

## Chapter 1

### One

There were two of him now, and neither one knew which was sane.

He stood atop the ridgeline running the length of the island and waited for the sun to drown. The ocean darkened. Shadows bled up the windward slope toward him. Bodies pierced by the trunks of obsidian trees became shrouded in the gloom. The smell of putrefying flesh fled as the heat of the day leached from the air. It was as if nothing had happened here. No horrors to relive, no nightmares to endure.

He might have believed that if not for the screams in his head. They echoed in the space between what he was, and what he was becoming.

Here, now, he stood in a world where the sun was setting and a cool ocean breeze was worrying the saw grass behind the dunes of the beach. Only the unhurried slide of waves over sand and the distant shouts and forced laughter of men from the shore party filled the air.

But he also stood here, now, where the screams of the dead still rasped from blood-red throats. Only yesterday the trees of the Shadow Monarch had flourished in this place, feeding on all they found as Her forest continued to expand across the known world.

Frost fire burned to life in his hands. He did nothing as it arced to the steel and wood of his musket, setting it afire in cold, black flame. He brought a hand close to his face, mesmerized. This was power and curse. The union of the Iron Elves' blood oath with Her magic.

The flames climbed higher and he staggered. There was a price for this. The gulf between his polar selves widened each time he called upon this newfound power. In his mind the outstretched limbs of the Shadow Monarch's forest inched a little closer. He knew it had to stop.

The last rays of the sun vanished into the sea. Dark forms rose from the lengthening shadows, surrounding him.

Dead hands reached out. He recognized the fallen and they did not frighten him:

One-eyed Meri, killed by dog spiders.

Alik and Buuko, struck down by rakkes and the Shadow Monarch's dark elves.

Regimental Sergeant Major Lorian, sitting tall on the horse Zwindarra, both felled in the battle at Luuguth Jor.

And so many othersâ€¦....â€¦....â€¦....

"Join us."

He eased the hammer back on his musket. A charge and ball already rested inside. He turned the musket so that the muzzle rested firmly over his heart.

Frost fire danced along the metal in anticipation.

It would take but one squeeze of the trigger, but what would he end, and what would begin?

"Join us."

He wanted to believe that all the pain, the fear, the terrifying rage, the nightmares that stalked his sleepâ€¦...â€¦...â€¦...â€¦...all would sink into a cold abyss. The shades of those that had gone before beckoned him, but their voices trembled with a pain he could only guess at. Could it be worse than what he lived with now?

One final act on his part and he would find out.

His finger tightened on the trigger.

"There you are!" Sergeant Yimt Arkhorn said, trudging up the slope. The dwarf's voice boomed like a cannon in the cooling night air. "IÂwoudn't a thought it possible to lose someone on this wee pebble of an island, but you just about managed it. You don't want to be hanging around this sad lot," he said, casting a hand toward the blackened husks of trees and the dead. If the dwarf saw the shadows, he said nothing.

Private Alwyn Renwar lowered his musket as the frost surged briefly before guttering out. He slowly turned to face the dwarf.

"Five islands in a row," Yimt said, huffing to a stop beside him on top of the ridge. He hoisted his shatterbow up to his shoulder, hooking one of the curved arms over it so that the double-barreled weapon hung down across his broad back. He reached to his side and grabbed his wooden canteen, first offering it to Alwyn, who shook his head.

"Suit yourself, but it helps your eyeballs," he said, referring to Alwyn's need for spectacles. Yimt upended the canteen and gulped several mouthfuls of a liquid most certainly not water as the pungent vapors drifted into the night air. Wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve, Yimt deftly stuffed a wad of crude, the rock spice the dwarf was forever chewing, between his cheek and metal-Âolored teeth.

"Five islands of nothing but black misery. I understand the need to weed these foul trees before they really take root, but why's it always us? I'll tell you this, Ally, if his arseness the Prince orders us to one more dust speck in the middle of the ocean, I might just risk the noose and kick the bugger right where his top and bottom halves meet. And with a running start."

A smile, Alwyn thought. I know I should smile.

Alwyn took a deep breath and let it out, forcing his shoulders to relax and doing his best to reassure. "I can see you're wasting no time in trying to lose those sergeant's stripes," he said.

Yimt patted his arm and traced a finger around the recently sewn-on stripes on his uniform. "These aren't what make a dwarf, Ally, though I got to admit I'm feeling a bit more protective of them this time round. Someone's got to keep their head."

"You're saying Major Swift Dragon isn't?"

Yimt rolled his eyes. "The major's spittin' musket balls. The Prince is a hairsbreadth from his last breath if he keeps sending us to these cursed islands instead of straight on to the desert wastes of the Hasshugeb Expanse. Now just between you and me, I'm starting to wonder a bit about the major. He's gettin' a bit frantic to find the first Iron Elves. 'Course, I can see his point. Be nice to have some reinforcements with all this going on," he said, again waving a hand around them. "I swear by the dew of a freshly laundered nun the major's going to do the Prince harm."

"Would that be so terrible?" Alwyn said, but the wind picked up just then and Yimt kept talking as if he hadn't heard.

"Our major is a kettle on full fire with half an ounce of water inside. We visit another island and the line of succession to the throne will be shorter by one." Yimt pointed a hand out to sea. "Not that it'll matter a cauldron of newts if this Shadow Monarch and Stars business keeps up. Like there ain't enough pain and suffering in the world already without someone wanting to take the whole bloody thing over and make it worse. Where's the sense in that?"

Alwyn answered before he could stop himself. "Maybe She doesn't see it that way. Maybe She's in pain none of us can understand, and this is Her way of trying to deal with it. People don't think straight when they are hurting. For Her, the Red Star offered a chance to change things." He didn't add that the Red Star also offered a chance for the blood oath the Iron Elves had taken to be broken, a chance that was lost at Luuguth Jor.

Yimt spat out a stream of crute, which sizzled in the sand. "Odd way of looking at it, Ally, but even if that's true -- and I don't buy it -- then all the more reason to find the first Iron Elves, get a mess of axes, and go pay a visit to Her little mountain. More Stars are bound to come tumbling down and She's gonna keep trying to get her hands on every one until She's stopped. She's already brought back rakkes, heaven knows what else She'll find."

Alwyn feared and hated the rakkes. They were massive, hideous creatures with fangs and claws and milky white eyes, but what truly made them horrific was that they were brought back from extinction with only killing as their

purpose. That the Shadow Monarch might bring back creatures worse than that added a whole new layer to his nightmares.

"But what of the oath we took?" Alwyn asked. "Her magic wove its way into it. We have power unlike anything else. I can do things, Yimt, that I don't want to be able to do. We weren't meant to have this kind of power. And She's behind it. Can't you feel thingsâ€¦...â€¦...â€¦...â€¦...changing?" The Shadow Monarch was ever present in Alwyn's dreams, forever calling to him. He couldn't hold out forever, none of them could.

"Changing?" Yimt lifted up the hem of his caerna and scratched at his thigh while he pondered the question. "I tried warming a cup of arr the other day between my hands, you know, calling up a bit of the frost fire. All I managed to do was light my beard on fire, and the arr was colder than when I started."

"You're making fun of me," Alwyn said. Yimt should understand. He took the oath as well.

"Don't get your caerna in a twist," Yimt said, smiling at him. "I just don't think it's as bad as you make out. Sure, we might be doomed to eternal service in the afterlife, but if we're still serving then we can't exactly be after life, see? I'll tell you this, Ally, having already put in a few decades in Her Majesty's employâ€¦...â€¦...â€¦...â€¦...traipsing hither and yon about the Empireâ€¦...â€¦...â€¦...â€¦...visiting smelly little villages with nasty little people chucking all kinds of sticks and stones and spells at youâ€¦...â€¦...â€¦...â€¦...I have to say, it ain't that bad. Personally," Yimt said, changing his scratching to his beard, "I can see some up sides."

Alwyn looked out to sea and tried to find the view Yimt saw there.

"C'mon, Ally, we can chaw this over back at camp. Doesn't do a fellow any good to be out alone in a place like this. What were you doing up here anyway?"

Alwyn shook his head. "Nothing. I just came up here for a walk and to get some fresh air. Miss Tekoy says I need to keep in motion to get the stump used to the new leg." Just a month ago a black arrow crafted by a dark art and wielded by an even darker creature had pierced his thigh. In the effort to save his life, Alwyn lost more than his leg that night. "And Miss Red Owl says I need to keep active so that I don't dwell onâ€¦...â€¦...â€¦...â€¦...things. ÂShe's teaching me meditation."

Yimt cast an appraising eye at Alwyn's wooden leg. Both Visyna Tekoy and Chayii Red Owl had crafted it from a living tree, magically entwining several slender branches into an intricate and flexible design. Yimt stepped closer and looked up, locking eyes with him. "Aye, couple of witchy women there, they oughta know. Wise to heed them, Ally. They only want what's best for you."

"Yes, I suppose Âyou're right," Alwyn said, trying to believe it. Around him, the shades still waited. The shadow of Meri moved closer, his one eye like a dark

portal offering Alwyn a path far away from here, though Alwyn knew Yimt couldn't understand.

"I'm always right," Yimt said, thumping his chest. "In fact, if I was a betting man, I'd say the two of them joined us on our little sailing adventure as much for you as for the major. I figured they'd stay back in Elfkyna with the rest of those Long Watch elves to look over the tree-star thing in Luuguth Jor, but I think you've become a bit of a project."

"A project?"

Yimt nodded. "Aye. See, women, no matter their age or race or even how witchy they are, like to work on projects, and by projects I mean men. The more screwed up or in need of repair the man is, the happier womenfolk are. And, Ally, between you and the major, I'd say those ladies have got their hands full for a long time to come."

"You always know just what to say," Alwyn said, not sure if he should be touched or offended by the idea. Where Yimt was concerned it was always a close-run thing.

Shrugging, Alwyn began to turn around to head back down the slope. Yimt reached out and grabbed him by the elbow, stopping him. He gently took the musket from his hands and eased the hammer back into place then handed it back to Alwyn.

"A fellow wants to be careful with a loaded weapon, especially out here."

For a moment, there was only Yimt, his friend, on the ridgeline with Alwyn. He looked into the dwarf's eyes and saw the concern.

"I'll try to remember that," Alwyn said.

Yimt beamed, flashing his metal-colored teeth. "Not to worry, Ally, not to worry. As long as Sergeant Arkhorn's around, you'll have me to remember it for you. We've got some serious glory and gallantry ahead of us and I sure as hell ain't about to face it alone. A fellow can only wear so many medals afore folks start to think he's a bit full of himself, y'know? Now get a move on. I got a turtle roasting on the fireâ€¦...â€¦...â€¦...â€¦...at least I think it's a turtle, and you want to eat it while it's still warm."

Alwyn smiled this time, a real smile. "Then get down there and save me a piece. I never miss a chance to try some of your cooking. I try, but unfortunately I never miss."

Yimt raised one bushy eyebrow and wagged a thick finger at him. "Cheeky bugger," he said, turning and heading down the slope. "I'll save you some of the brains; you can never have too many."

Alwyn watched him for a while until the shadows closed in again. Meri came to stand beside him.

"Join us, Alwyn." The others joined in, each urging him on. "Join us."

Alwyn gripped his musket, but this time no frost fire danced along it. He started to limp down toward the campfire, the pain in his stump reminding him with each step of what he had already lost, but also of what still remained. The shadows on the ridgeline did not follow, but kept their hands outstretched.

"Not yet," Alwyn said back to them, "not yet."

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