

KRAGOR GRIMSTRIDE

I AM KRAGOR GRIMSTRIDE, ORPHAN of Bladegarden. My parents were proud orcs of the Righteous Brand, fallen heroes who died defending our city's walls. But hushed whispers in the alleys hinted at a darker truth—betrayal, or sacrifices made in shadows. At five years old, none of that mattered. Only the gnawing emptiness of my belly and the cold stone streets that became my home.

I was never as strong or clever as the tyrannical bullies who ruled the streets. By deception, speed, stealth, and a silver tongue I survived until adulthood. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to be taken under the wing by a grizzled, retired veteran who had learned the art of tattooing while on tour near Xhorhas. He taught me the skill, and I scrapped together a few coppers as an apprentice. But my designs... they were never truly my own. Sometimes I would take up the needle, and my hands would move with a will I did not recognize, etching abstract, strange, and unsettling glyphs. Other than myself, they interested only a few mages, those who saw something beyond the ink on skin, something that mirrored the unsettling stirrings already taking root in my own mind. My mentor, Dagmuk, who taught me how to manifest these designs on my skin and others', often said I had a "touch for the unseen." He couldn't have known how literal that would become.

Even as I navigated the tangible threats of Bladegarden and the daily grind of survival, a far more insidious struggle began to unfold in the dark expanse of my unconscious mind. I don't know why, or how, but some presence... some thing... from outside our realm began whispering in my dreams—discordant, incomprehensible words, and images of impossible geometries. For months these dreams plagued me, a subtle, creeping insinuation into the corners of my mind. The murmurs were vague at first, then became

persistent, a distant echo of a vast, alien hunger stirring far beyond my comprehension.

My darkest hour arrived one night. After earning a decent sum from tattooing a wizard, I boasted about my newfound wealth, unaware that Brother Theron and his Tuskbreakers were watching. These thugs had terrorized downtrodden orcs like me for years. I was caught off guard and struggled to fend them off, but the blows rained down, each one a hammer against my fading strength. Blood filled my mouth. The world tilted into darkness. Feeble and desperate, despising the weakness that had always plagued me, my will to live burned hotter than ever. Then the whispers exploded into a roar inside my skull—an ancient will offering power beyond imagining. I screamed and I surrendered. Eldritch energy surged through my veins; my eyes bled black. The tattooed glyphs on my arms burned with a cold light. Muscles tensed unnaturally; power crackled at my fingertips. I didn't just fight back—I unleashed a storm. I obliterated one of the thugs and sent the others scattering into the night, their screams echoing my own.

Since then dream visions continued to haunt my slumber and reveal the depth of my awakened abilities. With my war hammer raised and eldritch energy crackling at my fingertips, I fought against the street tyrants at every opportunity, protecting those they sought to exploit.

Gradually, the chaos of my dreams began to coalesce into a chilling clarity—a command, stark and undeniable, and a promise of greater power. "Go north. Cross the frozen north. To Eiselcross." The purpose remained a shrouded mystery, yet a strange, cold resolve settled deep within me. I would follow.

When I went to give Dagmuk my farewell, he was gone and his shop was empty, abandoned. His tools were scattered like forgotten

memories. A scorched parchment bore one of my glyphs. An unspoken message? A warning? I felt a pang of loss for the only person who believed in me.

I hit the road with a cover story. A Righteous Brand veteran now seeking his own fortune was a tale that opened purses and secured passage. Merchants, traders, wandering groups paid for my protection, though my true purpose was survival. Traveling alone meant certain death. Joining caravans and groups was a matter of strategic necessity.

Nights were the hardest— when the cold bit through my cloak and the whispers in my mind grew louder, reminding me I was no mere soldier. Dangerous encounters were rare, but not nonexistent. Most challenges I met with a growl and a bluff, my war hammer a sufficient deterrent. But there were moments when mere brute force wouldn't suffice— moments when I felt the cold breath of death on my neck. It was then, when my instincts screamed that head-smashing is not enough, I would unleash the alien power within me, breaking the careful illusion of a simple veteran soldier. The reactions were always the same: a mix of shock, fear, and a quick retreat as

they recognized I was something else entirely. They would scatter, leaving me to continue my calculated journey, the whispers in my mind a constant companion.

Six weeks of winding roads and vicious winds carried me through Bladegarden, Hupperdook, Nogvugrot, and Yrrosa. Icehaven finally emerged from the Zemni Fields like a promise. Once I arrived, I made bargain with the first captain who would take me. The rest you know, as we all met on board the *Frostwind* on our way to Palebank Village.

