

The Law Beyond Fang

Morning came slowly to the northern valley. The light arrived before any warmth, turning the gray sky a pale yellow. Frost clung to the pine branches and each breath carried the smell of frozen earth.

Buck stood on a ridge above the valley. Below him, the iced river curved between dark trees, its surface buried under a fresh layer of snow. When a branch snapped in the distance, Buck's ears shifted outwards slightly. Beside Buck stood Siva, a silver-furred wolf, whose ears were just as keen.

Buck spotted the first sign of movement near the frozen river, where the ice thinned along a narrow bend between snow-covered rocks. It was a weak caribou, separated from its herd. Buck and Siva lowered their bodies to signal to the rest of the pack, and they all moved towards it.

Once they were within reach, Koda, the largest wolf in the pack, moved to the left of the animal without hesitation, his heavy steps forcing it away from the trees. Mira, a sharp-eyed wolf known for her speed, darted forward and back.

But Ash approached it too soon. The young wolf rushed at the caribou's left hind leg, snow spraying under his paws. The caribou kicked hard and nearly caught him. Buck snapped sharply as a warning. Ash fell back immediately, this time watching more carefully.

Soon, the chase tightened. Tarn, a dark-furred wolf with a torn ear and ghost-like silence, stayed wide in the trees, and finally cut off the caribou's escape. Mira struck at its legs, each bite aimed precisely at the same weak point. When the caribou fell to its knees, Buck ended the struggle with one clean bite. Within moments, the valley grew quiet again.

When the pack feeds, Buck waits. Only after the others finish does Buck step forward. Ash had noticed this, and for the first time, he began to eat only when Buck did. Buck had learned after several years at the head of the pack that leadership shows itself in the smallest ways.

It was Siva who first noticed the scent. Her head lifted, turning toward the west. Beneath the strong smell of pine was something complex: leather mixed with burning wood. It was humans.

Buck found Elias Rowe alone near the edge of the valley. Unlike the other hunters Buck had encountered, Elias walked with extra care, stopping often to study the nooks of the land. When he bent down, his movements were slow. Draped on his shoulders was a wool parka that showed years of wear and repairs. When he set up his camp, he had chosen a spot where the wind would carry the smoke away.

Buck watched him from the trees, as Elias knelt by the fire, sharpening a knife and humming softly to himself. After several polishes, he spoke quietly in Buck's direction, "I know you're there."

Preparing to attack, Buck stepped out from the trees cautiously. His head lowered, his eyes fixed on the man. As the distance between them closed, tension grew like tightening wire, but Elias still did not grab the bow resting beside him.

Instead, he kept his hands where Buck could see them. After a moment, he reached slowly into his pack and pulled out a strip of dried meat. He placed it between them and stepped back. Buck did not take it, as he had learned long ago that most humans could not be trusted.

Elias turned away first, returning to the fire. He resumed his work, repairing a broken strap, as if Buck were no more dangerous than the cold. Realizing that Elias had no intentions of fighting him, Buck snatched the meat and disappeared.

Winter grew deeper, and Elias stayed in the valley. And it was Buck who allowed him to do so. As snow climbed the ridges and the nights grew longer, Elias worked quietly, trapping small animals, though far from the wolves' territory.

One night, wind slammed into the valley, and snow whipped sideways. Ash's cry tore through the wind like the snapping of a bone. A huge chunk of snow had broken from a tree above Ash, causing him to take a tumble from a narrow ridge. He had fallen into a shallow ravine.

Buck reached him quickly, only to find that Elias was already there. The hunter had been exploring nearby when he heard Ash's wail. He climbed down without hesitation. He worked carefully, using a branch to free Ash's trapped leg. Elias

wrapped the leg with cloth torn from his sleeve and tied it tight. When he finished, he slowly backed away. Buck stepped forward and pushed Ash toward safer ground.

From then onwards, Buck began to visit Elias at his camp every evening. They would set out in the wild, tracking deer and caribou. Buck led him along the outer ridges, where the wind carved the snow into sharp drifts. He guided him down to a hidden hideout by a frozen stream, whose surface cracked under their weight. Once, Buck even brought him to the edge of where his pack sometimes rested. There, tall trees closed around them, creating a haven where the wind seemed to forget its place.

One dusk, Elias and Buck were camping in the quiet hollow beside the frozen stream. The campfire cracked softly, while the green lights of the Aurora Borealis drifted across the sky. Elias stared into the flames, his eyes watering. For a long moment, neither of them moved.

"My father died in a place like this," he said.

Buck felt the weight in his words.

The next morning, Buck and his pack left to hunt, tracking an elk herd across the northern flats. By midday, they had brought down several elk, and the pack fed well, their bellies full.

When they returned, Ash, who had stayed behind to rest his injured leg, was gone. The pack followed Ash's scent trail, which led them in the direction of Elias's camp. Ash would not have left on his own; his injured leg would never have carried him that far. The den was torn with signs of struggle. Buck wondered if Ash had gotten himself into trouble again, and Elias had come to his aid. As they came closer, Buck began to feel a great surge of fear. The wind carried unfamiliar human scents, and the sharp smell of iron made his fur rise.

At the heart of the clearing where Elias's camp had once been, Ash now struggled inside a metal trap cage. And around him stood three hunters and Elias. Their bows rested in their hands.

The smell of old blood drifted from their clothing, carrying a memory Buck knew too well. Years earlier, he had destroyed a group of Yeehat hunters who had killed John Thornton.

Buck stiffened. He had walked beside Elias. Hunted alongside him. Trusted him. Allowed him near the pack. Yet somehow, it had escaped him all this time that Elias was a Yeehat. The snow and smoke must have hidden it. Or perhaps Buck had simply wanted to trust him, a man who carried the same kindness as John Thornton did.

Now he understood. Growling, Buck stepped into the clearing. Siva and Koda stepped out from either side of him. The other wolves followed closely, encircling the hunters. The hunters aimed their arrows, prepared to shoot.

Elias's eyes met Buck's.

"He's the one," he said coldly. "The Ghost Dog."

The gentleness had vanished from his expression. His jaw was tight, his eyes intensely fixed, showing no trace of the man Buck had known.

The fight started fast. Koda lunged at one hunter with his full weight, slamming into his chest and sending both of them crashing into the snow. Mira struck

another, her teeth flashing as she snapped at his arm. Tarn weaved through the trees like smoke, forcing the hunters to turn again and again.

Elias fired his bow at Buck, narrowly missing him and striking near his paws.

Buck pounced towards him seconds later, and the two of them collided hard, rolling across the snow. Buck's teeth caught Elias's sleeve instead of his throat.

As they crashed down, Elias's bow snapped from his hands. He struck Buck with his fist, twisted free, and drew a knife.

They began to circle each other slowly. Buck watched the knife as Elias watched Buck's shoulders, both of them waiting for the moment the other might spring.

Both were waiting for the other to make the first mistake.

Ash yelped again, causing Buck's eyes to snap toward the sound for just a heartbeat. That brief distraction was enough for Elias to spring forward first.

Elias pinned Buck down. For a moment, they struggled for balance, tearing through the snow together. But Elias's strength was no match for Buck's, as

Buck eventually twisted his way out. As Buck was about to sink his teeth into Elias's leg, the knife came down.

Pain ripped across Buck's right side. He staggered back, his breath leaving him in a sharp rush. Warm blood spread through his fur, and his legs nearly gave way beneath him. Elias pressed forward. Buck forced himself to stand his ground. Although the pain burned, he lunged again. This time, his jaws closed around Elias's collar. He could feel Elias's pulse against his teeth. Buck knew that if he bit down harder now, that would end everything.

But Buck noticed that Elias had stopped fighting. Alarmed by the sudden lack of struggle, Buck hesitated for a moment. Elias held his hand close to his heart, clutching a small bone and leather necklace.

Buck froze. He had seen this necklace once before, around the neck of the Yeehat chief on the night the forest had been enveloped with blood and fire.

Buck, at last, understood that Elias had come for revenge.

Instantaneously, a flood of memories came rushing back. Buck remembered the camp of death. Pete lying still in his blankets. Skeet by the edge of the dark pool. And beneath the muddy water, John Thornton. The rage that followed returned to him, the night he had torn the Yeehats apart. Violence had answered violence. And now it returned again.

Buck felt the presence of his pack behind him. Ash. Siva. Koda. Their safety rested on his choices now.

And this man was the same. Another protector. Another leader. Another creature answering loss with fury. In that, Elias earned Buck's respect.

Buck realized that killing him would not be the end of this fight. Another would come. Then another.

Elias went still under Buck's hold, continuing to breathe hard. Around him, the other hunters laid motionless in the snow, while Buck's pack stood tense and ready. Siva had already torn open the cage, and Ash was reunited with the pack.

Finally, Buck loosened his grip.

Despite no longer being pinned down, Elias did not reach for his knife again. He looked at the wolves, then back at Buck. He understood that this was not his victory. More importantly, he understood that Buck had spared him.

With Elias still on the ground, Buck lifted his head and let out a long, low howl.

The sound rolled across the clearing. One by one, the wolves stepped back.

Then Buck turned away towards the forest, with the others following behind.

"What is the *Ghost Dog, Chief?*" a young boy asked.

Elias looked down at him, a small smile forming beneath the lines the northern winters had carved into his face. The firelight flickered, as the other villagers listened.

"The *Ghost Dog* runs at the head of his pack," Elias said. "It is true he is death to his enemies. But above everything else, he is brave and loyal."

And so, in the North, the story of the *Ghost Dog* began to change.