

Chains of Vengeance

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Edition 1

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Prologue

It was a windy evening in the Aegis Forest. The eastern reaches of the elven forest had been his home for many years, but this particular copper-skinned elf was feeling overly concerned. The animals were acting strange on this evening. The quiet scurrying of their tracks seemed odd as they attempted to leave the scene; to silently slip on the eve of the stormy excitement to come. The heavy winds rustled the higher branches of the trees, allowing many leaves to sail on the winds toward the forest's floor. The short copper-skinned elf smiled as a leaf fell helplessly into his dark hair. For a moment all was serene, all was as it should be. The rushing wind, the wetness of the air, it was just a hint of the natural beauty of the rainfall to come and the continuation of the endless cycle of the world around him. The millennia his people have spent amongst the trees seemed both eternal and instantaneous as his mind slipped away from the moment into the eternal stream and back again.

The elf climbed off his horse and walked towards the nearest tree and peered deeply into the woods, sensing something unseen. He knew he should not linger, for he was on an important mission. However, the driving desire to find the source of the unnatural feeling beckoned him. He then dropped his smile with his jaw and peered at two glowing red points less than a few strides from his position, hidden amongst the cloaking branches. The red orbs in the distance narrowed.

The elf gasped in surprise and rushed back to his horse. With a quick leap he was once again on the back of the quick steed. He patted the beast's flank and they took off in a great sprint down the old forest road. The horse's hooves creating a rhythmic patter upon the packed earth.

The elf looked behind him as fear and trepidation overtook his mind. The road was clear behind him, yet it did not ease him. He begged the chestnut horse onward into greater speed, hoping to escape the creature he had seen in the woods. The road ahead was also clear and the elf prayed they would escape.

Then it came. Out of the underbrush to the side of the road leapt a giant cat-like beast. It slammed into the rider's horse knocking both to the ground with a painful numbing force into the hard earth. The elf felt many bones in his body shatter from the impact and he cried out in pain, desperately trying to crawl away from his injured horse. His horse was now thrashing in pain as the strange creature slashed and bit into the horse's supple flesh. Then the horse was silent.

The elf cried vainly as he crawled down the road, his body aching with each effort. He was then violently pulled back, forced to face upward as two red eyes peered at him hungrily from above. Then he felt horrible pain as the beast tore into his intestines with razor-sharp fangs. With no more than a gargled gasp, the elf's eyes stared forever at the cloudy, windswept sky.

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Many of the wooden hovels built into the branches of the massive trees swayed in the wind this night. The occupants closed their windows and barred doors in hopes of keeping the

heavy winds from reaching their warm homes. The elves of the village scurried about, running across the many stretched bridges and branches that connected the tree-top village. Not a light-hearted face could be spotted among the usually cheerful elves as only a sense of dread filled the air. Nearly fifty archers had found positions among the trees, bows stretched in hand patiently, determinedly. All eyes faced to the northeast, towards the source of that dread. It had only been an hour since a few scouts had returned, fast on their feet, calling the warning that dark elves were on the march.

The dark elves, or shadmar, were once kin to the light-skinned elves of the world of Enelis. Once they joined in the elven revelry among the trees; singing praises to the stars and the moon in a celebration of life; but that was many ages ago. Now they were changed. Many millennia have passed since the shadmar tribe was banished to the deep underground, far below the world of the surface. Only the occasional raid to the lands above would bring their breed of darkness to the surface dwellers. It seemed that the village of Escailar was their target tonight.

Little more than a semi-permanent way-station for the mostly nomadic wood elves of the eastern reaches of the Aegis Forest, Escailar had been the home of elves for quite some time. Permanent residents were mostly hunters and forest-gatherers who gathered the riches of the forest. Others were herbalists and alchemists that traded their potions and elixirs to passing travelers in need. There were a few questionable sorts living in the village as well, especially those that traded with the men to the east of the forest in the land of Eshlien. There were also a few bounty hunters, always willing to kill a few of the unwanted in the lands of men; the poor who sought refuge and perhaps redemption amongst the forest boughs. They rarely received such luxury.

Another less-than-reputable character was the mystic who lived on the edge of the small village. Magic was a common thing for the elves of the forest. It was a subtle, quiet thing that breathed life and spirit into the trees and mystic places of the world. Practiced druids could beckon a tree to grow into the shape of a living home over the course of many years. This was in fact common practice for the fey folk to dwell in such homes.

Alchemists were common enough as well; finding the secret combinations of mystic herbs to aid in sleep or in the healing of a wound. They knew just the right combination of herbs and roots to elicit near-magical effects.

Wizards, however, practiced something else; something significantly less subtle. The tales tell of wizards who could command the minds of those around them or blast a tree to the ground with a flaming inferno. It probably is this latter practice that had given them such a bad reputation among the elves of Escailar. Only one such wizard lived in this village, though no one could claim to have seen him perform any real magic. He was quiet and kept to himself; only occasionally meeting at the community hall for wine and spirits among the evening stars. While most of the elves in Escailar were thunmar, or wood elves, having copper-toned skin and dark hair the color of tree bark, Thesomber Ambreaia was a silver elf; having pale skin with a tinge of a silvery moon and hair that resembled sparkling platinum. His deep blue eyes sparkled with hints of gold, always seeming to be staring off in contemplation.

He was in the midst of that deep contemplation, peering over the words of an ancient tome, unconsciously stroking his smooth chin.

A loud knock banged outside the wall near his door. “Thes, you are needed at the front lines!” a firm voice shouted behind the tangle of leaves that served as a door to the modest hovel.

A patient, humorous voice answered, “Then, if my services are required to save my kinsfolk, I shall be there before the village is asunder. But for now I must study. I am formulating a plan to allocate my resources.”

“Be quick, Master Ambreaia, we fear the shadmar have more numbers than our scouts have guessed,” the firm voice said in resolution as the nimble figure leaped his way through the trees.

“And be quick I shall. . .the village must be protected,” muttered the tall elf to himself as he slowly closed his tome in consideration of the actions he must soon take. He eyed the droplets of the rain that began to drip down outside his window, knowing the moments to come would not be easy.

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The battle raged on as copper-skinned elves danced in swordplay with their dark brethren. Poisoned darts flew into the melee from the dark reaches of the forest, and in turn many arrows sailed across the air from the treetops that formed the village of Escailar. The hopes and dreams of the copper-skinned elves sang out as they fought for their homeland from the shadmar that sought to devour it. The dark elves seemed to have numbers well beyond those of the village. The few aged elves who had lived through a shadmar raid before knew this was the biggest band seen in centuries.

The ferocious dark-skinned warriors were relentless fighters. They reveled in the chaos of battle and the splattering of blood at their feet. The copper-skinned elves were also quite determined. Though the spilling of blood was not in their nature, they showed no mercy to their evil brethren.

Within a moment, Thes found himself standing behind the melee watching the carnage below him as the newest ranks of wood elves charged in, swords swinging mechanically, meeting the charge of the chaotic shadmar. Seeing the approach of another band that sought to flank the wood elves, Thes closed his eyes and began murmuring the incantations of the powerful spell he had been studying.

His lips pursed slowly, in much the same way a person blows upon a sizzling cup of tea. A rhythmic high-pitched hum escaped the wizard's lips slowly gaining momentum, exponentially increasing its volume. Then the song abruptly stopped and the silver elf's eyes shot open. Then a freezing wind engulfed the dark elves and quickly shaped the now pouring rain into a hail of jagged ice crystals. The shards of sharp ice fell down upon the shadmar band like a hail of deadly arrows. Many shadmar screamed in pain as the shards tore through their ranks. Many such warriors were impaled by the freezing spears, piercing their skulls, shoulders, and sword arms, soon rendering over half the band useless in mere moments.

The slender elf stood tall with a determined gaze as the shadmar began to break ranks and the few remaining warriors fled towards the east. At that moment he seemed imposing to the fleeing shadmar, standing on the village balcony, high in the trees; his leather cloak waved behind him in the heavy winds. His dark green robes with bright yellow trim were kept untied,

which served more as an inner coat than true academic garb. A lightweight green-tinted shirt and leather trousers finished the ensemble with a pair of heavy leather boots. A bright leather satchel hung around his shoulder, bearing a few tomes. A dark scabbard was tied to his belt. The wizard appeared more like a disheveled traveler than a mage of any reputation. The shadmar, however, were unaware that Thes struggled to maintain his imposing posture. His mind burned in pain from the recent spell. A spell he knew might be more than he could handle. After a few moments, Thes was able to regain himself and he looked down closely at the ground below him.

The elf's eyes narrowed as another band rushed in with more ferocity than the previous group, felling many copper-skinned warriors as they flanked the wood elves that were caught in the melee between the two dark elf squads. Rage built into the young elven wizard as he saw his kin slaughtered in the carnage.

His hands fell into the intricate pattern of another spell. The silver elf pulled a small shard of iron from his satchel and he gently rubbed it across his chest before returning it to his bag. Thes uttered an archaic phrase, and wisps of blue sparks fell about his body into the shape of a metallic breastplate, but soon dissipated. Thes then leaped down the tree, rushing down massive branches that curved towards the ground below. He quickly, yet carefully, leaped from branch to branch, always keeping his stern visage on the scattered dark elves below. He drew his long slightly-curved blade and rushed in at the shadmar, shouting an elven war-cry that sounded more like a fierce song.

Thes jumped from the lowest branch into the treacherous battle. His blade met the face of an unwary warrior. Blood sprayed from the dark elf's face as the wizard's steel sliced down his neck. With two quick crisscrossing slashes, two more shadmar joined the first. After downing the few unprepared warriors, Thes noticed three more charging towards him from the north with sinister glares of anger painted on their faces.

Thes rapidly struck a nearby rock with his sword producing many sparks against the blade. Calling upon his mystical powers, Thes began manipulating that static energy, amplifying and focusing those sparks. Two fist-sized missiles of electric energy soon raced towards his target with unerring accuracy. The bursts exploded on the shadmar's skin, but the warrior only clenched his teeth and charged onward.

The shadmar warriors met the wizard brandishing their dark cruelly-edged swords and using their bucklers defensively. Thes parried an attack from the first and narrowly dodged a blow from the second, but the third warrior struck home. The sword scratched harmlessly off Thes's invisible magic armor bringing surprise to the shadmar's face. Three more attacks came in at the silver elf, again two were barely avoided, but the third had a clear shot at the elf's unguarded throat. But luck was with the silver elf at that moment, when an ally's arrow was suddenly protruding from the third shadmar's neck and his sword fell harmlessly across Thes's shoulder. Thes silently nodded his thanks to the hidden form on the village balcony, as he threw an attack from outside in a wide arc. The shadmar easily blocked the blow with his buckler. Another arrow struck the second shadmar dropping him to the floor. Thes suddenly felt more at ease with only a single opponent to face him, setting his feet preparing a defensive posture.

The shadmar rushed in, sword and shield before him. Thes evaded the bull rush with a quick strafe to the right. An arcing sword went in at Thes as the shadmar turned on her prey,

but Thes anticipated the strike and parried it with the middle of his blade. With a sneer, the shadmar kicked the silver elf with full force in the lower chest, only to squirm a second as her foot made contact with something unseen. Thes gasped for a second as the blow knocked him back vulnerably. Then a few arrows slammed into the shadmar felling her before any action could be taken. Thes waved another thanks to his companions in the trees above and ran off to find more fights in the arduous battle.

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The battle raged for hours, neither group seemed to be doing better than the other. Then a group of archers arrived from the village of Diiera, to the north. Within moments of the archers' arrival, morale had soared for the copper-skinned tree-dwellers and the wood elves soon had the upper hand. After another hour of chaotic battle, the shadmar were sorely outnumbered. It seemed that the wood elves would defend their homeland successfully.

It was then that Thes, exhausted and weary, his cloak and robes covered in dirt and dried blood, decided to begin the hunt for fleeing dark elf warriors to prevent them from returning to the mountains and bring word to others about the location of his home village. The action would bring the silver elf mixed feelings, for he did not like to slay those that did not offer any immediate danger, but shadmar that were allowed to flee would surely invite more to return, and like all elves, their life-spans were many centuries long.

After a few hours of chase, Thes had taken out quite a few of the fleeing shadmar. Now it was harder to find the dark-skinned warriors and Thes was quite far to the east of the village. Thes had only one more in his sight as the sun was beginning to peak over the horizon. The fatigued dark elf warrior sat upon a log among the trees catching his breath. He had fled quicker than the others as Thes dispatched his comrades right before his eyes. Little did that shadmar realize was that same elf had a bow cocked with an arrow aimed for his unwary head. Vengeance was but a gesture away.

Thes hesitated to fire, finding it hard to kill any foe unaware. But then again, these were dark elves. All the tales of his youth preached of their evil and treachery. He released his hold and the silver elf's head quickly veered to the side in disgust as the arrow shaft struck home in the shadmar's skull. Dark blood poured from the wound as the body hunched over never to look up again. Thes never saw him hit the ground. It was a long walk back towards the village and he knew he would be needed in the repairs that would be required in the aftermath of the battle. A shadmar raid had not occurred in this area in over a century, so it seemed odd that after all these years the vile dark-skinned elves would attack, especially such a small village with so few resources to gain.

Was it truly their wicked ideology that brought them so far from their home? the elf thought. The situation was perplexing to him. He could not fathom the motivations of a dark elf warrior to climb through the deep tunnels of the earth to the surface world, only to slay and pillage a few poor villages. He realized he did not know much about the shadmar's culture. Their relative absence from the surface world made them quite a mystery and perceived nightmare to those living on the surface. Although Thes had heard tales of the dark elves and knew the history that drove them underground, he did not truly understand their motives or their culture, and as a scholar, that ignorance worried the silver elf.

He sighed as he watched the slow wind rustle the dark canopies that glistened from the nightly rain in the pale dawn light.

Things seem to change too fast, he thought. It was only two days before that all was serene and quiet. The occasional traveler would bring news from the great elven cities or from the human villages to the east, but these things seemed so distant to the wizard. He was comfortably ignorant of the wide world around him for perhaps the first time in his life. Blissfully reading ancient texts by day and singing softly to the stars at night. But now, things have changed. The life he knew before had faded instantaneously. Though he knew the village would survive, he also knew things would never be the same again.

He sighed again, trying to regain the focus of his weary mind. He knew the walk would be long, so the wizard began to shuffle his weary feet in the proper direction still contemplating the changes to his life. After many minutes of walking, Thes decided to conjure an alternative now that his mind had recovered from the previous spellcraft. Whistling quietly into the wind, he stuck a small feather into his platinum hair. The wind began to blow stronger, but ever so gently. The elf's feet soon floated upward into the air, high above the trees. He gestured west and soared with a gentle speed towards his home village.

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When Thes finally reached the outskirts of the village, expecting to see others preparing the dead and giving life back to the trees, instead he saw only smoldering trees roaring in the flames before him. The elf's eyes grew wide and his breath did not come. An inferno roared as the tree-top village crumbled and burned to ashes. Not a single living creature was in sight of the wreckage and the flames were spreading from tree to tree. The wizard staggered back trying to understand how the dark elves could have won the battle. How those dark, vile monsters could have conquered the humble elves of Escailar. The battle seemed a sure victory when he had left to chase after the fleeing shadmar.

The guilt of his absence grew into a lump in the elf's throat. Tears glistened as they slid gently down the elven cheek. Hatred began to blaze in Thes's blood. It was a pure burning desire for retribution unlike that of which he had ever known. Minutes went by as the silver-skinned wizard stared at fires that mirrored the feelings in his heart. Then, unexpectedly to even Thes, the elf screamed to the rising sun. He screamed all the pain and guilt and anguish he felt until his throat was sore and his voice was raw. He dropped to his knees as tears streamed down his face, a fountain of guilt and remembrance for the village that had been his home.

"Over here!" a rough shadmar voice yelled to his companions upon seeing the wizard. The three dark elf warriors rushed in at the silver elf brandishing their swords, all eager for one last taste of bloodshed. Thes stared at the warriors for what seemed like an eternity, wishing to join in the death they offered; wishing to end his treacherous guilt. But the fires in his heart would not let him, they would not let him die meaninglessly when he had the strength for revenge.

The rage focused within the wizard, focused into his mind. The mage channeled that energy, barely containing the power of that anger. Lightning exploded from the wizard's fingertips uncontrollably, engulfing the dark elves in a torrent of electrical energies. The

shadmar screamed in pain as their muscles burned and scorched from the inside. Thes stepped over the three corpses after the energies dissipated, stepping determinedly towards the fires of the village.

A large band of shadmar came up the nearby hill charging towards the elven wizard. He already felt his mind weakening from the exertion of his blast. He drew his sword, eyeing the coming dark elves with nothing but hatred in his eyes. Soon the wizard began to realize the futility of that action, deciding it better to return another day, prepared and rested. With a single gesture, Thes continued his flight and soared straight upwards through the branches, using his sword to guide the way above. Glistening red eyes, with a hint of an amber glow, followed the elf's path, a mark of trepidation beginning to take form in the menacing orbs.

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