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EDGE OF DESTINY

Coming December 28, 2010 from  **POCKET STAR
BOOKS**

AN EXCERPT FROM
GUILD WARS®
EDGE OF DESTINY

J. Robert King

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FOOLS AND FOLLOWERS

Don't move!"
♦ The huge wolf snapped his head upright, eyes blazing.

"Stay exactly like that."

No one else in the world could order Garm to sit still. He was, after all, a dire wolf—five feet tall at the shoulder and twenty stone, with jet-black hackles and fire-red eyes. He was made to lope and chase and drag down. Not to sit still. Not to listen. But he did.

For Eir Stegalkin, he did.

Garm flicked a glance toward the norn warrior. She was tall, too, her hand rising to the rafters twelve feet up and snagging a mallet that hung there and bringing the thing down in her brawny grip. Her eyes darted toward Garm, who glanced forward again and tried to look fierce.

It wasn't that he feared this woman and her big hammer, which she swung just then with terrific force,

pounding a massive chisel and striking a wedge of granite from a huge block. Garm hazarded a look at that block, amorphous and pitted from chisel strokes. Soon, it would be a statue. A statue of him. But that wasn't why he sat still.

He sat still because she was the alpha.

The mallet fell again, the chisel bit, the block calved. More chunks of stone crashed to the floor, first in wedges and then shards and chips and finally a shower of grit.

Garm's figure was taking shape.

Eir stepped back from the sculpture and dragged an arm over her sweating brow. Her face was statuesque, her eyes moss green. She had drawn her mane of red hair back out of the way, bound by a leather thong. The leather work-apron she wore freed her arms but protected her chest and legs against stone shards. An intense look grew on her face, eyes etching out the shape in the stone. "This could be my masterpiece."

Garm looked around the log-hewn workshop at her other sculptures—a rearing ice-bear, a great elk with sixteen-foot antlers, a coiling snow serpent that stretched from floor to rafters, and of course her army of norn warriors captured in stone and wood. They hadn't started out as an army, but individuals who had come to be immortalized before going off to fight the Dragonspawn—the champion of the Elder Dragon Jormag.

Now only their statues remained.

"Hail, house of Stegalkin!" came a shout at the door. A norn warrior thrust his head in—long hair like a horse's tail and a face like what might be beneath. "By the Bear, the place is packed!"

Someone behind the man hissed, thumping his shoulder, "Them's statues!"

The warrior in the lead nodded, his hair flicking as if to shoo flies. "Course they are. Statues. That's why we're here." He paused to hiccup. "Soon, one of them will be me. I mean, I'll be one of them. I mean, I'll get my own. By the Raven, you brew it strong, Uri."

Eir stood there unmoving except for the vein that pulsed in her temple. "Patrons." With mallet and chisel in hand, she strode toward the door.

Garm broke from his pose to lope at her heels.

The man in the doorway nearly stumbled off the threshold.

Eir said, "You have come full of . . . courage, but it smells of hops."

"Yes!" the man enthused, glancing back at a group of twenty or so norn warriors swaying in the courtyard. "I am Sjord Frostfist."

"Sjord Foamfist?" she mispronounced, raising an eyebrow.

"Exactly. And I have come by Snow Leopard and Raven and Bear—by every living beast—to declare war on the Dragonspawn!"

Eir nodded. "You've come to the wrong place. I am not the Dragonspawn."

Sjord laughed. "Of course you aren't. You are norn, like me."

"Not quite like you."

"No! Of course not," Sjord said, suddenly earnest. "You're an artist. While I carve up monsters, you carve up rocks."

The warriors laughed.

Eir's fist flexed around the mallet handle as if she were about to carve Sjord himself.

"No offense meant, of course. Somebody has to make statues of us."

Garm looked to his master, wondering why she didn't just kill the man. She could. This man and all the others. Or Garm could. With just a word from her, he would tear the man's throat out, but Eir never gave the word.

"You want a statue in your image."

Sjord put his finger to his nose, indicating that she understood exactly.

"Pick any you wish," she said, gesturing to the statues behind her. "Brave young fools just like you, who gathered at the moot and drank and decided to save the world. I've met you before, a hundred times. Each of these men went to fight the Dragonspawn."

Sjord's grin only widened. "Then we understand each other." He thrust a bag of coins into her hand.

Eir stared levelly at him. "Take your money. Go rent a room. Go lie down and sleep. You cannot defeat the Dragonspawn."

Sjord stepped back, affronted, and the warriors behind him raised their eyebrows. "You are saying we should give up? You are saying that our people should get used to fleeing our homelands? Why do you oppose a man who would fight our foe?"

"I do not oppose you. I *warn* you."

"Warn me of what?"

"You cannot defeat the Dragonspawn. You will go to fight him but will end up fighting *for* him."

Sjord shook his head. "I will fight him and kill him, and you will commemorate what I do. There is your payment."

Eir slipped open the drawstring. The bag held a small fortune in silver. She sighed. "Come, Sjord Frostfist. Let us select the block of wood that will be your memorial."

"Monument," he corrected. "And, it will be stone, not wood."

"Silver buys wood. Gold buys stone."

Sjord scowled, hanging his head. "Wood, then."

Eir pressed past him and strode into the courtyard, with Garm loping behind. "Fir is better than stone, anyway," she said, passing a row of blocks and boles along one wall. "Fir is alive. It grows out of stone. Its roots break the stone into sand."

"Yes," Sjord said, the hopeless twinkle returning to his eyes. "Which of these great boles will become my statue?"

"This one." Eir stopped beside a fir trunk three feet wide and ten feet tall. "This one will immortalize you."

Sjord stared at it as if he could see his own figure trapped in the wood. He slowly nodded. "Good, then. Carve me."

Eir nodded grimly, hoisting the huge bole and planting it on the ground in the center of the courtyard. "You, stand over there."

Sjord moved into position and gestured excitedly to his comrades, who gathered around, quaffing from their flagons.

"Don't move!" she ordered.

Sjord snapped his head up, trying to look ferocious. Garm sympathized.

As the man posed, Eir returned to her workshop. A few moments later, she emerged, wearing a carving belt filled with dozens of blades, from axes and hatchets to knives and chisels. The band of warriors gazed in awe as Eir strode up before the fir bole.

“Spirit of Wolf, guide my work.”

A few of the armsmen tittered, but their laughter tumbled to silence as Eir brought the first blades out—a great axe in either hand. Both weapons began to rotate in slow, deadly circles above Eir’s head.

Garm sat down to watch the show.

These warriors had no idea what they had unleashed. Eir was no mere sculptor. That was no little prayer she’d spoken. It was an invocation, channeling the powers of the boreal forests to make her art.

And they did.

Out of that thunderhead of swinging steel, an axe dived down to shear away the bark from one edge of the bole. The other axe followed like a thunderstroke, stripping the opposite side. The blades rose again, spinning, and fell. The broad bole grew slender. Already, it was taking on the lines of the man.

Sjord no longer posed, but gaped.

Eir circled the fir bole, axes slicing down in rhythm, cleaving away all that was not Sjord Frostfist. Halfway through this ecstatic dance, the axes slid back into the belt, and the hatchets came out. They chopped at the form, flinging off chips and rounding the wood into the figure of the man.

“Straighten up!” she reminded without stopping.

Sjord jerked back into his noble pose.

And just in time, for the daggers and chisels were out now, fitted to sleeves on her fingers that brought them to bear with intricate care on the wooden form. Now it was down to shavings, curled ribbons of wood cascading around the rough figure.

“It’s me,” said Sjord breathlessly.

And so it seemed, the bole taking the shape of the man.

“Bear, guide my work.”

And then it was not knives and chisels in her hands but living claws, long and sharp, sliding along every contour of the figure. And it was not the lashing brawn of a norn warrior beneath that apron but the ancient muscle of a grizzly. The artist had been transfigured in her art.

Then she stepped back from the figure, the bear aura melting away. She was Eir Stegalkin once more, artist and warrior, slumping on a nearby bench and staring at what she had made.

It was magnificent. The sculpture was the man—Sjord Frostfist in wood. Indeed, the man and the statue stared at each other with such unrelenting amazement that few could have told them apart.

The swaying brothers began to chant, “Sjord! Sjord! Sjord! Sjord!” They hoisted the man who would lead them into doom.

“Not me!” Sjord protested, laughing. “The statue! The statue!”

The men lowered their friend to the ground and snatched up the carving. “Off to the market! Off to the market!” they cried joyously. “Sjord will stand forever in the market!”

“And nowhere else,” Eir murmured as Garm loped up beside her. She was spent. These ecstatic moments of creation always left her drained. She looked down at Garm and said bitterly, “He can’t save us. He can’t even save himself.”

That night, Eir couldn’t sleep. Garm had seen many such nights. The spinning in the bed, the pacing, the muttering, the sketching. She was imagining something, conceiving it as other women conceived children.

Garm rose from his blanket and trotted over to the workbench and looked down at the page where she drew.

It was an army of wood and stone.

For a week, she didn’t carve but only sketched in her workshop or paced through the courtyard or stared past the bridges that joined Hoelbrak to the Shiverpeaks all around. Garm had seen this look before. Eir was waiting for something. He knew by the way she sharpened her blades and oiled her bow.

A fortnight later, as the cold sun descended into clouds, the sentries of Hoelbrak began to shout.

“Invasion! Invasion! Icebrood!”

Eir turned from a sketch and strode to the wall where her battle-gear hung. She dragged off her work tunic and strapped on a breastplate of bronze. She girded herself and threw on a cape of wool, strapped on boots, and slung a quiver charged with arrows. To these, she added also her carving belt.

She looked to Garm and said, "Today, I carve Sjord Frostfist—again." Lifting her great bow, Eir headed for the door. "Come."

Garm followed his alpha out into the courtyard, where the shout of sentries was joined by the thud of boots. Eir charged into the lane, Garm loping beside her. Bjorn the blacksmith spotted them and trotted from his smithy, iron armor clattering on his smoke-blackened figure. They passed the weaver's workshop, and Silas emerged with short bow and shafts. Olin the jeweler and Soren the carpenter formed up with them as well. They were the crafters of the settlement, and Eir was their leader.

"Some of these icebrood will seem to be norn," she advised as they rushed down the lane toward the northern bridge, "but they'll not be. They are newly turned, their minds stolen by the Dragonspawn. They'll still have flesh and blood within their frozen husks, and killing them will be like killing our own kin."

Bjorn shook his head in anger. "We send our fools north, and the Dragonspawn sends its armies south."

"There are other, more deadly icebrood, too," Eir reminded. "They're mindless beasts of ice. There's no reasoning with them. Only shattering them."

Beside her, Silas nodded. He was a thin norn in the twilight of his fighting days. "So, for the ones that look like norn, it's arrows then, yes?" he asked, hoisting his short bow.

"Yes. We must kill as many as possible on the tundra before they reach the forts, but if the horde is great, the battle will push past the forts and reach the bridges to

the hunting hall.” She glanced at the rest of her militia. “Then there’ll be plenty of work for all of us.”

There was no more time for words. The group ran onto a bridge that stretched from Hoelbrak out to the fields beyond. At the end of the bridge stood a wooden defense-work that already bristled with warriors, including Knut Whitebear and his handpicked warriors—the Wolfborn. More norn streamed in each moment.

Eir led her group past the cluster of fighters to a thinly defended ridge and gazed out on the darkening northern fields. Mottled moss and torn lichen stretched to the misty distance, beneath towering mountains of ice.

“I don’t see anything,” Silas said, squinting.

“There,” Eir replied.

Out of the mist emerged a brutal horde. A dozen appeared at first, no match for the hundred norn along the ridge. But more came with each moment. Soon the icebrood were as many as the defenders, and then twice their number.

“Are they hardened yet or newly turned?” Silas asked. “My eyes are thick.”

“Most look newly turned,” Eir said. Indeed, the enemy were covered with a thin crust of rime, though their eyes were dead things.

“Arrows, then!” Silas said, hoisting his short bow and holding it somewhat shakily.

“Yes, Silas,” replied Eir as she lifted two arrows and nocked them on her bow and drew back. “Wait until they reach the red lichen, so that you can see them and your bow can reach them.” With that, Eir let fly, and both shafts soared out above the ridge and climbed the

sky, seeming to sail forever. They vanished in the darkling air, but a moment later, two of the distant figures fell, pinned to the ground. Even as they dropped, she loosed two more shafts, and as they skimmed the sky, she unleashed two more.

Four down. Six. Eight. Then other archers began to fire. In their dozens, the icebrood were falling, but in their hundreds, the invaders bounded over the bodies and kept on coming. When they reached the red lichen, Silas shot his shaft, and it found its mark in the forehead of an ice-caked foe.

“Not hardened yet!” Silas shouted. “Bring them down!”

Now their foes were close enough to hear, and what a howling sound they made! They had been driven mad with the desire to serve their lord.

Eir had already sent fivescore arrows, and she drew the last two from her quiver and buried them in a pair of icebrood. The rest crashed on the ridge like a tidal wave.

“Wolf, guide my work,” Eir murmured. Her eyes glowed with battle and her hands glowed with axes. She swung them overhead in a storm of steel.

An icebrood, newly turned, flung himself over the ridge and came down with a swinging axe. “Die!”

Eir leaped back from the blade and brought her own around to split the creature from shoulder to hip.

Another dead man leaped the ridge and bounded toward her.

Her other axe fell and broke the man like bread.

“Fall back!” Eir cried. “Give them room to land.”

The crafters complied, stepping back while mauls and axes and swords rained down.

Eir was in the midst, her knives and chisels now slung on her fingers. They flew as if she were carving wood instead of frozen flesh. They flayed skin and muscle from bone.

Beside her, Garm leaped to latch onto throats and bring down more of the enemy.

Bjorn meanwhile pounded the icebrood as if they were iron.

Olin and Soren fought back-to-back, cudgel and pry bar wreaking havoc.

Which left only Silas, the weaver, who had felled two of the creatures before they reached the ridge.

Now two felled him. One ripped out his belly while the other smashed his face.

Eir heard Silas's scream and turned to ram her chisels into the back of Silas's attacker. The steel sank to her fingertips, and red foam bubbled hot from the wounds. The rime-covered norn, gasping, rolled from Silas. Garm clamped onto the neck of the other icebrood and shook him like a rag.

Eir looked down at the weaver, her old friend. It was too late. Silas was gone.

Face and belly—he was gone.

Eir roared, her blades flinging out to slash the throats of two more icebrood. They fell beside her as another came on—a man with hair like a horse's tail.

She knew this man, though his face was smashed, his nose canted to one side, his teeth gone where some great fist had struck him. His flesh was sealed in ice. His eyes were white, filled with the fury of the Dragonspawn.

“Bear, guide my hands,” prayed Eir as she strode toward him.

It was just as it had been back in the sunlit courtyard. It was a storm of steel, slicing away what was not Sjord Frostfist. As she worked, she became the Bear—transforming so that the work of chisels became the work of claws. The only difference, this time, was that she carved flesh instead of wood.

Soon, the bloodied bear stepped back, and only pieces were on the ground before her.

That’s how she fought the rest of the battle. That’s how she avenged Silas and defended Hoelbrak.

When the battle was done, the defenders had prevailed. Even so, it seemed as if the Dragonspawn had won.

Back in her workshop that night, the bloodied woman stripped away her armor. She poured steaming kettles into her bath and washed the battle away. Dressed in a simple tunic, she used the water to bathe her wolf as well.

Wet and weary, Garm retreated to his blanket. He drifted into fitful sleep, haunted by the monsters he had fought.

Eir, though, was haunted by something else. She wandered among her army of statues, at last reaching the one where she always stopped. It was an aged norn male, his once-proud figure stooped a bit, his head bald, his eyes enfolded in rings. But a hopeful smile was on his lips.

“We stopped them, Father,” Eir said simply, looking

down at the statue's feet. "I wish others had stopped them for you." Her hand strayed into his, carved of stone and cold. She had carved that hand, had known it so well from holding it just this way when she was a girl—before the icebrood came.

"I'm going to kill the Dragonspawn, Father. I'm going to kill the Dragonspawn and the Elder Dragons themselves."

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