



A DARKNESS FORGED IN FIRE

BOOK ONE OF THE IRON ELVES

CHRIS EVANS

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—R. A. Salvatore

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*To my parents, Robert and Barbara, for believing.
It means everything.*

*We're little black sheep who've gone astray,
Baaaaaa!
Gentlemen-rankers out on the spree,
Damned from here to Eternity,
God ha' mercy on such as we,
Baa! Yah! Bah!*

~JOSEPH RUDYARD KIPLING, "GENTLEMEN RANKERS"

A DARKNESS FORGED IN FIRE

ONE

Mountains shouldn't scream, but this one did.

The agony of the rock vibrated beneath the paws of a small, brown squirrel crouched low behind a boulder near the summit. The frigid night air thrummed in sympathetic harmony with the mountain, blurring the light from a shooting star trailing crimson fire across the sky. Shadows shattered and reformed, their shapes subtly altered.

The squirrel sat up on its hind legs and looked to the sky, its glittering eyes following the path of the red star as it burned across the sky toward the east. Letting out a sigh, the squirrel shook its small head; no matter how many centuries you had to get ready, prophecies always caught you off guard. The Stars were returning to the world. It was a strange thought for a squirrel to have, but not for the elf-wizard that had taken squirrel form.

Remaining transformed for the time being, the wizard dropped to all fours and leaped to another boulder a few feet higher up, stretching out his arms and legs to take advantage of the loose folds of fur between them. He landed on the next boulder huffing for breath. It was definitely easier to fall going downhill. He looked up to the mountain summit and shivered in spite of the fur that currently covered his body. A group of trees dotted the peak. *And I'm just a squirrel*, the wizard thought, rubbing his paws together for warmth before continuing his climb.

The wizard's tail bushed as he scampered closer to the top. With each jump the ground felt increasingly wrong. Something was changing it from the inside, and he knew what. The roots of the trees on the summit were clawing their way deep into the heart of the mountain to feed on the rock. Until tonight, they had been contained, isolated on this mountaintop where they could be controlled, not destroyed. The falling of the Red Star in the east signaled that was no longer the case. A power not known in the world since the beginning of time was returning. Power that could either save it, or destroy it.

He concentrated on the forest, wishing he was powerful enough to wipe it from the face of the earth himself, but knowing it was far beyond him. He hoped, however, that his plan might help the one who could. All the wizard had to do was steal one small thing. And survive. It's why he had transformed himself. A wizard going into this forest would never return. A squirrel, on the other hand, had the slimmest of chances of surviving by going unnoticed.

He hoped.

The wizard paused again in his climb to catch his breath, watching it turn to mist and rise in the

icy air, drawing his eyes to the trees that clung to the rock.

~~No living thing should have found a home there, yet the forest survived, its roots boring ever deeper into the rock, suckling on the bitter ore it found. Leaves turned iron-black, the wind honing them to a razor edge. Bark crystallized, growing translucent to reveal the thick ichor pulsing beneath while branches withered needle thin, stabbing down at the ground in the vain search for something fleshier to consume.~~

It was a forest, of a kind.

The mountain shuddered and sent chunks of rock cartwheeling down its side, as if trying to shake the forest loose. Just in time the wizard hid in a crevice until the avalanche had passed. He poked his head up a moment later and prepared to make the final dash into the trees. It didn't look promising; arrowlike twigs splintered against rock with a sound of ringing iron as the trees now hunted among the shadows.

The wizard twitched his squirrel tail twice then darted between the crystal trunks in a wild dash for the center of the forest. Branches slashed down as he dodged and scrambled for his life.

Finally, out of breath and on the verge of exhaustion, he came to the very center of the forest.

There, on a ragged knuckle of granite, stood a silver Wolf Oak.

He knew the Wolf Oaks well, good nuts, but this one was wholly unlike the tall, majestic trees of the Great Forest of the Hyntaland on the plains below. Those trees were tall and proud, their limbs strong and supple in the nurturing sun. This tree shared none of those traits, growing low and wide across the rock, snaking its jagged limbs out in every direction to ensnare its progeny in a thicket of wild, dark hunger. Glinting, obsidian-shelled acorns covered the ground beneath it.

The forest was expanding.

The wizard felt the sudden urge to get off the ground and climb somewhere high. He looked at the trees around him and decided that the ground, as polluted as it was, was still preferable. It was what he feared. Being this close to the silver Wolf Oak was taking its toll; he was starting to think like a squirrel. Wolf Oaks were the natural conduits for the raw, elemental magic of nature, and among them the silvers had no equal. This one surpassed even them.

Five hundred rings ago, this silver Wolf Oak had been a sapling cub in the birthing meadow of the Great Forest, a new, young life full of promise. In time, it would have towered above the tallest trees, a singular being of incredible, if simple power, ruling and protecting the forest by influencing all living things around it. It had been that way since the beginning. Then the elves had come to the Hyntaland, and everything changed.

The wizard fought his most basic instinct—self and squirrel—to flee down the mountain. Not yet, though, not without getting what he came for. He placed one paw in front of the other and started to move cautiously toward the silver Wolf Oak, only to find his progress stopped because the most sensible squirrel part of his mind had wedged his tail between two rocks, saving his life.

Black, hoary frost sparkled on the rocks, radiating out from the tree in all directions. A moment later, a piece of night detached itself from the rest of the darkness.

The Shadow Monarch, elf witch of the high, dark forest, had come.

She stood beside the silver Wolf Oak, the reek of cold, metallic power filling the forest. He sensed more than saw. Her head turned and looked toward him. His breath froze in his lungs, his vision darkening around the edges.

Her gaze moved on. He relaxed ever so slightly, drawing in the tiniest of breaths. Frost glistened off his whiskers.

The Shadow Monarch looked up to the sky, following the path of the fallen Red Star. She reached

out to the tree. Anger, pain, desire, and something more infused the two, twisting the very air around them. ~~Their madness wove together until their power was one and the same, staining everything.~~ She then wrapped Her arms around the tree, a dark thing cradling a dark thing, and the wizard sensed what he had long feared: above all else, She wanted revenge.

The wizard raised his head, peering beyond his whiskers to the black tableau a few feet away. The Shadow Monarch was looking down at a pool of ichor beside the silver Wolf Oak. The pool shimmered, revealing an image of the Great Forest to the west of the mountain. Elves of the Long Watch, formed to protect the Great Forest from Her madness, patrolled among the trees. For centuries now they had kept Her at bay, forever vigilant, keeping Her and Her forest isolated high on the mountain.

It was a comforting vision. What happened next wasn't.

Black flame flickered in the Great Forest, and elves and trees began to shrivel and die. Stars fell but wherever they landed Her forest was there, devouring the Stars' power and making it Her own. New trees burst forth from the cold earth like daggers of crystal and ore. These trees spread, covering more and more ground until no free space remained...blanketing mountain and desert, lake and ocean in one dark forest.

The mountain shuddered anew. A different image formed in the dark pool. Soldiers now stood about, their green jackets and iron muskets the unmistakable hallmarks of the Calahrian Imperial Army, the sharp edge of the human empire across the ocean.

The image in the pool pulled back, revealing more. There was a small fortress on a hill, vaguely familiar to him. Power flowed from Her to the pool and the image grew larger as She searched for something there. The wizard gasped as Her magic suddenly washed over him. He struggled to keep control and remember why he was here, knowing he was slowly losing the fight as the magic of Her forest wreaked havoc with his mind.

The shooting star blazed across the sky above the small fort, then stopped, hanging there like a red sun. The brilliance of its light grew until the ichor turned completely crimson. And then the light was gone and no sign of the star remained, but something had changed.

Slowly, silently, he inched out of his hiding place and crept along the ground toward the thing he had come for. Every step was a cold needle in his paws, but there, just a foot away, lay one of the silver Wolf Oak's obsidian-shelled acorns. It was close, but he needed a distraction.

He concentrated, trying to draw magic from the foul power that coursed around him. Wincing with pain, he sifted it in his mind until he was able to cleanse enough to perform one small spell. That was all he would have to do.

He focused his thoughts on a tree on the other side of the clearing, and for a moment it looked more like what it should have been; brown and green and healthy. The other trees attacked it at once, flailing and stabbing it in a flurry of branches. The wizard lunged, grabbing the acorn between his paws and stuffing it into his mouth. Cold lightning flashed through his head, but he managed to scamper back behind a rock before spitting the acorn out into his paws where it steamed in the air.

The mountain shuddered again, a deep, mournful sound. Rock sundered. Chasms opened deep into the mountain's core, laying bare its ancient past. Flames of black frost leaped from the darkness and high into the night sky. Her forest dug ever deeper, delving more than rock, reaching back to an age long past. Primal, red-throated roars not heard for hundreds of years filled the air, and they were hungry. Another voice rose above them, and the bit of the wizard that remained in control shivered at the words.

You shall feed, too, She told them. Roots pulled misshapen creatures from the depths. The

spilled forth in black heaps, a shambling mass of crooked limbs and milky white eyes.

~~Go out in this world as you once did. Gather to me those that bear my mark. Those others that would harm My realm...destroy.~~

Every fiber in his body told him to run while his luck held, but he had to risk one last look in the pool. Like the Great Forest, tongues of frost fire were engulfing the fortress on the hill, burning everything. Her trees breached the earth, their roots clawing, searching for the star that had fallen there.

Enough. He stuffed the acorn back in his mouth and ran for his life.

The pain was overwhelming, but he had to get back down the mountain with his prize. Every leap took him further away from this infernal place and closer to the one who now had a chance to stop Her.

When he reached the bottom of the mountain he found a nearby cave and crawled into it, spitting the acorn out and collapsing in a heap, his body transforming to that of an elf again. He let the pain and exhaustion take him, drifting into unconsciousness with the satisfaction of knowing he had succeeded in the first part of his task. When he was fully recovered he would be able to deliver the prize in person.

High up on the mountain, the Shadow Monarch stood watching. She saw the elf-wizard collapse in the cave. Creatures stood beside Her, waiting. Some still bore the look of elves, though terribly twisted. They waited for the command to tear the wizard to shreds. The command did not come. Instead, the Shadow Monarch smiled.

Worlds shouldn't scream, but this one would.

TWO

A sentry leaned against an abandoned bullock cart, propping his musket against a shattered wheel. The faded painted letters on the side of the cart spelled out 35TH footcalahrian imperial army, not that he could read them, not that he cared. He took a quick glance around the other side of the cart and saw nothing, just a few dots of orange in the night where lanterns burned along the fortress walls. It was a run-down as the cart. Only in darkness did it still look fortlike, and even then the ragged line of lanterns showed where parts of the walls had collapsed through time and neglect.

He pushed his shako back on his head and ran a sleeve across his sweaty brow while undoing the top button of his uniform. You could poach an egg in this heat, he figured, then felt sick at the thought. There was a time when he'd scarf down a horse steak barely seared on the fire and ask for seconds, but the heat of this place robbed a man of appetite, and not just for food.

"Honor guard my arse," he grumbled to himself, pulling a small carved pipe and leather pouch of tobacco from a jacket pocket. "So the last Viceroy was daft enough to get himself killed here, so what? What honor do they think we're guarding now?" he asked, knowing he would not get a satisfactory answer, even if he wasn't just talking to himself. It was like that in the army. Ask away, the sergeant said, but you'll never like the answer. Made a soldier think there was little future in thinking much at all.

"Shoulda had a better guard two years ago, might have done him some good then," he said, chuckling at his own joke. He tamped a thick wad of leaf into the bowl of the pipe with his thumb, then with his left hand patted his uniform for his flint and tinder box. He stole another look back up at the fortress. He had ten minutes, fifteen at the most, before the sergeant would come down to check on him. Time enough for a good smoke, if only he could find the flint. His hand fell on something hard and square in a pocket and he smiled. Pulling out the tinder box, he quickly slipped the piece of flint from inside and was about to strike it when a glitter in the sky made him stop. He looked up into a fiery light that roared into being directly above the fort.

He screamed, dropping the flint and throwing an arm across his eyes. Pure, red light radiated in every direction and then just as quickly, was gone. Slowly, he let his arm drop, blinking to get his vision back.

Everything looked the same as before. The fort still stood, the lanterns marking its walls. Had it been a spell? He patted himself all over and found that he felt the same, too. He remembered the flint and bent over to look for it. Was that frost?

He leaned closer, reaching down with his hand. The air felt cool on his fingertips nearer to the ground.

The grass shriveled before his eyes as the earth cracked like a plate thrown to the floor. Something black burst through the earth and latched on to his wrist. He tried to fall backward, but he couldn't break free of the icy grip. A shout froze in his throat as a dark shape emerged from the ground in front of him. Its face was a jagged puzzle of shadow, but something about it looked familiar.

"...V-vice-roy?" he managed, his breath a pale mist.

The thing that held him let go of his wrist and grabbed him by the throat, lifting him up until his boots no longer touched the ground. The small pipe and tinder box fell to the dirt and were immediately covered in a cold, black frost.

"**Not anymore,**" Her Emissary said, letting go of the dead body and moving toward the dots of orange light up the hill. A forest, of a kind, began to grow in its wake.

It began to hunt.

There were many places you didn't want to be in the middle of summer in the sweltering humidity at high noon on the southern coast of Elfkyna. The center of the bazaar of Port Ghamjal topped the list. Heat oozed through the streets like wet mortar, filling every crack and crevice and slowing the pace of life to a crawl.

Faltinald Elkhart Gwyn, recipient of the Order of the Amber Chalice, holder of the Blessed Garter of St. DiWynn, Member of the Royal Society of Thaumaturgy and Science, and Her Majesty's newly appointed Viceroy for the Protectorate of Greater Elfkyna of the Calahrian Empire, was not amused. He should have been in the viceregal palace hours ago, but his carriage and procession were currently stopped dead.

"Malodorous cesspool," the Viceroy said, raising a scented handkerchief to his nose. Smells bubbled and oozed in the sweltering cauldron of five thousand merchant stalls jammed into an area originally intended to hold a fifth that number. Beasts of burden were as numerous as the flies that swarmed around them, buzzing black clouds surging several feet in the air with every swish of a dun-colored tail. Cinnamon, raw meats, curdling milk, mustard, cardamom, and the bitterly sharp tunga nut assaulted the nose and watered the eyes and almost distracted the marketgoer from the underlying stench of sweat and raw sewage.

The carriage door swung open and a lieutenant in the green uniform of the Calahrian infantry saluted. The market smells washed into the cabin and the Viceroy fought the urge to gag.

"Sorry for the delay, your grace, but one of the outriders' horses knocked over an elfkynan's stall and the merchant won't let us past until we pay."

The Viceroy sighed behind his handkerchief. "Is that all? Fine, shoot him."

The officer blinked and opened and closed his mouth. "Sir?"

"To delay the Viceroy is to delay the work of the Empire, which is tantamount to revolt." Of course, shooting a merchant in the bazaar as one of his first acts as newly appointed Viceroy would cause no little unrest in the country, he realized, and he was not unhappy at the thought. It was time for the Empire to forge a new path in the world even if Her Majesty did not agree, and to do so he would set Elfkyna aflame.

The lieutenant coughed, clearly lost on the word "tantamount." The word "revolt," however, registered with him like a cannon shot. "Your grace, I don't think it's as bad as all that!" The murmur of a growing crowd indicated that it wasn't yet, but could be if given the right provocation.

The Viceroy lowered his handkerchief and gave the officer a smile that showed teeth and not

hint of humanity. "Really? Bring me that news parchment," he said, pointing to a tattered scroll paper pinned to the wall across from the open door. The lieutenant yelled at a sergeant, who quickly retrieved the parchment, handing it to the officer who in turn handed it to the Viceroy.

"Can you read this?" the Viceroy asked, pointing to the large black letters at the top of the scroll.

"It's the *Imperial Weekly Herald*, your grace," the lieutenant said slowly.

"Of the Calahrian Empire, yes. And below that?"

The lieutenant squinted. "NORTHERN TRIBES STAGE PEACEFUL PROTEST, a story by Her Majesty's Scribe Rallie Synjyn."

The first twinge of a headache blossomed behind the Viceroy's eyes. The very idea of a report of events struck the Viceroy as running counter to everything he believed in. Spies for those in power were one thing, but informing the governed was quite another. The masses did not need to know, only to obey. Clearly, Her Majesty's Scribe Rallie Synjyn was a thorn that needed plucking.

"The natives are growing restless. They have been without proper leadership for too long. Order must be restored." The state of affairs was indeed deplorable; things were not disorderly enough, a fact Synjyn and the *Imperial Weekly Herald* continued to convey.

Two years ago, in a sop to Imperial brotherhood, Her Majesty had appointed an elf from the Hyntaland to oversee Elfkyna. It did not turn out as Her Majesty wished. For one thing, the elfkynan weren't actually elves, and harbored a deep resentment of those that were. Three centuries before, an explorer looking for an eastern sea passage to the homeland of the real elves in the Hyntaland discovered a new land by mistake. Convinced he really had found the Hyntaland, the explorer insisted on proclaiming the natives elf-kind, despite the fact that the elfkynan were a somewhat short, stocky race that looked nothing like elves and far more like humans, though the Viceroy deplored the idea.

A second problem had been the previous Viceroy's capricious, brutal, and above all, bloody reign. An iron fist in an iron glove. *How...appropriate*, the new Viceroy thought, refusing to even entertain the pun that the last Viceroy was murdered by the elf commanding the Iron Elves regiment, Her Majesty's colonial troops from the Hyntaland.

The scandal had rocked the Empire. The elves of the Hyntaland, once viewed as the Queen's most loyal colonial subjects, were now seen as the duplicitous beings they were. The Iron Elves were disbanded, their soldiers placed aboard a galley and sent south across the ocean to the desert wastes while their officer was court-martialed and cashiered from the service, but not, unfortunately, executed. Evidence apparently existed that suggested the previous Viceroy had in fact been working for someone else. While Calahr was mortified by it all, the elfkynan rejoiced in the Viceroy's demise and much of their growing resentment was deflated. The urgency to appoint a new Viceroy diminished, and it took considerable maneuvering within the royal court for Gwyn to finally secure the posting. In the meantime, the work of the last Viceroy had simmered in the heat with no one to stir it up.

Well, that was all about to change.

"I expect to be in my palace within the hour, Lieutenant. Someone is going to be shot in the next ten seconds; I'll leave it up to you who."

The lieutenant saluted and closed the door. Orders barked out and the sound of metal ramrods rattling in musket barrels sent up a cry among the crowd. The carriage swayed as people ran.

"*Fire!*" The musket volley echoed off the mud brick walls, followed by screaming. The carriage began to move forward again, the squelch of things beneath its wheels adding to the din. The Viceroy closed his eyes and allowed himself another smile. Things had indeed changed.

Four hours later the Viceroy stood among the ruins of his palace, looking for someone to blame. He took a calming breath and surveyed his new home. The palace was little more than a collection of tumbled blocks of sun-dried mud. It reminded him of a potter's wheel left unattended, the wet clay slumping and fracturing as it dried into soft, meaningless bits.

Shattered pieces of statues representing deities once venerated now suffocated under sheets of lichen, slowly eating away at them until not even the memory of their godliness remained. Had the previous Viceroy actually lived among this squalor? He considered that. The man *had* been an elf, one of the races close to nature and all that rubbish.

The lieutenant followed the Viceroy's gaze. "The last Viceroy never took up residence here, your grace," the lieutenant said, his voice quavering slightly.

"Always off on some kind of expedition or other. Searching for buried treasure, no doubt," the Viceroy said. It was a poorly kept secret that the previous Viceroy had spent the bulk of his time when not antagonizing the elfkynan, tearing up the country in search of magical artifacts. The elf search had ended, badly, at the little garrison fort of Luuguth Jor.

"They say he was looking for signs of the Stars, your grace, trying to find where they had once been. He had maps and wizards and everything to try and find them."

The Viceroy looked closely at the lieutenant for the first time. He had the look of a wax toy left too long in the sun. Everything about him drooped, from his eyes to his stance. Middle-aged, only a lieutenant, and assigned to guard duty in a backwater like Elfkynda, he was the epitome of the Empire today: soft.

The lieutenant blushed under the Viceroy's stare and continued. "You know, your grace, that old children's tale about how the Stars in the sky are really from the ground, and that one day, when a red star fell, the world would, well, end."

"The Eastern Star?" The Viceroy knew the legend, had heard the rumor about the elf expeditions, and had thought it a case of too much sun and too little brain, but now... "The Stars are just myth, points of light of no more power than that elf-witch in her forest across the sea."

The lieutenant shook his head, a not insignificant act of bravery for the man. "Oh, no, your grace, the Shadow Monarch is real. In fact, there's some who think, well, that the last Viceroy was working for Her, on account of him being an elf from over there, like Her..."

The Viceroy's eyes stared daggers, perfected from practicing the look in the mirror.

"Are you suggesting Her Majesty's representative was a traitor to the Empire?" The first rule he learned in the diplomatic corps was to never reveal your true thoughts to anyone. Ever.

The lieutenant stammered, so far out of his depth the pressure was making it hard to breathe. "I meant no disrespect, your grace! It's just that when Colonel Osveen killed him"

"That will be all, Lieutenant," the Viceroy said, offering the man another tooth-filled smile. "I suggest you put your imagination to better use by wondering what will happen if this palace is not restored to a fitting state within two weeks."

"Two weeks?" the lieutenant managed to squeak, his face draining of all color.

"Sooner, if you prefer. Now, don't let me keep you from your work," he said, turning away as the man saluted and stumbled off into the dark.

The Viceroy walked toward what had been the throne room, or perhaps, he wondered, had the man merely placed palm fronds on the floor and lounged there like so many dogs? Natives, he thought, they were the same the world over. The Empire was far too lenient in allowing them to keep their inferior cultures. It was long past time for the Empire to exert itself as it once had, bringing fire and steel and civilization to the unenlightened. Orcs, dwarves, elves, elfkynan, and the rest of the muddled

aces had been allowed to thrive in this age of peace, poisoning the Empire from within and without. The Queen's mercy would be the Empire's downfall if something wasn't done.

As he walked, he considered the rumors of the Red Star. He trusted rumors the way he trusted sharp knives, and sought a way to grasp the point without getting pricked. However, if the Stars were real...

Thoughts of the Stars were pushed aside as he entered his would-be throne room. Lanterns hung from iron poles in a circle. They cast a fluttering, yellow light, creating the impression of life where there was only crumbling mud and stone. The once ornate tile floor was spider-webbed with cracks and stained with splotches of fuzzy mold. Looking distinctly out of place in the center of the room was a long, oak conference table with two wicker chairs around it, the sum total of furnishings the palace had to offer. The chairs were of native design, far too rustic for his liking, but the table was unlike anything he had ever seen before. Its legs were carved to resemble those of a dragon, sinew and claw masterfully reproduced. It made the table look as if it were about to leap. The top gleamed with inlaid emerald leaves polished into the wood in the shape of a dragon's head, the mouth wide open and staring up at him with two black eyes. It made him feel he was being watched, a trick he suspected was created by more than a simple woodcarver's skill.

Viceroy Gwyn sat down in a chair in front of the table and ran his hands along the surface, marveling at the smooth, tingling sensation that ran up his arm. He deliberately placed his hand over the dragon's maw then chided himself for thinking anything might actually happen. It was a marvelous creation. He smiled. Well, well, it was the first positive thing the departed Viceroy had left him.

"Change is coming, wait and see," he said quietly. It might have been a breeze playing with the lantern flames, but for a moment, the table seemed to gleam a little brighter.

THREE

Konowa Swift Dragon didn't trust trees, not since he'd fallen out of one when he was a child of six years. His relationship with them had only gotten worse since then. He spun around quickly to face behind him, alert for any sign of movement. The game path he followed was bare, the trees to either side big, brown, green, and motionless. Good. Something buzzed by his ear and he slapped a hand against his neck then held it out in front of his face to examine the kill. He grunted with satisfaction; at least one black fly would no longer torment him.

"That'll teach you," he said, wiping his hand on the bark of a nearby tree. He grabbed the canteen slung across his shoulder and took a drink, looking around at this strange, sweltering forest that was now his home.

A miasma of sounds and smells assaulted him at every turn. Bugs, birds, and furred-beasts twittered, chattered, spewed, cawed, oozed, growled, yelped, and bit all day and most aggravatingly all night. The trees secreted bucketfuls of cloying sap, the smell every bit as vile as a formal palace ball he'd once attended at the height of summer years ago in the Calahrian capital.

Between the stink and the racket there was enough to make him despise the forest, but fate, it seemed, wasn't satisfied with that. On top of everything else, Konowa was certain the trees were watching him. Worse, he had the growing suspicion that they were trying to tell him something. He walked up to one, even reaching out a hand to pat it, but it looked and acted just like a tree, being absolutely inscrutable as it stood there.

It's just the heat, he decided, wiping the sweat from his brow. Elfkyna was suffocatingly hot in the summer, humid in the snowless winter, and miserable the rest of the year.

He was, as he had been for the past year, alone in a forest.

It brought to mind the angry words he'd shouted all those years ago as he clutched his broken arm and kicked the trunk of the tree that had let him fall: "*I hate the forest and I don't want to be an elf anymore!*"

Decades later, that sentiment remained.

Sighing, Konowa dropped the canteen to his side and held his hands out before him, palms up, wondering if he would ever hold his own fate again. He looked closer at his hands. His natural tanned color was deepening to a hue close to the reddish-brown bark of the trees around him. *Great, I thought, I'm turning into a bloody tree.* He ran his hands through the tangled thatch of long black hair on his head, half expecting to feel leaves sprouting there. Instead, his fingers brushed against the top

of his ears, feeling the point on the right, and ragged scar tissue on the left where the point used to be. The mutilation hadn't been by choice, but he wasn't overly upset with the results. He had never been comfortable with his heritage.

Konowa closed his eyes and let the forest talk to him. Nothing. He opened one to see if anything had changed. A large, brightly colored snake wound its way up the trunk of an old, bent teak, using the tree's flaking pale-gray bark for grip. The snake paused, turning to look at him. Its tongue darted in and out of its mouth testing the air. Konowa closed his eyes again and focused his thoughts on the snake, but all he sensed was how foolish he was for trying. He gave up and sought out the trees themselves.

They were nothing like the lean, straight pines and firs or thick and limb-heavy oaks he had known as a child. Here, everything curved, from the trunks of the trees to the creatures and vines that crawled over them. Even the leaves were different, some wide and flat, others garishly green and bitter to the taste.

He tried a new approach. *You're an elf*, he reminded himself, *born of the natural world; you're supposed to be able to do this.* He slowed his breathing and willed his body to relax, trying to let the forest infuse him with its essence. Infuse? Essence? He shook his head. This was pointless. Everything teemed with life and all had voices, yet he heard only noise, felt only chaos.

It had been the same the day he walked into the birthing meadow to become an elf of the Lone Watch. He remembered the mix of excitement and fear as he entered the most sacred realm of the *Hhar Vir*, the Deep Forest, seeking a sapling cub among the tender green shoots to become his *ryk faur*, his bond brother.

"Let your spirit walk among them, and one shall call to you," he was told, so he stayed in the meadow for five straight days without food or water, waiting, hoping. When the elves finally carried him out because he was too weak to walk, no sapling cub had yet called to him. The Wolf Oaks, the very embodiment of the natural world, had measured him, found him wanting, and rejected him. The thought still rankled. Even the elf-witch the elders told stories about to scare wayward children had found a sapling cub with which to bond.

Knowing it was fruitless but trying anyway, he now raised his arms high into the air and called again to the trees around him. His only answer was a swarm of gnats that flew into his mouth. Exasperated and spitting bugs, Konowa lowered his arms and squirmed inside the tattered and patched remnants of his uniform. The Calahrian Imperial Army green had faded to dirty white, and the knees and elbows sported ill-sewn patches of black leather from his knapsack. His musket, however, was in perfect condition. He let his left hand brush against the stock and smiled at the cold and lifeless feel of wood and steel entwined. The weapon would work if he kept his powder dry and the moving parts oiled, not if he "felt" in tune with it, as the oath weapons the Wolf Oaks bestowed on their *ryk faur* elves required.

A rumbling growl made Konowa turn. Jir, his companion of the last year, and probably the sole reason Konowa had not gone stark, raving mad out here, stood a foot away, having sneaked up on Konowa without the elf hearing a thing.

"You're better at this than me," he said, lightly rapping the bengar between the eyes with his knuckles. Jir snorted and shook his woolly head, staring up at him with big black eyes. Jir was larger than a dyre wolf, larger even than a tiger, sporting a coat of short, midnight-black fur streaked through with dull red stripes. His head featured a stubby, well-whiskered muzzle and a furry mantle of thick hair that ran halfway down his back. At the moment, he was marking his territory, forcing Konowa to jump back a pace. A swarm of black flies rose up from Jir's back as his long tail swished menacingly.

around his hindquarters. When he was done, Jir padded over on four big paws, rubbing against him and purring a deep, contented sound that made Konowa's body vibrate.

They were quite a pair, Konowa mused, scratching the bengar behind the ears. The feel of Jir's coarse fur reminded him of bark and he looked again at the forest that had become his home. Cathedral light fell like shafts of gold between the trunks as the sun dipped below the tops of the trees. It was the kind of moment his father had urged him to commune with, to find his center and become one with the forest. Konowa snorted. It was the kind of moment when he wanted a tankard of beer and a grilled sausage.

A light breeze sighed between the branches, evaporating the sweat from his forehead. After the heat of the past two weeks, it was a welcome change that would be even better once he and Jir were back in the hut with the door firmly in place. It was not wise to be out in the open when the moon climbed the sky.

Jir growled and shook his woolly head, indicating he'd had enough. Konowa lifted his hand and moved off. Lifting the stock of his musket out of the way, he squatted with some difficulty, his left knee twinging in protest, a souvenir from an orc lancer many years before. He grabbed a handful of dirt and sifted it through his hands, mimicking the actions of the Hynta-elves he'd watched all through his childhood years. His hand tingled with the power of the natural order, but he had no idea what to do with it. Konowa shivered in spite of the heat, dropping the dirt as if stung.

"Let's go home," he said.

Jir stared at him with apparent disdain. Konowa wasn't sure he didn't deserve it.

They walked for several minutes before he found a tree that he'd notched earlier that day with his small hunting hatchet. Cutting a tree was as much an act of defiance as an aid to navigation. The elves of his tribe would have been appalled to see him deface a tree with a steel ax, but they weren't here to guide him.

Feeling smug, Konowa lengthened his stride. He took one complete step and pitched forward into an unseen hollow.

"*Yirka umno!*" Konowa swore as he fell. He landed with a thud. As he lay there catching his breath, he realized with some surprise that he'd used a tribal curse, invoking summer lightning, the forest's most feared natural predator. *I'm going native*, he thought, pushing himself up to his hands and knees. He froze halfway up, coming face to rear with the hindquarters of one severely agitated skunk dragon.

"*Yirka!*" Konowa shouted, scrambling backward as the awful-smelling fire burst forth. He began to roll and beat at the flames, all the while gagging on the stench. Jir growled and wagged his tail furiously at the little black dragon and was no help at all. Konowa rolled and beat out the last of the foul-smelling flames, cursing all the while. He staggered to his feet, wielding his musket like a club, ready to dash the animal's brains onto the forest floor, but the dragon had already scampered off. Finally running out of breath, he leaned his musket against a tree, unstopped his canteen, and poured the contents over his head.

He stood like that for several seconds, his face dripping, his chest heaving, and his eyes darting wildly from side to side like an elf possessed. When the roar of blood in his ears quieted enough for him to hear the perpetual hum of the forest, he flung the canteen away. No sooner had he thrown it away and watched it disappear among the trees than he realized he'd need it.

Konowa took stock of his situation. Aside from what felt like a bad case of sunburn, he was uninjured. His uniform, however, was absolutely ruined. He stripped off his cartridge pouch, shirt, boots and trousers, leaving only his loincloth on as he gingerly hopped from foot to foot on the carpet

of nettles from the bushlike tree he found himself under.

~~After a few moments of that, Konowa decided it was time to try something new.~~ Thoughts of the clean, cool water by the hut spurred him to action. Shooting a withering glance at Jir, he put his boot back on after carefully brushing any clinging nettles off his bare feet. Flies, gnats, and a dozen other bugs he couldn't identify were now buzzing about his head, but none dared land; the stench of the skunk dragon acting as the first effective remedy he'd found to keep them at bay. Picking up his musket, he hung his soiled clothes and pouches from the muzzle and rested the weapon on his shoulder.

"What else can go wrong?" he muttered, and started to walk for home with Jir padding alongside at a discreet distance.

The unmistakable sound of a tree falling carried in the twilight, and for the briefest of moments Konowa sensed pain. It was gone so fast he wasn't sure it had happened, but when he looked over at Jir he knew something wasn't right. The bengar stood stiff-legged, his ears straight up, muzzle sniffing the air.

"It's nothing," Konowa lied, and kept walking, anxious to outpace the smell that clung to him. The light was fading quickly now, and he wanted to get back to the hut before it was completely dark. The sound of the forest changed at night, a subtle, gradual shift that crept up on the unsuspecting, along with things that made no sound at all.

Konowa turned to scold Jir to get a move on. The bengar was gone.

"Jir," he called softly. Jir had excellent hearing, but that wasn't why Konowa kept his voice low; the forest had gone silent. The constant hum of life that surged through the trees was absent, the forest was preternaturally still, as if time itself had ceased to exist.

"Not good," Konowa whispered to himself as he tipped the clothes from his musket and began to load the weapon, just to be safe.

Cradling the musket in front of his body, Konowa checked that the flint was still secure, then half-cocked the hammer as his old regiment's collect sounded in his ears.

Heavenly spirits, who watch over us...

He fished out a cartridge from his pouch with his right hand, bringing the waxed paper tube up to his mouth in one practiced motion and biting the end off.

...guide us into battle and make sure our hand...

The gunpowder mixed with his saliva and he grimaced at its familiar salty, bitter taste.

...that we might slay our enemy...

The weight of the small lead bullet pressed against his tongue, and he heard again the whip-crack of regimental pennants unfurled in a gusting wind, the creaking timber of gun carriages, the whinnying of horses, the pounding of their hooves, and the echoing barks of sergeants relaying the officers' commands.

...destroy them as those that went before us...

A tremor of anticipation coursed through Konowa's body.

...and keep our honored place as your faithful servants, your harbingers of death. We are the warriors of the Hynta. We fear nothing, for we are the Iron Elves!

"Amen," Konowa said out loud, no longer alone.

He prepared the musket for firing to the cadence of a sergeant long ago dead, killed by a swarm of battle-crazed orcs in a land even more foreign than this. Something cold and black touched Konowa then, and he felt the presence of the lost souls of his old regiment. He trickled a little gunpowder into the pan of the musket before closing the hammer. Keeping time with the past, he set the musket but

down in front of him and poured the remaining charge down the barrel before stuffing the lead ball and finally the paper cartridge after it. Without pause, he pulled out the ramrod slung beneath the barrel from the four brass pipes that held it in place and tamped down the wadding and bullet, all the while scanning the forest. He replaced the ramrod and brought the musket up to his hip, imagining the bristling line of soldiers to his left and right and drawing comfort from their stoic silence.

He nudged the cock all the way back, the chunk of flint held in its steel jaws glinting with purpose. He stood like that for several seconds, his hands growing slick on the wooden portions of the gun. All too quickly the nostalgia of the past bled away, leaving him alone again in a strange land very far from home.

Another sound came from somewhere to his left and Konowa moved toward it, allowing his senses to guide his feet as he kept his eyes searching the shadows ahead. The stillness of the forest hung like a veil from the branches, and the longer he walked the harder it seemed to push forward. He had decided he would only walk another fifty yards when he stepped into a clearing, and what had once been an exceptionally bad day became a waking nightmare.

FOUR

Not more than thirty yards away across the clearing crouched four rakkes around a fallen tree.

Four seven-foot-tall, boulder-shouldered, black, scraggly haired rakkes all staring at Konowa with milky eyes deep-set in scarred, leathery faces.

But rakkes were extinct.

What Konowa was seeing was impossible, yet he knew they were rakkes. He'd seen the drawings on stretched hides handed down from generation to generation, heard the ancient tales, even held a skull of one of the creatures in his hands. They had lived high in the mountain, coming down like nightfall to ravage the land below. The elves of the Long Watch had hunted them down and destroyed them. Centuries ago, and an ocean away.

Yet all of that meant nothing now. Four rakkes were only thirty yards away from him. They stood up as one, teetering slightly in this new bipedal stance, like drunks one round away from falling. Long curving claws slid out from pawlike hands that hung down by their knees.

The largest of them opened its mouth to reveal long, yellow fangs glistening with saliva. It screamed a high, mewling cry and the other three responded in kind, shaking the forest floor.

It was a sound as cold and black as the depths of time it should have been lost in.

"Cawwnnnawahhhh..."

Konowa's chest heaved, his breath rushing out as forcefully as if he'd been hit with a cannonball.

The largest of the four rakkes had clearly said his name. The creature's mouth contorted with the effort as it struggled to pronounce it, its tongue more used to moving around lacerated flesh than words.

"Cawwnnnawahhhh..."

He should have run away. It was the sensible thing to do.

Konowa fired his musket, then ran straight at the rakkes, screaming for all he was worth.

There was a loud crack, followed by a huge billowing cloud of acrid-smelling smoke flecked with sparks as the musket bucked in his hands. The musket ball passing through the chest of the rakke saying his name with a wet thwack, blowing out chunks of eerily white spine through the now gaping hole in its back.

Running hard, Konowa grabbed the musket by its warm muzzle and swung the weapon in a smooth arc at a second rakke's head. The musket struck flesh and bone, jarring Konowa's arms and shoulders and cutting off his yell as he bit his tongue. The closest rakke went down whimpering, its

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