

# MY BOOK

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## THIS IS ORCUS

**D**rizzle fell in shimmering sheets, iridescent in beams of sunlight piercing sword-silver clouds. Fog curled around the low hills, turning them into drifting islands adrift in a sea of mist. Yes, spirits dwell here—as in any world. Goodwill. Peace. Even love. But one spirit rules above all in this world: survival.

A bellowing roar echoed across the brush-covered hills. The earth trembled beneath the weight of something massive approaching. Creatures scurried into the underbrush as the gigantic three-horned crocker emerged from the mist. Standing taller than the oldest trees, its massive body was covered in thick, leathery hide, sun-baked and cracked like ancient earth. Three savage horns, gleaming with primal menace protruded from its enormous skull: two above its eyes and one atop its snout, each as long as a full-grown ogre. The beast's head was shielded by a bony frill studded with jagged spikes, swung from side to side as it surveyed its domain. Its golden eyes, each the size of a shield, scanned the surrounding hills with predatory intensity. The crocker's nostrils flared, catching the scent of a rival

on the wind, causing its powerful muscles to ripple beneath its armored skin. Four pillar-like legs, each ending in three-toed feet tipped with obsidian claws, supported its bulk. The beast's claws twitched in agitation, gouging deep furrows in the earth. As long as its body and covered in bony plates, a heavy tail swung behind it, clearing small trees and boulders with ease.

The three-horned crocker let out a bellowing roar that echoed across the steppes, a primal challenge that sent shivers through the very bones of the land. This was no mere animal but a living relic of a more savage age, a testament to Orcus's raw power and untamed ferocity.

Rumbling out of a hole in the hill's side, the roka roka lurched from its lair, a nightmarish fusion of reptile and insect. Its segmented body, the length of three war mammoths, writhed as it emerged. Thick, leathery hide covered its torso, mottled with iridescent scales that shimmered in the dim light. The beast snorted and shook, sending gouts of dust cascading from its armored exoskeleton. Six chitinous legs tipped with hooked claws gouged the earth on each body segment. Its head was a grotesque blend of reptilian features and insectoid mandibles, with eerily bulbous, multifaceted eyes glowing. The roka roka's lips curled back, revealing rows of black fangs dripping with caustic venom.

The two behemoths rush each other headlong and collide like. The side of one beast suffered the ripping away of muscle, tendon, and organs, leading to shuddering, gasping, and groaning blood gushed from gaping wounds, painting the hill crimson. The three-horned crock teetered backwards, sending tremors through the ground. Warm intestines slithered free like giant snakes fleeing a toppled

boulder. The sound of flesh being ripped from the bone echoed across steppes. To the victor go the spoils.

In this land, survival dwells on the tip of every claw, fang, and blade. It abandons the weak and worships the strong. This land is Orcus and in Orcus, survival dominates all.

## THE JAGGED KEEP

**T**hrough the swirling mist and over the undulating hills, a long procession snaked its way across the unforgiving landscape. The air hung heavy with a palpable sense of dread, each footfall a testament to the terror and torment that marred this grim parade. Chains clinked a mournful rhythm, punctuated by the occasional crack of a whip and the stifled whimpers of the enslaved.

A tiny tethered figure struggled to keep pace at the center of this wretched column. The ogre cub, no taller than a human child, stumbled on, legs trembling with exhaustion. His once-vibrant green skin had faded to a sickly pallor, marred by bruises and cuts from the cruel journey. With a final, pitiful moan, the cub's strength failed him, and he fell face-first into the cold, muddy ground. The impact sent spatters of muck across his emaciated form, blending with the tears that streamed silently down his cheeks.

The tethered cub in front, feeling the sudden jerk of the chain, turned to face the lifeless form of his fallen companion. His breath came out in ragged blasts of steam, visible in the chill air that bit at their exposed flesh. His feet, raw and

bleeding from endless walking, screamed in protest as he shifted his weight. Dark, sunken eyes, once filled with the innocent wonder of youth, now reflected only despair and bone-deep weariness. With trembling fingers, he reached out towards his fallen den-brother. The simple gesture seemed to require a herculean effort, each inch a battle against fatigue and the ever-present chains. His cracked lips parted, struggling to form words that might offer comfort or urge resilience, but only a hoarse whisper escaped.

"Unalt," he called.

White-hot pain seared his mind as the whip snapped across his back and tore away another section of his now meaningless tribal robes. Blood seeped from a reopened wound as he dropped to his knees, sucking breath and hard, trying to hug his pain away.

Heavy footfall thudded through the mud.

He held his breath as he stared into the great reptilian eyes of the tharrack. The beast sported a thick, leathery hide and a massive frilled neck adorned with spikes. A curved horn protruded from its snout as it lumbered past, indifferent to the suffering around it. The massive beast snorted, blasting the cub in the face. His great scaly hide shuttered, sending sheets of water pouring down upon him.

"Get moving, cub." He grunted.

The cub's eyes traveled up the head of tharrack; past its hulking shoulders to the ogre warrior astride its back. The warrior looked down upon him with matter-of-fact malice in green blood-shot eyes.

"You deaf cub?" He grunted, raising his whip hand again.

Caught between terror and pain-laden confusion, the cub pulled and pointed at the corpse of his brother to avoid another wicked blow. The ogre warrior dismounted his

tharrack in a splash of muddy water. He picked up the dead cub and removed its restraints, then shoved the body into a sack slung across his back. The warrior gave the cub a wry smile. "Breakfast."

The warrior barked laughter, leaped back into his saddle, and kicked his tharrack into motion, leaving the ogre cub watching. The cub lowered his quaking hands and fell back into a cold, comforting numbness. He long ago gave up on caring. He watched the ogre warrior, his brother's arm dangling from the bag. Unalt is one of the last of his den brothers. His heart pulsed.

"No, not for Unalt," he whispered.

Uncontrollable rage exploded inside of him, and he snarled. He pulsed fury, and all he could think of was to rip the head from the warrior's shoulders.

"You fangless thurngun," the cub roared, startling the enslaved ogres around him.

The surrounding slaves melted away from him like fog in the scorching sun. The warrior whirled and dismounted in one clean motion, spear in hand. He pounded a few steps over to the cub and lined up a throw. The cub fell away, shielding himself from inevitable death. The cub took an involuntary step away. The warrior reached back, spear aimed at his chest.

"No," barked a watching warrior. "You know what Thunder Bane said, 'that one goes to market if it survives on its own'."

He snarled and hurled the spear. The cub gasped as the spear pierced the ground a mere two inches to his left. The warrior walked over and pulled his iron spear from the ground. He spat at the cub's feet before turning, remounting his tharrack and kicking away.

The cub cursed himself and the ever-present anger



wiping dew and sweat from his face. "Why would we get ourselves killed for the sake of Unalt? He never cared for my life."

A voice as a deep mountain cavern rumbled in reply.

You speak truth. Unalt is unworthy of our vengeance, but look at you? You wear weakness like a fresh linen shirt. Why do you let these lessors enslave you?

The cub scoffed and waved the voice away.

"Do you not tire of spouting nonsense? I am a slave and less so a slave cub. What chance do I have against a full-grown warrior?"

As your father once said, 'excuses are like breaking wind. We all do it and it always stinks.'

"My father?" He scoffed. "Enough of your prattling. My thurngan of a father taught me nothing useful. His foolishness is why I am in this position to begin with."

The cub noticed another slave eyeing him sidelong.

She thinks you are mad.

A deep warbling war horn blared over the distance. The cub looked to the horizon to find the source of the call, and his eyes went wide. Through the gloom, what looked like three colossal spears thrust towards Heaven. A deep, thrumming rumble filled the air. He knew this sound, as did every ogre.

"War drums."

Ahead of him, road-worn warriors growled and brought their whips down harder on slaves, goading them to move faster.

He observed as the three immense spears changed into towers made of rough stone, as dark as deep water. He heard tales of this place but never thought he would see it.

"The Jagged Keep," he gasped. The legendary keep

fabled to have never fallen. Home of the Tribe of Bane, the most powerful of the Eight Greater Tribes.

“The stories are true. The towers look like blackened fangs.”

Ahead, bestial chant low and menacing intermingled with the war drums. The procession crested a hill and the cub looked down into what must be the underworld belched up to the surface. He dug his heels in and pulled against his restraints, not wanting to face the nightmare ahead.

Across a vast fog-covered plain, an otherworldly spectacle unfurled. A sprawling city, larger than anything he could have imagined, stretched to the misty horizon. Yellow-brown brick buildings rose like ancient monoliths, their weathered surfaces telling tales of countless seasons. Some structures twisted impossibly, while others stood as immovable as mountains. Interspersed among these, countless canvas-covered raka dotted the landscape. Their multicolored fabrics billowed in the breeze, creating a rippling sea of muted hues. The raka ranged from modest dwellings to massive pavilions, their shapes varying wildly – some conical, others domed, and some with multiple levels.

And amongst those raka, monsters waited.

This city embodied the very spirit of Orcus – survival, power, and the constant struggle between predator and prey.

Thick veins bulged over tensed, heavily scarred muscle as ogres roared and shook their wooly heads, spittle and clouds of steam spewing from jagged fangs. Clapping and chanting in time with a victorious beat. They banged a mishmash of objects together: knives, pans, pots, spears, anything to join the ancient devourer’s chant of Orcus.

The scent punched him in the nose, and his eyes

watered. No stranger to the smell of ogre his people, but never had he smelled it in this magnitude. The scent of hundreds of thousands of bodies all piled in, living on top of one another; sweat, sex, sickness, waste, and death all meddling into a potent redolence. After weeks of walking in near starvation, the smell made his head swim.

"No, I can't go there," he said and pulled backward against his restraints. "I need to get away. I don't want to die." He dug his heels into the slippery mud. But abruptly, his momentum shifted, and he went flying off his feet, face first into the ground, skidding painfully against the wet gravel.

"Keep moving," Thuk, his older brother, the cub tethered to in front of him, snarled. He scowled down at him, but the cub saw the truth behind that anger: fear. He fought back up to his feet and moved forward.

They crossed the threshold into the outskirts of the city's slave quarters. Bent, broken raka stood in rows interspersed with several long stone buildings, the slave quarters of the richest tribesmen; between these dark and menacing, the alleyway promised death for those without power or status.

Everywhere, ogres stalked about, roaring into the faces of the captives. Slinging insults into the face of the already defeated Garal's Tribe. But when their eyes fell upon the cub, they pulled away as if trying to avoid the strike of a grass binder. They glared at him, passing. Heated arguments broke out. They pointed at the cub; the braver ogres reached out with clawed hands. The cub recoiled and squeezed his eyes shut.

A club flashed out, cracking knuckles.

"Keep your hands off the plunder," a mounted ogre warrior warned, drawing a wicked-looking blade. Not an empty threat by any means; the ogres stepped back, but it

didn't stop the dissension that followed closely behind the cub. More and more ogres crowded in.

A mob of enforcers stormed up, studded cudgels in hand and struck the heads of the growing frenzied ogres. But emotions boiled over, and fights broke out. The war band warriors kicked into the sides of their tharrack, causing the powerful beast to rock their massive heads from side to side, knocking ogres away, creating some space between them and chaos. They brought their whips down upon the slaves, pushing them forward, breaking into a gait.

The Jagged Keep loomed ahead, a menacing silhouette against the pale sky. Its walls, crafted from obsidian-like black stone, seemed to absorb the surrounding light. The surface appeared scorched as if the fortress had withstood the flames of a thousand infernos, yet it stood unyielding and impenetrable. Jagged spires thrust upwards at irregular intervals, their tips disappearing into the low-hanging clouds, giving the impression of a monstrous, open maw ready to devour the sky itself.

The white gravel road stretched wide before them, a stark contrast to the darkness of the keep. It crunched beneath their feet, the sound a constant reminder of their inexorable approach toward the foreboding structure. As they drew nearer, the road widened.

The path opened up into a vast market square, a riot of color and noise that assaulted the senses after the monotony of the road. The square bustled with frenetic activity, a pulsing heart of commerce in the shadow of the ominous Keep. Vendors of all shapes and sizes crowded the space, their voices rising in a cacophony of shouts and bargaining. Stalls brimmed with an eclectic array of goods. Finely crafted tools glinted in the diffuse light, their edges promising both creation

and destruction. Clothing in a myriad of styles and fabrics fluttered in the breeze, from rough-spun tunics to elaborate robes adorned with mysterious symbols. Brewmasters proudly displayed their concoctions, the air thick with the pungent aromas of herbs, fruits, and less identifiable ingredients.

The cub's nostrils flared as a particularly tantalizing scent wafted past. His eyes locked onto a nearby food stall where sausages sizzled and popped on a large iron griddle. The vendor, a burly ogre with grease-stained hands, deftly flipped the meat, sending up clouds of savory steam. The cub's stomach groaned audibly, a painful reminder of the gnawing hunger that had been his constant companion. But before he could even contemplate the possibility of satisfying that hunger, a sharp yank on his chains jolted him back to reality. He stumbled, nearly losing his footing as he was roughly pulled away from the tempting aromas and sights of the market.

Their small procession pushed through the crowded square, drawing curious and sometimes hostile glances from the market-goers. As they emerged from the press of bodies, the cub found himself face to face with the imposing entrance to the Jagged Keep.

The gates loomed before them, massive and foreboding. Crafted from iron that had long since rusted to a deep, blood-red hue, they stood as a final, intimidating barrier. Intricate patterns were etched into the metal, depicting scenes of battle and conquest that seemed to writhe and move in the flickering torchlight.

Just outside the gate, a bone, hide, and metal platform loomed above the throng of milling ogres. A single grizzled ogre glared upon the platform, his hair white as winter frost at his hip enforcer cudgel banded in shiner ore. He held a

recurved bow, nocked with a strange bulb-headed arrow. He shouted.

“Clear a path for the Draga.” He aimed and fired just off to the left of the platform. The ogres that noticed shouted and scattered. The arrow exploded upon impact into a cloud of dust. Ogres unlucky enough to clear the radius, coughed and cursed, tears filling their eyes.

“Clear a path for the Draga,” he shouted again and fired, this time a little farther away, and exploded in the fleeing back of an ogre.

“Enforcers forward.”

A surge of cudgel and shield-wielding ogres marched towards the milling, confused crowd. Tired of being shoved, a tattoo-covered ogre turned to face the approaching enforcers. He roared and shook his wooly head.

“Go sit on a spear, you dumb krumglok,” he shouted, shaking his wooly head. The enforcer lowered his cudgel, catching the defiant fool in the mouth. The enforcers swarmed him like stinger wings on an injured insect, raining down blow after blow.

“Stupid,” the cub whispered.

Not stupid, just weak. To allow yourself to be pushed around like that is pathetic. Take heed of that lesson weakling.

“What do you know of power? If I am weak, you are weaker. You are only a voice in my head,” he growled.

He lurched forward, pushed from behind the path before them, cleared by the enforcers. They halted just below the platform. A hush fell over the gathered mob as a single powerful ogre lumbered up the platform; each step sent the planks squealing. His skin bore the scars of many battles. The green scalar and yellow pupils of his eyes held his subjects.

"Thunder Bane," the cub whispered. He shook and gnashed his little fangs as he gazed upon his greatest enemy. A campfire story come to life. The Draga Thunder Bane, the most powerful of the eight greater Draga. A warlord of immense strength and influence. He carried a savage slab of a weapon bristling with spikes casually over his shoulder as if the monstrous spiked mace weighed nothing. It glittered in the morning sun, made iron and pure shiner ore. He removed his horned half helm and let his snow-white wooly mane fall free. His armor wore the dings and chips of many battles but underneath the damage etched into metal and leather showed an artistic tapestry of war, beast, and blade.

His jaw was firm, his head held high, and the predatory ruler raised a fist. The mob exploded into a roar, chanting, "Thunder Bane. Thunder Bane. Thunder Bane." In reply, Thunder Bane tilted his head back and let out a mighty roar. A roar so powerful a startled tharrack reared, dismounting its rider.

When the cacophony stopped. Thunder Bane spoke. It carried over the throng with little effort, his voice so deep and resonating that it made the cub's skin itch. An ogre so powerful that even a casual word can harm you.

"Your war band returns victorious. Though I wish I could call this victory worthy," he said, and paced the platform. "Too long had it been since I have gone out on faced a worthy enemy in battle. My scouts heralding Duroc Garal as a worthy challenge. Come, our Draga, you must face him." He sighed. "I fear my warriors lied to me just to get me out of the keep for a while."

This brought raucous laughter and chest-beating from the honor guard.

"But all was not lost. Greeda, the goddess of bounty, blessed our efforts. They were fat with food and goods, and

plentiful with ogresses. Although if their warriors were any sign of the quality of breeding stock..." He shrugged his shoulders to more laughter.

The cub glared at the Draga, jaws clenched, wanting nothing more than to leap upon that platform and throttle him to death. His breath came in ragged snarls as he raised his fists. He looked at his bound wrists, overcome by a creeping numbing shame.

"Throttle him?" He gave a bitter laugh. "How? He is right. We are weak."

So you give up just like that? Well, I can't say I am surprised you've always been a coward, always hiding, never facing the challenges life puts in front of you. How do you expect to take your rightful place at the apex when you crawl along on your belly like a slug?

"As custom dictates, I, your Draga, and the war band have taken the first choice of the spoils and slaves for the betterment of Tribe. Your Draga won't be greedy and has left you some quality plunder. I have also left an interesting treat for you to bid over today." His eyes briefly touched the cub. "I turn over procession to the Soul Talker." Thunder Bane beat a fist to his chest, leaped with a grace that belayed his size and landed amongst his honor guard.

Thunder Bane joined his mount and pounded through the gates into Jagged Keep, the black gates clanging shut behind him.

All eyes returned to the platform as if materializing from thin air. An ogress clad in dark green robes the color of summer grass stood before them. Bones adorned the robes and made the shaman look as if a skeleton had come to life. The bones clacked with every step. Her gray-yellow eyes stared out from behind a skull mask and waves of silver hair



rolled down her back. The Soul Talker looked out beyond the tribe, to a place beyond the physical world. She muttered and swayed methodically from foot to foot, banging out a cadence on a tharrack hide drum and a femur.

The mob swayed, stomped, and clapped their hands in tandem with her beat.

"We embrace the soul of the subdued," she hummed

"Slay or die," the ogres chanted back.

"For your life now nourishes the tribe."

"Predator or prey."

The cadence grew faster as the shaman's chants became authoritative commands and with each pronouncement, the ogre mob grew more feral.

"Victory or death."

The gathered masses snarled, chanted, and bared their fangs at some unseen force battling on another plane. They chanted until they could no longer keep time with the rhythm and broke out into a long, continuous, snarling roar. The shaman banged three hard notes as quickly as it began, followed by the final resounding note. All grew silent—a collective breath held.

The Soul Talker shaman stood still, then exhaled. "The soul of Garal's tribe has been subdued. Let the auction begin."

Herded up on the platform, first, were the ogresses. In ogre culture, slaves of the conquered tribes were composed only of ogresses and cubs. If any ogre survived, the soul of the defeated tribe would live on through him and cause the conquering tribe misfortune.

The cub's heart leaped into his throat as he saw his haggard mother press onto the auction block. She scanned the crowd, resigned to her fate while ogres placed their bids.

Her eyes touched his. She frowned and looked away. Even if it did not surprise him, it didn't hurt any less.

"She called me weak so often that I thought that was my name," the cub said under his breath.

He remembered his life before Thunder Bane's raiders descended upon Duroc Garal's growing but meager tribe. He was one of many den mates and had many brothers and sisters. None of them cared and most actively sought to harm him because of his condition.

The cub snapped back from contemplation by a press ogres herd them up onto the platform like domesticated beasts. The cub's foot got caught between planks and it twisted. He yowled and went down shoulder-first, slamming onto the platform. Silence fell like a sharp blade from the watching mob. He sighed and struggled to his feet. Even the little drum fell from the Soul Talkers' hand. Her expression was blank, and she whispered, "A blood-red ogre."

The gathered ogres erupted into shouts and roars at this creature they did not understand.

"Is it a demon?" one yelled.

"Does it have a sickness? Is it contagious?" another wailed.

"Kill it before it brings a curse down upon all of us."

A sudden burst of pain laden light filled his vision, and he gripped a bloody nose. Someone threw a stone. They pelleted him with garbage. He dropped to his knees, making himself as small as possible. Under the rabble, he heard Thuk laugh.

The Soul Talker took charge, banging her drum hard. "Enough." She bellowed and glared at the mob with her unnatural eyes. The crowd fell silent. No one wanted to cross a Soul Talker. She side-eyed the blood-colored cub. She circled him, her haunting gaze taking in all that he was.

The scent of fear and anger thick in the air. The cub held his breath.

"I will commune with the Soul Talkers of the past to discern what this strange ogre is."

She placed a hand on his head. Her eyes rolled back into her skull, and she mumbled something old and forgotten.

The crowd waited, holding their silence. Not even a word. They knew not to speak when a Soul Talker communed with the other world. The cub swallowed hard and winced as her long, sharp claws dug into his scalp, though he dared not pull away. The Soul Talker Shaman came back gasping, her eyes rolled before she composed herself, never taking her eyes from the cub she said.

"The Soul Talkers of the past have spoken. They say when a red ogre is born, it can bring great change upon the world."

The ogres argued in hush tones until one shouted above the others.

"Change is constant," said an old merchant. "What changes will he bring?"

"The Soul Talkers do not predict the future. We speak of cause, not effect. It could very well be he dies before anything happens."

"So, what do we do with it?" another ogre shouted.

She looked down at the cub. Even behind the bone mask, he saw she was at a loss. She raised her head. "Continue the auction."

The auctioneer, a grizzled ogre with a voice like grinding stones, called out the opening bid. His words were barely audible over the crowd's din, but a sudden hush fell as the first bid was shouted. The novelty of owning such a unique specimen had sparked a fervor. Bids flew thick and fast, each one higher than the last. Voices raised in excitement

and frustration as the price climbed to unprecedented heights. Coins clinked, gems flashed, and even rare artifacts were offered up in exchange for the crimson cub. As the bidding intensified, tempers flared. A burly ogre with elaborate facial tattoos shoved his neighbor, accusing him of interfering with his bid. The neighbor responded with a swift punch, and soon, a brawl erupted on the fringes of the crowd. Fists flew and tusks gnashed, the sound of breaking bones adding a percussive rhythm to the chaotic symphony of the auction. Through it all, the auctioneer continued his rapid-fire chant, expertly playing the crowd's excitement to drive the bids ever higher. The cub watched with wide, fearful eyes, understanding that these terrifying giants were deciding his fate.

After an eternity of shouting, fighting, and frenzied bidding, a deafening roar of triumph cut through the chaos. The cub watched as the crowd parted and an older ogre set into body in a way that only an ogre in the second century could do. He wore a stern, menacing quality that all ogres appreciated as he moved. His round belly quivered with each limping step. He used a toothy two-handed mace made of the quality common with thick bands of spiked shiner as a walking stick, three thick shiner chains around his neck. He took the leashes of the two cubs, and, pulling them along, he purchased Thuk as an afterthought for a fraction of the price one could never have to many labors. He led them left down the side steps of the platform and towards a burning coal pit. He dropped iron into red hot coal and waited.

Realization dawned upon the cubs gripped by terror and impending agony; they struggled against their bonds. Rod barely registered their resistance, his eyes eyeing the heated brand. An old slave ogre with a rotted-out eye pinned

grabbed Thuk and laid him flat on his side, like fish fresh for gutting. The slave ogre rolled up Thuk's tattered robe, exposing the thigh's flesh. Thuk squirmed and begged.

"Hold now; it hurts worse if you struggle," the old ogre said, a weary kindness to his voice.

Rod pulled the brand from the pit and pressed it to Thuk's thigh, bringing a long, terrible wail from his gritted fangs. Flesh sizzled and spat, and when the brand pulled away, the cub saw the squared symbol of a thread and needle seared into his flesh, an ogreish character fixed at the bottom: Rod's Sigil.

Shame washed over the cub as the scent of his brother's cooked flesh and his empty stomach growled.

The slave reached out a gnarled hand and took the cub by the shoulder. He didn't resist. He allowed himself to be pinned down and retreated into his mind. The searing brand pressed against his thigh. His nostrils flared as he smelled his cooking flesh. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He looked up at the old one-eyed ogre, with hate in his eyes. He hated him; he hated Rod; he hated his father, and he hated himself.

The cub followed Rod, who climbed on this mount. They moved south along a winding gravel pathway, the crunch of stones beneath their feet a constant rhythm as they left the clamor of the slave auction behind. The cub's new owner led the way. The small, crimson-skinned cub stumbled along behind, his chains clinking as he struggled to keep pace. To their right, the imposing black wall of the Jagged Keep loomed, a stark contrast to the warm, earthen tones of the surrounding raka city. The obsidian-like stone seemed to absorb the very light around it, casting a perpetual shadow over their path. The cub couldn't help but shiver each time he glanced at the fortress, its jagged

spires piercing the sky like the teeth of some monstrous beast.

As they delved deeper into the city proper, the cub's eyes widened in wonder at the sights surrounding him. Unlike the forbidding Keep, the buildings here were a riot of color and architectural marvels. Each structure boasted great stone pillars, their surfaces alive with intricate carvings that told stories of Orcus's rich and violent history. One pillar depicted a massive, serpentine creature wrapped around a mountain, its scales so finely etched that they seemed to shimmer in the sunlight. The cub recognized it as Gorgoroth, the world-serpent from the Epic of Altaan. His gaze lingered on the carving, remembering the tales of how Gorgoroth's breath created the first storms. Further along, another building showcased the Ten Warlords in battle stance, their exaggerated muscles and fierce expressions capturing the essence of Orcus's warrior culture. The cub could almost hear the clash of weapons and war cries emanating from the stone. A smaller structure bore gentler images – scenes from the Anecdotes of Old Duppa. Here, a wizened ogre sat surrounded by cubs, his hands raised in the midst of what was surely a captivating tale.

It all seems so...happy so full of life. So different from his time in his tribe. But not all was well. Because of his new brand, his eyes burned with a new clarity. He now saw the strife from the other side. The numbing pain that had always surrounded him, but rather than being an observer, he became a part of it. Slaves were everywhere.

Even without seeing chains, it was simple to pick out the other slaves; not just in physical appearance, but something that pressed down upon the soul, an oppression that hung about like a suffocating miasma.

A blank-eyed ogre grunted as a whip split his already

heavily scarred back as he pushed a cart heavy-laden with bricks. An ogress with eyes cast down worked on a never-ending canvas pile. A cub leaned against her leg, his ribs clearly visible under his skin. And the brands, the brands were everywhere. He saw a brand of a hammer and anvil, a brand of mortar and pistil, but he saw the thunderbolt more than any other brand. The sigil belongs to the Draga. Enforcers lorded over the slaves; clubs and whips at hand while these slaves toiled at public works, from graveling dirt paths, to hauling water or digging ditches.

Rod reigned in his tharrack and dismounted before a modest but well-positioned stone home. The entrance hung with a canvas door, a threaded tapestry of spring fields, flowers, and grazing tharrack all adorned with shimmering multi-colored beads. Above the entrance, a sigil was carved into the rough stone, the same sigil branded on the cub's thigh.

Off to the right, a couple of cubs sat tethered to small tanning stations, scraping the flesh off some raw tharrack hide whip scars and ribs clear to see. At Rod's approach, they picked up pace, scrapping faster. Rod tied his tharrack to a post just beyond the two working cubs. He looked down on the cub and Thuk.

"Don't move." he warned.

They watched as Rod hammered down two new stations next to the busy cubs. He placed two large piles of bloody hides next to the stations. He handed each one of them a sharpening stone.

"Now I tell you, only once. Get to scrapping these hides clean. Finish before the sun sets today, or you may not want to know what I will do to you. Remember, all the meat you scrape off them hides is mine. I have done this for thirty-plus season cycle, so I know how much meat should come

off them hides. Put it in these bowls.” He put a pair of clay bowls before them. He scratched his ass, turned and walked into his home.

Thuk set to work. He growled between clenched fangs and dragged the sharpened stone over the hides in a rushed, spasmodic motion. The cub watched him and decided he was inefficient. He sniffed and looked at the two other cubs at work. He watched their technique. Long clean drags up, flip the stone and then down. Their approach seemed superior, so he imitated them.

Exhaustion and hunger put small spots in his vision, but he ignored them and focused on his work. He zoned in on his work, blocking all else out. The longer he scraped, the more deficiencies he found in the other cub's technique, and he refined his method. Within an hour, he cleaned hides half, as fast as the other cubs and twice as fast as Thuk. It was now just before the sunset. He sighed, wiped the sweat from his brow, and smiled. Not a strand of meat on any of his hide.

He was slammed sideways, face first, into the grass and dirt. He blinked, clearing his vision, and looked up to see his brother standing over him. Thuk smiled down at him. A smile that only promised misfortune. He stared slack-jawed as Thuk took his pile of finished hides and dropped all his unfinished hides before the cub. Thuk had only finished a quarter of his work. The other two slave cubs looked on momentarily and then returned to work.

“Better get to work, red curse. The sun’s almost down,” Thuk said.



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