

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART TWO

24th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

William longed for the days when he carried a sword.

The battleaxe of the kingsblades was a tradition dating back to the first of them under King Vargor Rathin. They were large, they were heavy, they were an unwieldy weapon, and William had been tempted to ask more than once if he could just bear a sword instead. Training with the other kingsblades had quickly disabused him of the notion that such questions were a good idea. The battleaxe, he had been told, was the weapon of a defender of the crown. Nothing else would do, he had been told. It was a symbol of the enemy being cut down before their king like kindling, he had been told.

He had been told a lot of things, but none of it had convinced William that an axe of that size was a viable weapon to wield in combat. Still, the kingsblades trained extensively in the use of them, and after a season's worth of practice William had become relatively proficient with it himself. His Carisi sword was left back in his and Daniel's home, secreted away in that otherwise-empty nook behind the dresser. The idea of a kingsblade wielding a foreign weapon was laughable to the other kingsblades, and would just invite needless questions and mistrust.

What was worse still was that most of the kingsblades *weren't* inherently mistrustful or doubtful of him. The hyena had learned quickly that they looked on him quite a bit more favourably than Fredrick did, both for his success at his trial and for his relationship to Zane. Zane's respect was accorded him in turn, as if his father's deeds had passed to William upon his death. Certainly his post may well have, and the sympathies for the loss of his father had come thick and fast. While they faded over time in favour of professionalism, the appreciation of Master Zane, son of Jakob, kingsblade of Ratholarin stuck with William long after his father was gone.

Which, as he made his way through the midday-lit streets of Sanwell, only made the reappearance of his blood-father that day all the more confusing.

The note had been left in one of the escape tunnels from the castle. It had proven to be a safe and secure place to leave them; the little tunnels that Tobias used to sneak out to the Crimson Crest were the most efficient to traverse, and so leaving letters in coded Carisi script on the less-trod paths was as safe as anything. It had named a smithy in the mid-city, a time, and a code phrase to gain access. William had ignited a flame from his paw and incinerated the letter once he'd committed it to memory and headed on his way.

It was more than just his blood-father's appearance that had been difficult, literally hours after Zane's death. He had been friendly with William, but driven by something more. He'd complimented his son, but only insofar as what he was complimenting was useful to the cause he'd dedicated himself to. He'd been thrilled at William's growing understanding of Miarvis' magic, even as his growing skill with its conjuration had worried William. And then

there was their shared name. Even years later, calling him 'William' felt as weird as calling him 'father.' Actually, once he came to think of it, calling him father was weirder than calling him William.

By *far*.

At least William's promotion to the kingsblades meant that he didn't have to fear the glares of the guardians anymore. As he walked the streets of Sanwell, he watched as a pair of guardians and a trio of watch members questioned a pair of kneeling rats. The guardians had their weapons drawn and the rats looked utterly terrified. William felt his throat vibrate with a silent growl. He didn't have to deal with it, but too many others did. Fredrick's edicts were only growing more and more exacting, and something had to be done. Soon.

By the time he arrived at the smithy, he'd been able to witness three such detainments and even avoided another one himself. One of the guardians on patrol had started to head in his direction, but William had stared at the guardian's helmed visage and tilted his posture to show the battleaxe slung across his back. The guardian's approach had stalled a couple seconds later once they had recognised the weapon, and they snapped to attention in turn. It was as much apology as William had come to expect. Civility was dead in Sanwell.

Pushing the door to the smithy open, heat exceeding that out in the streets assailed William. A broad-shouldered bull with his back to the hyena was working the bellows to his forge, and William settled in to wait for him. He watched as the coals in the forge glowed hotter and hotter, though as the bull turned back toward a half-finished sword on a bench nearby he finally caught sight of William. "Sorry, mate. Busy now; you'll have to come back l... oh!" His eyes widened as they drifted behind William to the hilt of his axe. "Beg pardon, kingsblade!"

He waved a paw toward the bull and shook his head. "Nothing to be pardoned for, sir. If you're busy, I don't wish to interrupt."

"Nonsense! Always got time for kingsblades in this place!" The bull did spare a quick glance back at his forge, but it continued to burn bright. "What can I do for you, milord?"

That, too, had been something to get used to. Being called 'lord' was far more of a title and respect than William had ever expected, let alone wanted. "I'm looking to have some arrowheads crafted especially for me."

One of the bull's eyebrows lifted, and he swiped a paw across his brow as he looked William up and down. "Arrowheads, y'say? Best goin' to a bowyer then; my forge's more for armour and small arms."

There it was: the response he'd been expecting. "True enough. But you do work with armour, and I need to strike through *plate*." The bull's eyes widened as he glanced back at the battleaxe again like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard. "I hear that you can help me with... such things."

"Yeah... s'pose I can, at that." The smith's eyes raked over William's face before they softened again. "Yeah. Now that I'm seein' the family resemblance, I think I got just whatcha need. Just through there." He turned to point to a door in the corner of the room. "Hook a right.

You'll see the way down to my stock. Jus' let me know if'n you need any help findin' what you're lookin' for."

"I'll be fine, no doubt." William bowed his head slightly, and the bull mirrored the gesture. Family resemblance? William had always been told he looked more like his mother, but apparently there was enough of his blood-father in him to be notable. "Please, don't let me hold you up any longer, and thank you."

The bull nodded to him again as he lifted his head, but his gaze lingered on William for a few more seconds before he returned to the bellows to heat the forge anew. Briefly, William wondered if this was the first chance that the bull – doubtless one of his blood-father's rebels – had to see just how deep the infiltration in Ratholarin had gone. William made his way over to the indicated door and opened it to reveal a small hall, wider than it was long. The reason was immediately apparent, as a couple of doors marked the left-side wall but a cellar door graced the floor to the right. The bull *had* said his 'stock' was down after all.

Pulling up on the hatch revealed a dimly lit ladder descending into an underground passage. William lowered himself down the hole and closed the hatch after him. The coolness of the passage was a welcome respite from the heat of the forge above, and William followed it around to a small door that seemed to be set into a stone wall. The hyena frowned at it and, with no other instructions, gave it a quick couple of knocks.

It was a couple of seconds before the door opened outward, and William stepped back to the sight of Leena in the doorway. She smiled up at William. "You're early. We didn't expect you for a few more hours at least."

The hyena shrugged. "Tobias is working. Thought I'd get this over with quick so I can actually sleep today."

"Touchy. Alright." She stepped back from the door and waved him past. "Please, by all means. Come in. I think you'll get a lot out of this."

"Do you now." William sighed as he was ushered into what seemed like a storeroom, full of tools and equipment doubtless for the smithy upstairs. Leena moved in front of him, leading him between the shelves. "And why's that?"

"Because your father wants a word. Opportunities are coming." She looked him up and down as she paused before a rack full of armour plates. They looked almost exactly like guardian armour. "You don't look too happy about that."

William rolled his eyes. "I'm not happy about a lot of things these days, Leena. What do you want from me? I'm doing what I'm told. Doing what I'm expected to do."

Her smile grew. He'd grown to hate the sight of her amusement. Nothing he ever did seemed to ever be taken seriously by her. "And to make sure you're ready for what's to come, we've got a little test for you. Right through here." She gestured to the shelf. "Would you mind? It's large, and I'm so small and weak."

The hyena grit his teeth and fought the urge to draw his axe. Instead he grasped the edge of the shelf, and heaved against it. It slid away to reveal a hidden passage behind. Warmer air, thick with the smell of sweat and blood, assailed his nostrils as soon as he took a breath. "I smell-"

“It’s fine. It’s expected. There’s no danger here.” She danced over to the newly revealed passage as William frowned. Exertion and violence didn’t exactly feel like *fine* to him. “Come along, William. He’s waiting for you before we begin.” She paused. “Oh! Don’t worry about moving it back. We won’t be long.”

Begin what? The question was teased on William’s tongue, but he didn’t bother to open his muzzle and ask. Leena would just deny him the information again for her own amusement. Instead he grit his teeth and followed her down into the shadows.

Unlike the storeroom which was lit from the outside by a small grate at street level, the underground passage was much darker. The limited light from the storeroom didn’t reach all the way down, and he wound up bumping into a wall as it turned out of sight. The hyena bit back a curse. “Why do you always have a thing for winding undercity passages?”

Leena just chuckled, and William used the sound to reorient himself with a glare. “We don’t. They’ve always been here. Sanwell’s older than the Rathin line and it’ll be here long after them, too. Sometimes we just find the passages. Sometimes we’re looking for them. This one was suspected to exist, and we... *acquired* the smithy four years ago.”

Something in her tone made William utterly unwilling to press her on how exactly they had come to take charge of the smithy. He bit his tongue instead. For as noble as the intentions that the rebels seemed to have, the methods they employed constantly left William uncomfortable. Like he was tainted with them, going along with it all.

The smell of sweat and blood continued to grow stronger in the air as the passageway lightened. There was another corner ahead as the passage widened, and Leena waited there for him with folded arms. “Just through here, William. You’ll see why you’re here in a moment.”

Again, there was something about Leena’s tone that sent a shiver up his spine. He couldn’t help but growl as he passed her by, and one paw dipped to his side to rest on the haft of the hatchet there. Better safe than sorry.

But as he entered the chamber beyond the tunnel, he could see that he wouldn’t need that weapon right away. His blood-father sat, unconcerned, with a small book in one paw and a cup of some steaming beverage in his other. Three more rebels – a goat, a horse and another hyena – all stood with swords drawn at the ready. They were of considerably less interest than the arrayed figures on the ground before them.

Suddenly, the guardian armour in the storeroom made a lot more sense. They *were* guardians, though that was hard to tell from what little of their garments remained. They had been beaten bloody, all five of them dripping blood from various gashes and cuts. A fox, the smallest of the five, was sprawled out on the floor, unconscious or dead with their paws still manacled.

But what really sold their identity was Daniel, manacled and beaten like the rest.

He knelt like three of his fellows, eyes closed and panting slowly. His face was a mess, his chest had been cut into, and there was little doubt that one of his arms was broken. While the others groaned in pain, he simply knelt there and kept his breathing even. William knew from experience that he was biding his time and waiting for a chance to strike. Good. The hyena’s eyes flicked up to the rebels and drank in their every detail, careful to remember Leena

still lingered at his back. Four targets. Five, including his blood-father. Rough in an enclosed space, but magic would even the odds if things went that bad. “What is *this*!?”

Daniel’s eyes snapped open as a look of disbelief crossed his beaten and swollen face. They turned toward him immediately, widening at the sight of William there. The hyena let every ounce of his rage show on his face, snarling toothily at the goat as he pointed at Daniel. “Unbind him *now*!”

“He will do no such thing, son.” The book that William’s blood-father was reading was snapped shut and laid down on the arm of his chair. He kept his drink though as he stood. Daniel’s jaw, conversely, had dropped at the word ‘son’ and the disbelief had begun to transmute into dread. *Damn it all*. “These are enemies, and useful subjects for our purpose.”

“Subj... these are *people*!” William’s rage turned on the older hyena as his fingers closed around the hatchet’s haft. “And guardians no less! Have you lost your mind? What is going on?”

His blood-father nodded as he looked down at the arrayed prisoners. William almost followed his gaze, but the moment he caught sight of Daniel’s tear-filled eyes he had to look away again. The resolve that burned in his heart chilled several degrees at the sight of it. “These soldiers accosted several of our kin and pursued an ally. They would have murdered them all in the streets. Thankfully, we were close to the Riverrun and managed to capture them without alerting any other patrols.”

“That is *not* what I meant!” William pointed down at the guardians as the rebels began to take up positions behind them. Was this to be an execution too? He couldn’t let that happen! “Why now? Why are you being so reckless? You’re going to put everything at risk!”

“This is their fault. Not mine.” The older hyena arched an eyebrow as he looked William up and down. “I need to see what you’ve learned. I need to see that you’re willing to do anything and everything that victory will require of us.” His head tilted toward the prisoners. “Kill them.”

William snarled back at him. “Excuse me? No. Absolutely not.”

His blood-father turned away to look at the goat. He nodded once, and the goat brought a knife to the throat of one of the guardians. There was no hesitation as the goat gripped the guardian’s head with one paw, wrenched it upward, and drew the blade across his throat. Blood gushed from the deep wound, and the rebel kicked the guardian down into the ground as the victim scrambled to keep his neck closed. His struggle didn’t last long.

William watched it happen as every muscle in his body tensed. “That was an unarmed prisoner!”

“That was a soldier who would have gladly done the same to me, to you, to your mother, and to anyone in this damn realm that didn’t agree wholeheartedly with a monster wearing a crown!” William found himself shrinking back. His blood-father had been firm and cool when discussing their plans, but never had he snapped at his son. Something must have happened behind just an errant guardian patrol. “Or have you so quickly forgotten what the Ratholarin have taken from us?”

“And that’s what you want from me? You want for me to become a killer? Murder these people in cold blood?” William looked down at Daniel, but the bear’s eyes were more

accusatory than anything else by then. He didn't speak, but he remained just as tense and ready as William. "If you harm another hair on his head, I swear it you *will* make me a killer. You will not be glad that you did."

"If you think that our cause is worth less than *one* person's life, then so be it." The older hyena nodded, and the rebel horse outright drove his dagger into the side of the next guardian's throat. The tip pierced through to the other side, and when he ripped it out there was a much more panicked, flailing effort. Blood splattered across the side of Daniel's face, and he turned away with eyes squeezed shut. He'd begun to growl as the life drained out of the guardian beside him.

Neither he nor William had failed to notice that the last rebel had taken up a position behind the bear.

William pulled his hatchet free as he turned back on his father again. "That male right there that you're about to execute? The one I won't *let* you execute? He's the reason I'm doing any of this! He's the reason I'm helping you at all." Fingers flexed on the handle of the hatchet. "You give the order to kill him, and I swear by *all* the gods that you'll have to kill me first."

"Then let us test that, shall we?" His blood-father didn't waste time; he turned to the hyena rebel and nodded.

His head had barely moved before William acted. He hurled the hatchet straight at the other hyena, and the blade of it buried in his chest. He gave a gurgled cry of surprise and pain as he fell back against the wall. In the same motion, William unslung his battleaxe and jabbed the haft of the weapon behind him.

Leena, no doubt moving into position to take him out, caught the haft right in her gut. He flicked the end of his axe upward and slammed it into her chin, her jaw snapping shut as he lifted her from the ground with the strength of his blow. He looked up as the other rebels brandished their knives. His blood-father simply sat back down and picked up his book again.

Both the horse and the goat closed in, blades at the ready. Once more William lamented his lack of a sword in such a close fight as he brought his battleaxe up and around. A couple of quick warning swings warded the rebels off as he snarled at them, but they began to circle and William knew he was going to be trapped if he couldn't deal with them in the cavern's tight confines. He barked out a curse as he did the only thing he could: he dropped his axe to the ground.

The horse hesitated in surprise at the move, but the goat clearly thought it an opportunity. He leaped in, blade toward William. The hyena turned and twisted away from the blow, and one of his paws closed around the goat's wrist. A quick twist saw the blade dropped from his suddenly-opened fingers, and any surprise on his face was wiped clean as William's other fist crashed into the rebel's muzzle. Bone shattered under the force of his strike; fresh blood stained the floor and the air.

William kicked out as he heard the horse approach from behind. The blow slammed into the equine's gut and staggered him for a moment, and William used that time to spin back around to face the new threat. In his periphery he could see a stunned Leena trying to rise to her feet, but he was forced to dodge a couple of quick swings from the horse before he was sliced to ribbons.

He wasn't ready however for the same tactic he'd taken with them to be turned back on him. As he prepared a couple of fast punches, the horse dropped the dagger from his paw. It clattered to the ground as he outright caught William's punch, wrenching the hyena's arm around. William grit his teeth and moved with it, rotating through the twist until his back was to Daniel.

One of his arms was still trapped however, and Leena was getting up. William growled as he brought up his free paw in front of the horse's face not to strike him, but to ignite a brilliant burst of flame right in front of his eyes. The horse cried out in pain and surprise, and he stumbled back as he released William. Only for a moment however, as he lunged forward again to strike for the hyena.

There was no time for thought and William's paw was already outstretched. The flame that he conjured to his paw erupted as a brilliant plume of fire, short-lived though it was. The small cone enveloped the horse's torso and head, and any scream he might have made was equally scorched from him as his fur and flesh. His body – or what was left of it – was knocked back by the weight of the magical attack.

In the wake of it though, William felt his energy flag. He grunted and stumbled back against Daniel as his vision began to tunnel. He blinked the darkness at the edge of his sight away as he looked at Leena, the rat by then upright and with a knife in each paw. William twisted as he tried to bring both her and his father into view, though the latter seemed more interested in his book than in what William had done by then. "I told you. You have to go through me first."

"Then it's a good thing that we have no intention of doing so." William frowned at his blood-father as the elder hyena looked up at last from his book to meet Leena's eyes. "That will be all, thank you. We have what we need."

William frowned, but he caught the nod from the rat as she sheathed her blades and stepped back. Her lip was split from his strike, but William didn't exactly feel an abundance of guilt for the injury. He growled as he turned his gaze on his blood-father. "What is this? Some sort of test?"

"Everything I do is a test. Everything is *always* a test." He lay his book down in his lap as he leaned back in the chair. His expression had softened considerably as he smiled up at William. "We could have learned one of two things. Either your loyalty to our cause was absolute, or we would see if your magic is advancing as we need it to. Clearly it is."

He snapped his jaws wordlessly at his blood-father as sparks ignited in his paws. "You just lost three people to learn something you could have discovered by *asking* me a question!"

His blood-father rolled his eyes as his gaze flicked briefly to William's sparking paws. "Untried and untested recruits who, themselves, thought this a test of their worthiness. They are acceptable casualties."

William's growl, long and low, rolled out like a wave lapping at the shore. Once again, his blood-father's brutality in the pursuit of his goals was demonstrated. "And my loyalty to Daniel is stronger than my loyalty to you. So where does that leave you, now?"

The older William lifted both eyebrows as he cocked his head to the side. “Oh? And now, as I’m prepared to offer your lover’s life back to you, you wish to kill me? Your own father?” His smile slipped as he lifted his head a little higher. “If you feel it necessary, go ahead. Kill me. Just know what happens next if you do.”

“And what’s that?” The flames in William’s paws burned brighter.

“Chaos, son.” He spread his arms wide, book in one paw and mug in the other. “Fredrick will continue to bear his will down on innocent people. The rebels will lose their leader and all the plans yet to be put into action. They’ll lash out as best they can, and you have no idea how many people – how many *innocent* people – will die in the bloodbath to follow.” His smile came back as he tucked his arms back in close. “You *don’t* want unnecessary bloodshed? Killing me is the worst mistake you could make. And I don’t think you, of all people, are quite capable of spilling your own blood.”

William spared a glance over at Leena. The rat was leaning almost lazily against the wall; it looked, now that he had a moment to do so, like his strike to her chin had split the rat’s lip. She’d produced an apple from somewhere, and had begun to use one of her knives to slice it up and nibble on it piece by piece. She didn’t even seem to be listening, nor did she seem to notice the blood she dripped onto the fruit. “You’re making a lot of assumptions about me.”

“You are my son. My blood flows in your veins. I know all I need to know.” His blood-father set down his mug and reached into a pocket. From it he withdrew a small iron key, and he tossed it over to William a moment later. The flames in one paw died off as William caught it, but those in his other paw intensified. “For your husband’s restraints. Take him and leave, but then return as soon as you are able. We have matters of importance to discuss. Oh, and Daniel?” William scowled as the older hyena leaned to the side to bring the bear back into view. “If you show your face in this city again after tonight, know that my son will not be here to protect you the next time.”

Again William snapped his jaws at his blood-father. “Go on, threaten him again. See how cooperative I am then, and what matters I am willing to discuss.”

The older male chuckled to himself and shook his head. “It was not a threat, son. Just a promise, and one easily fulfilled. He stands on the wrong side of the battle to come, and with those who oppress and destroy our people.”

“He’s not the one executing helpless people in front of me as a gods-damned *test*.” William’s eyes narrowed as he allowed the flames in his other paw to go out. He turned his back on the older hyena and knelt down in front of Daniel. The bear wasn’t looking at him; instead his eyes blazed with anger at his blood-father. “Hold on, love. I’m going to get you out of here.”

He didn’t answer. From the dried blood around Daniel’s muzzle, William wondered if the bear even *could* speak. He sighed as he slid the key into Daniel’s manacles, and with a quick twist they came loose. Daniel’s paws fell slack as William pulled the bindings free, and tossed them back at his blood-father’s feet. He glanced back over his shoulder to see that the hyena was back to reading his book. “You and I are going to have *words* later, and I had best like I what I hear.”

The elder male nodded absently as his eyes remained locked on the pages before him. “Given that it will regard the culmination of all we have worked toward, I don’t doubt that you will like it very much.” His eyes flicked up and over the rim of his book. “Now run along, son. His wounds will need cleaning. You don’t want them to get infected now, do you?”

William’s answer came as a growl, but it was drowned out by Daniel’s. He placed a gentle paw on the shoulder of the bear’s unbroken arm, but it was shrugged away a moment later. William blinked, and sighed quietly to himself. He deserved that. “Come on. Let’s get you up. Let’s get you home.”

Daniel remained silent, but he did allow William to help him up to his feet. The bear’s glare remained fixed on the older hyena even as the younger eased him toward the passage that William had entered through. Leena waved them forward, chewing on a piece of apple with a slight smile of her own. William could see that she’d picked up his battleaxe, but he didn’t care. He’d come back for it later. Daniel was his first priority. Daniel was his last priority. Daniel was every priority to him.

Daniel was, right at that moment, his *only* priority.

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Home wasn’t far from the smithy, and William had to wonder if his blood-father had chosen that spot specifically for the proximity. Daniel earned more than a few strange looks from people as William all but carried him through the streets, but not a single person was willing to speak a word of it. Perhaps they were worried about what the watch or the guardians would do if they were to suggest anything.

Daniel himself was silent the whole way home, and William didn’t blame him. He also didn’t mind, because it would at least give him a fighting chance of coming up with something to say. Something that would explain himself; give Daniel some peace of mind and reassurance through all of this. There wasn’t anything, of course, but that didn’t mean the hyena wouldn’t try.

He remained silent as William cleared the dust off a chair and set Daniel down in it. He sparked a small fire – with his magic, what with no more need to hide it from the bear – and began to boil some water. Cloths were dipped into it so that he could begin to clean and tend to his love’s injuries, but Daniel still didn’t have anything to say to him. He’d barely even brought himself to look William in the eye, and it was only the sheer weight of concern the hyena felt for Daniel and his injuries that kept him from breaking down at the silent judgement.

It wasn’t until William tried to peel off Daniel’s shirt to get at his shoulder that his functional arm lifted to close a paw gently around William’s damp paw. “No.”

William stopped immediately; his wrist went limp as he allowed Daniel to move his paw away. It was the most he’d spoken since he’d seen him under the smithy, and it was a start. Not a great one, but a start. “If there’s one thing he was right about, it was this. *I need* to clean your wounds.”

“What’s it matter?” His head slowly turned and his eyes fixed on William. Despite that, the bear seemed to be a million miles away. It was like his gaze pierced right through him, and continued off far into the world. “Infected wounds ain’t gonna kill me. *He* will.”

The hyena swallowed. He wanted to look anywhere else, but he wasn't going to lose the opportunity to see the bear. "He wouldn't dare. He still needs me if he expects to get what he wants, and besides which, he gave you until tomorrow. You'll have time to rest now and gather what you need before--"

"You're sending me away too?" The bear's brows knit together. His muzzle trembled even as it curled. "That what you want, Will?"

It took all that William had to not throw his arms around Daniel and squeeze him tight. With the beating he'd suffered, he wondered if an embrace as tight as the one he wished to give would kill him. "I never want to be away from you. I've never, *ever* wanted to be away from you. Not from the moment you opened my heart up and crawled inside it. Not ever, Daniel."

Daniel sighed and finally let his head sag. His shoulders went with it. "Y'know I suspected, right? What you were doin' with the whole... not running away with me plan? I was all but sure when you insisted on the whole kingsblade thing." He grunted as William once again began to try and coax his arms up to lift his shirt away. In the end, William was able to do one arm, then the bear's head, and carefully slid the broken arm free with a bit more effort.

Once the bloody garment had been left to pool on the dusty floor of their home, William shook his head. "I'm sorry, and I know that doesn't matter in the least. How could it? You're angry with me, and you're right to be."

What might have been a laugh started to bark out from the bear's muzzle, but it turned to a grunt of pain as William winced. He probably had cracked or broken ribs. "Angry with you? Why'd I be angry?"

"Oh, I don't know." He began to dab the warm, wet cloth against the cuts in Daniel's back as the bear hissed. "Becoming a rebel? Infiltrating the castle? Learning magic?"

"I mean, that last bit's definitely somethin' but... here, look't me." Daniel's paw reached out for William's again, and he used it to pull the hyena around in front of him once more. For the first time since they'd started talking, it was like Daniel's eyes were focused on William. "Yeah... I was angry at first. You lied to me. Deceived me. And you probably did it to protect me, but that doesn't change a thing. You should have told me, Will."

The hyena swallowed. He wanted so hard to speak and refute what Daniel was saying; to insist that his protection *was* all William had wanted, and that he had no other way to keep his love safe. He knew that Daniel knew, though. He also knew it was wrong. He'd never been under any illusions on that score.

And so, in his silence, Daniel nodded and continued. "Just like... I should've told you about the poison at your kingsblade trial. I ain't got room to talk. Besides, you just... you put yourself between me and y'father. You were... you'd have killed him for me."

William pursed his lips but couldn't tear his eyes from Daniel's stare. He didn't want to. "I wasn't thinking. When I saw you there, I just--"

"Sshhh. It's okay." The bear offered him a little, if pained, smile. "Doin' the wrong thing to protect someone's one thing. But you put y'self on the line against your *father*; stood in front of him for me."

William grit his teeth. "He's not my father, Daniel. He's just the one who... who seeded my mother. My real father's been dead for years."

Daniel sighed and closed his eyes as William reached out to start cleaning his injuries again. "Yeah, but still. That's... really him? William the first? Uh... William the Senior?"

"Good a name as any, I guess." William heard the growl threading through each of his words. "I actually thought, when I met him for the first time, that everything was going to be different. I couldn't believe he was alive. I..." He shook his head as Daniel winced; he'd rubbed one particular cut too hard. "Sorry."

"It's okay. No worse than they did." Daniel lifted his head again. "So... your blood-father?" William nodded. That worked, after a fashion. "He's alive. Runnin' the rebels... and he got you into the kingsblades so you could kill Fredrick?"

William shook his head even as he worked his way around behind Daniel to continue his efforts. The washbasin he'd filled with hot water was growing grimmer and bloodier with each rinse of the cloth; it'd need changing soon. "You sure you want this information? If the guardians catch you-"

"Hey, I'm leavin' town tonight, so no worries, right? Not like I'm stickin' around Ratholarin after this." Daniel turned his head as far as he could. "You know I'd never turn you in, right?"

The hyena froze. He'd worried, in quiet, private moments about whether or not Daniel would. He'd never believed that the bear would, of course, but the fear had plagued him nonetheless. He leaned in to gently kiss Daniel's cheek where the bruising was least severe. "I worried... but only because I worry about everything these days. Forgive me?"

Daniel nodded, but there was still no more smile on his face. "Yeah. I understand. And like I said, you standin' in front of ol' William the Senior for me did a lot to convince me, too." He sagged again as William started down his back. "Tell you what, though... seein' you show up there? First thought you were investigating something and were gonna save us. Like I'd been wrong about what you were up to."

"I saw. Saw the moment you realised... when he called me his son." William shuddered. "I'm still not used to hearing it."

"I'm still not used to you burnin' guardians down with magic." Daniel turned his head as William worked lightly at the bear's side. "Doesn't it... you know. Hurt? Burn?"

William paused as he lifted a paw from the cloth. He held it in front of Daniel and concentrated for a second, willing the fire to come forth. Steam boiled off his digits for a moment before a single flame flickered to life in the palm of his paw. "Don't touch it. Magic flame burns hotter than normal fire. But... no. It doesn't burn me. I don't even feel it. It's like..." He frowned as he looked down at the flame. "I don't know how to describe it. It's like I can feel heat rushing through my body, and then it just pools there and... grows. Like a waterspout in the bathhouse, but I control the flow through the spout. And, uh... I'm the spout. Gotta be careful I don't spit out too much, though. It's... exhausting. Dangerous."

“If it weren’t damn terrifying, it’d be amazing.” Daniel reached toward it, but William quickly snuffed the flame before the bear could touch it. “Think you could teach me somethin’ like that? Might be useful for keepin’ rebels and guardians off my back, if I’m running.”

The hyena shook his head as he sighed and knelt down beside Daniel. He didn’t understand it well enough to explain it, but the bear deserved to know what little William did. “Magic was a gift of the gods, or so they say. And back in the Age of Immortals, they invested part of their power in their most devout followers. Wove it right into who they are.”

Daniel nodded along as William took a deep breath. “Well, whatever the gods *meant*, what they did changed the people they gifted magic to. Once the power was awoken, their children and their children’s children inherited the same power. Mother was a priestess, and my... uh, my blood-father is descended from a shaman who was a rare son of an Aspect; a powerful vessel for a godforged essence that inherited the...” He smiled as Daniel began to look more confused. “Yeah, that’s about where my eyes glazed over, too.”

“Good to know I’m not the only one.” He frowned though as William’s smile grew. “I thought Catherine was just a farm girl.”

“That’s what she told me. That’s what she told everyone in Ratholarin, and she was raised in a farming family.” William reached up to gently clasp Daniel’s paw, and was relieved when Daniel squeezed it back. “Apparently she was from a long line of priests on her father’s side. Felt the call, and was the priestess of her village. Until she met my fath... my blood-father.”

Daniel’s expression tightened all at once. “Startin’ to get why you don’t like callin’ him your father. That guy, he’s... he’s bad news, Will.”

That was certainly an idea that had been filtering through William’s mind for the better part of a couple of years. Ever since they’d met, he’d been left thinking the same thing as Daniel. “I don’t know that he’s worse news than Fredrick, though. You know what the king’s been doing. This isn’t about Caris, or even Ratholarin. This is about the whole south sea. All the realms are in danger, and he won’t stop there if he doesn’t have to. Fredrick has to be stopped, Daniel.”

The bear nodded slowly, but when he looked down at William again it was with fear shining in his eyes. “And you’re gonna be the one to do it.”

William nodded back as he sighed. “Someone has to. And I have a chance. You have to be a captain or higher to even attempt the trials, and I’m the only one they had.” He swallowed as he glanced aside. “Remember when I was trying to root out the rebels in Sanwell? I probably would have just done the job if Fredrick hadn’t turned into a monster overnight.”

“He didn’t turn into a monster overnight, Will. He’s just a monster what turned into a king.” Daniel scowled as he squeezed gently at William’s paw. “I wouldn’t have ever turned you in, you know. I’d have done anything to protect you, rebel or not.”

“I know.” William shuffled closer and lay his head down gently on Daniel’s paw. “And I wish I could have just... run off with you, like you said. That we could just go away and never come back.”

Daniel hummed and nodded as he looked down. “We still could. But somethin’ tells me you’re not willin’ to leave just yet.” When William tilted his head up to meet his gaze, the bear nodded again. “Somethin’ left to do?”

“He’s *got* to be stopped, Daniel. You know it.” William closed his eyes as he nuzzled against that paw. It might be the last time he ever would, and he’d be damned if he was going to let go before he had to. “My... blood-father, he wants to rebuild Caris. Can’t do that without the crown being taken down. That means Fredrick goes. Brett, too.”

The bear frowned. “What about Prince Tobias?”

But William just shook his head. He’d already asked that question of his blood-father. “Originally, he intended to kill Tobias, too. I think I managed to change his mind.”

“Good. I can’t imagine you wantin’ to see him gutted, no matter if it was you or someone else doin’ it.” The bear sighed and closed his eyes again. “He’s a mess, that Tobias... but he’s the only one of the three Rathin boys who’s got a heart in his chest. He might not like bein’ king but he’s the only one I know I’d be comfortable with.”

“He’s also the only one who might give Caris back to the Carisi.” William lifted his head and slowly stood. “Took some work to convince my blood-father that if I could stay in Tobias’ good graces, I could convince him to take the throne when the time was right. He thought their... whole line needed to be scoured. A cleansing fire was just what he wanted.”

Daniel snorted and shook his head, though he winced with the motion. “Good luck with that. There’s cousins for days who’d jump at the chance to stake their claim on the throne. It’d be little factional wars until someone stepped in and put it right. I don’t wanna see Ratholarin torn to pieces from the inside, Will. Don’t let that happen, please.”

William nodded. He didn’t bother adding that that had been his blood-father’s plan in the first place. “I won’t. With Tobias on the throne, it won’t come to that. Ratholarin doesn’t have to suffer, and the Carisi can have their homeland back. Everyone wins.”

“Yeah, ‘cept Fredrick. I’m sure I’ll shed a tear.” Daniel heaved himself up out of the chair, and his paw slipped from William’s as he rolled his shoulder and stretched the arm out. “Still... can’t convince you to come with me? Maybe I’m too badly hurt to escape. Maybe I’ll never make it without you to help me.”

“If I didn’t know you, that might work.” William smirked back at him.

Daniel shrugged again, wince and all. “If you didn’t know me, you wouldn’t care.” He paused, then smiled. “Nah. You’d care. You always care, whether you know someone or not.”

“But I do know you. And I do care.” He paused as he stood and moved in closer. Daniel’s good arm wrapped around William, and the hyena sighed as he let himself gently fall in against his love. “Where will you go?”

“Ingsbren. Like the old plan.” He squeezed William in a little tighter as the hyena’s arms wrapped around Daniel’s middle. “I’ll go see my brother. Been a while, but I should be able to rest up and recover there. If they’re still where I think they are, that is. Past the outskirts of Ciroven; a little farm half a day beyond the wall. Can see the palace from a hill on his land, too. Nice view at sunset, apparently.”

William sighed. That sounded nice. A little farm far away, with no war or rebels or anything else like that to worry about. Just a good, simple life. Briefly, William wondered if he'd ever have the chance to see what that sort of life might be like. If, at the end of it all, he could maybe find out with Daniel. He froze up a little at that thought. 'With' Daniel might not be as sure a thing as he had always thought it would be. "I wish I could come with you. I mean, if you even wanted-"

"I *just* said I wanted you to come with me." The arm squeezed him tighter, but William relaxed into the bear's embrace further all the same. "I told you before and I'll tell you a hundred times if I gotta. I love you. Ain't nothin' gonna change that." He leaned down and, once he was able to strain himself to reach low enough, kissed the top of William's head. "You just make sure you live. You gotta come find me out there. Promise me when it's done you'll do that for me, okay? Promise you'll come find me. I don't wanna do this without you."

The hyena nodded without even thinking. "I love you too, and I promise. You're amazing. You're utterly amazing."

"You're pretty wonderful yourself, you know. But no more secrets, huh?" He nosed down against William's head, and the hyena heard him sniffing sharply. Either he was crying, or was trying to commit the hyena's scent to memory. Probably both. "I wanna know we're getting out of this, love. I wanna know I'm not sayin' goodbye. I need to know."

"You aren't." William tilted his head up and lifted a paw with it to cup Daniel's cheek. The bear's smile lit a new fire in his heart, stronger than any magical flame. "You're just getting a head start. Getting things ready for us. Everything together, right? Always together."

"Promise?" Daniel touched his nose to William's and pressed into a soft kiss.

Blood and grime and strife and fear couldn't banish the sweetness of that kiss. William leaned into it as if it was the last kiss he'd ever taste. Even if it was, there was no way in all the world that William would trade it for any other. Daniel was still his. He was still Daniel's. No matter what plots or laws or rules or orders came down, neither one of them would compromise on each other.

They'd made their choices. They'd not just fallen in love; they'd *chosen* to love one another. Through war and rebellion and spying and rebels and poisons and assassination attempts. Nothing was stronger than that choice. Not Fredrick. Not William's blood-father. Nothing.

"I promise."