

Thalya dropped out of the trees near one of the many ork hunting paths that crossed the Ysendar Forest. Fresh tracks broke the surface of the dirt, softened by the recent rains. They had headed northwest, up the trace towards the Linward-Heilberg road. An ambush. She made a quick count of the tracks so she wouldn't run blindly in over her head, then shinnied back up one of the trees along the path.

Ysendar was a dense forest, an ancient forest. She had lived there her entire life, and the upper branches were as a highway to her, and she could cross most of the forest's core without touching the ground. Towards the edges, where the foresters had made inroads, too much had been cut, and she had to descend to stalk the shadows, but the Linward-Heilberg road ran through the darkest depths of the forest, and Thalya could fly like a squirrel most of the way there.

Because it ran through the darkest depths, though, the Linward-Heilberg road was one of the orks' favorite targets for ambushes. Anything truly valuable would be under heavy guard, but the weaker prey – pilgrims or small merchants – usually had things the orks were more interested in than gold, anyway. Those who lived in and off the wood often valued wrought iron or milled grain more than jeweled baubles.

Thalya could hear the ambush in progress as she got closer to the road, and she unslung her bow as she approached. Her mother's bow. The thought ran through her mind every time she strung it. She walked her mother's path, a ranger of the Ysendar. She didn't descend from the trees yet, but merely worked her way lower, to the thicker branches where she could comfortably aim with sufficiently thick boughs beneath her for cover.

The prey was unusual, she noted as she picked out the first ork for her arrows. Three men, two already unconscious or dead, the third fighting like a wolverine. She was freer with her arrows, and the orks realized that they were no longer alone.

"You can't reach me in the trees," she taunted in their tongue. "Do you really want me to come down there?"

"Half-breed little bitch," one of the orks growled. "You don't have the nerve!"

"Hmm..." Thalya glanced along the stretch of road briefly to count the dead and wounded, then stowed her bow and loosed a sword almost as long as she was tall from the scabbard hung over one shoulder. She took three running steps along the branch to position herself, then skipped off the side and landed on the shoulders of one of the orks, knocking him to the ground. The third man had just fallen from his horse, and she quickly cut through four orks to move in his direction before they finished him off.

"Is that enough?" she called at the ork wearing the marks of the ambushers' leader. "Or do more of you want to bleed?"

He lunged at her with a snarl, but she lashed out with the sword, catching him across the shoulder, and he fell back.

"Fine," he snapped, "you've done enough today. We shall meet again."

Over several moments, the orks caught the men's horses, picked up their dead and wounded, and disappeared into the trees. Once they were gone, Thalya dropped to one knee beside the last man to fall, as he was bleeding the most heavily. He had taken many wounds from the orks' blades, and he was not likely to live long. She bound the worst of the injuries quickly, with cloth cut from his cloak, then bundled him in the remains of it before seeing to the other two.

One, a man in wizard's robes, had taken an arrow in one shoulder, and did not seem to be in bad shape beyond that; she guessed that he had hit his head upon falling off his horse, for the

wound was not a serious danger. The other was dressed in somewhat generic travelling garb, and had been struck a blow across the head which had bled some, but mostly would just leave him with a headache. She left each on a broad, low branch in trees near the road, then picked up their more seriously wounded companion and headed off into the forest.

Her mother would have had a fit if she was still alive, Thalya mused as she picked her way through the forest, heading back to her home. *Avoid strange men! You never know what could happen!* Thalya frowned to herself as she made her way across the stones in a stream. *She* was not going off drunk with some random guy in a bar. Mother could just keep her posthumous opinions to herself, *thank you very much.*

Once she had gotten back to the glade with her tree, she set the wounded man down and scrambled up to the upper branches to let down the lift. The Ysendar orks probably *could* climb the trees and come after her if they really wanted, but it was risky, and they hadn't tried it yet. And attacking the trees themselves would anger far older, more dangerous magicks than was really worth the hassle of dealing with.

She hopped out of the lift at the bottom and carefully loaded the man into it, then winched her way back up to the front entry, a shelf molded against the trunk of the tree about forty feet above the ground. He was paler than when she had started, and her face fell. Maybe at least he would have a more dignified death than being dismembered by orks...

She carried him through the main room and up a short flight of steps into a guest chamber, laying him on a bed before going to get water and bandages and herbs. In her mother's day, years ago, they had been ranger quarters, and a full scouting troop was kept along the Borderland. But now it was just her, alone, and the Four Clans didn't bother with her at all.

Cleaning and binding his wounds took time, and Thalya wondered as she headed out again whether his companions were awake yet. Maybe; maybe not. Several hours had passed; she found both where she had left them, and collected the one with the arrow wound to take back next. He was lighter than the other, and the trip went faster; his wounds, as well, were not as serious, and she was able to more quickly return for the third. Only after all three were secured and tended did she herself clean up, change out of her ranger garb and into a work dress, and start preparing food.

Late in the evening, the man who had worn the wizard robes – now stripped to his pants, as she had removed the robes while tending his wounds – made his way cautiously to the bottom of the steps to the main room. Thalya stood from her table and curtseyed formally.

"Good even, Magus," she hazarded. "Are you hungry? It must have been many hours since you have eaten."

"Who are you? Where are we?"

Thalya inwardly sighed at his suspiciousness. "My name is Nathalya Lenskovna. This was once a ranger station, years ago, but now is simply my home. Please, sit down. The wound was not bad, but it did bleed a bit."

The reminder of the hole under the bandages on his shoulder prompted him to come over to the table and sit.

"The others – how are they?" he asked as, unbidden, she put a plate of stew and a mug of something he was uncertain of the exact consistency of in front of him.

"The one will have a headache," Thalya said, refilling her own mug. "The other..." After a moment she shrugged. "I don't know yet. He bled quite a bit, fairly fast."

He was quiet for a while, then, picking at the food. Thalya stood several times, every ten minutes or so, to check on the others. Magus had apparently been an accurate guess for the one,

as he was quickly lost within his own mind, and introducing himself and his companions apparently hadn't even occurred to him.

"Did you see them?" he asked after almost forty minutes.

Thalya just nodded slightly.

"What *were* they?"

"Orks," she said, one brow rising slightly. "A wizard who has never heard of orks?"

"I've heard of them," he frowned. "We've just never traveled outside civilized lands before. I never thought I'd actually *see* one."

She smiled faintly. "The elves would not be happy to hear your appraisal of the Ysendar."

"Elves haven't come south of the Jihlarn River in almost a hundred years," he objected. "These woods are not elven. Judging by your living *here*, they don't even man their ranger stations anymore."

"Not this far south," she ceded. "The orks would not raid so boldly if they did."

"I guess we are lucky, then, not to be dead, with the rangers so long gone," he said, turning his eyes back to his plate.

Thalya's expression didn't change, though she frowned internally. Yes, her mother *really* didn't have to worry about her bringing home strange men, because the ones she pulled off the road half-dead apparently held opinions of women which would only irritate her.

"They're really more interested in the horses and the goods than anything else," she shrugged. "Bandits of any flavor are about the same at the root of it. Orks just tend to make a living of it when the forest gets too crowded."

"Too crowded? There's hardly anything for fifty miles," he protested.

"Well, yes and no. There are quite a lot of orks. And the threshold at which a forest becomes too densely populated to sustain a group is much lower than for the farming lands."

"They can't just... civilize? They *look* practically human..."

"In the same way that humans look practically elven?" she smiled. "No, the wars are much less frequent if you don't try to shoehorn one into the model of the other."

She stood to check on the other two again. The one with the head wound was just sleeping now; his breathing had settled, and the swelling was going down. The other was as pale and still as before, his chest rising and falling but slightly, irregularly; she sat down beside the bed to check his wounds. After a few minutes, the wizard came to the doorway, carrying his mug.

"You should try to sleep," Thalya said without looking up.

"I doubt I could."

"The orks won't climb trees," she said, "and most things that can know better than to bother an elven structure."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I've lived here all my life."

"Ah."

He eventually made his way back up the hallway, and Thalya heard the door to the small room close.

A wizard without a staff. She frowned. She could be wrong; he could just be a scribe. But the one she was tending was most certainly battle-tested, and bore the scars to prove it. Yet he was without armor, without even a shield, and from what she had seen, he had been wanting it. Something was... wrong. If they were what they seemed to be, the wizard should have

carried a staff, and the warrior should have been armored, with livery beyond the drab greys and browns. And the third was just a puzzle – a servant? A friend? Regardless, it was really none of her business.