

Valdore

Winter

Fall of the East Ranger

The humans pushed on relentlessly, despite the forest ensnaring and trapping their every moment. Line after line advanced, and line after line fell. Neither side would come out of this alive, and neither side would be the first to back down.

It was uncertain whether the humans hailed from the north or the south, or perhaps were an army of mercenaries hired by the west. Regardless, they were pushing their way through the forests of the east with reckless abandon, a careless tactic not foreseen by the generals.

Continuing their assault, the woodland rangers of the Elves strove tirelessly to hold back the advancing forces, buying previous time for the nearby town of De'lar to be evacuated and prepared for battle.

Among the rangers, Valdore Winter flitted back and forth through the trees, striking and melting back into dense woodland. Without an immediate army of armoured soldiers, the best she and her rangers could hope to do was delay the humans as much as possible.

The druids had long since retreated, opting to prepare a strong bulwark of enchanted plants and animals. The more time they and the town had, the more likely the invaders would be turned back.

If time is all that my people require, then time shall be what they receive. These invaders shall fall like grains of sand in an hourglass!

For hours the battle continued, the rangers slowly giving ground as their numbers dwindled, their lines shrinking as the humans advanced. As arrows began to dry up, more and more melee skirmishes broke out as rangers threw their lives against the enemy lines to buy just a few more seconds.

"Here... take them all, spread them among any you can find still able to use them!" Valdore commanded her men, emptying yet another stash of ammunition concealed among the trees.

As they dispersed back into the trees, she sighed and clenched a fist. There were no more caches. The only other place with ammunition was the town, and now even that was too close for comfort. The humans would not stop until they hit De'lar, at which point the lives of every person in it would be held in the balance. They needed more time, and she was running out of ways to give it to them.

"I sense your worry and doubt, Valdore." a soft voice spoke out, coming from somewhere in the underbrush. Spinning, bow drawn, arrow notched, Valdore's heart skipped a beat. The humans could not be this close, not yet!

Passing effortlessly through the bushes, Aefanwe revealed herself. There was no mistaking her shocking orange hair and

green eyes, her druidic companion owl perched on her shoulder.

Relaxing, Valdore slowly lowered her bow.

"By the earth-mother, you'll end up with a hole in you, going around creeping up on people like that!" Valdore exclaimed, anger tinged the relief in her voice. "In the middle of a battle, no less. What are you doing here, you should be at the town, preparing."

"As I have been, Valdore. In fact, I left there only minutes ago to seek you within the lines."

"Me?" Valdore raised an eyebrow at that. "You're not worried about me, are you, Aefanwe? Worried I may have fallen into a ditch somewhere and died? It'll take more humans than this to put an end to me, or to the East."

Aefanwe smiled, gently stepping forward and placing a hand on Valdore's shoulder. "I will admit I did worry, but that is not why I sought you out." She paused before continuing.

"The druids have expended all of their energies. The lines are as set as they will ever be, but we are still too few. Reinforcements from the East are still an hour away, and those that have not been evacuated number only a hundred."

Stepping away, Valdore spoke several curses, slamming her fist into a tree.

"By the earth-mother, I only have so many rangers left, Aefanwe. Already so many have given their lives to bolster De'lar. I do not know how much more time I can give you!"

Aefanwe smiled understandingly, but her eyes betrayed a deep sadness. "I can ask no more of you than I already have, Valdore, but I need you... I need as many men as possible alive to defend De'lar. We will not make it as we are."

Valdore frowned at her words. "What would you have me do? Order a retreat, allow the humans to advance even faster than they already are?" her voice rises, hands gesturing in final motions.

"We would rather die than let them step one foot in De'lar. If it takes the life of every ranger I have out there, we will hold them back!"

Aefanwe lowered her head, the certain sadness overwhelming her face. "That is what I fear, Valdore. I fear the death of us all. There is a darkness in the air, I can taste it as sure as a wolf smells prey in the night."

A moment passes in silence between them. Stepping forward, Valdore took Aefanwe's arm, their hands clasping together around the wrist almost by reflex.

"I promise you, Aefanwe. No people shall die here today than is necessary."

There was a cold determination to her voice, and leaving no time for any answer Valdore turned and began darting into the woods.

"Wait, I...!" Aefanwe called after her, but Valdore did not stop, slow, or hesitate. Her movements were now set as if by destiny or fate, a certain resolution guiding her every step.

The sounds of battle grew louder, the whistles of arrows passing to and fro, the sounds of

people dying, men and Elves alike. As she ran, the dark figures popping in and out of the treeline began to converge on her, a final volley of arrows sending the humans into a temporary halt as they hid behind their shields.

A dozen or so rangers gathered around Valdore as she came to a stop. There was no more to any of them than the weapons they carried; between them they could not have filled a quiver.

Taking the moment, Valdore looked to each of them in turn, feeling a certain pride as she observed them. Some she had trained herself, others she respected.

"Go forth to our brothers and sisters," she began, her voice carrying a calm steel. "The defence at De'lar is complete, and now it is time to re-join them for the final stand. Gather every ranger you can, and retreat to De'lar."

A murmur rippled among the gathered rangers. They could not believe what they were being ordered to do, but as much as she admired their conviction, Valdore knew that she could accept no argument against her orders.

"We must defend the East from the enemy at all costs. I am ordering you to withdraw to De'lar proper to help prepare the defences."

"I will make my stand here and buy you as much time as I am able. Use it well, and make our Lord proud."

"It has been a great honour to fight beside you in defence of our land, and our people."

One by one they saluted, turned, and disappeared into the woods. Turning her attention to the treeline, the humans were just about ready to resume their advance. They had taken full advantage of the silence to gather their wounded and rotate their troops.

Just as they gained enough confidence to advance, several arrows flew out against their lines as the rangers withdrew from the battlefield. Volleys flew out in quick succession as they strived to use up the last of their ammunition before leaving, until finally they petered out and fell silent once again.

In the moment, Valdore silently prayed:

Now as the darkness threatens our land and our lives, accept my vow and my soul, and embrace me as I return to the earth-mother.

A voice called out the forward advance. Rising from her knees, Valdore spared little time preparing, after all, where she was going she would have little use for the potions and scrolls she had been saving for an emergency.

Running her finger along the string of her bow, she held it firm in her hand for one last time. *Grant me your strength, and we shall find rest together yet.*

The human line halted abruptly as Valdore emerged from the woods. An aura of light surrounded her as the various magical barriers and protections shone out, casting her in an ethereal light.

"You will proceed no further, humans! For as long as my bow is in my hands, this ranger of the East shall not fall!"