

Chains of Vengeance

by E.J. Cain

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Edition 1

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(2) Unlikely Friends

The lonely elf trudged out of the woods. It had been a few days since the fires of Escailar. Thes had flown far eastward, away from that tragedy. Eventually his mind had burned with exhaustion and he was forced to take to the ground. He felt tortured, reliving those feelings of guilt and dread as he mindlessly walked. The winds blew from the northwest into the gap between the mountains, heading towards the valleys of Eshlien. For a moment, the cool winds brought his mind into the present as his lungs took in the crisp air. Far in the distance small wisps of smoke blew almost horizontally across the hills from the many small smokestacks that rose from the small village ahead.

Beyond the village would be the green rolling hills and forests of Eshlien. There dwelt the half-elves with their numerous trade empires along the Moon Lake. Beyond Eshlien lay many feudal kingdoms of men. They were the last remnants of the fallen Nomen Empire. The once powerful empire, with its just democracy and virtuous draconic deities, had claimed all the lands along the eastern coast, from the Noradrie lands in the cold north, to the Toldan lands of the south. It had now become nothing more than scattered kingdoms, all fighting to reclaim the old empire's glory. There was one exception to the madness. The city of Goldwall, the former seat of the old empire. Goldwall maintained a democratic leadership and a fair government, however, the old city could do little more than protect its own borders as it served as a neutral trading hub for the warring kingdoms.

Thes's eyes looked to the northeast where he saw the shadow of the Eriasha Peaks in the distance. Beyond the mountains was the land of the dwarves, an alpine land of tall peaks and beautiful valleys. The Kingdom of Kalavar could be found there in the mineral-rich mountains. The dwarven kingdom was nearly as old as the elven culture of the Aegis Forest and the dwarves that dwelt there were a proud and talented people. Dwarves were a stout folk, no taller than four or five feet high with long braided hair. Their men usually had equally elaborate braids in their long beards. Thes had little personal experience with the dwarves, for long ago many wars were fought between the elves and dwarves. The two races were conflicted, lacking an understanding of one another's culture and values. Initially the war came about by the dwarves' deforestation of the forest as they expanded their domain. The philosophical differences between the races only made it worse. For two-hundred years the empires fought. Eventually a treaty was signed, putting an end to the war, but both races still carried a great deal of bitterness.

Thes had lived most his life in the trees of the forest. Elves were a magical race, believed to be one of the first sentient beings to appear after the dragons. Over the millennia, the race of elves split into at least five distinct tribes. It is said in the ancient folklore that the bodies of the heavens blessed each of the ancient tribes.

The sun blessed the sulmar, the People of the Sun, or gold elves to the menfolk. They had tanned skin tinged with gold, with hair that ranged from shimmering black to radiant platinum. They had built many fabled cities of marble and crystal along the lakes found deep in the Aegis Forest. Though few of these cities remained, the great city of Elienspar, the City of Brilliant Light, still stood as a bastion for elfkind. Thes had visited the place many times, but

found the people there to be generally haughty and pretentious. He preferred the quiet humility of the forests.

The thunmar, People of the Twilight, or wood elves, were the elves of the deep forests. They had copper-toned skin with hair that ranged from the color of bark to greenish tints. They were masters of the forests, expert hunters and woodsmen. Their druids, who still clung to the old spiritual beliefs, created villages among the trees, willing the massive trunks to grow into the shapes of homes for the elves. It was among these wood elves Thes felt most at home. He enjoyed the simplicity and community in their lives.

Thes shook his head to keep thoughts of his former home away. He cleared his mind and looked onward at the human village that still lay miles ahead. He took another deep breath before he let his mind wander again.

He was of the ethmar, the People of the Moon, or the silver elves to the men. His people were master tradesmen, diplomats, and travelers of the rivers. They tended to be the most common elf seen outside of the Aegis Forest. They had pale skin with a slight tinge of blue or silver. Hair colors ranged through all human varieties, though some had gold or platinum hair. Thes was not a typical ethmar, for he practiced the scholarship and magic of the sulmar, but preferred to dwell deep in the forests with the thunmar.

There once was the stelmar, or People of the Stars. They had a great empire that reached throughout the eastern coasts before the coming of men. However, that empire was destroyed by raging dragons in the early days of the world, leaving no trace of the star elves except for broken ruins scattered throughout the eastern regions.

Last was the shadmar, or People of the Starless Night, the dark elves. Aptly named, for they were fond of caves and dark hidden corners of the forests. They had dark, ebony skin with hair that ranged from blonde to platinum white. Long ago, the ancient kingdom of the shadmar was the strongest of the old kingdoms. They once ruled over the valleys in the shadow of the mountains of the very region where Escailar once stood. The dark elves desired more, however, and sought to rule over all four of the elven crowns. It was just as the Treaty of Arrow and Axe was signed, which ended the wars with the dwarves. The elven Emperor and the dwarven High Magistrate were assassinated by a conspiracy of the shadmar tribes and one of the dwarven clans, as both groups opposed the treaty. This resulted in an internal war between the shadmar and the other three elven kingdoms. In the end, the shadmar were banished to the deep underground for their treachery. The might of the elven kingdoms never recovered and the elven people continued to dwindle over the many centuries since.

Thes continued his steps, eager to rest in the village. Thes's eyes may have had the village in view, but his mind was elsewhere. The burning fires of his home continued to ignite before him. Evil shadmar faces snickered and snarled at him from every angle, challenging the wizard to face them. The clash of the battle still rang in the silver elf's ears, as it had for the three days since the elf wandered eastward, unwittingly heading straight out of the great reaches of the Aegis Forest. The wizard suddenly felt lonely and isolated, a lost soul drifting helplessly in a sea of emptiness. He fought firmly against the tide of these feelings and shook his head hard to regain his focus on the current moment and his current surroundings. He vowed that he would seek revenge when the time came, for now, he must find rest.

Thes now walked in open fields and rolling hills with scattered woodlands; occasionally sighting a tower or crumbling ruin from some lost kingdom. This area was a lawless land with

many bandits and brigands, orcs and goblins, and even the occasional giant or dragon to threaten the common folk who dared to make their life here without the safety of a kingdom's soldiery. These were strong and brave folk, used to relying on grit and determination to protect their homes. As a consequence, the townspeople rarely trusted strangers and often would chase out any perceived threat with pitchforks and torches.

Thes drew his cloak tighter around his shoulders. With a lonely sigh, he pulled in some courage and eyed the human village from the distance. It had been awhile since he had spoken the language of men, and he mumbled a few phrases to remind himself. The rolling words of the old Nomen tongue came easily to the elf. He tightened his cloak again and trudged forward; it had been too long, he decided, since he had spoken with another soul.

Nearing the village, the elf noticed the scattered farms surrounding the small gathering of fifty or so squat buildings that defined the village of Allsvale. The buildings were mostly built of wood with sod to fill in the gaps; thatch and twine covered most of the roofs. Only two of the buildings were made of stone, a small chapel on the edge of town and a large two-story building in the center, presumably the inn.

Thes walked into the village, the hood of his cloak taken down as a sign of openness. A few townsfolk glared as the elf nimbly walked past their gardens and into the village proper. The bustle of the common folk surrounded the elf: men and women rushing and shouting at each other, pushing wheelbarrows and pulling carts. Children squealed as they chased each other in the crisp air of the late morning. The wizard tried to remain innocuous as he shuffled his way through the crowd, gaining only the occasional stare from the humans around him. The children were the most excited, for most had associated elves with the sounds of music and song.

Though Thes was glad to have happy, smiling faces around him again, he tried his best to avoid the curious children, as he was too tired to fully commune with anyone just yet. The wizard scrambled past a group of youngsters begging for an elvish song, but Thes only could smile meekly and shake his head as he finally stepped into the inn.

The Allsvale Inn was a simple establishment barely making a coin from the few travelers that came through from the Aegis Forest into Eshlien proper. They served a simple cuisine featuring mostly roasted birds or venison with plenty of potatoes and yams. Their ale was thin and watery, and the wine tasted more like beets and yeast than most would find palatable, but for the farmers and game hunters of Allsvale, the inn offered an easy meal and a chance to vent about everyday chores to family and friends. The occasional outsider also provided a piece of news from beyond the fields; and exciting news like that wouldn't be missed.

The homely inn had a bellowing aura of smoke in the air as a few locals sat with long, curved pipes near the entrance, drowning their worries away in a mug of cheap beer. A few travelers sat at the bar, but otherwise the place was quiet and near empty. The tired silver elf hardly noticed anything as he found a table in the corner. His body relaxed as he sat upon the chair; a needed comfort for his weary bones. After a moment a young human lass with large blue eyes came towards the elf. Within a few minutes, the elf sat in remembrance hunched over a wooden cup filled with some pungent beet wine and a small bowl of porridge.

The memories of the battle still afire in his heart, he sunk his head low with a frown of discord. He felt it would be a long while still before a smile would once again stretch across his slender face. Taking the cue from the near silence, the barmaid left him in peace. The elf ate

and drank what he could. Lost in the memories of the onslaught, Thes didn't notice the brawny, bear-of-a-man sit down across from him.

"I recognize that turmoil," the big fellow said in his deep bellowing voice. "Seen the tragedies of war, ye have. Why don't ya tell ole' Morstar yer tale."

Thes, now suddenly aware of the stranger's arrival, pulled back from the man, annoyed that his thoughts had been disturbed.

Please leave me alone, he pleaded silently with his eyes as he grabbed his bags and stood, eyeing a new seat at the bar. He managed a grim look of annoyance in the direction of the man as he grabbed his wine and sat upon the wooden stool at the stained counter.

The man thought little of the elf's attempt to avoid him. He soon was sitting next to the elf at the bar, with a smile spread across his thick-bearded face. Thes, now feeling defeated for his chance at solitude, turned to face the man. As his gaze met the dark brown eyes hiding behind the bushy eyebrows, he was actually relieved that he had someone with whom he could confide.

"Please accept my apologies," the elf apologized, "the battle was a brutal one and my heart still bears the pain. I'd prefer to be alone."

"Aye, ye could do that, or ye could tell the tale and feel better fer sharing it," the man said cheerily. "By Rolk's beard! Ye can't let it tear down yer spirits. It'll slowly eat ye away. Believe me, I know."

At the mention of the dwarven deity of warfare, Thes's gaze slowly went to the bearded man's legs and realized they were short and dangling from the stool.

This is no man before me. I am conversing with a dwarf! Thes realized, and he became confused. He peered more closely at the stranger sitting beside him. He was dressed in thick leathers and padded cloths, the kind typically worn under heavy armor. A long, bushy dark beard hung down to the dwarf's thick leather belt. The charcoal-black beard was braided with two long braids to the sides of the central beard. The dwarf's hair was also braided in five long braids down his back. On his face he wore a curious smile beneath a large, rosy nose.

"Why does a dwarf make conversation with an elf so eagerly?" Thes asked curiously.

The calm dwarf reflected in thought for a second, and then replied, "Maybe you haven't noticed, but we are the only two in this bar not of the menfolk. Strangely enough, I felt more comfortable talking to ye than those others." He chuckled to himself and then added solemnly, "And ye have a tortured spirit, something of which I know all too well."

Thes was completely surprised at the reaction of the dwarf. *Surely, I have met the most contemplative dwarf known to walk the face of Enelis*, he thought.

"How odd!" the elf replied. "I always pictured dwarves more at home discussing metals and stones with men, rather than listening to what any of the fey-folk would have to say."

"Aye, tis true our races have had their problems, but no two stones are ever alike, I always say. Who am I to judge one stone over another, they all have their uses. But before we reach a long conversation regarding rocks and stones," the dwarf said with a grin, "tell me the tale of yer battle. You look like you've seen something horrible," his face now showing genuine concern.

The silver elf sat a moment in thought regarding the request. Then, mustering courage, he muttered the two words that brought clarity to the dwarf, "Dark elves."

A second or two passed before the elf continued, he slowly explained the details of the battle and the role he played in the course of the chaos. However, he left out anything about his use of magic, fearing any eavesdroppers that might cause a scene. He explained his feelings of guilt for not making his way to the village in time, for not dying alongside his friends when the enemies closed in. The dwarf remained quiet, occasionally nodding and grunting with each tragedy the elf explained, honest concern displayed clearly on his face.

"I have long sought an end to my restlessness and wanderlust," Thes continued, "I had searched deeply for a true home. Just when I felt that I had found it, 'twas swept away in but a day. So I walk only with my guilt and the fires in my heart, so that one day I can achieve my vengeance upon those who have wronged me." The elf's tone became grim and determined.

The dwarf snorted at that final declaration. He considered it for a while, and then slowly began to speak, choosing his words carefully, seemingly holding back emotions of his own. "Vengeance will not repair your heart, elf-friend, nor bring your allies back to life, only spread that pain like a plague." The dwarf's eyes became firm as he stared off to the side, biting back the emotions from his own tumultuous past.

Images of the dead elves flashed all in Thes' mind. Perhaps it was the great weariness that hung upon him, as he could almost hear the gleeful cries of the shadmar fill his ears in the roar of a battle. His face burned red as anger poured through him. Flames roared behind the wizard's eyes as they bore into the dwarf, though Morstar was not the target of the silver elf's wrath. The pained wizard only saw the faces of cruel dark elves before him. Morstar, however, only stared back with true concern.

The elf and dwarf stared off for what seemed like an eternity. Thes then suddenly snapped back into the present, his eyes finally blinking. Tense words dripped from the elven lips as fire still tinged in his eyes.

"I will avenge the villagers, and not a soul in Enelis will stop me." Thes turned from the dwarf, his face hot with ire. He ordered for a room from the barkeep, and stormed up the wooden stairs hefting his leather satchel over his shoulder. The dwarf just sat quietly at the bar, shaking his head.

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It was late in the evening. The burly dwarf was chomping down his third helping of venison, eagerly licking the grease off his fingers. He had barely moved from his seat at the bar from earlier in the day. His fourteenth mug of beer was down to its bottom and the dwarf was eagerly awaiting his fifteenth as the bartender filled his wooden mug with the foamy dark-amber liquid. The dwarf nodded his thanks as he grasped the mug and took a hefty gulp of the ale to wash down the bits of meat clogging his throat. Afterwards, the mug came down hard on the bar and the dwarf withheld a belch as he took in a lungful of air.

"That hit the spot," the dwarf muttered in his own language, the heavy consonants of the Dwarven tongue perplexing the bartender as Morstar grasped another piece of the thick, smoked deer meat with his stubby fingers.

A nimble figure sat next to the dwarf and ordered some wine. Thes took a few cautious sips of the sour-tasting drink, trying to gather his thoughts.

It had been a long day for the elf. He'd intended to get enough sleep to let his mind finally acquire the rest it needed, but the dwarf's words had left too strong an impression on the elf. Staring wearily at the ceiling of the dim room, the straw of the mattress poking hard into his back, Thes had contemplated the dwarf's words and his own feelings regarding the tragedy of Escailar. He came to terms with his guilt and, though he still wished to slaughter every dark elf on the face of Enelis, he knew it would be foolish to strike alone against the shadmar in their deep caverns. It was no life to live fighting solely for vengeance.

Thes sighed as he turned to the dwarf and spoke in the tongue of the human traders.

"I'm sorry about earlier, sir dwarf," the elf began apologetically. "Your words had true wisdom. My anger is not for you."

"Morstar," the dwarf mumbled with a mouth full of venison.

"More stars?" Thes echoed confusedly.

The dwarf swallowed his mouthful and cleared his throat before he spoke, "Morstar Haglekdon, Slayer-of-Orcs, Hunter-of-Worgs, and Foe-of-All-Goblinkind; at your service." The dwarf bowed his head a moment then offered his greasy hand to the elf.

Thes grasped the oily paw and shook it gingerly with a smile, bowing his head as well. The elf was glad to be smiling again.

"I'm Thesomber Ambreaia, but most folk call me Thes."

The dwarf smiled back at the elf as he released his hand and returned to his meal.

"Anyway, Sir Hag-lek-don, I wish to thank you for your wisdom. I am quite fortunate to have bumped into such a wise dwarf."

"Don't ye mention it, elf. I just happened to experience yer pain some years back. It ain't easy, but ye'll live through it."

Thes solemnly nodded with the dwarf's words, believing them fully, confident that he could find solace in time.

Curious, the elf asked, "What experience similar to my own have you endured?"

The dwarf stopped, swallowed hard, and dropped the meat he held back on to his plate. He sat in thought for a few moments, staring off into space, before he said, "Well elf, it's a long tale, and it doesn't have a happy ending."

"Nevertheless, I am eager to hear it. A tale for a tale," Thes replied.

"Well, then, I suppose it started many years ago..." the dwarf began. He then described his position as a patrol sergeant for the city of Gorgaddur. It was their task to roam the wide mountainous region above the Hanu-gar Forests on the northern edge of the Kingdom of Kalavar. They would search for goblins, orcs, and other dangerous beasts that wished harm on the dwarven commonfolk. More importantly, they protected the vast amount of wealth the dwarves stored deep in their stone halls, nestled beneath the mountains.

One crisp autumn night, while Morstar's band of thirty dwarves prepared their camps in the lowlands. They had tied up their ponies, and were trying to get some sleep. A band of goblins had ambushed the dwarves. The battle was brutal and vicious, for the dwarves were ill-prepared and many of the soldiers were new recruits, without the reflexes of a seasoned warrior.

Morstar recalled awakening to the sounds of screams as many of the soldiers awoke to find crossbow bolts already protruding from their chests. The look-outs were hanging dead from nearby trees, strangled by nooses silently slipped around their necks. The dwarf-sergeant

had leapt from his bedroll, warhammer in hand. He pummeled and hammered each goblin within reach with his deadly weapon. Morstar recalled how he had been fighting desperately for survival. The goblins had surrounded him and only a few of his brave soldiers were left still standing. A hard thud suddenly echoed through the stout warrior's body as a huge branch was cut above him, the massive limb slamming him to the ground, his consciousness gone in an instant. In the end, the goblins had slaughtered every dwarf in Morstar's band and the poor sergeant had survived simply because the goblin's counted him among the dead.

To the dwarf's luck, some traders had found him among the broken tree several hours later and brought the wounded warrior back to the comforts of the underground city. It was not long before the dwarf had recovered. He recounted how he had requested another patrol to avenge his comrades. The request was denied, however. Morstar explained how his rage soon had him forsaking his post to pursue vengeance on his own. Though the dwarf had eventually succeeded in slaughtering a goblin band single-handedly, an act that would make any warrior proud, he explained how he had no way of knowing if it was the same band that slaughtered his kin. More importantly, Morstar explained how the killing blows upon his enemies did not quench the fires in his heart. He came to realize a life of vengeance was incomplete.

"So you see," the dwarf continued, "that's the sad tale of this dwarf. I know the pain you carry, it'll pass with time."

The elf sighed, "I hope so..."

"At least until you run into a dark elf again, for the fires shall burn for a lifetime," the warrior added, bringing a look of understanding to both their faces.

"So how did you end up here?" the elf asked.

Morstar explained how the fires in his heart still burned for the loss of his companions. He knew he would never find solace if he remained in Kalavar. The dwarven warrior knew he had to find a new purpose for his life, and so he sought the road. He had little skills outside of his knowledge of warfare so he headed south, hiring himself out as a caravan guard to traveling merchants, occasionally using his hammer to defend the wagons from thieves and monsters. Morstar recounted how he had lived the mercenary life for many years. More recently, the dwarf had been a guard for a wine merchant that had just traveled to Allsvale. Coincidentally, Morstar's contract expired, leaving the dwarf seeking new opportunities.

"I have had my fill of adventure," the elf said with a sigh. "I planned to hang up my traveling boots. I thought I had found a home, a place to spread roots and grow tall. Now I just don't know what to do with myself."

"Ye can fight can't ye?" the dwarf asked. "I could use another pair of hands for me next little adventure."

"What exactly would that be?" Thes queried.

"Well, I got this map from a local woodsman. It leads to an old ruin not too far into the forest westward. I'm a wee bit doubtful t'will lead to anything more than a crumble of stones, but the locals say it used to be a crypt of a powerful sorcerer from back in the Nomen days."

Thes's eyes lit up, he was always interested in ancient magic. The tingling excitement of a possible adventure rekindled something in the elf. While the elf had truly wished to end his traveling days, he felt a resurgence of that curiosity and thirst for knowledge that drove him on all those adventures many years before.

“So would ye like to join an old warrior and go searching for hidden trinkets? Half the treasure would be yours of course,” the dwarf promised with a large grin.

The rekindled spark exploded and the elf felt a giddy excitement come over him. Perhaps because it was a ready distraction from his heavy heart, but the elf wanted to jump at the opportunity.

“I'd love to,” the elf said with a matching smile.

The dwarf chuckled. “And a new adventure begins,” he said excitedly. Two wooden cups came together with a dull *thunk*. They were both eager for the excitement to come. That night the two shared many drinks and some tales of previous adventures.

Morstar was certainly a seasoned warrior, spending much of his life as a soldier for the dwarves of Kalavar. He relayed stories of battles with orcs to the north of his homeland, wars with giants in the mountains, and even a few skirmishes with the Noradric horselords of the hills and tundras in the cold northlands. He described the Noradrie as the bravest and fiercest warriors of the race of men.

Thes recounted much of his travels across the eastern regions of Enelis. He described the human cities along the eastern coasts, and the great city-state of Goldwall in all its marvel and beauty. He told of the haunted forests of the Toldan lands and the dangers of the dragons to the south. He told of the great war between the desert Empire of Arathkelsara and the noble knights who sought to claim the holy land for their own deity. Thes told of his failed excursion through the Freewind Savannah to the unknown western lands beyond. He had met many strange creatures in his expeditions, but never made it to the far side of those wild, unsettled lands.

Eventually, the elf and the dwarf had their fill of ale and wine and thought it best to turn in for the night, though the excitement of the journey ahead made it hard for either of them to sleep. The next morning, the two adventurers bought a few supplies for their journey. Morstar donned his thick scaled armor and tied a mighty warhammer to his belt. Thes had no need for armor, relying on magic and speed to save his flesh from harm.

As they made their way out of the village, the townsfolk eyed them very curiously, for it was an odd thing to see an elf and dwarf laughing together through the village. Quite a few times, Thes had to stop and share a song with the local children. This time he was more than happy to do so. At these times Morstar would play a small wooden flute he kept in his pocket, or he hummed deep low notes with the elf's high-pitched song.

It was not long until they were far from the village, the line of the forest stretched before them far on the horizon. The elf was a little nervous about returning to the forest. He was not eager to return near the ruins of Escailar, but he reasoned that the shadmar raid was long finished and the dark elves had probably all returned to their caverns deep in the earth, where surface-dwellers readily agreed they belonged.