



CLEAR-CUT

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Tanith's breath steamed in the night air as she surveyed the place the Khadoran trespassers would die. The young druid's argus padded up to her side. One of the dog's two broad heads panted as it examined its surroundings; the other pressed into her palm as if asking her to pet it. She did not. Others might view a warbeast as a companion, but to her it was a hunter's arrow, to be loosed at her prey. Much the way her master Vernor the Nightbringer must view her, she thought.

Washed out by a sheet of snow and the wan moonlight of Calder, the expanse was a strip of deforested land between the forest and the mountains. Stumps dotted the ground, testament to the hunger of the plundering Khadorans. Irregular mounds lay scattered across the snow, piles of deadfall and branches the northerners didn't bother to harvest.

On the far side stood a Khadoran mining compound, a squat series of boxes connected by scaffolding. A tall lumber mill stood on one side to cut timbers to reinforce the mine. The northern men had come here to wrest iron out of the mountain to feed the needs of their cities, to build the ships that carried them to new lands they could exploit and infect with more cities—cities that would sicken the ley lines, the flows of natural energy passing beneath the surface of the world. The druids of the Circle Orboros couldn't easily destroy the great cities of men, but when those men intruded into unspoiled lands, forces like Tanith's would drive them out.

Her eyes hardened as she saw a pair of men with rifles walking the perimeter of the camp, the collars of their fur-lined coats pulled up against the chill. Even at a distance she could hear their idle conversation. The laugh of one

carried to her, and she watched him pull a flask from his coat. The men were soldiers, but poorly disciplined. Good. There would be others resting in the bunkhouses or huddled near fireplaces, but these, at least, would not be a challenge.

She signaled, and shadows detached from the gloom behind her as her soldiers crept forward. Wearing bronze armor and heavy furs, the Wolves of Orboros—the tribal men and women sworn to serve her, awaited her orders. Behind them came Karul, her pureblood warwolf, towering above the humans. The top of his head brushed the high branches, and he moved with a grace that seemed unnatural for a creature so massive and strong.

In the faint moonlight Karul's white fur glistened. He was a pureblood, the offspring of warwolves. This meant that although he shared his parents' great size, strength, and protean ability to transform his flesh, he could not take on human form as lesser warwolves could. The mind of a pureblood was cunning, though—perhaps the most cunning of all warbeasts—and his was the callous and bloodthirsty mind of a true predator.

Karul looked down to the warriors. He growled a few syllables that his wolf-like muzzle rendered difficult to comprehend, but Tanith could hear the hunger in his voice and feel his eagerness through the bond they shared. "Do we strike?"

She watched the soldiers vanish around the southern corner of the compound on their patrol. "Now," she said. The Wolves of Orboros rushed forward, barely making a sound.



A rifle cracked and one of Tanith's charging warriors fell into the snow before he could reach the wall of the bunkhouse. The others sprinted for the cover of the brush piles. On the left flank a brave miner scrambled atop one of the piles and blasted his scattergun down, killing his target, then caught the forked blade of a Wolf's spear under his jaw. The unseen rifleman fired again, snapping the attacking Wolf's head back. Both bodies dropped into the snow.

Someone in the mining camp had raised the alarm. Now defenders boiled out into the killing field wielding hunting rifles and scatterguns. All

Khadoran men were conscripted into the army and trained with weapons, so she knew better than to underestimate them. She ordered her warriors into two strike teams to funnel the enemy into Karul's waiting jaws.

The pureblood waded through the first group, bullets and scattershot peppering his hide with blood. Each sweep of his great arms sent torn and broken bodies spinning into the air. He needed little encouragement from her to keep killing, so Tanith impelled her argus around the southern flank of the compound to deal with a sharpshooter among the main bunkhouse smokestacks.

Through the telepathic link she shared with her beast, she spotted a pile of timber behind the bunkhouse. At a silent mental prod the argus bounded up the stacked logs. Stoking the rage within the beast, she sent it at a woman kneeling behind a brick chimney on the building's roof. As the beast leapt to strike, it let out an eerie, doubled bark from its twin heads that reverberated over the battlefield and left the sniper reeling.

Before pulling her attention back to the fight on the ground, Tanith siphoned off the argus' potent fury. Then she let her senses feel the flow of life and energy on the battlefield, reaching down into ley lines below. With a predatory grin she slashed her weapon down to strike the earth. Cut from the ancient and powerful tree Wurmwood, the Staff of Fate called out to the severed roots below the soil, the last remnants of a once-vibrant forest.

In response, deep roots erupted from the ground to enwrap two Khadorans. With a series of wet snaps the roots dragged one of them down deep into the frozen soil, his screams muffled by the crushing weight of earth. The roots bound the other into place, making him an easy target for a swipe of Karul's claws.

She turned to shout an order at the faltering left flank when a series of shrill whistles pierced the air. Her argus began to snarl and bark, and Karul raised his bloody muzzle to search for the source of the noise. The warpwolf stalked to Tanith and swept her behind him.

To the south she saw several glowing lights swaying through the trees. She looked through Karul's eyes, piercing the darkness outside the camp, and saw four steamjacks rushing forward, snapping smaller trees in their advance. They were huge hunchbacked constructs, a mocking echo of mankind. Two were the Khadoran's laborjacks, used to perform heavy physical work.

The third and fourth, though, wielded two double-bitted axes and held themselves with the same barely constrained rage that Karul now showed. An armored man behind them shouted orders, instructing the machines to charge Tanith's forces. Two of the Wolves to her right were trampled under the steel feet of the foremost 'jack.

"Fall back!" Tanith shouted to her Wolves. "Into the trees!" The survivors broke from cover and ran toward the forest. She urged her argus to do the same, and it leapt from its rooftop perch to sprint toward her in a spray of snow. A few rifle shots snapped off after it, throwing plumes of snow and soil into the air.

Tanith turned back to the forest, but Karul stood facing down the four hulking machines, flexing his clawed hands and snarling. Great spikes and crests of bone tore from his hide as he transformed his flesh to gain strength for the coming fight. Tanith knew the warwolf could not battle all four steamjacks at once, so she grabbed his mind and forced him to face her. "To the trees. *Now.*"

She felt the rancor swelling in his heart. In moments she would need it.



The warjacks crashed forward, swinging their axes in great arcs to carve a path through the trees. Behind them the laborjacks hurled the felled trunks aside, clearing the way for the Khadorans with rifles and scatterguns. The soldiers fired at Tanith's force as they fled through a cloud of powder smoke, leaving Karul's back slick with blood and her argus limping. A Wolf of Orboros took a bullet through his neck as he sprang over a fallen log and crashed down on the other side.

Karul turned back to intercept the lead warjack and crouched low. As it came to strike him, the great warbeast tapped into the mystical power that was the birthright of the pureblood and became as insubstantial as smoke. He sprinted forward, and the warjack's axe passed through his ghostly form as he darted behind it. The machine faltered, confused.

Tanith saw Karul's plan and drew on the link between them to facilitate his transformation. Now behind the warjack, the pureblood spun around. His muscles rippled and bulged with renewed strength. His claws pierced the warjack's steam boiler and ripped it free. On the path

behind the two titanic figures, Tanith heard startled shouting from the Khadorans.

The other warjack loosed an angry blast of steam and charged forward, ignoring its controller's shouts to hold back. Rather than striking with its axes, it slammed into Karul, sending the warwolf and the machine both flying back toward Tanith. Unable to get out of the way, she was slammed violently back, her ribs cracking as she bounced off the roots of another tree.

Instinctively, Tanith channeled the pain to one of her warbeasts. Not the argus, which would not survive such a wound, or Karul, who was struggling to his feet as he grappled the warjack. Another warbeast, a gorax she didn't care for and barely trusted. She had ordered the Wolves to chain it to the largest, strongest tree they could find, far from the sights and smells of the mining camp. In the distance it howled in indignation as its ribs snapped in place of her own. The sound of chains snapping rang out as the gorax tore free from its fetters.

The Khadorans had moved forward to aid the embattled warjack when the sound hit them. The older man commanding the two laborjacks directed them to move together for cover. His voice wavered and grew louder as the gorax stormed forward. Foam poured from its tusked maw, and its eyes were wild. Gorax responded to pain with a thoughtless, destructive rage, gaining strength and ferocity from their wounds. Its broken ribs were more than enough to goad it into a blind rampage.

The gorax crashed into the laborjack to the left with its thick skull down, knocking the machine off its feet. Tanith saw the machine's controller vanish under the many tons of metal. She drew on the gorax's wellspring of rage, feeding some of it into Karul and pulling the rest into herself. Empowered by this ferocity, Karul hurled the warjack back and sprang forward. Together the warbeasts tore through the remaining 'jacks. In moments the last survivors stood undefended, desperately reloading their weapons to fire at the enormous creatures.

Tanith closed her eyes, feeling the spirit of each warbeast like points of light in a vast sea of darkness. She felt the hot anger of the gorax, the anguish from her injured argus, and the thoughts of Karul slipping away beneath the frenzy of the animus. Then, summoning all the power she had drawn from her beasts, Tanith wove a spell of pure destruction,

glowing runes of power circling her outstretched hands. She used her link to the beasts as a conduit, causing the spell to manifest from each of them down at the packed men. From three directions the spell converged on them, three blasts of destructive power that exploded with tremendous force.

A wave of wind, dust, and snow blasted out, causing the trees to bend and quake. Where the mine's defenders had stood, there was now a deep, dark crater filled with the twisted scrap of fallen 'jacks. Panting with exertion, Tanith called out to her Wolves.

"If any of you are still alive, follow me."



Tanith and four of her Wolves watched as the compound burned. Somewhere deep inside a roof collapsed, sending whirling sparks into the night sky. Behind the group her warbeasts recovered, the gorax safely back in its fetters while the argus licked submissively at the creature's knuckles.

"What next?" Karul growled.

"That was the first," she responded. "The Khadorans have three other mines across two hundred miles. We are to destroy them all."

"Will they all be as well defended?" one of the Wolves asked, her voice muffled by her steel helmet. "I've lost six of my tribe already."

"Most likely," Tanith said. "Does it matter? We have our instructions." She was confused by the question until the other woman pulled off her helmet. Tanith saw the mixture of fear and loss in the woman's eyes. She tried to remember what that kind of grief felt like, what such loss meant to someone who hadn't received training from the senior druids of the order. She paused before speaking again.

"There are other tribes between here and the next site. I will remind them of their obligations to my order. Claim your dead. Your work is done for now." With that she inclined her head toward the southern trees. "Come, Karul. We have work to do."

