***The Sellsword Sisterhood***

 Leaves rustled gently against the soft easterly breeze, the great boughs of the massive oaks and dense rosewoods filtering the light until it was naught but a dim green illumination. This made it no easier to follow the trail for the red woman leading her two compatriots. They had been tracking an albino dire wolf and its pack for days after being hired by a large shepherd village that had been terrorized by the beasts, losing both animals and people in the attacks. It had seemed a simple enough quest when they started, yet for every day they followed the creatures, the alpha’s paw prints looked larger and more menacing.

 “What’s taking so long, Qyreia?”

 “How much do you know about animal tracking, blueberry?” she hissed back, trying to stay quiet in case the wolves were nearby. If they were, however, they could have heard her whisper as easily as the small blue woman’s. “Don’t give me guff unless you feel like taking the lead.”

 As a ranger, Qyreia’s specialty lay as much in combat as in practical field skills; and while she favored the bow, she had no problems getting into the fray with sword or fist. Leeadra, also known as “blueberry,” was an inquisitor of questionable piety. She seemed more interested in the gold than serving her god, but she *did* come in handy when an informant was being particularly stubborn with their information. The third member of the party, a pale raven-haired elf by the name of Keira, was a quiet spellsword who spent as much time studying obscure tomes as was available. Thankfully she set the task aside when they were on the move, but Qyreia assumed that was simply so that she did not trip.

 “How long much longer will this take?” the caster said flatly. “That village will not be bothered by these beasts if they are going to range so far from their feeding ground.”

 “Wolves are smart bastards,” Qyreia said, rising from her scrutiny of the tracks and motioning for them to move out. “They’ll be back in a couple weeks after they’ve agitated another village or two. It keeps the populace off their trail and keeps the food fresh and aplenty.”

 “Fair point,” Keira said, looking over her shoulder. “Still, every day we spend on tracking this pack, that is another day that we are wasting.”

 “Wasting on *what*?” Leeadra chided, her comparatively shorter legs sore from having to keep up the whole time. “You’ve never said what exactly you, and by extension *we*, are looking for.” A chuckle passed her lips. “Although I’ll give you this: each day wasted is another day without filling the coffers or getting a good hot meal.”

 “Hey, you said you *liked* my rabbit rotisserie,” Qyreia said as they picked up the pace.

 “I did, but after getting nothing *but* rabbit for three days, I’m looking for a little variety.”

 “Well *sorry* that anything larger is either fled or eaten up by the wolves. I’d shoot a bird, but then I’d have to listen to you complain about there not being any meat and too many little bones.”

 Their spellsword chuckled at Leeadra’s grumbling reaction, but she said no more on the matter. At least, not until their ranger caught the night’s dinner: rabbit.

 With exception to their inquisitor’s penchant for complaining about Qyreia, and vice versa, the group worked well together. The ranger could spot game as well as a good (or bad) deal in local markets – a skill gained from years of travelling and working with trading caravans. The inquisitor was wicked with her blade as well as when seeking information. Keira was an expert mage who showed equal skill with her longsword and, despite the red ranger burning their trail, the caster was by far the most skilled by comparison with the other two.

 They all complemented each other well. Sometimes too well. While it was likely obvious Leeadra, Qyreia had been sneaking into Keira’s bedroll for almost a month. The relationship was awkward, especially given their third wheel, and they seemed almost too good at separating their professional and personal lives. That didn’t stop the red-skinned tracker from making a little magic of her own with the spellsword.

 It was another four days of grueling tracking that had revealed two more, smaller villages than the first, that had been attacked simply by having the ill fate of being in the wolves’ path of travel. They at least offered inns and a small respite from the same dinner every night – Leeadra almost cried when she was served chicken – but the pack only seemed to gain ground on them.

 “Don’t these four-legged freaks ever *sleep*,” the blue woman grumbled as they continued on their march.

 “They don’t need as much as we do,” Keira said with an air of academia. “That, and their bodies were crafted by the heavens to run for long distances at greater speeds than men and most mer.”

 “At least this trail is the freshest we’ve seen thus far.” Qyreia angled her head to regard a pile of droppings. “We can’t be more than a couple hours behind them. They’re getting weighed down by all the quarry they’ve been eating.”

 “At least we’ve got the drop on ‘em,” Leeadra said.

 Wind drifted between the trunks, crawling up their spines and carrying with it the faint sound of what was most assuredly a growl.

 “You just *had* to say it, didn’t you, blueberry?”

 “How did they figure out we were here?” Keira asked as she unsheathed her blade with one hand, preparing a spell in the other.

 “It’s that wind,” Qyreia said as she nocked an arrow. “It changed direction on us. We started with us downwind of them; now we’re *upwind*. They could probably smell us since yesterday.”

 As if in response, out from a nearby stand of trees strode the largest wolf the trio had ever seen. It stood, at its shoulder, on par with Leeadra’s height, with thick white fur that stood in stark contrast with both the surrounding forest as well as the piercing red eyes that shown with feral hunger. Its teeth bared and a short, gruff growl huffed from its maw, signaling for the pack to come forth.

 And they did so with a vengeance.

 The first wolf was too loud, and Qyreia was able to turn her bow in time to loose an arrow into the leaping creature’s chest. Another canid, just as large as the first attacker, erupted from the foliage, only to catch Keira’s blade between the teeth, splitting it from jaw to shoulder as the elf slashed into the flesh and fur. The attacks quickly increased their tempo, Leeadra finding herself fending off two of the beasts while Qyreia was unleashing a storm of arrows into the fringe-walkers. One nearly got the better of her if not for the timely magical blast from Keira that sent the wolf flying into a tree trunk, connecting with a pained yelp, only to resume the hunt of the humanoids.

 “Is it just me,” Leeadra said, struggling between assailants, “or is the big one getting closer?”

 Qyreia took a glance at the dire wolf and saw that it was indeed moving forward, its pace sickeningly slow so as not to arouse suspicion. *It’s coming in for the jugular strike*, she thought kicking at one foe before lashing out with her sword at another. *That’s what the alpha does: it waits for the pack to tire the quarry, then makes the final kill*.

 “Let’s see how they like some *fire*!” Keira flashed her hand and sent a stream of flame at the giant canid, only to watch as two smaller wolves intercepted and caught the larger blast before it hit their leader, which only suffered minor singing to its otherwise immaculate coat.

 “They’re sacrificing themselves for that thing?!”

 “It’s the alpha wolf, Leeadra,” Qyreia grunted as she frantically moved from bow to blade. “That thing has been getting them fed, and fed *well*. Besides, they’re not badly hurt.”

 Sure enough, the two afflicted dogs rose and rejoined the fray, only sparse patches of reddened skin showing through their thick fur that was designed by Nature herself to repel the elements. Keira quietly cursed before letting loose a wide arc of lightning at the nearest opponents. *We have to kill the alpha to end this fight, then.*

 “Qyreia! Focus your fire on the dire wolf!”

 “I can barely keep the *little* ones off of me! I shoot *that* one, and I’ll just piss it off!”

 “I will protect you,” she replied, stepping close and arraying her magics in an intricate web that glowed off the earth beneath their feet. “Just do it.”

 The red woman hesitated for only half a heartbeat before nodding and returning to her bow, her tired arm struggling to draw the high-tension bowstring. Her first arrows only hit the wandering guardian wolves, leaping in front of the projectiles to catch them in their sides and limbs. After taking two or three hits though, blood flowing from the wounds with vigor, the guardians’ maneuvers were slowing. For her part, Keira and Leeadra both were working hard at keeping the others at bay: Leeadra with her blades offered a rare prayer as she cut through the fur and flesh, while Keira unleashed hell on the smaller creatures with sword and spell alike.

 It seemed almost lucky when an arrow finally met its mark in the alpha’s shoulder.

 “I hit it!” Qyreia nocked another arrow and let fly, only partially intercepted by the guardian wolves and still managing to find its mark in a deep graze over the dire wolf’s brow, eliciting a deep, angry growl. She reached for another arrow… but found only air. “Well crap.”

 “What?”

 “Out of arrows,” she said, shouldering the bow and grasping her sword in both hands. “Looks like we get to do this the hard way.”

 “We’ve *been* doing it the hard way while you were shooting your stupid little sticks,” Leeadra cried as a claw found purchase on her shoulder, leaving a trio of deep gashes even as she buried her blade in the wolf’s chest to slip, red and slick, out its back.

 “*Really*?! You’re picking *now* to be a sassy prat?!”

 “Hey,” she chuckled as they repulsed another assault, “might not get another chance, cherry pie.”

 “Fair enough, blueberry.”

 “When you two are finished with your… *unf*… fruit salad, we still have a pack of angry wolves to fight!”

 “Does that make you the dressing for the salad?” Qyreia yelled jovially as she drove out from their small circle of safety to lash out at several of the pack-mates. A paw flashed out and cut at her back, while another wolf buried its teeth into her thigh, forcing a scream from the ranger that turned Keira’s eyes away from her own combat.

 “Qyreia!”

 “Keep fighting,” she yelled back, turning her sword to slide along the beast’s throat, opening an arterial spray.

 What the ranger didn’t notice that the spellsword did was the dire wolf walking toward the red woman with a hunter’s care. The smaller wolves’ attacks redoubled, some even managing to find chinks in Keira’s heavier armor and spill some of her immortal blood. Still, she knew that if something wasn’t done, then Qyreia would be lost.

 “Leeadra, I need you to cover for me.”

 “What?! I’m having a hard enough…”

 “Just *do* it!” Keira boomed in a voice that seemed not wholly like her own.

 Elven syllables flowed from her lips like an angry waterfall, a ball of sparking energy quickly growing in her clenched hand. It took nearly all her concentration, and more than one wolf managed to get a strike on her lowered defenses despite her returns with her sword. Leeadra could only cover so much territory by herself, and she was on the verge of being overwhelmed simply by weight of bodies.

 “Die, you son of a whore slime,” Qyreia screamed as her blade bit into yet another canid, turning to the nearest growl, only to see the giant albino standing menacingly before her. “Well crap.”

 The ranger swung her sword as the giant lunged, hoping that she might at least cripple the beast before it tore her in half. Her eyes had barely begun to cringe when a flash of light erupted in concert with a furious and deep howl in a language that Qyreia didn’t understand, but knew to be elvish. The enormous bolt of lightning erupted in the dire wolf’s side, exploding against fur and flesh in a fiery burst that sent both it and the red woman toppling.

 Beast and humanoid recovered quickly, but the humanoid was faster. Keira was exhausted from the spell, and could barely stand, much less defend herself, but the other wolves’ attention was on their leader now. Free of the siege of teeth for a moment, Qyreia lunged at the great beast and drove her sword down on the creature’s snout even as it tried to rise. The blade pierced the mouth from roof to base, effectively pinning the creature to the ground and unable to so much as bark.

 “Leeadra! Now!”

 The inquisitor wasted only a half second on worry for the elf before sprinting toward the alpha, weapon raised. The other wolves were too distracted by the sight of their leader so humbled to notice the furious blue woman until she had already leapt onto the albino’s back. The fight was over once she buried her sword through the back of its neck, severing the spine before finishing it with a sweep that opened the alpha’s blood flow in a powerful spray that signaled the end of the trio’s quarry.

 Every member of the pack hesitated before gradually withdrawing back into the woods, several even nipping at each other angrily in shows of power. The alpha was dead, and it was time for the successor to make their claim. Qyreia said as much as they tended their own wounds afterward, noting how the pack would likely lose several more members from infighting, and even splinter to the point that they would be little more than nuisances to the locals.

 “That was a good save there, Keira,” the ranger said, wrapping an arm across the elf’s shoulders as they sat around the fire. Forgetting Leeadra, she went so far as to kiss the spellsword’s cheek with a little more passion than was normal for a gesture that was usually more friendly in nature.

 “Not here,” she hissed, but not bothering to remove Qyreia’s arm. “You’re welcome, although I’m tired as hell now.”

 “Me too,” the blue inquisitor said, taking another bite of the spit-roasted wolf meat. “I think we all deserve a full night’s rest, then we’ll go collect our reward from that shepherd town. Shouldn’t take so long now that we don’t have to do any tracking.”

 “Agreed,” Qyreia said, settling sleepily into Keira’s unarmored chest. “Let’s get some rest.”