently. He defended differently. It threw everyone else off.

All those realities swam about her head, filling it with buzzing noise, as the pair circled around each other. Seeking out openings, trying to keep from creating any. Only occasionally lunging forward for an attack; harmless ones, of course. She was mostly going for swipes, he was aiming for punches. She tried get her feet above her target to rake her claws down it, he was aiming for direct kicks which drove the the flat of a hoof into his.

'Ug! This is so confusing! Like starting all over!' Distracted by the demands of tracking alternate fighting forms, she knew she was going to mess up some way or another. She proved herself right by putting her leg out to block a strike to her right thigh. Twisting her leg inwards and away from a rake, as she had practiced countless times, instead of raising her shin to block a kick. She realized her mistake just in time to do the exact wrong thing; juking left with a one-footed hop with her tail in the wrong position! Hopelessly off-balance, Keesha tripped over herself, tumbling to the mat.

Lying there, tasting hard fibers, the Ferret was quite glad that her very first martial arts lesson had the title of How To Fall. And that Sensei D'Spiros had made good and sure the lessons had stuck before moving on to How To Do Anything Else. She waved off Christoph's offered hand, and got herself up. "I'm fine. Good hit."

He gave her a nod, and went right back into his ready stance. It didn't take long before she was eating mat again. That's when the the peanut gallery started up. Quiet commentary from the other sparring pairs.

"What's he even doing here?" Tyler.

"Wasting Keesha's time." Keesha.

"This *used* to be a Claw Fu class." Maggie.

Lawrence just snickered through that and another round of quips.

All of which were delivered quietly, so as the elder Lioness would not hear. But she could hear, and that meant Christoph could too. His face became harder, but the taunting didn't stop him from trying to do as he had in instructed.

And the quiet voices didn't stop Sensei D'Spiros from hearing. "Everyone stand down." She didn't growl, but she might have wanted to, for the low rumble underneath her words.

The youngsters immediately stopped what they were doing and assumed attention stances. "Yes, Sensei!"

The teacher paced a line before her students. Looking over the clawed members of her class in turn, notably leaving Christoph free of reprisal. "Looking down on others for being different is a *Human* failing. I won't have it in my class." Lawrence, Maggie, Yasmeen, Tyler.

Keesha was shocked to have that hard glance pointed her way. "But I didn't say anything..." she said meekly.

"You didn't say anything to *stop* what was being said, either," the Lioness chided. "So you can be the first to apologize to him, Leaner Kaidis. Go on."

Keesha swallowed, and compiled. "I'm sorry, Christoph." Followed by each of the others. Lawrence tried to make it all out as a joke gone wrong.

"It's alright," he said in the end, wriggling his spacious nose at though to leave a bad smell behind. "I'd just like to get back to work catching up, please."

D'Spiros bowed her head toward the Boar, one paw flattened over the other in a ritualized show of respect. Once the gesture was returned, she addressed the remaining students. "Your classmate's graciousness has spared the rest of you another round of calisthenics. Everybody switch partners. From here on, lets focus on elbow and knee and palm strikes. And blocking the same." The teacher demonstrated the moves she wanted to see. Ones all six could perform with equal skill. Or lack of skill.

By the end of the day's session, D'Spiros made sure everyone had gone a spar with Christoph.

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After class, and the sonic shower that followed, Keesha's ears were still burning from the unhappy words of her instructor. All she wanted to do was go back to her family's apartment before doing, or not doing, anything else that might get her into trouble. *'Maybe Sensei will forget it all happened by next session...'* She could only hope. She didn't want to have to tell her mother that anything had gone bad class! She'd had to win an argument just to be able to take fighting lessons!

Aching to go unnoticed, she hid behind Maggie's height as the three females exited the lady's shower room, and then Tyler's girth when the female party met the male back along the gym wall. Yasmeen, who couldn't avoid her own mother, silently stepped into position to help her friend smuggle herself outside. Notably, the boar wasn't among the boys.

"He always washes up quick and bails early," Lawrence explained, then went right back to chatting up Tyler about hovercars. A subject picked up by Maggie as the group near the exit door. Keesha was almost home free...

"Learner Kaidis! I need to talk to you!" The Ferret girl cringed and turned backwards. To see the teacher motioning her closer with an authoritative paw and a Big Lecture look on her face. From over by the weights.

The eyes her fellow students were upon her. She couldn't hear the 'oooohs!' but she could feel them. So it wasn't over, after all. Would D'Spiros be telling everyone's parents what had happened earlier? Would her mother use this as a reason to take back her permission? Well, if it was going to end, it would end with Keesha showing she could be trusted to follow instructions. "Y-yes, Sensei."

Yasmeen stepped out of her way, only to be summoned as well. "You too, Leaener D'Spiros. It'll save me repeating myself at home." The implied ending of that sentence -- 'in front of your other parents.' -- was enough to flatten the Lion girl's ears with worry.

Keesha stepped up beside her best friend, and together they walked towards her maybe-ex-sensei. The Ferret trying not to look like she was lurching there. The Lioness walking with her tail curled down between her legs.

The other youngsters had cleared out by the time they reached the weight station. Wisely, perhaps. D'Spiros took a seat at one of the dumbbell benches, and offered Keesha and Yasmeen to do the same. "These classes started because you two had a *plan* for your lives. You both still want to join the Planet Guard someday, yeah?"

"Yes'm," nodded Keesha. Yasmeen nodded as well.

"The I think I have to ask... Is there anyone you don't want to protect? Say, do you have a problem with ungulates?"

"Ungawhatnow?" Keesha winced and turned sideways, looking at her teacher through the corner of her eyes. She didn't mean to sound sass-mouthed, she honestly didn't know that word.

The Lioness' whiskers twitched with understanding. "It's a fancy word for hoofed beings."

"Oh... No! No, of course not!" Yasmeen squeaked. Quickly echoed by her friend.

"Pigs in general, then? Or is it Boars in particular that you two don't care for?"

The nervous pair shouted over each other trying to impress that this was not the case.

D'Spiros waited for them to calm down before continuing. "If the Guard accepts you, is it only guns and clubs and fists you plan to be protecting your fellows against?"

Yasmeen's ears twitched, and worked her mouth. Maybe she thought this a trick question?

But the Ferret was glad enough to get a question she could answer in the positive. "Well, yeah! That's what a protector does!"

"But it's not *all* they do," D'Spiros said pointedly. But then faltered, searching for words that seemed to have gone missing. "If someone wants to help their fellow Furs... No. Oh, how do I say this?... We are here on this rock because..." She sighed harshly, turning her gaze past the

girls. Past the door. Past the building they were sitting in. "Because somewhere else, there weren't enough people -- Furs or Humans -- willing enough to defend us against whispers. Like the ones you were passing about today, young Lion."

Without waiting for her ashamed daughter to reply, the mother and teacher went on. "Whispers piled up into rumors. Rumors became fact enough to be turned against us. To turn us out. Shout us down." As the Lioness spoke, her ears slowly flattened against her skull. Keesha's gaze couldn't help but wander from the speaker's mouth to those ears. When any Cat did that, Big or otherwise, it meant they were about to pounce at something. Someone.

Catching the subtle motion of her student's head, D'Spiros shook her head, loosening her ears to softer poise. "Now it's my turn to apologize to you, youngling. It's not you I'm mad at. But we need to do better than that here. All of us. Because if Planet Dirt ever does rack up any enemies, the first thing they'll come at us with are words."

"Like the trash-talk at the front of your old matches!" Yasmeen's eyes went wide with realization.

"Yeah," the former competitor chuckled. "Kind of like that. Just remember that this-" She stamped a padded foot on the metallic floor. "Isn't one-on-one. We're all of us on the same team. And we need to behave that way. Can you do that, Keesha?" Blue eyes scrutinized the girl's face. Looking not with cynicism but with hope.

"Yes'm," the girl nodded somberly. Taking small comfort in her teacher not saying those two most awful words a respected adult could ever say to a child; 'Very disappointed.'

"Yasmeen?" the mother's expression didn't change.

"Yes, Mother." The tension in the cub's tail eased away.

"Glad to hear it," the grown-up stood, and put a supportive paw on a shoulder of each girl. "Now Keesha, you get home before your family starts to fret over you. Yasmeen, can you help me clean this place up for the next group?"

"Sure!" The dark-furred girl hopped to. And Keesha bounded away with a wave. Down the lit section of gym floor and out the double-door.

But she didn't go right home. Instead, she went looking for Christoph. Poking her nose here and there among the public places of the colony. She found the boar by himself in an sitting area topped with a slanted metal sheet. Near one of the ramshackle sculptures that someone had been putting up lately, made out of random scrap that no one else had found a use for. All odd angles and mismatching colors.

'Is that how we made him feel?' she asked herself? *'Like he didn't fit anywhere?'*

She had to find out. And, if possible, help fix that. *'We're all on the same team.'* There was an empty seat next to the male, and she headed for it. Waving at him when he noticed her. She didn't know what she was going to say to him, yet. But she was going to try.