*Roseblood*.

Vylith’s eyes never left the straggling Tintink bull as she slowly, every so slowly crept up behind the barren blacknettle bush. Bow still strung over shoulder, she went to one knee behind the tangled mass of thorns. It would be months yet before the nettle bloomed, or she would never have stepped so close to its brambles. She called again.

*Roseblood, do you see him?*

She waited, one knee sinking into powdered snow and ash, growing anxious at her companion’s slow progress. Ahead, the male Tintink’s lean, sinuous body was proof of this year’s harsh summer, which had decimated the flora of Vatrik. As much as it pained Vylith, they needed his meat. Well, Roseblood needed his meat. To kill one of the Hallowed was among the greatest of crimes among the Faithful. It was murder, of course. But more than that. A crime against Narzha herself. Vylith shuddered as she watched the bull scraping aside some ash from the barren ground with a despondent hoof.

*I see him*, came Roseblood’s sending at last.

*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 stifled a 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 you take?*

Another pause, briefer this time.

*Wind.*

Roseblood always wanted Wind for hunting, and although they hunted prey blessed by Narzha herself with the gift of intelligence, he would die just like any other beast. Vylith obliged Roseblood’s request as 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 through the space 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, 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 even 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.

At the same moment that they had loosed the arrow, however, they had pounced from the gray bleakness thirty paces from him and lunged for his neck at the exact spot where his jugular should be when he landed. When they were Wind, they produced no sound, and the ground below somehow had less purchase on them, allowing them to leap much farther than was usually possible.

But Narzha must have been displeased with their actions, for as the beast landed on four hooves, he sunk into a shallow pit of ashen snow, and their fangs missed his throat by inches. Fumbling, they swiped furiously with their paws, hoping to score a lucky blow. But the Tinkink was panicked now, and he rolled aside before lithely leaping back to all fours.

*Oh no*, they thought.

Knowing he was surely doomed, the Tintink faced his death with honor. He stood erect on four hooves and looked up toward the ashen sky. One last sending. An image of his murderers. One, a honey-toned teenage girl with two thick brown braids framing almost boyish features, pale grey hood, pants, boots, and blouse covered by a bright crimson cloak. The same color as her eyes. The other, a great white saber-tooth tiger with massive shoulders and a thick red band of fur crossing her spine from snout to tail. Her eyes matched the girl’s. Alongside this image, the Tintink sent his last words:

*The Blooded Ones take me.*

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

Snapping back to individuality, Vylith’s eyes lost their glow as she released the Wind and shouldered her bow. Not three heartbeats later, Roseblood came skidding past her in a flash, her steely claws grating on the rocky ground as she slowed herself, the thin layer of ashy snow offering 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 dead forest as fast as Roseblood’s powerful strides would allow.

A few moments later, however, they heard the screams. Wails of sorrow echoed in their minds as the Tintink’s brothers and sisters 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. Some ground seed paste, a small lizard she’d caught that morning, and a few mushrooms she couldn’t identify but risked eating anyway. Roseblood had it worse, of course. She hadn’t eaten in over a week, and Vylith could feel that hunger leaking through their bond.

*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.

*Why?*

The sending came from a mind 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 thought.

*Why did you take my son from me?*

Her face still pressed into Roseblood’s fur, Vylith gave a quiet sob, her tears beginning to mix with the speckled ash trapped in Roseblood’s silky fur.

*Say nothing, little one*, said Roseblood privately to her. *There is nothing to do for it.*

As she wept, 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. Sorrow and confusion gave way to wrath and determination.

*You will pay.*

*Make them suffer.*

*Let 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 now smeared with wet ash, and turned to face the path they’d come down. Through the ashy snowfall, she could make out little beyond a hundred paces, but she knew what lay beyond view.

They were coming.

*What do we do,* she sent to Roseblood, a note of pleading 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 actually slowed her down, as they lost speed while slowly falling during those long jumps.

*Maybe I can scare them away? The new form?*

Uncertainty poured through the bond from Roseblood.

*We don’t know how it works. Or* if *it works. You might kill them. You might kill* us.

*Do we have a choice*, asked Vylith.

*Perhaps, but it seems you’ve made yours already.*

She was right. They were out of time. She 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 dozens, hundreds of hooves.

Taking three deep, steadying breaths, Vylith closed her eyes and for the second time that day, reached through the space between dreams. Awareness opened her mind, and she fought not to let its brilliance dazzle her. She brushed against the Wind, a flowing ribbon of cool silk in that starry space, but this time the Wind was not her quarry. She let it slip past and reached further, 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 writhed like a white hot snake in her grasp, and as she let go of it, an enormous boom jolted her out of the space between dreams and her eyes shot open to find a branch crashing before her, spraying her and Roseblood with bits of wood and cinder.

This time, she approached it carefully, with grim determination.

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

Holding her breath, she 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 surround her, like webs of invisible liquid fire were flowing along the surface of her skin. She felt a few strands of hair that had broken free from her braids during their flight begin to float up and tickle her temples, 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, growing closer with every heartbeat.

Without knowing exactly what she was doing, she looked at the shrinking space between them and the horde, and still firmly grasping the writhing band of hot energy in her mind, gave it a slight tug.

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

The sound of those booms instantly reminded Vylith of the first time she’d witnessed one of the saints erupt as a child. Even though it was miles away, the sound had made her ears pop, and she remembered clutching to her father’s cloak as she trembled, wondering what could have possibly made the saint so angry that she’d spew fire and rock into the sky like that.

“It is a thing of saints and gods, my *Siska*,” he had said. “She is not mad at us, I promise you.”

That had been before she’d bonded Roseblood, of course. Before she’d lost him--lost them all.

*That was incredible, little one,* sent Roseblood, interrupting her reverie. *But could you please release that form? I can’t feel my tail anymore.*

*They haven’t stopped though,* sent Vylith. Indeed, although the brilliant bursts had shocked the herd and some in the front had trotted off, clearly unwilling to confront the possibility of whatever had just happened happening again, most were redoubling their efforts, and were now back to only fifty paces from them.

Maybe she’d try one one more time, focusing on a spot closer to the herd--just in front of them. She turned back to face the swirl of white and blue, still holding onto the strange new form.

As Vylith gave one more tug, Roseblood stumbled, her left forepaw sinking into a shallow pit of snow.

Her tug became a yank as the shock of falling tore the band from her grasp.

A vast column of pure white light enveloped the space where the herd had been charging. For an instant, that bright light consumed Vylith’s vision, before all became black.