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Short Story

The title "The Razor's Edge" is written in a large, golden, serif font with a slight shadow effect. The background is a lush, green jungle scene with a river in the foreground and three figures walking away in the distance. The scene is illuminated with a soft, green glow.

The  
Razor's  
Edge

Robert Lassen

# The Razor's Edge

An



Short Story

**Robert Lassen**

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

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Head of Story:  
Steve Danuser  
Content Editor/Lead Fiction Writer:  
[Maxwell Alexander Drake](#)

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# SURVIVOR



Blood coated Tork's face. As it trickled across his half-open eye, he offered a silent prayer of thanks to the Warlord. Blood might fool them. Blood might make them think he was just another ogre corpse. So he let it drip from his eyelid, fighting the urge to blink.

To blink meant death.

Only the faintest of sounds betrayed the presence of elves walking among the bodies surrounding him. Almost inaudible against the hum of the jungle, the black-clad Teir'Dal moved with the same deadly silence that had allowed them to spring their ambush and cut the Razors to pieces.

Bahkran had died first, his grizzled features frozen in shock as a black-fletched arrow punched through his windpipe. Durgus, so full of boyish courage, shrieked once when an arrowhead pierced his eye. Four more finished him before he could utter another sound. The others died in silence, or perhaps the whistling of elven arrows had drowned out their pain and terror.

Tork lay where he'd fallen, his temple throbbing where a steel-tipped arrow had sliced open the soft flesh. Even as he slumped into the mud while the rest of the Razors died around him, he'd known it was a minor wound. He'd shrugged off worse in tavern brawls. This was different. The strength to fight back still coursed through him, except his body would not obey. *Rest*, his terror had seemed to whisper to him in honeyed, insistent tones. *Stay still, and they might think you dead already.*

"Are any of them still alive?"

The high voice that rang out across the jungle seemed

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feeble. It would have amused Tork at another time. How, he wondered, could such weak creatures, these Teir'Dal and their fellow elves, bring so much terror to the world? Still, he did not move. The paralysis in his body felt so complete he doubted he would ever move again.

"Checking," a second voice responded, unnervingly close. Tork felt the pressure of a boot on his spine. Somehow he didn't tense up, even as his ears filled with the rasp of a dagger being drawn above him. He simply lay and waited, staring without blinking across the damp, scarlet-flecked jungle floor. He forced his eyes not to turn upward as sunlight glinted off the blade looming over him.

Someone groaned, and in an instant the pressure of the foot was gone. Despite his best efforts, his blood-coated eye flickered to the source of the sound. Acrid panic rose from his gut at the thought of the movement giving him away, but it seemed the Teir'Dal had looked away too.

Through a crimson curtain, he saw Ashrak try to rise to her elbows in defiance of the two arrows lodged in her chest, their shafts snapped where her weight had fallen on them. Their eyes met, Ashrak's widening in surprise and realization before her lip curled up in disgust.

"Get up and fight," Ashrak muttered, the words half-lost in the bloody froth that bubbled across the older ogre's lips.

In two bounding steps, the black-clad elf was on her. In one fluid motion, he drove his dagger into the thick muscle and sinew at the back of her neck. Ashrak collapsed into a puddle of brackish water laced with her blood.

"Ogres," the Teir'Dal spat. He aimed a vicious kick at the corpse's head.

"That's enough," the high voice said. Its owner, a slim, shaven-headed female, stepped out from among the trees along the side of the track.

The first Teir'Dal snorted, the sound wracked with contempt. "Don't give me that false morality, Lessa. Do you know how many friends I've lost to this damned jungle? Or how many of my kin were slaughtered in the massacre at Quin'Sari?"

“We’ve all lost loved ones,” the female replied in a cool tone as more Teir’Dal emerged from the jungle shadows behind her. “That doesn’t mean we should stoop to the level of these beasts.”

“Besides, Ellund,” one of the newcomers chuckled, “tonight, the ogres will lose their taste for war. All of Toskirakk will rue the day they provoked Valinor’s wrath. If the Renda’Elith proves even half as powerful—”

“Enough!” the female snapped. “The jungle has ears. It’s not for you to speak the general’s secrets aloud. Now retrieve your shafts and let’s move. If we hurry, we might catch the rest of this war band before they reach the city.”

“Secrets,” the first Teir’Dal muttered as he bent down close to Tork and dragged his dagger free of Ashrak’s corpse with a wet squelch. “Who is alive to hear them?” With a chuckle, the Teir’Dal rose and followed the others back into the jungle.

The shadows swallowed them in moments, but Tork did not move. He told himself he’d wait a dozen heartbeats, then fifty, then a hundred. Each time, he tried to rise. Each time, his body ignored his commands and his gaze remained fixed on Ashrak’s glassy eyes, still judging him in death. Insects and vermin were already crawling over her body, beginning the process of returning it to nature. Nothing went to waste in the Feerrott, and it reclaimed its own quickly.

Something small scuttled along the back of Tork’s neck and took an exploratory bite of his ear.

The ogre clambered to his feet, brushing twigs and insects from his clothing and listening carefully. The normal buzz of the deep Feerrott had descended again like a chittering blanket. He dabbed at the blood congealing on his face, his fingertip rubbing mud into the shallow wound.

Durgus lay close by, his youthful face at peace. He could have been sleeping, but for the broken arrow shaft jutting out from one eye. Of all the Razors, Durgus was the one he might have called friend, if only because they were of an age and both were on their first patrol. Tork soon realized, though, that they had little else in common. Durgus had reveled in battle,

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whooping with joy as he fought, cocksure in his immortality.

Tork grimaced. *Everything a warrior should be.*

Reaching down, he retrieved his fallen mace from the sludge. He stood alone amidst the bodies, knowing for certain now that he was the only survivor of the second platoon. Vomit exploded from his throat and left him gasping on his knees.

Without caring where he headed, only that it was away from the path of the elves, Tork stumbled to his feet and plunged into the foliage. It had been a mistake to follow the trail, he knew, but they'd been so confident, so full of themselves. Just another successful patrol for the Razors, harassing the rear of the slow-moving dal army as it hacked its way through the Feerrott. Another thirty elven heads collected, and dozens more left to rot. Such intoxicating power. The Razors had carried out three ambushes, the last so tactically perfect as to be a thing of beauty. The wagon drivers and the dal regulars guarding them barely had time to draw their weapons before roaring death took them.

Tork grimaced, remembering how that oaf Kattar had killed four dal, then mocked Tork for lurking on the fringes of the fight. The words had stung Tork, laced as they were with the unthinkable charge of cowardice. He should have called Kattar out then and there, challenging the bigger ogre to an honor duel, but that was what Kattar wanted. Their warchief hadn't chosen his Daiku bodyguard for his intelligence, but for the raw, brutal fighting ability that had made Kattar almost as great a legend as his leader. Tork would not have stood a chance, and so he'd accepted the contempt of all as he swallowed the bitter insults.

It tasted all the worse now, knowing Kattar was right.

The ground rose toward a crest in the ridge. The going underfoot became tougher as grasping roots poked free of the cloying soil. Tork slowed his maddened stumble through the undergrowth, keeping his forearm high to protect his eyes from the slicing limbs of the twisted fungal trees. He'd never heard of a coward amongst the ogres. None of the old stories

told of such disgusting weakness, nor did the gnarled elders telling the tales hint at anything so foul.

Tork's first fight had been quick and confusing, leaving the tendrils of fear little time to take hold. Two more battles with the dal, though, and the horrible realization struck home. The furious gnawing in his guts and the soft whimpers for salvation marked him an abomination, a pariah.

Their war leader, Razor, felt no fear. He hadn't named his band; they had named themselves, choosing "the Razors" in the hope of emulating his legendary deeds. As for Kattar—damn him!—that mindless Daiku thug could no more feel fear than could his axe.

Tork ran his forearm across his brow, sending red-flecked sweat cascading down his nose and onto the baked leather armor covering his chest. Razor had split the band into two platoons for the journey home. Where, Tork wondered, was the warchief now? Dead, in another ambush by the accursed Teir'Dal? Or already safe in Toskirakk, swigging mead and laughing with Kattar, fully content that Ashrak, his second-in-command, would soon join them?

The thick jungle parted ahead of Tork, revealing a small clearing in the shadow of the ridgeline. It took him several seconds to realize that the odd-shaped masses in the center were the ruined walls of some ancient building, almost consumed by creeping vines and fronds. An indistinct patch, darker than the rest, became an opening as he came closer. The shadows within hinted at cooler air and relief, however temporary, from the brutal heat and cloying humidity of the Feerrott.

His years of training called for caution, but his muscles obeyed the simpler, more primal need for rest. He stepped into the shadows.

The air rushed from his lungs, replaced by searing agony. He felt the jagged stones of the ruin's floor jab into his spine before the numbness of the impact to his chest spread through his whole frame. Between the sudden darkness and the flickering lights across his vision, his eyes floundered in blindness. His

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ears heard nothing but the rattling groan the pain tore from his lips. Of his senses, only touch did not fail him.

Nothing could have disguised the feel of cold steel against the warmth of his throat.



# COWARD



“Where are the others?” Naked menace hung on every rasped word.

Tork tried to respond, but his voice failed him, as if his throat feared that uttering a word would mean dashing itself against the blade.

“Do not make me ask again,” his unseen assailant growled. A sharp jolt of pain ran through Tork as the pressure on the steel grew. He felt a new wetness on his throat, warmer than his sweat.

“Dead,” Tork gasped. His eyes, adjusting, picked out a huge, looming shadow against the darkness of the vine-draped walls. “Teir’Dal ambush,” he added.

“Yet here you lie.” The shadow cleared its throat, and Tork heard the splatter of spit against stone. “How is it that you live, when your betters died?”

Something about the voice struck Tork as familiar, but in his terror, finding a name was like groping in a swamp for black eels. The thing was definitely an ogre, though. “Fought my way clear,” he tried.

“No blood on your mace.”

“Enough,” a different voice said. Tork heard the footsteps as the newcomer descended into the ruins. The shadow only pressed the blade harder.

“Must have washed off when I crossed a stream,” Tork stammered. This time, the words did bring new pain. He felt his skin scraping onto the steel edge with every syllable.

“I said enough, Kattar.” The new voice remained calm and reasonable, but with an unmistakable note of command. The knife blade withdrew.

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Tork gulped at the stagnant air, marveling at how fresh it tasted now.

"The coward lies," Kattar said.

"That matter is mine to judge," the newcomer said, and this time Tork knew the voice. An instant more and the darkness seemed to melt away. Standing over him, with the sunlit entrance at his back, Razor reached down and offered a hand. "Ashrak?"

"Dead," Tork said as he let the warchief pull him to his feet. "The others, too."

Razor blinked. Behind him, Kattar paced up and down in the doorway, muttering to himself and glaring at Tork.

"Tell me," Razor said.

"We patrolled the path below the ridge, as ordered," Tork said, squirming beneath the stares of the two ogres. He caught a glimpse of others out in the clearing. "Ashrak worried about using the Old Road, but thought speed important. She wanted to get back to Toskirakk. Wanted to see her young." She never would now, he thought, feeling a rush of nausea. His hand began to seek the stone wall to steady himself before he caught the gesture.

Razor nodded. The fingers of his right hand dropped to rest lightly on the hilt of a dagger. He carried six, named for the father and five brothers whose lives had been taken in glorious battle. His left hand was long gone, lost fighting alongside those brothers. The wicked serrated blade cunningly woven into the stump was named for his mother, dead at the moment of his birth. "The ambush," he prompted.

"It came from nowhere. Lots of arrows." Tork swallowed, his mind trying to construct a plausible lie. "I was struck in the head. When I awoke, they had gone."

Kattar let out a mocking bark of a laugh. Razor frowned at him, and then took Tork's chin in a grip that could have crushed the jawbone if he'd wanted. Instead, he twisted Tork's head to one side. Raising his bladed stump, he pointed it at the mud-clogged wound in Tork's temple. "Look," Razor said, locking Kattar in a stare. "An arrow did this. Another

half-inch, he would be dead." He turned back to Tork. "The Feerrott is crawling with dal today. They ambushed us, too."

"We killed many," Kattar grinned. "Gained much glory."

"But lost three warriors," Razor snapped at him. "Too many elves. We cannot kill them all."

Kattar shrugged. "Then we die trying."

Tork saw a momentary flash of emotion – pain, perhaps? – pass across the commander's eyes. "Come," Razor said. "We go home."

Within the clearing, four more ogres squatted among the broken masonry and twisted roots. The Razors had been thirty-two strong when they headed south, skirting the lead columns of the dal army and slashing at its soft underbelly. Thirteen had died in their three battles with elven soldiers, but they had cut down at least a dozen dal for each ogre called to the Warfield. Not Teir'Dal, Tork reminded himself, but still skilled, battle-hardened elf soldiers. That had left nineteen to make the slow trek back to Toskirakk, splitting into two groups only when they came within a day's march of home. That close to the city's impenetrable walls, the jungle teemed with the advance elements of the elven armies, and two smaller groups had a better chance of evading the roving dal patrols than if they all moved as one.

Three shapeless lumps lay piled together at the edge of the clearing. From a corner of the mass not covered in a seething carpet of insects, Tork saw a scaly forearm and hand poking out, its claw-tipped fingers frozen in a half-fist.

"Thulians," Kattar grunted, following Tork's gaze. "Always lurking about ruins. The lizardmen did not want to give this one up."

Razor made a gesture and the ogres rose to their feet, gathering their equipment and weapons in silence. The heat of the jungle closed in like a smothering embrace, warming the cold sweat of terror that clung to Tork's neck. Kattar smirked at him. Tork focused on Razor's broad back as he led them from the clearing, his thick legs setting a punishing pace. They kept the ridgeline above them and to their left, ignoring the broad

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road that straddled the crest in favor of this half-forgotten, weed-choked hunter's trail. Despite his bulk, Razor made no sound, gliding between the trees. The others could not match his stealth, but they came close. They were all experienced in jungle warfare. By contrast, Tork was acutely aware of the rustling, crackling noise he left in their wake. With each step the sodden ground tried to suck his mud-caked boots deep into it, only releasing him with a wrench and a wet popping sound.

The trail edged further up the slope toward the ridgeline. Razor dropped to one knee, signaling a halt. Turning, he beckoned first for Tork, then for Kattar.

"This trail joins with the main path soon," Razor murmured. "The Teir'Dal would be fools to leave the way unguarded."

"We would gain much honor by taking that route," Kattar said, grinning as he ran his finger down the blade of his axe.

Razor shook his head. "Tork, you see which way the ambushers headed?"

"No, boss." Tork stared at his feet. "But I heard them saying things about the city. Strange things."

Kattar snorted. "You could still hear when you were unconscious, then?"

Razor silenced his bodyguard with an irritated flick of his hand. "What did they say about the city?"

Tork felt his heart hammer against his ribcage. Trying to pick out the words from his terror-clouded memories was a struggle. A pressure bore down on his chest, recalling the heaviness he felt on his back when the Teir'Dal knelt to finish him. Ashrak had saved him then, if unwittingly, but now it was her eyes Tork saw, accusing him as they filled with blood, knowing him for the coward he was.

"Report!" The sharp bark of Razor's command shocked Tork from his stupor.

Tork took a deep breath and told them everything he remembered. He echoed the leader's speech, trying to mimic her high, lilting voice. He repeated the laughing Teir'Dal's boasts about the city and the weapon borne by Valinor, though his tongue stumbled on the elven term for it.

He left out Ashrak's last words.

Razor stroked his jaw, leaving a thin line of reddish-brown mud clinging to his scarred and pockmarked skin. The reedy sound of a bird call drifted down from the trees above. "Renda'Elith," he muttered, the dark pools of his eyes boring into Tork. "You're sure he said *Renda'Elith*?"

Tork nodded. There was a hint of something in the warchief's eyes he had never seen before. He would almost have called it fear, if Razor had been capable of such weakness.

"You know this word?" Tork struggled to keep his voice even, but it quaked with the same uncertainty that hung on Razor's brow.

"Dal-speak for High Magic," the warchief growled. "A fancy name for the secrets they lord over us." Razor rubbed his chin and stared into the jungle, back the way they had come. "What," he mused aloud, "is that marsh snake Tah'Re planning now?"

"Maybe he found some spellflingers to die on their siege ladders," Kattar sneered. "They never had the courage to attack before we left. Doubt they did better while we were gone."

"Maybe," Razor said, nodding. "Maybe not. Valinor is a bastard, but no fool."

The bird call came again. Kattar licked his lips. "That sound makes me hungry."

Razor's eyes widened.

Something blurred the air as it whistled between Razor and Tork and slammed into Kattar's shoulder. Looking down with a dumbstruck expression, Kattar stared at the fletching that was all that remained visible of the arrow, at least from his front. Tork's eyes lingered in disbelief on the blood-drenched steel that had burrowed free of Kattar's upper back.

The blade at the tip of Razor's left forearm flashed in the sunlight as his right hand drew the oversized hunting knife that lent him its name. Even as two ogres dropped in a hail of arrows, Razor leaped forward and met the first of the charging Teir'Dal as he sprang down the slope. The dal, a young officer with eyes that glinted with pleasure and confidence, swung

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his slim sword in a lightning-fast arc at Razor's throat. Tork gasped, knowing his warchief was as good as dead.

Razor's blade hand blurred the air as it parried the sword. He was already turning to his next opponent before the huge knife eviscerated the officer and sent him squealing to the ground.

The sound of ringing metal and agonized shrieks wrenched Tork from his frozen torpor. An older Teir'Dal with a hideously scarred face thrust at him with a short spear. Tork stumbled back, instinctively swatting the spear point aside with his mace before tumbling onto his rump in the mud. The Teir'Dal grimaced and drew his spear back for another lunge, his predatory eyes focused on Tork's chest. The focus cost him his life.

With a bellow, Kattar crushed the dal's skull with the flat of his axe, and then cleaved another elf almost to the spine with a backhand sweep.

Tork scrambled to his feet. To his right he saw Yazdrek snap the neck of a dal then collapse over the body, three feet of elven steel driven through her thick chest. Razor crushed the jaw of an opponent, and then parried a downward swing from another. Before the elf could recover, Kattar's axe took both his legs beneath the knee. The dal dropped, blood pumping out in great spurts into the dirt.

Kattar ended the elf's pain-maddened shrieks with a flick of his axe, plunging the jungle into silence.

Razor stood, blood dripping a steady beat from both blades. "Only twelve of them," he murmured.

"They grow arrogant," Kattar growled. "To attack us with so few."

Tork stared at Yazdrek's corpse. The warrior had been barely older than him, and less fanatic than other Daiku cultists. Now she was dead. Tork wrenched his eyes away from the young warrior and the other bodies. "It was enough, it would seem." He frowned at Kattar, pointing one shaking finger at the arrow still jutting from the giant's shoulder. "Does that hurt?"

Kattar shrugged. "Does what hurt?"

"Twelve," Razor repeated. "Perhaps arrogant. Perhaps they had no choice but to attack." He reached out and snapped off the exposed portion of the arrow jutting from Kattar's back. Kattar blinked, but made no sound. "If Tork was right," Razor continued, "Valinor will want no outsiders coming to rescue the city." He flung the broken arrow shaft to the ground. "We must warn our people."

Kattar lifted his arm and pointed to the ridge. The motion sent a thin rivulet of blood streaming down the leather of his back armor. "The Old Road will be quickest."

The sour tang of nausea flooded into Tork's throat. "There could be dozens of patrols. There are only three of us now!"

Kattar spat. "Two that count," he sneered. "Razor and I have faced worse odds. We will win much glory."

"Not today, my *deinir*," Razor said, resting his thick hand on Kattar's neck. "Tork is right. Glory is of no use if his message dies with us. We must choose the path of stealth."

"Stealth." Kattar shook his head in disbelief. "A coward's path. Let Tork take it, and let us stride the path of glory."

Razor stared at Tork. He knew what his leader expected. No true ogre could suffer such an insult and fail to challenge his accuser. Few ogres alive had won as much honor as Razor, even among warchiefs, and the hot throbbing of shame burned upon Tork's cheeks. Kattar looked at him expectantly, a half-smile playing across his battered features.

Tork felt the muscles of his fist contract, his grip closing on the shaft of his mace.

The giant was strong and deadly, but he was wounded. Blood loss and the length of wood still lodged in his muscles would slow him. Tork could handle the mace. In the proving grounds, he had been feared for his speed and his skill, even if both had deserted him in true combat. Perhaps Kattar was there for the taking, but would there be honor in such a victory?

Tork's gaze shifted to the blanket of carrion-eating insects already feasting on Yazdrek. That was what honor looked like.

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The mace swung loose by his side. "A fight could give our position to the Teir'Dal," he said, trying to keep his voice firm and knowing he failed. "The warchief has spoken," he added, staring at Razor.

Kattar laughed. "An unworthy excuse."

Razor sighed. "Tork is right," he said, but disappointment brimmed in his eyes as he returned the stare. "We move. Now. And be silent."



# FLIGHT



The Feerrott, ever dangerous, now pulsed with malignant intent.

Tork kept his eyes sweeping, checking every possible threat, and never letting his gaze settle for more than a moment on Razor's back. Behind him, he could just hear the low muttering of Kattar, and cursed the thug for a fool. Noise meant attention. In the Feerrott, you could be killed by most anything that moved, and many things that didn't. Creatures that bit and stung. Thorns that could rend flesh like paper. Trees that glowed with radiant color and smelt of luscious fruit, yet could devour an ogre whole. Tork knew that few ogres felt fear the way he did, but they were all cautious enough to know that leaving the well-trodden paths was idiocy. At least on the tracks, you had a chance of seeing the shadows poised to attack.

The Feerrott had teemed with death long before the Teir'Dal arrived, and would do so long after they were driven from it.

Razor paused to wipe sweat from his furrowed brow, torment thick on his scarred features. Speed meant noise, and noise meant a Teir'Dal patrol—or something worse—would find them all the sooner. To survive, they had to move slowly, knowing that each moment they failed to carry their warning to Toskirakk meant another moment closer to Valinor's surprise attack. Razor's mouth twitched in what could have been a silent prayer, his eyes lingering on the thick canopy overhead and the scattered patches of daylight. Then, with a shrug, he moved on.

The full heat of the day closed in on them, stifling and

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brutal as they edged higher up the towering slopes that hid Toskirakk from the outside world. Any respite gained by the cooler air of the mountains dwindled in the face of the effort required to traverse the slimy, weed-clogged slopes. Twice Tork slipped. The first time he came to rest less than a pace away in a thick patch of greenfang, wincing as the plant's thick-woven spines punctured his skin in a dozen places. The second time he would have tumbled a hundred feet to neck-snapping ruin if Kattar hadn't snagged him by the hair and half-pulled, half-thrown him back to his feet. Tork had murmured his thanks, and received an impatient shove in the back for his attempt at civility.

Razor often motioned them to halt so he could listen. Once, they caught the faint crunching of something big moving through the undergrowth, fortunately far away. With each stop, Tork heard the babble and hum of jungle life and wondered how close the Teir'Dal could be. They would not announce their presence with crackling and noise. The dal were weak, their muscles puny and undersized, but they were fast and deadly, and even in the Feerrott few things could match them for stealth. Too many ogres had learned that already. A Teir'Dal blade could be poised in the looming shadows, ready for a killing stroke, and Tork doubted he would hear a thing until the telltale tearing of his own hide.

The thought made him shiver, despite the broiling air. His throat felt desperately dry. He told himself it was the heat.

Razor halted again, signaling for silence, before beckoning them closer. "The jungle closes in ahead. It will slow us." His eyes betrayed his exhaustion. He raised a forearm crisscrossed with tiny cuts and pointed with his one hand toward a narrow, rock-strewn defile rising like a chimney up the hillside. "We will follow that up, and seek higher ground and easier going."

Tork swallowed. "That path will take us across the Old Road," he said.

"Then let us take it," Kattar said, eyes burning with fervor. "The Old Road is the quickest way. The Teir'Dal will not stand against us."

Razor shook his head. "No. We will cross it, and then seek cover beyond. We must reach Toskirakk before sundown."

Kattar growled. "But we can be at the city gates in an hour—"

"Shut your mouth," Razor snapped. "I tire of your foolishness!" Startled by the sudden outburst, something unseen exploded out of the nearby undergrowth and flapped laboriously on huge wings toward the safety of the treetops.

Kattar's face paled, his eyes filling with shock and pain. Razor reached out and placed a hand on his cheek. "Forgive me," he said in a more gentle tone. "You and I will win great glory when the dal attack begins. But for now, for the sake of our people, we must live to warn the others."

Kattar nodded, chewing his lip. "But when the enemy comes, my deinir, we will seek glory?"

Razor smiled. "They will sing songs of our deeds for generations."

They clasped hands, both smirking like fools, while Tork's insides writhed in torment. How could they care so little that they would not be alive to hear those stories?

Still grinning, Razor led them up the chimney. Tork slung his mace over his back to free his hands as the ground became almost vertical. The same forgotten watercourse that scoured this passage from the ground had left the rock handholds smooth and treacherous, flecked with slippery moss, yet above him Razor seemed to have few problems despite his single hand. As they scrambled higher, the branches of nearby trees clustered close enough to the hillside to cut off the light and leave them ascending a suffocating humid tunnel toward a rare patch of blue above. Tork glanced down between his feet and could just make out Kattar's sweat-bathed skull in the darkness. A slip of his toe sent mud and pebbles bouncing down, and Kattar's muffled curses drifted up in embittered reply.

The light became brighter, and Tork gratefully took Razor's outstretched hand as he slid out of the shaft and collapsed sighing onto the slimy ground. It felt cool, and even

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its rotting stench seemed wholesome after the stagnant air of the chimney. Razor motioned him to remain low. A few paces above them, the way stood barred by a thicket of thorns, but through the less-cluttered roots Tork caught a glimpse of the broken, half-buried stones of the Old Road.

With a final curse, Kattar emerged, and the three slithered on their bellies to a gap of sorts in the greenfang. Razor sniffed the air, his eyes distant. The Old Road could not have been more than the length of a dal pike wide, yet it seemed a vast chasm compared to the dense jungle.

"I go first," Kattar murmured, and began to rise. Razor's hand snapped closed on his arm, and Kattar looked down in surprise.

"Wait," Razor mouthed. "Something is wrong."

Without letting his head turn, Tork scanned the road and the thick undergrowth along its far edge. He saw nothing. He strained his ears, but heard no sound. His eyes met Kattar's and saw his own confusion mirrored in them.

No sounds. Not one. The omnipresent hum of the jungle had ceased.

Razor made a faint warning sign, and the three of them sank to the mud. A hundred paces away, a shadow detached itself from the greater darkness and edged toward them with cautious steps. More emerged from the undergrowth behind it, all clad in dark armor.

Tork fought the urge to plunge headfirst into the refuge of the chimney. A Teir'Dal patrol. Tork did not think their trio had been seen, but it could only be a matter of time before his trembling gave them away. The dal leader's sword was drawn, point held low as she edged forward with the other dal fanned out behind her.

Tork counted eight of them. His mind made the assessment that this patrol must have suffered casualties to be so small, but then the cool appraisal tumbled away, lost in a rising tide of panic. Eight was more than enough to kill three ogres—or at least one timid, exhausted ogre.

His muscles shuddered as adrenaline flooded into them,

demanding that he flee. The patrol came closer, the leader making gestures but still not uttering a sound as the dal closed the gap on the three ogres hugging the ground beneath the feeble cover of the shrub line.

To Tork's right, Kattar's eyes glowed with ferocity. Razor's hand remained locked on Kattar's arm as his head turned a fraction toward Tork, looked at his mace, and gave a barely perceptible shake of the head.

The dal came on, close enough that Tork could hear the whisper of their feet on the time-worn stones. He tried to force his sight to stay locked on the ground, but terror proved stronger than his discipline, wrenching his gaze upward. He caught a glimpse of the dal leader's eyes, all coiled aggression and tightly wound bloodlust, and recognition flooded through him. She was the one they had called Lessa, back where Ashrak and the others fell. That she had been tracking them this whole time was a less terrifying thought than that she knew an ogre had survived her ambush. That she'd been tracking *him*.

No, he told himself, they had just taken the direct route to get ahead of them and any others trying to reach Toskirakk. Most important of all, the dal's eyes stared straight ahead. Whatever Lessa and her Teir'Dal were waiting for, she believed it lay on the path before them.

Despite the elf's distraction, death hovered, ready to strike. One glance down at the right moment and the ogres would be revealed. A pair of silt-caked leather boots passed barely two paces in front of Tork's face, followed by a second.

The last black-clad Teir'Dal paused for a moment, right in front of them, before hefting his spear and stepping forward to catch the others. Tork realized he had been holding his breath, and opened his mouth a fraction to let a thin stream of air escape between cracked, dry lips.

With a roar, Kattar shrugged off Razor's hand and leapt at the trailing elf.

The elf managed a half turn before the axe took off his jaw. Cursing, Razor exploded into action, racing behind the

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shoulder of his bodyguard to disembowel a second dal with his blade hand.

Tork decided to press himself into the cloying earth, determined to disappear as he had during the ambush that killed Ashrak. Inexplicably, though, he found himself moving, his legs churning the sludge as they powered him forward. He felt a scream of terror rise from his roiling stomach, somehow bursting through his lips as a snarl. His pulse hammered in his ears. The mace felt heavy and yet weightless, a mere extension of his flesh and blood as he raised it.

The Teir'Dal patrol reacted with the snake-like speed of their race. One slashed a spear point across Kattar's face, opening a deep gash beneath the eye. A second nearly took Razor's windpipe with his sword edge, but the ogre swayed back. The dal was too slow to avoid the riposte. Dropping his sword, he stumbled back with both hands clasping his face as frantic fingers desperately sought to hold the dripping gore of his unseeing eyes together.

A boyish Teir'Dal, barely as tall as Tork's chest, lunged with a perfect spear thrust. Tork flailed with the mace, knocking the spear point aside enough that it only ripped the flesh of his left bicep. His momentum carried him on, bundling the dal to the ground. Stumbling, he fell onto the elf, the point of his knee dropping onto the dal's undersized sternum with the concentrated force of all Tork's mass behind it. The elf's squeal was lost in the sound of cracking bones, his eyes rolling back as a blood-flecked cough exploded from his mouth.

A flash of movement flickered in the corner of Tork's eye, and with desperate haste he flung out his arm. The tip of his mace caught a Teir'Dal in the forearm, splintering the bone. A long-bladed dagger slipped from the Teir'Dal's nerveless fingers and spun end over end into the dirt half an inch from Tork's thigh.

Tork sobbed with terror as he crushed the unarmed Teir'Dal's skull and spun to face the others.

There was only one. The female they called Lessa circled warily among the still or twitching remnants of her patrol, her

longsword held in a steady hand. If she felt fear, none showed on her pale, chiseled face.

"Nice kills, Tork," Kattar grunted. Blood from the gash beneath his eye had carved a crimson valley through the caked mud on his face, and darker blood oozed from vicious cuts on both his arms. "We will make a warrior of him yet, eh, Razor?"

Razor said nothing. His tired eyes remained firmly on the elf. Tork saw at least half a dozen seeping wounds on his leader's body, but knew the warchief hadn't felt a single one of them.

"Razor," the Teir'Dal purred. "You're something of a legend. I'd always hoped to fight you one day." She smiled as the three ogres closed on her. "If you all surrender now, General Tah'Re might show mercy. He is always in need of servants with strong backs."

Kattar spat and swung his axe in a wide, glittering arc. The elf ducked and flicked out her sword. With a grunt of surprise, Kattar stumbled back, blood soaking his breeches where the point had opened his thigh.

"Or I can take you to him a piece at a time," the Teir'Dal murmured. "Your choice."

Tork couldn't help but marvel at how placid her face remained, even as he followed Razor's order and swung out to the right to cut off her escape. Razor edged left, close to the tree line, leaving the furious Kattar to draw her attention to the front. Kattar swung again, but the Teir'Dal slipped the blow and then effortlessly parried Razor's exhausted swing of his hunting knife.

Her speed was incredible. They had been lucky, Tork realized, to overcome the rest of the patrol, but their luck was fast running out. Both his companions breathed hard, the exertion, heat, and a myriad of wounds taking their toll. The Teir'Dal bounced lightly on her feet, smirking with sadistic glee.

Tork tightened his grip on the mace, but his hands felt slippery and weak. The surge of mindless aggression that

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vaulted him into battle had poured out of him like so much sweat. He knew that when she had finished with Razor and Kattar, she would end him without mercy. His eyes met hers, and he saw she knew it too.

"Let me take her alone," Kattar said through rasping breaths. "I want the glory."

The elf laughed. Battle madness danced in her eyes. She should have been terrified, one elf against three ogres, but Tork knew she had recognized their weakness.

Kattar looked at his warchief with pleading eyes.

Razor shook his head. "No," he said simply. "She seeks to delay us, to ensure we do not reach the city before her master." He took a deep breath. "Take her as one," he said. "The bitch cannot stop us all."

Lessa just smiled, swaying from side to side in curious time with the wall of green behind her.

With a piercing shriek, something huge burst from the undergrowth. A mass of long, bony legs and beetle-black carapace, it knocked Razor aside with one blurring limb while two more reached out to sink their barbed tips into the elf. Lessa screamed in terror and agony as it wrenched her into the air and scuttled back into the enveloping shadows.

Tork stared in disbelief at the trail of blood and crushed vegetation the thing had left behind it. His eyes met Kattar's.

"Millivore," the Daiku whistled. "Never saw one so big." He snorted. "I guess the jungle hates the dal as we do."

The elf's shrieks rose to a piercing crescendo, then stopped with horrifying finality. Tork twisted and, no longer caring what anyone thought, spewed onto the stones of the Old Road.

Kattar chuckled and turned to Razor, slumped on the ground with his fist in his lap. "The bug surprised you, boss," Kattar said. "Old age must be slowing you." Grinning, he reached down and offered Razor his hand.

Razor ignored it.

"Boss?" Kattar frowned.

Slowly raising his head, Razor opened his fist. His palm

was soaked in blood. Beneath it, the leather armor was unmarked. The wound, the *devastation*, was lower than that.

"By the Warlord," Kattar whispered.

Tork retched again, but there was nothing left in his stomach to expel. Instead, at Razor's beckon, he stumbled across and fell to one knee next to his dying warchief. Kattar, still muttering in disbelief, dropped down on the other side of him.

Razor reached out and took Tork's forearm in an iron grip. "Up to you now," he said, his voice a drawn out rustle of wind on the treetops. "Follow the ridge to Hunter's Trail. May not be guarded. Get to the city. Take our message."

"I will avenge you," Kattar raged. "Hunt down every damned Teir'Dal in the Feerrott. I will—"

"No," Razor snapped, the effort turning the word into a wracking, pink-tinged cough. Tork tried not to look at how the wound roiled with each spasm. "For once, my deinir, put the future of our people before your glory."

Kattar rose with an anguished cry, staggered away, and targeted a dead Teir'Dal with thudding, rhythmic kicks.

"Tork," Razor whispered, pulling him closer. "Take our message. Save our people. It is up to you."

"I cannot," Tork sobbed. Razor's head dropped, and the movement pulled all of Tork's secrets with it. "I am a coward," he stammered. "The fear gnaws at my guts like a disease. I am not a warrior. Not a hero. Just afraid."

"You think I am not? Fear lingers within every warrior. A hero fights in spite of the fear, as you have done." Razor raised his eyes to meet Tork's. They looked lost, like a youngling's. "Do this for Toskirakk, and for me. Death draws near."

Razor's words felt like a blow. Ten paces away, Kattar screamed incoherent curses as he hacked at another corpse. "I cannot," Tork whispered. "I am not like you."

"You are wrong," Razor gasped. He shuddered and slipped back from Tork's grasp onto the Old Road, where his spreading blood had pooled between the stones. "Save our people."

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Kattar now stood over them in silence. Razor smiled up at him. His trembling hand reached up and interlocked their fingers. "We will be together on the Warfield soon, my deinir," he murmured. "We will share...such glory."

Kattar pulled away, dabbing at his face, and Tork watched as the Daiku collapsed to his knees among the huddled bodies.

When Tork looked down again, Razor was dead.



## TO THE CITY



It seemed wrong to intrude on Kattar's grief. Tork had never thought the Daiku thug capable of such feelings. He reached down and laid his hand on Kattar's shoulder, and felt the thick muscle tremble as it worked to contain a tide of emotion.

"Come," Tork said, forcing the word through the cotton-like gag of his own sorrow. "We must go. More Teir'Dal will be coming."

"Let them come," Kattar muttered.

Something moved in the Feerrott, little more than a rustle. Probably nothing, Tork thought, knowing at least part of his assessment was optimism. It could be a snake or a plague rat. But it could be Teir'Dal, or the millivore returning for more satisfying fare than a single elf. He shivered. "Now, Kattar," he said, raising his voice as loud as he dared and tugging at the kneeling ogre's armor.

"I will kill them all," Kattar growled. He gave no sign that he felt the insistent hand on his shoulder.

"Not our orders," Tork told him. "We need to get to Toskirakk. Now!"

"I will avenge him."

Tork's hand tightened on his mace. The noise, whatever it was, drifted closer with each heartbeat. "If we die," he said, picking his words carefully, "the Razors die with us. *He* dies with us." Tork pointed to the broken body on the stones. "*He* wanted you to reach the city alive, not die in a selfish attempt to kill few more Teir'Dal."

Without warning, Kattar leapt to his feet, smacking Tork's hand aside. "I kill my enemies," he snarled, gobbets of phlegm

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spitting from his lips as he shoved his face within a fist's width of Tork's. "I kill for glory!"

"That is why Razor is dead!" The words exploded from Tork's mouth before he could hold them, every syllable laced with seething contempt. Part of him wanted to flinch at the thought of what Kattar might do, but the greater part demanded more than words. He felt his knuckles grinding with the effort of squeezing the mace, tight enough that he feared the wooden haft would snap.

Kattar's eyes flooded with anger and imminent violence, and just as suddenly emptied of all emotion but despair. The axe fell from his fingers into the mud. He sagged, head lolling against his chest. The giant of blood and violence became mortal in the blink of an eye.

"You are right," Kattar murmured. "You are right."

Tork inhaled slowly. Kneeling down to pick up the axe, he pressed it into Kattar's hand, and then took the hunting knife from Razor's half-open fingers, slipping it into his belt. A dead branch cracked somewhere in the dense undergrowth, and silence descended once more over the Feerrott.

"Come," Tork snapped, turning Kattar by the arm and half-shoving him into action. They set off at a sprint along the Old Road. It hardly mattered to Tork that they were vulnerable on the path. All that mattered was getting away from that creeping death in the jungle and living long enough to carry their message to the city.

He couldn't tell if they were being followed, not above the echo of their heavy boots on the stones. Ahead, the Old Road plunged down the ridgeline to join the New Road for the final few leagues to Toskirakk. Either meant Teir'Dal patrols, supply convoys, and reinforcements to feed the vast dal army that crowded at the base of Toskirakk's unconquerable walls. Either meant death.

Tork muttered for Kattar to take the lead. The Daiku grasped his axe and began hacking a path into the undergrowth to the north of the road. They barreled through the vegetation as the route dropped precipitously to their right. This ridge, Tork

knew, would keep rising until it towered the narrow plateau and cliffs that overlooked the city. Behind them, he heard faint sounds of movement, but could not tell if they were real or just the conjuring of his terrified imagination. It made no difference either way. Speed was everything now.

A low bird cry rose from within a thick band of trees below them, and was answered from the rock-strewn slopes above.

"Teir'Dal," Kattar said, though his gasping turned the words into little more than a single agonized grunt. Tork nodded, his gaze darting across the shadows.

The sun had dropped below the towering peaks to their north. By now, Toskirakk would be bathed in the long, cooling shade of the Rathetyr Mountains. Within the constant twilight of the Feerrott, it made little difference. The heat Tork gave off as he churned upward through shoulder-high weeds more than compensated. Torrents of sweat ran into his eyes and mouth, adding to the odd sensation that movement now was more like swimming than walking.

He knew they should be starting to drop down from the ridge if they were to make the Hunter's Trail, but the back and forth of bird calls from below made it impossible. Teir'Dal lurked throughout the undergrowth, perhaps on the trail itself. More were behind, their signals getting louder as they followed the unmistakable path of broken vegetation and upturned earth the ogres left in their wake. The Teir'Dal were closing in, that much was clear. If the trail was blocked, they'd never reach the city. The message would die with them.

Tork wanted to scream his defiance at their unseen stalkers, but no words would come. The Feerrott itself had lapsed into sullen silence, as if it were a single creature aware of the black-clad killers that threaded their way through its innards. The sudden quiet allowed other sounds to rise to the fore, even above the pounding of his exhausted, tortured heart. He could hear the unmistakable rushing of water.

"The falls," Kattar gasped. "We are too high."

Tork slumped against the moist bark of a tree, looking past it to where the jungle subsided into open rocks. He

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could not see the river that fed the Troll's Tears, forging its endless path from the highest peaks of the Rathetyr to the walls of Toskirakk and beyond. He did not need to. He heard it tumbling beyond the clustered boulders near them. The silvery path it carved down the mountainside stood out in the gathering gloom.

"Yes, too high," Tork agreed. "At least we can die looking down on the city. Come on."

A natural fissure split the rocks ahead, and he began to pick his way toward it. An arrow shattered on the stone at his feet, and a chorus of crazed whoops and calls burst from the jungle behind them. The two ogres stumbled and leaped down the boulders as more arrows flew from the shadows. One glanced off Tork's armor. Another jammed into the gap beneath Kattar's shoulder blade. The older warrior grunted and ripped the arrow loose, hardly slowing his pace as he did so.

They reached the rock cleft and sprinted into its welcoming embrace as a dozen more arrows sparked from the stones, the noise of their impact lost in the tumult of the river beyond.

Tork followed the sound, only to stop mid-stride when he noticed that his were the only footsteps he heard. He turned back to Kattar. "Are you coming?"

Kattar shook his head. Blood from wounds old and new was already pooling at his feet. "No," he said. "This is as good a spot as any to die." The passageway was hardly wider than his shoulders, but he began swinging his axe anyway in loosening sweeps. The blade rang from the stones.

Tork took another step toward the water. "We can still make it," he said. "The river—"

"*You* can still make it," Kattar corrected. "But not with Teir'Dal arrows in your back. I will hold them here." The Daiku smiled. "And I will take my place by Razor's side."

A thousand thoughts flashed through Tork's mind. He dismissed them all, until only the falls remained—and the seed of a plan.

"Wait," Kattar said as Tork turned from him.

"What is it?"

Kattar took a step closer, wincing. The broken shaft of yet another arrow jutted from the muscle of his left calf. "May you find glory," he said.

"May it never leave you," Tork answered, clasping Kattar's outstretched hand. It was sticky with blood.

Kattar grinned. "Go." He shoved Tork hard enough to spin him and send him stumbling down the narrow defile.

Tork let momentum take him. Jumping over a low boulder, he sprang down the passage, twisting his body as he ran to pass through a section where the walls closed in yet further. The tip of the hunting knife in his belt screeched against the rock. Behind him, he heard Kattar's roar, followed by a high-pitched squeal of agony. Steel rang on steel, the sound magnified by the high stones. An elven voice shouted a string of curses and was cut off. Kattar's booming laughter mingled with cries of pain.

Then there was only silence behind him, and the raging torrent ahead.

Shoulders bleeding from the scraping grasp of the rock, Tork burst from the passage. He didn't hesitate. Fear tugged at him, but he refused to let it slow his breakneck pace. With a single desperate breath, he dived from the bank and into the river.

The furious chill of the Rathetyr peaks infused every drop of water, and the shock of contact sucked the breath from Tork's body. The current swept him along, helpless as a mewling infant as it smashed his already battered frame against hidden rocks and the unyielding bank. Sharp pain flared in his upper arm, and he caught a glimpse of something slim and dark slashing through the water. The river was hungry too.

Then bubbling foam obscured everything, flicking from light to dark as he tumbled end over end, a ragdoll in the river's malevolent embrace. He clung to his mace as if it might save him, but it just dragged him deeper. He felt the resistance as his fingers became trapped in a submerged crevice, then the release as one finger snapped, the rock spitting him out again and leaving him careering in the current. His mouth

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opened of its own accord, hoping to scream, but frigid water pumped into his throat and lungs instead.

The violent choking subsided. The river flung him about as viciously as ever, its roar growing louder with every second, but the violence and the noise no longer bothered him. A wave of peaceful languor swept over him, soothing and caressing. The pain faded from his many wounds. Warmth seemed to flow from lungs freed of the need to gasp for air. The hammering of the torrent reached a deafening crescendo, filling his ears, yet he hardly heard it.

This, he realized, astonishing himself with his lack of fear, was how it felt to die.



# FALL



The river spat him out and left him hanging weightless in the sky.

The world spun. Trees, then mountains, then sky, then trees again. Tork wanted to laugh at the beauty of it, the freedom. Was this how it felt to be a bird, soaring above the Feerrott? Or a dragon, freed from the leash of the sullen earth, spreading its wings to abandon the insects below? The air was cool against his wet skin, soothing his body as the rushing sound filled his ears. He wished he could stay like this forever, but the Feerrott, spurned and jealous, beckoned him closer, rushing to meet him.

With an impact like a thousand fists striking at once, Tork hit the pool at the foot of the falls.

The weight of the water forced him to the bottom, but after saving him from Teir'Dal arrows, Tork had faith the Troll's Tears were not about to betray him now. He emerged fifty paces downstream into the warm evening glow, his lungs sucking in the humid, fetid, beautiful air of the lower Feerrott. Four exhausted strokes brought him to the bank. Grasping fistfuls of reeds, he dragged himself out of the water, his mace still locked in his fist as if it were part of him. He was bruised, he was half-frozen, and the salt tang of his own blood played on his lips.

But he was alive.

To his surprise, the hunting knife still hung at his side. The serrated edge had all but severed the leather of his belt, yet somehow it had stayed wedged in place. He drew it, holding it aloft in a silent salute. Somewhere up there, beyond the awesome spectacle of the towering Troll's Tears, Razor and Kattar lay apart, their spirits united in glory.

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"For so long as I live," Tork whispered. "You will not be forgotten."

He looked around at the calm-flowing river and the tangled trees beyond the marsh grass and reeds. He knew exactly where he was. How many times had he stood on the walls of Toskirakk and watched the falls, distant yet almost close enough to touch? How many times had he taken the well-trodden path from the gates to this spot, for weapons practice by the river's edge, or simply to fish and enjoy the cool of the evening? Turning his back on the cliffs and the tumbling water, he set off at a weary pace up the familiar path, knowing that just beyond this final band of trees he would see the city.

It would be good to be home, he realized as he passed into the shadow beneath the leaves, even if home meant an army of dal to kill. The thought did not frighten him. He smiled. His fear had gone, drowned at the bottom of the river or swept away by the crushing torrent of the Troll's Tears.

He thought for a moment about the message he bore. Razor had seemed to understand what it meant, but Tork did not. Once inside the city, he would seek the elder shamans, he decided. They would know how to stop the High Magic of the elves and thwart the general's plan. They had to.

Voices rang out ahead of him.

For an instant he allowed himself to dream that they were the cheering cries of ogres, that his kin had broken the elves' siege and were waiting to welcome him home. The thought began to die in the moment of its conception. These voices were too high, too lyrical.

Gripping the hilt of the hunting knife, Tork lowered himself to the ground and crawled slowly forward through the tangled undergrowth. Beyond the edge of the trees, a low marshy meadow separated the squalid darkness of the Feerrott from the imposing battlements of Toskirakk. The bulk of the dal army had shifted to the far side of the city gates, leaving perhaps a dozen elves scattered about the clearing, their attention fixed upon the high walls before them. They weren't

Teir'Dal, though Tork could see a number of the black-clad killers too, crouching with notched bows in the waist-high grass. The standing elves wore robes, some garishly bright, others stark in their simplicity. As he watched, more robed figures made their way across the meadow, marching in silent procession.

The faint sound of deeper voices drifted down from the distant battlements. Tork could just make out the shapes of armored ogres on the walls, their burnished steel catching the last of the light. They were jeering the small cadre of elves in the meadow, beckoning them closer, to come and meet their deaths. He saw one of the Teir'Dal spit on the ground, rocking back and forth in her evident eagerness to accept the invitation.

The robed figures ignored the shouts and gathered into a single loose circle.

Tork cast his eyes from left to right. With the meadow blocked, he would have to skirt around to reach the city gates and deliver his message. The left was no use. That would just take him back to the river, and leave him exposed to the view of the leftmost Teir'Dal. They wouldn't even have to move; they could riddle him with arrows from where they squatted. That left only the tree line to his right, and he began to carefully shift in that direction.

Before Tork had taken more than a few steps, a dozen Teir'Dal emerged from the trees ahead. They strode forward in two groups of six, flanking a tall elf who dressed like the warriors save for an ornate sigil of green and gold on his chest, and a striking female in a robe that exuded expense and seemed wholly unsullied by the filth of the Feerott. The two were deep in conversation. Tork strained to hear their words, but could make out little over the sound of his own breathing and the insulting cries of his kin. The tall elf was clearly in command, spurring Teir'Dal into action with mere gestures and demanding answers of the female. She, for her part, responded to his agitation with calming smiles and unheard assurances. A dozen paces beyond them, the diminutive

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figure of a halfling stood watching, making notes in a small leather-bound journal.

Finally, the tall elf gave the female a curt nod. Hands on his hips, he turned slowly through a full circle, as if looking for something, and for the first time the sigil on his chest was fully visible. Tork's breath snagged in his gut. Something foul rose in his throat, his body trembling with a sudden surging desire to race forward and strike this monster down. He knew the sigil. All of the Razors had seen it before.

Valinor Tah'Re, the Butcher of Lake Rathetyr himself, was walking toward him across the meadow.

"Closer," Tork murmured. What blessing of the Warlord was this? Just fifty paces more, then a short sprint would bring him face to face with Valinor before the accursed Teir'Dal could even raise their bows. It was said that few elves were more deadly than Valinor. But none who had faced him had ever returned to tell of his skills, so how could anyone know for sure? Valinor glanced back over his shoulder but kept coming, his path taking him toward a low rise in the ground, barely forty paces in front of Tork.

Behind Valinor, the female joined the other robed figures, perhaps twenty in all. They linked hands and bowed their heads, and the rhythmic sound of their low chanting filled the clearing as the soft glow of magic began swirling at their feet.

"Closer," Tork repeated, and smiled. Valinor had reached his chosen spot and turned to face the city, his back to the undergrowth. The Teir'Dal followed his gaze, all eyes on the towering walls beyond the circle. Gripping his mace tight, Tork rose from the shadows.

Before he could take a step, the universe exploded in wind and fire.

Tork landed hard on his back, broken boughs showering his face. His skin stung, scorched and blistered. The whole world had merged into a single white blur softened by his tears. He closed his eyes against the awfulness of it all. The ground beneath him shuddered and roiled. The Feerrott groaned in harmony with the howl of a hot, dust-laden

cyclone that whipped at the trees, his armor, and his flesh with equal bitterness. Even as the rumbling began to subside, the area around him shook with the thud of weighty impacts. He heard the screams of a thousand voices, suddenly aware that one of them was his own.

Silence descended, broken only by distant cries and sobs. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at the exposed twilight sky, the trees above him shorn of leaves, and in some cases snapped in two. Shattered fragments of masonry pockmarked the ground around him. A huge chunk of what had once been a building lay buried in the mire inches from his skull.

Groaning, he rolled onto all fours, brushing at his face and smearing blood across his forehead with the back of his hand. The motion brought fresh pain. With oddly calm detachment, he realized that something deep inside him had snapped or torn. He coughed, blood and phlegm splattering the ground.

Shaking his head, he raised his gaze toward the meadow.

One by one, dal clambered to their feet. Some didn't move at all, but lay twisted and broken in the flattened grass. The female rose jerkily to her full height, her long blonde hair matted with dirt and a streak of crimson vivid against the alabaster white of her skin. Her mouth hung open.

A few of the Teir'Dal were standing, shouting questions to each other. Tork could barely hear them over the ringing in his ears. A robed dal retched violently onto the ground next to a pair of black-clad legs protruding from beneath a huge chunk of masonry, one foot still twitching. The halfling sat with his knees drawn to his chest, tears streaming down his face.

Tork's eyes instinctively flicked to the low rise in front of him. Valinor was there, still alive but prone, trying and failing to make it to his knees. He was utterly vulnerable. Tork took a lurching step forward, picturing the imminent moment when his mace would crush the dal's skull. As he hobbled closer, his eyes drifted beyond his helpless prey, past the stumbling, incoherent dal, to the city he loved. To Toskirakk.

His home lay in ruins.

## The Razor's Edge

He stopped, his legs helpless to carry him further, his mind unable to take it in. He could see the meadow, and the distant mountains, and the fading glow of the sky. But of the majestic walls, high and impregnable, carved from the Rathetyr over a thousand years, walls that had stood against a dozen armies and countless swords, little remained but rubble. Where once temples and markets and arenas stood, only dust and debris remained. Just shattered stones, broken bodies, and the growing moans of agony and despair of an ancient race, decimated in an instant of dal evil.

*"All of Toskirakk will rue the day they provoked Valinor's wrath."* The words of that nameless dal, now just another corpse along the Old Road, rang mockingly in Tork's ears as Valinor dragged himself at last to his feet. The general murmured something to the robed female. She did not reply, but simply raised a finger to point past him.

Valinor turned. His gaze met Tork's.

Tork expected to see gloating in the victor's eyes, to see the satisfaction of not just defeating an opponent, but destroying him utterly. Wasn't that what victory meant? Yet Valinor's eyes showed nothing of that, nor anything but shock and disbelief. His face was streaked with sweat, mingling with the blood that seeped from both his ears.

Behind him, the female dropped to her knees, trembling, yet her lips curled into a satisfied smile.

Valinor's sword still hung in the scabbard at his side, and Tork knew, looking at him, that he was too stunned to draw it. At that moment, Valinor was as awed by the completeness of the devastation as Tork himself. But Tork also knew that it would not last. The ogres were defeated, and Valinor would be feted throughout the dal kingdom. Soon he would embrace the carnage he had unleashed and learn to love his victory. In time, he would seek more. That was the way of things. That was the way of glory.

*Unless I end the bastard's triumph now,* Tork thought. He spat on the ground between himself and Valinor. If there could be no more glory for the ogres, there was still vengeance, now

and forever. And if Valinor died here, there was still a chance for the ogre villages scattered across Norrath and Akashidak, and hope for all the races.

Tork took a step forward, hefting his mace in his blood-encrusted hands, and stopped.

Within the back of his mind, almost buried beneath the layers of pain and rage, a thought drifted up, little more than a whisper. Valinor Tah're's death would rob the elves of their victory, yes, but it would not bring back Toskirakk. It would not give the sacrifice of Razor and Kattar any greater meaning. The whisper grew in strength, becoming a murmur. There was still time for him to run, while the elves remained entranced by the horror they had wrought. He could warn the world of what had happened here today, perhaps buy them time to prepare, to unite against dal aggression.

The general still stared at him, but his eyes were more focused now. At his side, the mage began to giggle at the tears pouring from her face onto the shattered ground.

Tork took a step back, letting calm logic wash over him. By retreating now, he could gather strength to fight another day, when he was not already wounded and spent. He did not have to die...

With a roar, Tork swung his mace down onto a chunk of wall embedded in the mud. The sudden crash of splintering stone cut the mage's laughter short, and she looked up with bemusement. Valinor gave a slight smile and drew his sword. Behind him, two more Teir'Dal rose from the ground, their weapons shining as they took up positions alongside the general.

Tork laughed. He recognized, at last, the tones that filled his head. It was the same wretched part of him that had held him paralyzed while the Teir'Dal massacred his friends, that had forced him to swallow Kattar's insults, that had caused his innards to twitch and roil in pathetic terror. It was the old him. The coward.

"I am not a coward," he growled, then grinned at the surprise on Valinor's face. "I am a warrior!"

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The two Teir'Dal bodyguards rushed at him, and he sprang to meet them. Knocking the first elf's sword aside, he brought his mace down and drove the feeble creature's clavicle into the scrawny elven chest below. A sudden pain flared in his side. He spun, the movement ripping the spear in his ribs out of the second Teir'Dal's hands. Not even bothering to swing his mace, he grabbed the elf's tiny head in his hand and with one convulsive effort drove the bodyguard skull-first into the broken masonry, feeling the bone come apart in his fingers.

Roaring with joy, Tork turned to face Valinor, pulling the spear free of his flesh with a wet rasp. The pain had already softened to nothing. The warm sensation he felt beneath the wound was more than just blood, he knew. Somewhere the Warlord smiled upon him. Tork yearned to bask in the glow of his approval, but the spellflinger was raising her hands and muttering under her breath thirty paces from him. Without pause, he flung the blood-drenched spear at her. The haft smashed into her face and sent the witch stumbling to the ground.

Her scream faded, leaving the air silent but for the soft groans of the dying and the exhortations of a dozen or more Teir'Dal as they raced across the open ground to Valinor. Tork smiled. They would not reach him in time. Only two spear lengths separated them now. "Now you die." Tork grinned as he leapt toward glory.

Valinor side-stepped to his right with serpentine speed. Just as Tork had expected him to do. He checked his apparent swing and reversed it, the heavy mace whistling through the air in line with the general's jaw. The elf's sword came up, turning the mace aside in a shower of sparks, but the impact sent Valinor scrambling back, cursing with pain. Tork followed, this time swinging low at the general's waist. Again, the sword knocked the blow aside.

Tork breathed hard, as did Valinor. The elf glanced sidelong at the Teir'Dal rushing to his aid but still nigh two-hundred paces away. Tork saw the motion and laughed at the general's pale eyes lingering a fraction too long.

He lunged, aiming the head of his mace at the dirt-smearred gap between the dal's eyes.

Almost nonchalantly, the general leaned to the side, the mace whistling harmlessly past his ear. His sword hand flicked, hardly more than a wave of the fingers, and he took two steps back with a smile on his face.

Tork moved to follow, but realized he no longer had his weapon. He glanced down and spotted it lying at his feet. He stared, fascinated, as a drop of crimson landed on the crude steel, then another, until a rain of red spattered the mace along with the hand that still clung to it.

"You fought well," Valinor said in an admiring tone, wiping the red from his sword with a piece of cloth before sliding the blade back into its scabbard. "If only your race had chosen to submit, all this could have been avoided." He made a gesture in the direction of the shattered city that lay behind the Teir'Dal who had slowed their pace to a walk, seeing their general's victory.

Tork peered at the stump of his right arm. There was no pain.

"You gambled that the purge of Quin'Sari would weaken our resolve," Valinor said in a quiet voice. "And you have paid the price." Sudden color flared on his cut-glass cheekbones as he stabbed his hand at the broken walls. "Think you that I wanted to do this? So many dead?"

The Teir'Dal warriors stopped in confusion, shifting on nervous feet, though their eyes, and bows, remained on Tork.

Valinor took a step closer.

Carefully, Tork reached behind him with his left hand and closed his fingers on the hilt of Razor's knife still tucked in his belt. Another four paces and the general would be within reach.

"You made your choice," Valinor said, his voice so low that it seemed he murmured the words for Tork's ears alone. "And I have made mine. Soon every kingdom will know what has transpired here, and they will heed the message. Shed but a single drop of elven blood and I will wash the world in a river

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of yours. I will not hesitate to use this magic again and again to protect the dal from the lesser races." He took another step.

Tork slid the knife free with care. *Give me this one last blessing, Warlord*, he prayed, knowing that the darkness closing in on him was not the night's calm. *Give me this one final honor.*

Valinor sighed. Suddenly he looked exhausted, but still his shadowed eyes burned with passion. "The children of Toskirakk have paid the price for your aggression," Valinor intoned. "Now none will dare to threaten us, lest they share your fate."

Tork brought the knife into view, knowing it was already too late.

The grim-faced Teir'Dal closed ranks to bar the path to their general. As one, they raised their bows. Their arrowheads glinted blood-red in the death throes of sunset, eager for the release that would send them cleaving the air to bury themselves in the ogre warrior's heart.

Excitement bubbled inside of Tork. Now, at last, he understood why Kattar had so willingly stayed behind. His grip on Razor's hallowed blade tightened—it deserved one last taste of dal blood before Tork joined his brethren in the Warfield.

He charged, roaring, into the Warlord's glorious embrace.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



British author Robert Lassen created his first fictional dragon at the age of eight. It was the start of a life-long love of writing fiction, and the genesis of an unwavering dream to earn his living as a novelist. Putting it all temporarily on hold in order to serve his country, Lassen joined the Royal Air Force in 2002. Eleven years and two wars later, he blended his military experience with his love of dark fantasy in his debut novel, *Wrathful Skies* - the first in a trilogy set during the dark depths of the Second World War, when the end truly justified the means and no weapon was beyond consideration, no matter how sinister.

Lassen lives in England with his Californian wife and their two children, and loves every minute he spends facing once again the dragons of his youth on behalf of Sony Online Entertainment.

Keep up to date with what he is doing on his office website, [www.robertlassen.com](http://www.robertlassen.com).