

Snow fell like a shifting fog over the mountains. It sank from the clouds and met the ground in a perfect slab of white and frost. The hollow sound of nothing rang out along its surface, filling the air with loneliness, though no one was there to feel it. The icy floor made its home in a clearing – barely 200 paces across – sleeping idly in a fist of Ironbark. Elder trees that numbered too many to count, standing shoulder-to-shoulder for miles in every direction. A place like this would have been overlooked in almost any lowland forest. Just another open curtain in the trees. Greenery of lesser resolve could not claw through the ice and snow that ruled here, but the flesh of these trees had dulled the axes of men for a thousand years and slept soundly through winters that would eat the bark of any other. They had watched empires rise and burn, felt the earth freeze over and start again. The few men who dared to venture this far into the forest named it a “dead wood.” Nothing breathed here but the wind between the trees. No deer, no wolves, no foxes or boar. Any beast knew better than to venture here. It was a living graveyard - a gallow land slumbering in the bowels of The Green. Stories of the elder forest tickled the ears of every child in the realm from the time they could sit upright. Tales of glory and gold filled their heads, dreaming of the wonders that flowed from the heart of the Fyorgan Mountains. Every generation managed to raise a handful of foolish souls bold enough to wander into the forest, hoping to fell one of the sleeping giants.

Very few had succeeded in harvesting the bark of an elder tree, but those who *did*, lost enough to regret the journey. Most wandered for unknown stretches of time, praying to see home again. They would fumble in circles looking for the trade roads that disappeared into the trees. Industrious houses made their fortunes from lumber, creating roads and infrastructure along the perimeter. But gold can only cut so deep... Often, they gave up their search and succumbed to madness. The journey along the old trade roads was marked by frozen corpses that lived in a cycle of thaw and rot until they were nothing more than bones. Men and women alike were always slaughtered – by their companions, their hunger, or some other horror. One could never tell.

On occasion, a lucky soul would be spat from the trees unscathed. They spent the rest of their days at crowded tables in crowded inns, regaling all who would listen with tales of traveling the old road through the ruins of Aeldreqar. But no matter how fanciful their stage or their audience, they always grew sad when the ale was gone and falsity had nowhere else to go. The truth ate at their minds, and in their own way, they all found death in the end. Men were not made for such a place.

And so, the trees were many and their slumber deep.

But not for all...

Those whose roots grew at the border of this lone clearing dare not close their eyes. To fall idle is to die like a man. They made no sound, they had forgotten how. They even feared to drink the rain.

With waking eyes they watched the void, this hole in the forest. Because at its center, stood something different, something that didn't fit: a single tree – crooked and somehow even older than the rest. Its bark, black like moonstone and fresh-charred cinder. Its limbs, groped towards the forest in a wicked shape. Its shape, perfectly still and yet... ever-changing.

Had men ever managed to lay eyes on its form, they would have truly thought it *dead*.
But men know nothing of the forest.

It forwent leaves in favor of a bright gown of nuts and berries... the dressings of an orchard. They grow unimpeded by the season, alien even to themselves. A small house sparrow tends to them. It is clothed in subtle shades of black and brown, unremarkable to the eye. It does not sing, it does not sleep. Day and night it hops from branch to branch, studying this strange and eclectic crop. Pruning and shaping, discarding those it finds misshapen or frostbitten, droning on and on like a tiny feathered farmer. Once it had tended a nut or berry ripe enough to garner, it carefully removed them and took them back to the safety of her nest. Resting on the thickest branch of the blackened tree, it measured the same height and width, two and one-half spans of tightly woven iron straw. It was far larger and more durable than such a sparrow could ever need, but it would need a storehouse for any bountiful harvest. An opening double the size of the bird was the only way in or out. Inside, the contents were split in two. As one crop began to waste away, it was refreshed by its latest gestation with meticulous precision.

The sparrow labored away, tending to her branches with practiced motions, wielding her beak like a tender blade, thinking only of her storehouse... but on this particular snowfall, for the first time in what could have been an age, she was not alone. A hundred strokes toward the sky was a single raven, hovering on the breeze. Spit from the mouth of a storm or thrown by a northern wind on his way across the mountain range – one couldn't say. But it flew alone.

Lost in the aberration of the Ironwood, it was likely days since it had eaten. It was lost in a simple dream, one of highland mice and caterpillars, or maybe the amethyst berries that grew thick on the plains. Long it had searched with nothing other than the grayness below, but it did not know the nature of this wood.

From its perch on the wind, its eyes caught a faint saturation through the thick-speckled air, set against the snow. Instinct pulled its wings firmly against its body, and it rolled violently towards the earth. It fell half the distance before clumsily catching itself on the frigid air. Gliding on a corkscrew, descending

on the blackened tree. Through the blur of win-bound snow, the colors of scarlet, plum, and apricot grew bigger and richer. The hunger intensified.

An awkward flourish of both wings broke the momentum of its approach as claws extended in anticipation of his landing. They gripped the branch, cutting into the coalish bark.

Opening his ashy, curved bill, he sunk into his legs and rested on the branch. Purple-black feathers flourished to warm his bones and announce his arrival. He turned his head here and there, entranced by the melange that pulled him from the sky, pitch-black eyes harassed every shape that protruded from the branches. Fruits and nuts, more brilliant than even his airborne dreams. The longer he stared, the more they seemed to grow. Fuller and more colorful by the moment. So quickly, they seemed to strain the branch that cradled them. The Raven's eyes grew bigger... darker. It hopped along the branch, investigating each of the alien shapes. Every time his focus narrowed enough to snap at his choice of fruit, another caught his eye. This short-lived infatuation gave chase to every inch of every branch until he found himself at the door of the little sparrow's nest. Straw woven along the nest's opening held her almost-weightless body. She stared silently, at first. Only her head moved, twitching and rotating as she observed the foreign creature that was perched before her. Unusual rhythms coursed through the straw, ones she had not felt in an age. They pulsed, growing as the raven examined his most recent treasure. Several moments passed this way – between the little sparrow and her colossus. Silence of the known and the unknowing.

Finally, the cracked and misshapen bill lurched for one of the vivid orbs, ripping it from the branch. As the color pulped within the maw, unbridled pleasure engulfed him – flavor was nonexistent before now. His mind groped at comprehension. Again and again, it tried but failed all the same.

A tiny trill cut through the silence. The raven wheeled to its side. He glared down his bill towards the nest, fixated on the little brown sparrow.

As they locked eyes, the hunger evolved from a concept into a desperate and all-consuming pang. It bellowed with an unearthly sound, and the air became stale and sick. The events had set, and what came was now inescapable.

Black wings filled the sparrow's vision as the raven sprung towards her. Both feet wrapped around the bark, claws digging into the branch. The dwarfed in his presence. Snow eddied around them in a whirlwind as the raven violently beat his wings against the air, as if he was trying to carry away the whole of the vibrant hoard.

The sparrow was unmoved. She continued to stare, unphased by the titan at her door. Once more she trilled, turning her head to look more closely at the purple-black wall of feathers. The hunger swelled.

As it cocked its head, the raven's maw opened, then crashed towards the tiny bird. It clamped down halfway along the sparrow's body and tightened with a horrible sound. The raven carved paths through the air, violently thrashing his prey. Over and over again, he blindly slammed the bundle of feathers into the branch like a hammer to a nail. His fit ceased as he broke through the top of the nest. The sparrow hung from his mouth lifeless and unrecognizable – a bloodied mixture of bone and feathers. She slid down his throat like another bit of pulped fruit.

His newest treasure lay within the wet reds of the nest. Again he abandoned control, and the sparrow's yield quickly joined her as the raven snapped at the mounds she had collected. Every color mixed and swirled together, expanding the flavor of comprehension. Time ceased to move. Snow no longer fell from the sky. New thoughts and understanding began to flood his mind. His stasis brought the story of the mountains that carried him here, every song and color that danced on the wind – the overwhelming history of the world brimmed the very limits of his mind. All was known, all was understood. He had transcended the winged form nature had given and become something else entirely.

But now he knew the law of this wood.

Dread gripped his bones. New language erupted from his mind – *I-I must leave... I cannot remain!* He leaped backward from the nest in a panic, nearly falling from the branch. Both wings began to flog the thin air until they lifted him upwards.

Away, away!

There was no time to exercise this new power, all it gave was new and more terrible words for fear. This... terrible fear. More and more of the same in different tongues and inflections. Every flap of his wings brought one older than the last. Suddenly, the fear began to drain from the raven's mind. One at a time, they crept back into the void. As they did, he noticed his wings were no longer flapping. Nor were they carrying him through the air. They had relaxed and he was cold... wet.

A thick hedge of deep crimson seethed from the mangled bird, eating away at the icy slab. Its blackened eyes, now grayer than before, were as wide as its skull would allow. It began to retch and gasp, every exhale spat blood into the air. It came not with an articulate thought, but an empty, shrill, and raspy "AARRGGKK." Its labored breathing built into another caw. Again and again and again, he screamed. He gasped and coughed and spat until his body forgot how.

His belly lay cleaved in two – like a newborn riverhead.

The only other sound to be heard was that of the little sparrow. She hopped side-to-side, retrieving and gathering her misplaced crop. A small pile formed just outside the growing red hollow. The raven watched as time reversed before him. He no longer understood. After all, how much can a raven truly comprehend? One last caw clawed its way into the air, but no sound emerged. There was nothing left to be said. Nothing took shape except the little sparrow.. The g drew its final breath.

She wistfully darted left and right. She trilled and examined the corpse. All the crop that could be tenably recovered had been set aside. Now she just watched as her former captor died. Dumb, lame, and alone.

The bloody pool had turned into a steaming hole, the only blemish in a perfectly white sheet. Hunger could no longer be restrained. A muffled and steady creaking vibrated deep within the snow. It grew louder and louder until the sparrow felt the vibrations in her feet, the same as before. She leaped into the air to escape what came.

Pillars of cinder-black wood crept out of white slate, perfectly in unison slithering towards the sky. They looked like tentacles, emerging from the earth, set on a subtle curve to grip their prey. A wicked creak sounded from their bark as they coiled tighter around the dead bird, breaking its bones one at a time. Snapping them like hay straw. With a final twist, it softened the corpse into a vessel of crunchy paste, and the dark fist of feathers and bark disappeared back into the snow.

It was not long until the snow had filled the hole and the memory of anything being there at all.

Little sparrow watched from her branch until all she could see was white. After tilting her head here and there, she began putting her nest back in order. She must return to work, she thought.

Another may follow soon. I must be prepared.

The trees watched and feared now more than ever.

It had awoken.