

SCOUTS

Gaeldzae waded through the marsh with his loaded rifle hooked into his folded arms, ready to be pulled into his shoulder and fired in an instant. He surveyed the surroundings and even though the night was dark his eyes easily distinguished his four companions, and the herd of memchuni off in the distance silently slipping into a deep pool. He returned his attention to the ground and sought for any sign of Taeichi's trail.

Out of the corner of his eye Gaeldzae detected movement and peered in its direction; the undergrowth was waving too vigorously and he knew something other than the wind had disturbed it. He gave the signal to crouch as he squatted low behind some reeds and scanned the trees. He didn't hear the hum of the bowstring but he spotted the arrow split through a bush and in an instant it was upon him. He threw himself to one side, ensuring his rifle remained above the ankle high water, and felt the arrowhead strike him hard in his ribs. He instinctively clasped his hand to the wound and was relieved to find the arrow had found only his hard leather cuirass and had glanced off without penetrating it. It had still hurt.

A deluge of ensuing arrows sailed through the air and finding no target they peppered the soft, marshy ground. Adrenalin coursed through Gaeldzae's veins. He lay prostrate and hoped for the barrage to pass him by. Water seeped under his armour soaking through his clothing and saturating his fur. He heard a cry and turned but could see nothing through the tall grasses and rushes.

"Aymae's hit," a voice shouted.

"Can he move?" Gaeldzae bellowed back and then flinched as an arrow sliced through the reeds and embedded itself in the ground so close that it splashed muddy water into his face.

"It caught him in the shoulder."

"To the trees." Gaeldzae instructed pushing himself up and sprinting towards the tree-line opposite the enemy. As he ran through the marsh water the mud sucked at his feet making his progress slow and frustrating. In front of him Aymae held his shoulder and Naes carried two rifles. They were finding it as hard as he but they went as fast as the terrain would allow. Gaeldzae dared look behind and was relieved to note that there was no pursuit. Ahead, Dzualos and Eivala reached the trees and took up defensive positions using the woodland as cover. They aimed their rifles past Gaeldzae towards the enemy but as no target presented itself they refrained from pulling their triggers.

Aymae and Naes ran into the wood but an arrow shot true and found its mark burying itself deep in Aymae's back. Aymae cried out in agony as he fell face down into the marsh. Naes dropped down to his companion. "He's gone," he said as Gaeldzae reached them.

"Get under cover," Gaeldzae hauled Naes up and pushed him behind a tree.

Arrows whizzed by as Gaeldzae knelt behind a tree and brought his rifle up to his shoulder. He sighted along the barrel and tried to control his breathing but there was nothing to aim at. A rumble of thunder reverberated overhead, followed by a magnificent flash of lightning which lit up the entirety of the marsh and in that instant Gaeldzae spotted a single Angueth step out from the undergrowth. She wore the golden fur taken from a great predator as a knee length dress over her slim frame with leather leggings underneath. Her long hair was wild and free and in each hand she carried a narrow bladed axe, each glinting in the lightning like wicked tusks. Gaeldzae went icy cold as fear gripped his stomach.

As quickly as it was torn away the night returned but Gaeldzae could clearly see the Angueth walk towards them. A peel of thunder deafened the land and Gaeldzae jumped as if someone had just leaped out of the dark at him. His heart was sprinting in his chest and threatened to burst through his ribs.

The growling sky abated and Gaeldzae shouted to his men, "break ranks and head home." He sighted down the barrel of his rifle but his hands were shaking and he couldn't keep it steady. The Angueth started to run. Gaeldzae pushed his gun hard against the tree, finally getting it to cease wobbling, and pulled the trigger. Ignited powder from the pan stung his cheek and an instant later the rifle kicked into his shoulder, the sound of it firing deafening in his ear like thunder, the smoke belched from the muzzle blinding his vision like thick fog. Another two reports sounded close as Dzualos and Eivala also fired. Gaeldzae sprang up as the smoke was blown away on the breeze to see the Angueth half way across the open ground and bearing down on them fast.

"Go! Go!" Gaeldzae shouted as he turned and belted into the trees. He slung his rifle over his back and then focused on running. He had a one in four chance of the Angueth following him but he wasn't going to look behind to see if she was. He pumped his legs as fast as he could as he sloshed along the myriad animal trails cutting through the forest, constantly changing direction as he sought to shake off the Angueth should she be pursuing. The wood grew more impenetrable, the trails becoming thinner between the dense groves of thin trees and overhead the storm bellowed, flashes of lightning strobed the world and then the rains fell in a torrent to hammer on his helmet and seep under his armour to saturate his already sodden clothes.

Gaeldzae still didn't dare look behind or slow his pace. Any moment now he expected to feel an axe blade in his back or for the Angueth to leap out in front of him and take his head clean off. His nerves were as tight as an ill fitting cuirass but the fear gave him energy and propelled him along. A scream broke through the night close by and Gaeldzae veered away from its source. Thunder and lightning punctuated the death cry. He wondered who it was and prayed that it wasn't Eivala and then felt a pang of guilt that he had hoped that it was either Naes or Dzualos that had met their fate.

He slowed his pace a little knowing he'd run out of energy soon. He dared a glance over his shoulder but could see very little through the wall of rain but at least the Angueth wasn't right behind. He cut left down a new trail, the rain streaming off his face, his feet splashing underfoot and emerged onto the bank of the river. Without pause he dove in and stayed submerged for as long as possible, which for a Meoqai was a long time. For the first time since the attack he felt relatively safe as he hugged the pebbled river bed and let the current carry him along. His rifle and pistols would be useless and it would take hours to clean them properly but he didn't care; he'd escaped.

The weeds by the riverbank parted, a swarm of furred river vermin emerged and they sped like a volley of bullets in pursuit of the solitary Meoqai drifting weakly along the riverbed.