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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 Tintink bull as she slowly crept up toward the barren blacknettle bush, always keeping it between her and their prey.

As she creeped forward, she watched it carefully for any signs that it had noticed her or Roseblood. Its usually dazzling blue and white stripes were dull now, covered in ashy snow as they were, and he raked a single hoof despondently across the grey dusting that blanketed the rocky ground, searching for any signs of plant life.

Bow strung over shoulder, Vylith went to one knee behind the tangled mass of thorns that made up the blacknettle as she finally reached the position her and Roseblood had settled on. It would be many months at least before the nettle bloomed, even if Saint Yvon decided to stop spewing ash into the sky soon. She would never have stepped so close to its brambles otherwise. She called again.

*Roseblood, do you see him?*

She waited, one knee sinking into powdered snow and ash, nervous anxiety swelling to unbearable heights at her companion’s slow progress.

What Vylith was planning to do today had her heart beating wildly and her stomach churning. She was no youngling, hands shaking as she raised her bow to fire at her first stag. She had killed greater beasts many times over, a veteran of the Great Hunt three years over by the time she'd reached maturity over two years ago.

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

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 permit holding 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 finished curing it and would hopefully do so again today.

*Are you ready,* Vylith sent.

There was a pause before Roseblood’s reply came.

*…Yes.*

*Which form will we take?*

Another pause, briefer this time.

*Wind.*

No surprise there. 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 Tintink, and they began their dance.

From a hundred paces away, they stood, eyes alight with a sharp crimson glow, and fired a single arrow at the bull. He, of course, felt 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 loosed the bowstring, they 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 Tintink 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 Tintink faced his death with honor. 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, his yellow eyes bore into hers, proud 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 light-brown-skinned teenage girl with two black braids framing almost boyish features, grey hood, breeches, boots, and blouse enveloped in a bright crimson cloak. Her eyes matched the tigers’ eyes glow for startling glow.

Alongside these flashing images, the Tintink 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 vanished like a shuttered lantern, and she released the Wind.

As she shouldered her bow, Roseblood came skidding past her in a flash, her steely claws grating on the rocky ground as she slowed herself, sending up sparks as the thin layer of ashy snow offered little protection from those wicked daggers.

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

Ten quick strides later, they heard the screams. Wails of sorrow echoed in their minds as the Tintink’s herd gazed upon their slain kin.

Vylith felt a sharp stab of guilt at those cries. It was the first time she’d 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.

*I’m sorry,* she sent in the direction of the grieving Tintinks.

All at once, their cries hushed and Vylith realized the apology may have been a mistake. Two strides later, a voice replied.

*Why?*

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

*Let it not be so*, Vylith thought to herself. They’d made a point to find a bull that was isolated, without a family—or so they’d thought.

*Why did you take my son from me?*

A pleading question. One Vylith did not know how to answer.

Her face still pressed into Roseblood’s fur, Vylith thought of the mother Tintink looking down at her son’s corpse, and she quietly sobbed. 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 bad, sis.*

But it was not the time for weeping. She 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 sorrow and confusion that had first met them quickly gave way to wrath and fierce determination. She could pick out some of the cries 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 away from Roseblood, her cheeks smeared with wet ash, 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 her time 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 couldn’t make Roseblood go any faster. In fact, Vylith was fairly certain it slowed her down, as they lost speed while slowly falling during those long jumps. She thought for three 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 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. It was like the vast emptiness between stars.

Reaching, 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. But the Wind was not her quarry. 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 writhed like a white hot snake in her grasp, and as she gasped and released it, an enormous boom jolted her out of the space between dreams.

Her eyes had snapped open just in time to find a massive branch crashing before her, spraying her and Roseblood with bits of wood and cinder. Roseblood had shown her what she’d seen as Vylith touched that new form—a branching tree of blinding white light had sprung from the branch and shot up toward the sky, severing it from the main trunk. Neither of them knew what to make of this power.

This time, as she felt between the dreams, 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 Tintinks, 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. She gasped, and her eyes shot open, but somehow she held onto that energy. She felt an odd aura suffuse her, like rivers of warm, invisible liquid were starting to flow along the surface of her skin. She felt a few loose strands of hair that had broken free from her braids begin to float up and tickle her forehead and noticed that Roseblood’s fur was also rising oddly around her.

*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,* sent Vylith.

She turned her head 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 a slight tug.

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

The crushing weight of those booms reminded Vylith of the first time she’d witnessed one of the saints erupt as a child, making her eardrums pop. That had been before she’d bonded Roseblood. Before she’d lost *him*—lost them all.

Vylith had no name for the branches of white fire she’d called from the heavens; they were something neither her nor Roseblood had ever seen before.

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

Attempting to blink away a glowing afterimage of those sharp bolts, she was able to make out some of the beasts at the front of the heard trotting off, clearly unwilling to confront the possibility of whatever had just happened happening again, but most were redoubling their efforts and were now closing fifty paces on them once more.

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

She’d try one more 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, still holding onto the strange 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.

Vylith’s gentle tug became a yank, and the shock of falling tore the band of hot 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 entire horde. For an instant, that enormous column of white-hot fire consumed Vylith’s vision.

She felt the world tumble violently around her, then go still as darkness came upon 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 came to 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 St. Timrok had finally lain to rest one autumn, her father had guided her up to where the angry saint had been spewing forth ash and rock. As they neared the top, she remembered the air beginning to smell foul, a mixture of hundreds of odd scents she’d never before encountered.

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

Snapping back to the present, her thoughts were coming faster now. 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 and frantic. Perhaps if she’d been thinking straight, 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 could still feel her in the back of her mind, but her mind was quiet, as if sleeping.

Unable to fully clear her vision, she 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 hood and felt at the back of her head, and grimaced 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 hot 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 down 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, as her father had taught her.

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