

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART TWELVE

30th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

“My name is William, blood of Vothos, and I am afraid that I am here to kill you.”

It took almost all that William had left to force himself up to his feet again. He just about buckled as he braced himself with his battleaxe, but managed to rise as his blood-father cast a disappointed eye in his direction. “Don’t you *dare*.”

“The die is already cast, William. His father cast it years ago.” The older hyena twisted his sword slowly back and forth as he turned his eyes on Tobias again. “It is a shame, and I promise you that what pleasure I will take from your death will be small. Far smaller than I deserve, after all that I have lost thanks to you and yours.”

“He has taken nothing from you.” William growled as he stumbled; lifting the axe had proven almost too much for his exhausted body to handle. The stumble did send him to the side just enough to interpose himself between Tobias and his blood-father, so there was that much at least. They’d had a deal. William wasn’t going to let the older male break it.

“No, he specifically has not.” The older male smiled at his son, and William shuddered. What was he playing at? “Perhaps I misspoke. The Rathin tongue is so crude; so lacking in melody and nuance both. When I said that I would be killing him, I meant that only in the abstract. Only in that I am *responsible* ultimately for it.” He waved his empty paw toward William. “You have been wronged. He has taken from *you*, my son. You will be the one to strike him down.”

William snarled. “I will not.”

“No? After all he has done to you? All the harm he has caused you?” His blood-father clicked his tongue and shook his head as William glanced back down at Tobias. The tiger remained on his knees behind him, looking up with confusion and sudden, new fear. Did he honestly think that William would do that? “Surely you of all people would relish the feel of his blood on your paws.”

The kingsblade sneered as he turned back on the older hyena. Of course that was something his blood-father would have thought. “I only just now finished saying to Tobias that my soldiering days are well behind me after this. I don’t want to feel the blood of *anyone* on my paws. Not ever again.”

“Excuse me.” The voice was Tobias’ and it came as the tiger shakily rose to his feet behind William. He kept his eyes on the other hyena, though; if his blood-father wanted Tobias dead, he couldn’t let himself get distracted. “Sorry. We’re just discussing my potentially imminent demise, and I rather thought that I should have some say in it.”

The older hyena’s muzzle twisted, but it melted into a cool smile a moment later. “Of course. There is no reason to be so rude in the presence of royalty now, is there?” The greying hyena lifted his sword as William squeezed at the haft of his axe, but his blood-father didn’t move to strike. Instead he slid it smoothly into its sheath as he stared at Tobias. “Are you satisfied, your majesty?”

Tobias chuckle drew a wince from William. He doubted that the tiger was viewing this as a game, but not taking his blood-father seriously would only make things worse. “Of course not. You wouldn’t have sheathed your blade unless you were certain you could kill me without it. Confidence in your son, perhaps?”

“One option of many, I admit. Most wise.” The bow of the commander’s head seemed to be in earnest, but William still didn’t lower his guard. The muscles of his arms began to burn with the weight of the axe, but he stiffened them as much as he could. He couldn’t afford to drop it. “You know why I am here.”

“I know why you are *apparently* here. You claim it’s to kill me, but I doubt that’s the real reason.” Tobias stepped forward, and he finally entered the edge of William’s vision. He twisted slightly so that he could both see Tobias and his blood-father at the same time. “You cannot possibly strike and hold Sanwell. Many more Ratholarin soldiers will reclaim the city before you can properly lay claim to it, so I wonder if you would share what your true goals are. Perhaps we can be honest with one another?”

“Now that right there is an idea, is it not? A fine one. Honesty is something I have not been able to express so openly in thirty years.” The older hyena folded his arms as William issued a warning growl. He couldn’t see his blood-father’s paws. If he had a concealed weapon... “So then, let us be honest. I *do* wish to kill you.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate. Even now, I do not wish to kill *you*. I’ve killed more today than I ever want to again.” Tobias shook his head as he waved up at the bell in the ceiling, still ringing away. The commander looked up at it for a moment, but William kept his eyes square on his blood-father. If he made *any* moves...

But they didn’t come. Instead, when his head lowered again it was with a smile on his face. “It is nothing personal, your majesty, I promise you that. Now, if your father were standing there where you are, with the male who stole my wife and son from me between he and I, things would be different. I would, on a very personal level, have done absolutely everything within my power to rip the life from their hearts myself.

“But you are not them, and my son stands as your ward. This presents a problem, because I cannot – I *must not* – cause him to come to harm. Too much rests on the future he will help us to build; a future where Caris stands tall again, free of your rule.” His arms

unfolded as he pointed at Tobias. “One of two things will happen here, your majesty. You will cede Caris back to the Carisi, or I will take it from you by force. You will die. Your people will suffer. And then, when all is done, I will salt your lands and raze everything Ratholarin to the ground. I will strike you and your people from the world, and-”

“That’s quite enough.” Tobias held up a paw, and William watched as a spark of fresh anger and indignation touched his blood-father’s face. He certainly wasn’t used to being interrupted, and doubly not by Ratholarin royalty. “Please. I have heard your request, and I am ready to answer. Pray hear me well.” He leaned forward, expression firm as his fur bristled. “I say to you now: *no*.”

Silence reigned but for the toll of the bell. The older male lifted an eyebrow and perked an ear, as if surprised to have heard the word. Perhaps he was; William could scarcely believe he’d heard it himself. “Forgive me, your majesty; Rathin is not my native tongue. You told me... *no*.”

“That’s correct. I said *no*, and I say it again. *No*.” Tobias shook his head as the anger continued to mount on the commander’s face. “You know, you had me for a second. You spoke of not harming your son – by the way, you and I *are* discussing that later, William – and I was quite happy to listen to your request.” He directed that little aside directly at the kingsblade, and William sighed as he nodded. If they survived, that would be a fun chat. “However, you went and undermined yourself with a critical negotiating flaw.”

“And in the interest of bettering myself for the future, what would that flaw be?” The older hyena stood up taller, paws clasped behind his back as he stared Tobias down. He was seething, William could tell. It wasn’t that he was being dismissed so casually, but that it was his *enemy* doing it that was boiling his blood. He could sense the anger rising, and echoes of it stoked the fire within William as well.

Tobias, perhaps ignorant and perhaps counting on it, simply smiled. “You issued threat. Against me is one thing, of course; I would expect nothing less.” His smile slipped as he stepped forward again, beyond William’s reach.

The hyena felt a flicker of panic. In his weakened state, Tobias was putting himself outside of William’s ability to protect him! “If you had just asked for Caris, we could have discussed terms. If that was what you put forward, it would have been fine.” The tiger’s eyes narrowed as William’s blood-father began to growl. “But you threatened my people. Thousands upon thousands of people who are innocent... and now I cannot be certain that you would honour any such agreement. *That* is your mistake.”

The older hyena lifted his head higher. It was almost with contempt that he looked down at Tobias, though his gaze did flick briefly to William. Was it to gauge his son’s strength? His capability of fulfilling his duty as kingsblade? “You pretend care poorly. Ratholarin royalty do not cater to the needs of the common folk. Your family line have proven this in abundance. It would be stupid of me to fall for such an obvious lie.”

“There is no lie, but I do not expect you to be so understanding. You have lost so much.” Tobias shook his head as his tone softened. “The lie is not mine, William, of the blood of Vothos, but yours. You are not here to free the Carisi. You are not here to restore Caris.” Tobias touched his chest through his bloody robe. “If that happened it would just be a happy accident; a delightful side-effect of your success here. You are here for revenge, and you will take it however much it costs. I implore you, sir: if you mean to take my life, be honest about the reason. Show me that much respect, at least.”

“Tobias.” William said the name slowly, but the prince didn’t turn back to regard him. He did catch the warning glance of his blood-father. If he wasn’t careful, the tiger was likely to goad him into an attack. William’s arms burned not with the fire in his heart, but with fatigue. “Step back. Please.”

“I am not afraid of him. I am not going to *be* afraid of him. I refuse.” Tobias kept his eyes locked on William’s blood-father instead as the younger hyena sighed. “I will not let thousands upon thousands of Ratholarin people be harmed for the revenge of *one* person. You see what he is, William. You’re too smart not to.”

“My son knows well what I have lost, and for what reason I fight.” There was a lick of anger that had slipped into the rebel commander’s words, and William was sure the sound wasn’t lost on Tobias as well. “You, however, are not worth the truth. You, who have lived your life in a castle surrounded by the spoils of the wars your forefathers raged, do not get to stand there and speak to *me* of innocent lives lost.”

The growl that came from Tobias was deep and resolute and stunned William almost right to his core. From the way his blood-father recoiled, it was clear that he too was just as surprised at the sound of it. “I *will* speak of it, because I am not guilty of the sins of my forefathers. I have not committed those atrocities. I have not ordered wars against innocents. I have not joined campaigns to harm people, William, of the blood of Vothos. Nor, if I take the throne, do I have any interest in doing so.

“So if you seek to hate me, is not hatred of *me* you hold. It is the hatred of the deeds done of those who came before me, and for you to lay that at my feet before I have a chance to do anything to make amends, *while* claiming that your cause is morally righteous enough to justify the deaths of the innocent is... it is *sickening* to me.” Tobias shook his head as the older hyena began to growl back at him. “So. That brings me back to my original response. No. I will not be ceding to someone such as you. Not *your* lands, not my life, and certainly not my people. I am, however, prepared to discuss the terms of your total surrender at this time.” Tobias’ eyes narrowed. “And that is a kinder offer than my forefathers would have made, I assure you. You would be wise to consider it.”

The commander’s eyes narrowed as his growl deepened. “You do not understand what you are doing here, *your majesty*. Provoking me is most unwise.”

“Then let us be unwise.” Tobias’ paws shifted to his hips as he stood his ground before the glowering hyena. William would have been impressed in any other situation,

but he knew better than Tobias not to underestimate the male before him. “You use violence to get what you wish. You demand absolute submission to your goal. You are willing to harm those who have done you no wrong to achieve it. What exactly about your methods separate you from the atrocities of my father? From my brother?”

Even as the older male opened his muzzle to reply, William beat him to it. Better to not give his blood-father a chance to speak. “He is right. The pain and suffering that you – that our people – have gone through is not justification enough to hurt innocent people.”

“I do not need to justify myself or my people’s actions to you, son.” The commander’s eyes flicked to Tobias, full of contempt as they looked the prince up and down. “Nor to you, a spoiled little brat who has lived fat off the agony of whole kingdoms. Who has benefited from the pain and suffering his family has caused for generations.”

William shook his head, but Tobias beat him to a response. “What would you do, then?”

The older male glared. “I do not understand the question.”

“What would you do? When you kill me, and presumably your son because you *know* he is not going to go along with whatever it is you intend to do next... what *do* you intend to do?” Tobias shrugged. “You must have goals. Plans. What happens once you kill me?”

“We take advantage of the crisis of succession.” There was no smile on the face of the commander, just grim determination that hardened his eyes. “Your uncles will war for the throne. Ratholarin will be weakened by the crisis, and we will have a chance to rebuild Caris. Yaroven.”

“And then?” Tobias shook his head once more as William’s axe began to dip. The weight of it was growing far too much, and his body was far too exhausted from the fighting, the magic, and the wounds he had suffered. This had to end, and soon! “What happens after that? What happens once you have Caris, and the succession crisis is resolved?”

The hyena’s head tilted slowly to the side, and his eyes flicked to William. William frowned back at him. He already knew the answer to the question. His blood-father knew it, too. “Then your people live. The Carisi live. The Yarovenni live.”

William snorted even as Tobias shook his head. His blood-father knew that he knew the answer, yet still he tried that. The elder’s head snapped to the side, fixing William with an intense glare. “You lie. That’s not what you told me and that’s not what you just told us you wanted to do. That’s not what you and the elders were planning, is it?” His muzzle twitched with a brief snarl. “What happened to salting the earth? Razing Ratholarin to the ground? I thought you were going to be honest with him. But then, you promised *me* he would live, didn’t you? What’s one more lie, *William*?”

“So much for honest conversation, I suppose.” Tobias sighed as he stepped back to bring himself alongside William again. “William, the blood of Vothos... thank you for your time and your words. I truly do appreciate them, false as they have been. It was very nice to meet you.” He waved a paw up toward the hyena. “Now. Lay down your arms and surrender.”

The elder hyena snorted. “You think you can defeat me?”

Tobias just shook his head and heaved a tired sigh. “I’m hoping I won’t have to. That you’ll see sense.”

For a moment, it looked to William like his blood-father was about to do so. It seemed for all the world like the older hyena was ready to surrender; to let that desire to see pain and suffering come to countless innocent Ratholarin citizens go. To let his quest for revenge go. To let all of that hate go.

Then he laughed.

It was a deep, wracking sound, almost a cough and almost manic with the energy and force behind it. He doubled over, clutching at his middle as he shook with it all. Tobias and William exchanged a quick glance. The prince looked as perturbed by the sound of it as William did. “You must forgive me; I did not mean to speak in jest.”

The laughter died off, fading into a deep sigh as the older hyena lifted his head once more. The smile was slipping away as his muzzle curled the other way. “The mistake was mine, your majesty, to think of you as anything more than a joke.” He reached to the sword sheathed at his side, and his fingers brushed along the hilt as William squeezed his axe tighter. “I am the blood of Caris. Caris does not surrender to the Ratholarin.” His eyes locked on Tobias even as he raised his voice. “William. Strike him down.”

Tobias didn’t even turn his head. His kingsblade smiled tightly to himself. It had only taken a couple of decades, but he had the absolute trust of the prince once more. “*William*. Stand down and disarm. This is your final warning.”

The commander’s jaw tightened as an ear flicked. “You betray your father? You betray your kin? Your home? Your lineage?”

“My father is dead.” William shook his head as he forced himself to stand up tall again, and the older male’s eyes finally shifted to him. “My kin – my *mother* – is dead. My home is where my love is, and you forced him from me. And my lineage...” He shook his head as he raised the axe higher. His muscles burned. His heart burned hotter. “I don’t give a *damn* about my lineage.”

“So I *am* betrayed.” He shook his head as his fingers closed around his sword’s hilt. “Your destiny was to be the founder of a new line, William. Patriarch of a bloodline of warrior sorcerers. The glory of Caris, in service to the gods and the people.” He shook his head and sighed; his sword slowly unsheathed as he drew it free. The commander brought

it before him, his empty paw at his back as he straightened up. “If I must spill my own blood to see Caris restored... I am sorry, my son, but I *will* spill it.”

“You’re right about one part.” William’s head rose as he stared right into his father’s eyes. Something was wrong. Something was off. He couldn’t quite put a finger on it, but the way his blood-father stood wasn’t right... “Your blood *will* spill if you do this.” He had a plan. He had something in mind; William just didn’t know what it was. If he just had a moment more...

He caught the flash of murderous intent in the older hyena’s eye a split second before it happened. It came with a shift in the older hyena’s shoulder, not at the end of his swordarm but the *other*. Too late, William saw his blood-father’s intention in the glint of iron – a small knife – that flashed in his grip. It was already in flight, loosed by a quick flick of the wrist as William leaped forward. His axe was too low.

The kingsblade did not had time to block the blade with his weapon, but he *did* have enough time to place himself in its path. The impact of the knife came as a thud in William’s chest. Pain surged through him as he watched his blood-father’s eyes widen in surprise. The blade had not been meant for him. It had been meant for Tobias.

But there was the handle, sticking out of William’s chest.

Tobias might have screamed, but William was still in motion. His axe had been too low for a block, but that just left it in prime position for a sweep. He roared in response as the older hyena froze in utter shock. He didn’t raise his weapon. He didn’t stop William’s axe from its adrenaline-fueled swing up from near the ground. He just stared at the grip of the knife that was buried in his son’s chest as that son screamed in his face and swung his axe up with all of his might.

The slash was perfectly spaced. The edge of the axe cleaved cleanly through the older male’s leathers. It cleft fur from flesh. The blade sliced down into the flesh of the rebel commander’s hip, and cut a broad red line from there to his shoulder. Blood spilled across the weapon and William both; the same blood that flowed in his veins. The same blood spilling around the knife wedged between his ribs.

William’s axe slipped free of his grasp as his stroke cleared his blood-father’s body. The older male’s leathers, severed completely by the blow, fell off his body as he slumped forward at William’s feet. The axe arced through the air as William grunted and began to tumble forward as well.

A desperate paw grabbed him by the arm though, and stalled out his descent. William was pulled bodily back as that surge of desperate strength left his body, and he coughed as the metallic taste of blood spilled across his tongue. His head rolled back with the motion, and Tobias almost buckled as he pulled William’s full weight against his chest. The two sank down to the ground together, with the tiger’s chest and lap propping William up. Somewhere else, his axe clattered to the ground. The hyena grit his teeth as he looked

down at his blood-father's still, leaking form. He couldn't muster words, and settled for launching a gob of bloody spittle at the back of his head.

There was no reaction. He was gone.

It was done.

"William..." The word was little more than a sigh, ragged and full of fear as it rolled from Tobias' muzzle. The hyena lay his head back against the tiger's chest as he reached a paw up to his chest. He could feel his leathers growing warm and wet from his own blood as it drooled out over the knife. "William, what did... *why* did you..."

The hyena swallowed hard against the blood in his throat, only to cough it back up again a moment later. The knife had obviously hit something vital. Removing it would probably spill too much of his already depleted blood. Leaving it in wasn't an option. It was with an odd sense of calm that he realised, right then in Tobias' lap, that he was dead. He hadn't stopped moving yet, but he was dead. It would just take a moment more to set in.

He looked up at Tobias. The prince's face was full of horror, his eyes wide and his paws reaching desperately for the knife. That was a mistake. William quickly covered the knife from Tobias and shook his head. "N-no... no, leave it."

"Absolutely not. We've got to get it out, summon the physician; we..." He gasped, choking on his own words as he shook his head. Tears flecked this way and that. "You can't die. You can't. I forbid it."

"Sure. I'll... get right on that for you." William winced as he tried to sit up a little higher, but the effort sent a surge of pain through his chest and he slumped right back down with a sigh. He wasn't going anywhere. "Tobias. I... I can't move. Not without... you know."

"Then I'm going to get help." He tried to shuffle about a little, to dislodge William and lay him down on the floor, but he was stalled out by a squeeze of William's paw on his wrist. "William. You *need* help. I have to-

"It's too late." He coughed again, tilting his head to the side to spill the blood pooling in his lungs across the ground. That wasn't a good sign. "The knife has to come out. Once it does, I'll just... bleed. Tobias, listen to me." He tugged on the tiger's paw as he looked back down and met William's eyes again, tears and all. "I'm done. Alright? I'm *done*."

The tiger's muzzle twitched as he bit back sobs. It was sweet, really; Tobias was actually broken up about his death. He'd wondered, privately, how the prince would have reacted to such a thing. He'd never hoped to find out, of course, but at least he knew for sure right then. "You are *not* done! What... what about Daniel? William, you can't be done; you need to get to Daniel, remember?"

“Daniel...” That awoke a deeper pain in William’s chest. He gasped, the effort filling his muzzle with blood again as he struggled to breathe. *Daniel*. His bear. His love. “I promised him...”

Tobias nodded as his tears splashed William’s leathers. The prince’s eyes hardened as he stared down firmly at William. “Exactly. You promised him, so you don’t get to... you *can* ’t!”

“Don’t have a choice. What’s done... is done.” He coughed again, trying to force actual air back into his lungs. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. Already his fingers and toes had gone cold. He couldn’t feel his tail. “Did do something right. Kept one promise.” He flashed a weak, bloody smile up at the frowning tiger. “Promised... I’d keep you safe. Not let... not let him kill you, too.”

“I didn’t want this.” The words were almost inaudible. Tobias launched into wracking sobs, the motion jostling William in his lap. It didn’t hurt anymore, and somewhere deep inside William knew that that wasn’t a good thing. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered anymore; not for him. “You should’ve let him just-”

“Not a chance.” William sighed. He tried to spit the blood from his muzzle out, but only succeeded in causing it to drool out the corners of his mouth. Damn. “You need... to sit the throne. Tobias. You have to.” He gave a tiny shake of his head. “Don’t... don’t let this... be for nothing. Alright? You need... to fix all this.”

“For *him*?” There was a surge of anger in Tobias’ voice as he looked over at the other hyena. He lay still; his blood had begun to flow slowly down the steps.

William’s eyes closed for a moment; they almost stayed closed, but he forced them open again. Tobias needed him. Just one more time; just for a moment more. “Not for him. For me.” He smiled again as Tobias’ attention returned to him. The tiger’s paws rubbed at his arms, but he barely felt it. “Stop the rebels, but... help the people. The ones they... they’re fighting for. Please?” He gave another quiet cough. More blood came that time. “For me, ‘cause I... I can’t. I pr... I promised Daniel that...”

The whimper that slipped out between Tobias’ lips was all William needed to hear to know that he’d gotten through to his old friend. The nod only confirmed it, and he sighed with relief. Good. One promise fulfilled. Two, if he counted keeping Tobias safe. It was done. It was finished. The rebels wouldn’t get the bloody revolution they wanted, but maybe they’d get something better. He had to hope they would. He had to trust that Tobias would see it through.

“Please don’t go.” Tobias sounded so much like himself two decades ago. It was almost as though William could see the young tiger as he was back when life was grand and full and wonderful. In the days before Daniel and war and kings and magic. He sounded like he really was. Like he always had been in the deepest corners of William’s memories. His real self. “Please, William. I need you. I *need* you to stay with me.”

That, William knew, was a promise he couldn't keep. The paw that had protected the knife from Tobias' interference lost the strength to stay where it was, and it started to slide down William's body as the darkness at the edge of his field of view closed in. What was past it, he wondered? Were the gods watching? Could Miarvis see him and what he'd done? What would she think of it all? What did any of them think? Did they even care?

"Please..." Tobias' voice held him there for a moment longer; a single thread that kept William's eyes open. His eyes rolled upward to bring the tiger back into view one more time. The prince's eyes were reddened, desperately shedding tears like they could replace the blood William had lost. "Please, William... you can't. I need... I *love* you."

Love. What a wonderful word. What a wonderful thing. William smiled as his head lolled back into Tobias' arm. "Huh... 's funny." His smile fell slack as his eyes closed for the last time, and the darkness wrapped around Tobias' confused, distraught expression even as it reached out for William. "Never... thought I'd... hear you... say..."

It was funny, even though he didn't have the air or the strength to laugh. The sensation of his body being shaken barely broke through the fog of his fading life. William smiled. He'd done it. Kept one promise to Daniel, at least.

The bear was safe. His *everything* was safe. Daniel was alright. He could almost imagine his lover's smile. It was a fine thought to leave on.

A smile big and warm and broad enough to wrap around William as sure as his arms.

Daniel was absolutely perfect.

He was everything.

Everything that

William

could

ever