

### **Fate Falls Hard**

Ellre looked over the caravan, fighting down despair. As the most experienced Warden, it fell upon her to organize the refugees, to lead them to safety. Once again, she had failed. Her scout, Zeno, stood before her, stony faced after delivering the bad news: the others had abandoned the rally point at least a day ago, if not longer. So many losses....

They lacked mounts, were running thin on their food and water, were utterly out of medical supplies, and most of them were injured in one form or another. She knew the orders; the Cairn would be sealed at sunset the next day, sealing out the Vreech... as well as any others who had not made it to safety in time. There was no way they would be able to make it in time. Even a forced march through the rapidly-approaching night would not get them to the gates in time.

Recriminations echoed in her heart; this disaster was the Wardens' fault. When the Harbingers had first arrived at the Protectorate, the Wardens had not heeded their warnings. The Wardens had arrogantly assumed that they would be able to handle the threat. The loss of the floating city of Zephyrcrest had alarmed them, but had not cured them of their hubris. That had taken the destruction of Liashi and Gelriar, and the loss of Citadel Volawell and the bulk of the Skyfleet armada. Even then, it hadn't stopped them from performing a ritual to banish the Vreech, as if magic - even something as complex as the Celestial Chorus' most daring work - would solve the issue. How many lives had been lost due to their arrogance? How many times would failures like this haunt the Wardens? Haunt her?

The months that had followed were a study in catastrophe. Ellre had gone from one failure to the next, one slaughter to the next. She'd survived - barely - through more battles in the last two years than she had seen in the three decades prior. Those she'd served with, fought with, lead into combat - all dead. She'd been unable to keep any of them alive, and now these refugees' lives were in her hands. They were all going to die....

She shook her head. She was Ellre Ashwolf, Fourth Blade of the... she paused. She was all that was left of the Vengeful Hunters, making her the First Blade... if it mattered any more. If any of it, if anything, mattered any more. "How do we make this right, Zeno?" she asked him quietly. It was technically a breach of protocol; First Blades didn't ask tactical advice from a scout, let alone from another company. Ellre didn't care. Protocol, at this point, no longer mattered. He was a Warden, and, as with her, had been effectively promoted by virtue of simple survival. "We've got a day to travel," he grunted, looking towards the mountains in the distance, "and about two days' worth of distance, at this pace." He sighed, not looking towards her. "If we leave everything behind that's slowing us down, push all night, a few might make it there in time." Not a suggestion, she could tell, just a simple statement of the odds. "Assuming we don't run into any trouble, and are willing to leave most of these people behind."

Ellre nodded her head. "Might save a few, but would doom most, which means it's not an option. We need food, water, and shelter. Someplace to rest." Zeno grunted again, frowning. "Good luck there. Cities destroyed, farms burned... there's no place safe, unless we hide in the trees with

the few Jade Pact that refused to leave....” Ellre shook her head. “These people aren’t Wardens. They’d no more survive in the wild like that than they could handle the forced march to reach the Cairn in time. We need something different, something that doesn’t involve using magic and putting a beacon on us.”

This time, Zeno snorted, looking over the caravan. “Most of these people aren’t used to that sort of discipline. Their whole lives involved magic, what they cast or what the Selunari made.” “Then they need to change,” Ellre replied, looking out into the gathering gloom. “We all need to change.” She took a deep breath. “Set the watch, have the civilians make camp. I’ll have an answer by morning.” Zeno saluted, then went to gather the perilously few Wardens they had left. She watched him go, then went to look for the Skyfleet lieutenant that had fallen in with the group. He didn’t speak a lot, but watched much. Ellre hoped that he would have some information she could use.

\*\*\*\*\*

“I’ve never worked with Skyfleet Intelligence before,” Ellre said. “We’re a bit different from the rest of Skyfleet,” Thalenil replied, lounging against a stump the previous group had left near the fire pit. “A bit less obvious in our activities, perhaps. Most of the time, our official actions are directly with the Captains’ Council.” Ellre nodded. As Fourth Blade, she would never have interacted with the Skyfleet leadership. Perhaps the First Blade had....

The survivor’s guilt threatened to swallow her up again. She closed her eyes and tried to fend it off. “I wish I could help you more, Warden,” the Dark Elf continued. “I can provide you with information on Vreech tactics and capabilities, locations of battles, even the names of the Skyfleet vessels covering the retreat. Safe places, I’m unfortunately lacking. From the information I’ve had access to, the security of the Cairn comes from its isolation. Once they close the doors tomorrow, they collapse the tunnels behind them.” He shrugged “Most of the Skyfleet defenses are based heavily on magic, which ended up attracting the Vreech more than anything.” “Another instance of best intentions getting people hurt. This is what happens when people rely on us....” Ellre whispered, pained. “Warden?” Thalenil interrupted, leaning forward, frowning at her. He searched her face for a moment. “What is it you’re searching for? Personal survival? Safety for those you lead? Vengeance? Absolution?” His face was suddenly intense in the firelight, eyes burning bright against the indigo of his skin. “You need to consider what is your highest priority, and what you’re willing to sacrifice to get it.”

Ellre stopped, frowning. “I need to get these people to safety,” she said, indignant. “Or as close to it as we can find. And I’m willing to sacrifice everything to make that happen.” Thalenil nodded, giving a satisfied smile, and returned to his lounging position. “Then we do that.” Ellre snorted at his seemingly-flippant response. “You don’t understand. You don’t know how many people have died under my command, as a result of my-” “No!” he said abruptly, leaning forward again. “You said everything. That includes indulging in the vice of self-pity. Take responsibility for any failure you feel you need to, but if you want these people to survive, you must sacrifice your ego and lead them with a clear head.” She glared at him, but said nothing. His words infuriated

her, but he had a point; fighting without a clear head was dangerous. It wasn't what she'd wanted to hear, but perhaps it would be enough to help her salvage her mission. She paused as a new idea struck her. Salvage.... Perhaps... perhaps he had given her what she was looking for after all.... With a distracted nod, she stood and moved off into the night, leaving the lieutenant behind.

\*\*\*\*\*

The morning sky was still red with the dawn when Ellre had Zeno gather up the refugees. Most of them had been still sleeping, but she needed to talk to them immediately. She could see the mix of confusion and apprehension on their faces; the ones who weren't still trying to wake up had noticed the newly sprouted rocky outcroppings on her face, marking a new major Oath. The freshly-blackened blade she held as she impatiently stalked back and forth, marking her as Ruined, only contributed to their concern. They eyed the sword in her hand with more than a bit of apprehension, uncertain as to why their lead Warden was suddenly wielding an outcast's weapon.

"I am Ellre Ashwolf, First Blade of the Mourning Shadows." She ignored the surprised expressions from the other Wardens. One didn't simply declare a new Warden company - not like this. There were customs to observe, rites to perform... traditions that dated back millenia. She had set all that aside. It wasn't the first, and it wouldn't be the last.  
She kept going, trying to build momentum to keep going. She was going to need as much of it as she could get, if she was going to see this through. She pointed to the Wardens around her, as she declared the new ranks. "Zeno Blightwing, First Scout; Corym Basilisk, Second Blade; Venali Hydra, Second Scout; Anfalen Howlbear, First Spear." Next, she gestured to Thalenil. In for a copper, in for a platinum. "Skyfleet Captain Thalenil Eaglesong of the Artano Ascendent."

Protocol be damned. Propriety be damned. Those were things she would happily sacrifice. Thalenil should've expected this, after what he'd said, and she took perverse pleasure from his raised eyebrows. "We have tried to get you to the safety of the Cairn in time. I have failed you." She pushed away the darkness inside her, focusing on her next words and the rising sun. No time for herself, not now. "We will not make it there before the doors seal. Which means we need a different goal."

She looked out over their faces as those words sank in. She had mere seconds before they were lost to despair and terror. "We are instead striking out east, away from the mountains, and away from the Vreech. This is no longer a rescue operation, but a relocation. There is farmland along the Desevian river where we can resupply and rest. As long as we don't use magic, we shouldn't draw the Vreech's attention; they'll be too busy testing the Cairn's defenses. We'll try to find survivors, and do what we can to scavenge along the way. The city of Spheris fell along the Desevian, in an area where the ley-lines are sparse. If we cannot find a safe place to build a refuge along the way, we'll salvage what we can from Spheris and use that to defend ourselves."

She held up her necklace, Oath-Ring dangling beneath her fist. The Dragon-wrought metal that had changed the Warden's fates drew everyone's attention. "I am Ruined, but I have sworn an Oath. I will see you to safety, or die my final death in the attempt." She put every last ounce of confidence and determination into her voice. "We eat on the move, but we do not leave anyone behind. Gather your belongings; we make for the river. For the Protectorate!" The rest of the newly-formed Mourning Shadows took up the cry, while the civilians under their care remained scared and quiet.