

It was a peaceful evening in the Forsworn camp, and several people were gathered around the fire. Cyhrain was done with their evening bout of darting about, running into things, and was now resting next to Rowan in beast form, their head in his lap. Rowan, one of the two Briarhearts of the camp, sat cross-legged, and had one hand on Cyhrain's head, scratching the top of their head absent-mindedly as he gathered his thoughts for the story he wanted to tell.

It would be a tale of how the Briarhearts came about, so it would be fitting if he told it, being one himself. That, and the camp's other Briarheart angrily shot down any requests. What a jerk, Rowan thought, involuntarily, but then brushed it aside. The man probably wasn't the most outgoing person before the ceremony, and was content with hammering away at pieces of armor at the forge. So, it fell to him to tell the story tonight.

"Long ago, the Reach had a King. Faolan, the Red Eagle. He was a warrior without match, and he united the Reach under his rule. But it was not to last, and the Empire came from the south, and one by one, the Reach elders surrendered. Red Eagle alone stood against the invaders, and for that, he was exiled. He disappeared into the hills, and gathered those who still held onto the old ways. He and his people were like we are now, the first of the Forsworn: routed from our own land, untamed and unbroken, vengeful spirits haunting those seeking to take over the Reach."

Rowan paused to take a sip from his tea mug.

"One bleak and cold night, a cloaked figure approached Red Eagle's camp. His men were about to chase the stranger away, but Red Eagle stopped them. He went out to greet the figure who revealed herself to be a hagraven. She had come with offers of strength and power beyond measure. But, as it often is, the offer had a steep price."

Rowan stopped and put a hand over the open wound on his chest, where a briar heart was nestled, rooted into his veins.

"His heart, and with it, his free will, and humanity. Still, Faolan agreed, and so the first Briarheart came to be."

He had to stop here again for a few moments, considering the implications for himself. He had to learn how to be human and how to feel all over again, something most Briarhearts either didn't bother with, or didn't have a chance to do.

"They say his mind wasn't his own these days," Rowan paused, a shadow passing over his features, and he wondered if telling this story was a good idea because memories resurfaced that he'd rather not be dealing with right now.

Cyhrain, who until now had been resting, unusually still, with their head in his lap, stirred and nudged at him in support. Rowan glanced down at the werewolf, and gave them a weak smile, before continuing the story.

"He led his men on many raids, and in time, the invaders were chased out. The Empire was routed, but there would be no peace for the Reach, as they came back tenfold. Red Eagle stood his ground, and he fought off thousands, but has fallen with the night. His warriors found him dying in a pool of blood, and his eyes were clear, free of whatever took hold of his mind. He was carried to a tomb carved out for him in the hills, and wherever his blood fell to the ground, Briar trees grew, and all the Briar trees we have in the Reach come from those."

Cyhrain sat up next to him, shifting back to their human form, and during a lull in the story, they interjected: "I heard that his tomb's overgrown with briar trees, but no one's ever returned from there. But, hey, it's rumors. Just a creepy story I heard around another fire once."

Rowan nodded, and continued: "In the end, he gave to his people: his blood, his life, and his sword, and it is said that when the Reach is ours again, his descendants will bring him his sword back, and he will rule the Reach once again."

People were quiet, the fire started to dwindle, so someone poked around the coals and logs, and the fire jumped up, making Rowan's red hair gleam in the shifting light, and reflecting off his blind eyes as if they were opals. Cyhrain stared at him, transfixed. Thoughts were churning in their feverish mind, until one rose to the top.

"What if you're the descendant?"

Rowan gave them a sad laugh.

"I... I don't know."