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Chapter

1

*To Spit in God’s Eye*

0x414F:A:6 – 2:04 – Alignment Standard Time

*Roseblood*.

Vylith’s eyes never left the straggling Teizan bull as she slowly crept up toward the blacknettle bush, careful to let its mass of dark vines obscure her skulking form. Blood pounded in her skull with every glacial step, and she had to take slow, deep breaths to keep herself from shaking as she crept toward her prey.

*Almost there.*

The bull’s stripes, usually a dazzling blend of white and blue, were dull now. Coat covered in a dusting of ashy snow, he raked a single hoof despondently across the grey powder that blanketed the rocky ground, searching for any signs of food.

When she finally made it to the bush, Vylith carefully went to one knee behind the tangled mass of thorns that made up the blacknettle. It would be a few months at least before the nettle bloomed, even if Saint Yvon chose to stop spewing ash into the sky soon. She would never have stepped so close to the deadly brambles otherwise. She called again.

*Roseblood, do you see him?*

She waited, shifting her knee to stop the snow from numbing it, nervous anxiety swelling to unbearable heights at her companion’s slow progress.

What Vylith was planning to do today churned her stomach, nearly empty though it was. She was no youngling, hands shaking as she raised her bow to loose an arrow upon her first stag. She had killed stronger beasts many times over, a veteran of the Great Hunt three years over by the time she had reached adulthood.

Today, however, her prey was no ordinary beast of the land. This bull thought, dreamt, and loved. He was alive in every sense of the word, blessed by Narzha with the true intelligence once reserved only for her kind if the stories were correct.

What she was planning to do today went against the core of everything she knew to be right. To murder one of the Hallowed was among the greatest of crimes. It was a crime against Narzha herself. But it had been almost two weeks since Roseblood had eaten, and Vylith could not sit idly by while her sister withered away.

*I see him*, came Roseblood’s sending at last, as if she knew Vylith had been thinking of her at that moment.

*Finally. What took you so long?*

A mental growl and an impression of paws sinking into a pit of ash two span deep were all Vylith received in response. She held back a nervous chuckle and slowly unshouldered her bow, forced to hold it parallel to the ground as its length would not allow her to hold it upright from a crouched position. A simple, yet dependable length of light brown, it was beautiful in the way that all well-made, simple things were. It had served her well since the day she had finished curing it and would hopefully serve her well today as she committed her first murder.

*Are you ready,* Vylith sent.

There was a pause before Roseblood replied.

*…Yes.*

*Which form will we take?*

Another pause, briefer this time.

*Wind.*

So, they were sticking to the original plan.

When they were Wind, they produced no sound, and the pull from the ground below somehow had less purchase on them. Vylith obliged Roseblood’s request, and she felt the boundaries of her mind waver, all her thoughts and sensations melding with those of Roseblood completely. At the same time, she—they—reached out with their mind, through the void between dreams, to take hold of the Wind.

Two became one and then became two again. *They* werethe Wind. And the *Wind* was them.

Two sets of eyes now locked on the Teizan, and they began their dance.

From a hundred paces away, they stood, eyes alight with a fiery crimson glow, and fired a single black-fletched arrow at the bull. He, of course, sensed the snap of the bowstring before the arrow had crossed half the distance toward his heart and leapt to the side, spinning in the air as he did so, intending to land facing the direction the arrow had come from.

But at the same moment that they had loosed the bowstring, they had also pounced from the gray bleakness thirty paces from the bull and lunged for his neck at the exact spot where his jugular would be when he landed.

But Narzha took pity on the beast, for instead of a lithe landing on four strong hooves, his hind legs sunk into a shallow pit of ashen snow, and their fangs missed his throat by inches as he stumbled. Fumbling, they swiped furiously with their paws, hoping to score a lucky blow—a silencing blow. But the Teizan was alert now, and he rolled aside before lithely leaping back to all fours.

*Oh no*, they thought.

Seeing death burning in Roseblood’s eyes, the Teizan faced his death with the honor every member of his species wore like a mantle. He stood erect on four hooves and stared purposefully back at Roseblood, then out toward where Vylith now stood behind the blacknettle, smoothly drawing another arrow. For a moment, the forked pupils of his yellow eyes bore into theirs, fierce condemnation radiating from that wide, angular visage. Then, he tilted his head up toward the ashen sky. One last sending.

An image of his murderers.

One, a great white tiger with massive shoulders and a thick red band of fur running down her spine from snout to tail, two slender ivory daggers gleaming down the sides of her mouth, eyes of burning coal.

The other, a dusky teenage girl with two black braids framing boyish features, her ragged gray clothes enveloped in the bright crimson cloak she dared not part with. Her eyes matched the tiger’s eyes glow for ruddy glow.

Alongside these flashing images, the Teizan sent his last words out toward the east, where his herd would be.

*The Cursed Ones take me.*

Indeed, their arrow took him through the throat an instant later, but the damage was done.

Snapping back to individuality, the glow in Vylith’s eyes winked out like a shuttered lantern, and she released the Wind.

In a state of shock, she mechanically shouldered her bow. Usually after making a kill there would be prayers to say, thanking Narzha for the blessing of game. But Vylith had just spat in Narzha’s eye.

Roseblood came skidding past her in a flash, her steely claws grating on the rocky ground as she slowed herself. The slide sent up sparks as those daggers grated into the volcanic rock.

Vylith numbly climbed up onto Roseblood’s back and gripped the crimson stripe of fur that ran down her spine. She flattened her body against her sister’s back, her cloak blending smoothly with the red fur, and in moments they were racing away from the scene through the dead forest as fast as Roseblood’s powerful strides would allow.

Ten strides into their retreat, they heard the first screams. Wails of sorrow echoed in their minds as the Teizan’s herd gazed upon their slain kin.

Vylith felt a sharp stab of guilt at those cries. It was the first time she had killed another intelligent being in cold blood. As they flew past ash covered branches, Vylith forced her eyes closed and pulled herself tighter to Roseblood out of fear she might empty her stomach, though truthfully, there was not much to be emptied.

The howls continued and before she could stop herself, she called out in the direction of the grieving Teizans.

*I’m sorry.*

All at once, their cries hushed and Vylith realized the sending was a mistake. Two strides later, a strong voice replied.

*Why?*

The sending came from a mind that Vylith could sense was older, a mare, by the pitch. The slain Teizan’s wife?

*Let it not be so*, Vylith thought to herself. She had made a point to find a bull that was isolated, without a family. She was sure he had no calves to care for.

*Why did you take my son from me?*

A mother, then. A mother with a pleading question that Vylith did not know how to answer.

Her face still pressed into Roseblood’s fur, Vylith thought of the mother Teizan looking down at her son’s corpse, and she began to weep quietly. In moments, tears began to mix with the speckled ash trapped in Roseblood’s silky fur.

*Damn*, sent Roseblood privately to her, sympathy leaking through the bond. *We messed up, didn’t we?*

But it was not the time for weeping. Vylith took two deep breaths, the first shaky, the second less so, and steadied herself as more accusations echoed in her mind—sendings from a growing multitude of beasts, voices of different pitches and timbres, the tone shifting as new minds joined the cacophony.

The cries of sorrow and confusion that had first met them quickly gave way to cries of wrath and fierce determination. She could pick out some of the voices from the growing chaos.

*You will pay.*

*Make them suffer.*

*Make them bleed.*

*Stomp their skulls.*

*Drag their corpses.*

*Burn them. Crush them. Drag them. Stomp them.*

*Kill them. Kill them. KILL THEM.*

At this horrifying chant, Vylith pulled her face away from Roseblood, wiping the wet ash from her cheeks as best she could, and turned to face the direction they’d come from. Through the ashy snowfall, she could make out little beyond a hundred paces, but she knew what must lay beyond view.

They were coming.

*What do we do,* she sent to Roseblood, a sense of hopelessness leaking into the thought.

Sixteen soft thumps broke the silence of the forest as Roseblood took time to consider before responding.

*I don’t know. Can you make us run faster?*

They both knew she couldn’t. Wind was excellent for stealth and climbing, but it wouldn’t make Roseblood go any faster. In fact, Vylith was sure it slowed her sister down, as she lost speed while slowly falling during those long jumps. She thought for three more heartbeats before deciding.

*Maybe I can scare them away? The new form? S*he sent it as a question.

*Yes! Do it,* said Roseblood.

*I don’t think we have much of a choice*, said Vylith.

Nervous and excited energy through the bond was Roseblood’s only reply.

Vylith turned her head back once more and could see now, in the distance, a disturbance in the ashfall. A great cloud was forming, ash kicked up from hundreds of trampling hooves.

Taking three deep, steadying breaths, Vylith closed her eyes, and for the second time that day, reached out with her mind through the void between dreams. Awareness bloomed within her, and she struggled not to let its brilliance dazzle her. It was not truly a place, she knew, this space between her dreams. It was like the emptiness between stars, unknowable and unfathomably great.

Reaching into that void, she brushed against the Wind, which was still fresh in her mind from their recent encounter. It was a flowing ribbon of cool blue silk in that starry space, eager to dance with her again. But the Wind was not her quarry, this time. She let it slip past and reached further, past other forms she knew, toward that brilliant thrashing band of hot quicksilver that she’d only recently discovered.

The first time she’d tried to take hold of it, it had been while sleeping. She found herself wandering the space between dreams often while asleep, and this time she had stumbled upon something new.

When she reached out to take it, the new form had writhed like a white-hot snake in her grasp, and as she gasped and released it, an enormous boom jolted her and Roseblood from their slumber.

When they went out to investigate what caused the boom, all they found was a tree that looked like it had been cloven in two, a roaring fire consuming the exposed heartwood. She had been too frightened to try harnessing that form again.

And now, it was her only chance at escape. So, this time, as she slipped past the other forms, she approached the writhing band of hot energy with grim determination.

*Hurry*, sent Roseblood from across the nothingness. A quick scene flashed in her mind as seen from Roseblood’s eyes—hundreds of Teizans, close enough now that their blue and white stripes were forming a dizzying illusion; it was impossible to tell where one beast ended, and another began.

Holding her breath, Vylith reached out and took hold of the quicksilver band. The shock jolted her from the place between dreams immediately, but this time, she held onto the form, determined not to let it go.

She felt an odd aura suffuse her, like rivers of warm, invisible liquid were beginning to flow along the surface of her skin. She felt a few loose strands of hair that had broken free from her braids earlier begin to float up and tickle her forehead and noticed that Roseblood’s fur was also rising oddly around her, as if her hackles were raised.

*What in hells is that? It’s making my skin go numb,* sent Roseblood. Evidently, she could feel whatever was happening to Vylith as well.

*No time,* said Vylith.

She turned back to see the herd not forty paces behind them. An ocean of blue and white stripes thrashed toward them, looming closer with every heartbeat.

Without knowing exactly what it was she intended, she stared at the shrinking space between them and the horde, and still firmly grasping the writhing band of hot energy in her mind, she gave it the slightest *tug*.

Three brilliant, jagged bolts of light struck the space in front of the horde immediately followed by overlapping booms. The wave of Teizans faltered as those in front tried to slow down while those behind trampled forward.

Attempting to blink away a glowing afterimage of those sharp bolts, Vylith tried to understand what exactly she had done. She had no name for the branches of white fire she had just called down from Heaven when she pulled on that form.

*That was awesome, sis,* sent Roseblood. *But could you let go of that form now? I can’t feel my tail anymore.*

Vylith ignored her sister’s complaints. Her vision slowly returning, she was able to make out some of the beasts that were at the front of the heard slowing to let others with unmarred vision overtake them, but their pace as a whole was almost back to what it was before, and they were now closing fifty paces on them once more.

*I don’t think it stopped them,* sent Vylith.

She had to try one more time, this time focusing on a spot closer to the herd—directly in front of them. She focused on that spot just in front of the swirl of white and blue, focusing her grip on the new form.

As Vylith attempted to pull power from the new source, however, Roseblood stumbled, her left forepaw sinking into a shallow pit of snow.

The shock turned Vylith’s gentle tug into a yank, and the brief terror of falling broke her concentration and ripped the band of energy from her grasp.

A vast trunk of pure white light over sixty paces across arced up from the space where the beasts had been charging, completely enveloping the horde. For an instant, that enormous column of branching, white-hot fire consumed Vylith’s vision.

Then, she felt the world tumble violently around her and go still as darkness rapidly took her.

Chapter

2

*Hunter’s Folly*

0x414F:A:6 – 2:3A – Alignment Standard Time

*What is that smell?*

The first thing Vylith noticed as she awoke was the blend of odd scents suffusing the air. Her thoughts were sluggish, and all she could think of as she wiped ash from her eyes was how one of the scents she detected reminded her of something she’d smelled once as a child when her father had taken her to climb one of the slumbering saints.

After Saint Timrok had finally lain to rest one autumn, her father had guided her up to where the saint had been spewing forth ash and rock. As they neared the top, she remembered the air beginning to smell foul, a mixture of odd scents she’d never encountered before.

She remembered her joy when her father let her fire an arrow into the saint’s cooling maw in retribution for Vylith’s pet chicken, who had been caught outside when the saint first erupted.

*Why does it smell like Saint Timrok*, she thought groggily as she lay in the snow. She wrinkled her nose.

Oddly, the second scent that tickled Vylith’s nose, and made her stomach grumble as she groggily tried to blink away the last of the ash from her eyes, was the smell of burnt meat.

Suddenly, she remembered where she was.

*Roseblood!*

The sending was *loud—*foolishly so. Perhaps if she’d been thinking clearly, she might have called out more quietly at first.

But there was no response, even so.

Vylith would know if her little sister was dead, she reminded herself; she could still feel Roseblood in the back of her mind, but her mind was quiet, as if sleeping.

Unable to fully clear her vision, Vylith cursed, and carefully got to her feet anyway. She gently flexed and stretched her arms and legs, carefully turning her head one way, then the other. Nothing seemed torn or broken, though she ached all over.

She gingerly pulled down her crimson hood and felt at the back of her head. She flinched as she felt a wet spot two inches above her left ear. She must have hit something as she fell off Roseblood.

*Why can’t I see straight?*

She wiped her eyes again, blinked rapidly while looking down, then tried to look around again. She felt a flash of fear pulse through her chest as she realized her hazy vision wasn’t getting any clearer.

Her eyes wouldn’t stop watering, but even after wiping away the salty tears, her vision was still blurred. She could tell that it was still light out and could see vague shapes in her periphery—a tree here, what might be a boulder there.

But in the center of her vision there was nothing but an indistinct haze. She remembered the blinding pillar of light she’d called down, and the building sense of dread she felt deep down finally overwhelmed her.

She fell to her knees, not registering the icy cold of the ashy slush underfoot and coughed up what remained of her meager breakfast. It wasn’t much, but the desperation of her situation made her dry heave for another minute anyway.

She got back up to her feet, though her knees still trembled, and tried to take eleven deep breaths, mentally reciting the names and warning-signs of one of the saints with each breath, just as her father had taught her.

On the third breath, she closed her eyes, as the blurry landscape was doing nothing to calm her nerves.

As she let out the eleventh breath, and opened her eyes, she felt Roseblood’s consciousness stirring awake.

*Roseblood, you there?*

A moment went by before she replied.

*What the hell happened?*

The sending came from close by, just ahead of her.

*And what the hell is that smell,* she said.

*I’m not sure*, Vylith said.

She took a deep breath and braced herself.

*I—I don’t think I can see right,* she continued. *Or at all, really. Where are you? Do you see my bow?*

She tried to keep the panic from leaking through the thought, but knew she had failed as Roseblood echoed worry back at her.

*You can’t…was it the light? Your bow is right in front of you, but…*

By the way the sending trailed off, Vylith knew her bow was gone. She bent down anyway and fumbled her gloved hands around the snow in front of her. She quickly bumped a piece of wood with her thumb, but as her fingers encircled a limb, she could immediately tell by its weight that it had snapped.

Suddenly, she felt Roseblood’s hot breath on her arm, and was shocked she hadn’t heard her approaching. She realized for the first time since coming to that her hearing must also be damaged, or she’d have heard her sister approach. A dull ringing in her ears told her so much. That would heal in time, she knew. She was no stranger to loud noises in a land dominated by the saints. But her vision…

She struggled not to let the dread overtake her again.

*Narzha above*, Roseblood sent.

*What*, Vylith asked.

*What did you do, Vylith?* A sense of awe and revulsion poured through the bond along with the sending.

*How would I know? I can’t see, remember.* Though even as she said it, she couldn’t shake the memory of the last thing she’d seen before the fall. The entire herd consumed by that blinding light.

Suddenly, the scent of burned meat that suffused the air began to make a horrible sense.

*Show me*, she said.

*I don’t think—*Roseblood started.

*Show me. Please*, she said again.

Roseblood didn’t reply, instead obliging with an image of what she was seeing.

She saw herself, hair disheveled, a thin cut across her forehead, and a tear in her breeches baring a badly scraped knee. Her crimson cloak, thankfully, seemed unharmed.

Then, she began to take note of what Roseblood was really looking at. The ashfall had slowed, letting the tiger’s sharp eyes see the charred mounds that lay on the ground not thirty paces away.

Some of the shapes near the edges were still recognizable as once-animals, their flesh merely severely burned. Around them, some trees were still smoldering despite the falling snow. Near the center however, all that remained of the creatures were blackened piles of slag.

*I—*Vylith sent. *I didn’t… I didn’t know…*

The image faded from her mind, leaving her with nothing but an empty sense of shock. She felt Roseblood’s nose press into her abdomen gently, and heard whimpers come through the bond from her little sister.

Vylith absently reached down and scratched behind her ears soothingly, unable to think of what to do or say.

As she went over the image of the charred corpses in her mind’s eye once more, the full extent of her mistake dawned on her.

She’d left that morning desperate to find food for her sister, so desperate that she was willing to commit murder to keep her alive. It wasn’t a spur of the moment decision. She’d been expecting it might come to this sooner or later for months now.

She’d discussed the possibility with Roseblood, who didn’t seem to mind the idea as much as she did, and they both agreed it was necessary.

They picked one with no wife or children. With no family, so they’d thought.

*The mother,* Vylith thought to herself. Remembering the blackened piles of melted flesh, Vylith quickly cut off that line of thought.

For two days they had stalked the herd before deciding on how they’d strike. It was supposed to be quick, painless.

Like the rest of the herd, the bull was a Hallowed One, like Roseblood. If he was to die, he deserved a quick death. And though it hadn’t gone exactly as they’d hoped, it *had been* quick.

But in calling down that power onto the herd as she’d inadvertently done, she knew she’d damned her soul for eternity. Vylith had spat in God’s eye, and all knew that Narzha’s retribution was swift.

Even as she stroked Roseblood’s fur, attempting to calm her trembling sister, she knew deep in her heart that she would never see again.