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—R. A. Salvatore

A DARKNESS

BOOK ONE OF THE IRON ELVES

FORGED IN FIRE



CHRIS
EVANS



BOOK ONE OF THE IRON ELVES

Chris Evans



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**A
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To my parents, Robert and Barbara, for believing.

It means everything.

We're little black sheep who've gone astray,

Baa—aa—aa!

Gentlemen-rankers out on the spree,

Damned from here to Eternity,

God ha'mercy on such as we,

Baa! Yab! Bab!

~JOSEPH RUDYARD KIPLING, "GENTLEMEN RANKERS"





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 fly 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, if 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 in 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 as 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 instincts—elf 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 more 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 turn and look 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. It 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. They 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.

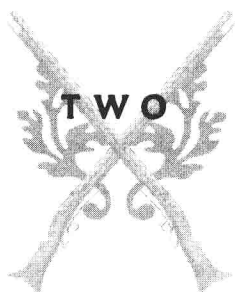
Enough. He stuffed the acorn back in his mouth and ran for his life.

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.



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 FOOT—CALAHRIAN 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 as 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 sergeants 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-iceroy?" 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 of 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 dung-crusting tail. Cinnamon, raw meats, curdling milk, mustard, cardamom, and the bitterly sharp tungam 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 a hint of humanity. "Really? Bring me that news parchment," he said, pointing to a tattered scroll of 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 reporter 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.