

KINGDOMS:
THE KINGDOM OF
CHAOS



BOOK 1 IN THE KINGDOMS SAGA

E. M. BUCHAN

Kingdoms: The Kingdom of Chaos
Written by E. M. Buchan

Copyright © 2022 E. M. Buchan*

All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 9798819792827

*and other published names held by Author including Elijah Buchan, Elijah M Buchan, Green Leaf Writing

All names, characters, places, races, countries, etc. are original concepts of the Author and no part of this work may be reproduced for sale or by any means without written permission from Author except brief quotes with citation.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations (and some paraphrases) are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Additional Scripture paraphrases are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, Copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Additional Scripture paraphrases are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

www.elijahbuchan.com

Table of Contents

<u>Prologue</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>I</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>II</u>	<u>41</u>
<u>III</u>	<u>58</u>
<u>IV</u>	<u>76</u>
<u>V</u>	<u>100</u>
<u>VI</u>	<u>124</u>
<u>VII</u>	<u>148</u>
<u>VIII</u>	<u>171</u>
<u>IX</u>	<u>196</u>
<u>X</u>	<u>227</u>

Introduction

I created the Kingdoms Saga in the wake of many fantasy stories popularized with vulgar and graphic content. My desire was to make an epic, fun, and clean story that would captivate adults, young adults, and teens.

I love fantasy novels. They offer an escape from the real world. But the best books are those that also teach the reader about the world they actually live in. C. S. Lewis had a talent for creating alternate realities but with similar spiritual truths to our own. Like him, I hope to lead readers to another world where the laws, lands, and peoples are different, but the God, the Creator, is similar in heart, purpose, and action. All this to help us understand why we exist on Earth and if we are bound to the situational constraints that come with our placement. But mostly, to understand His relentless pursuit for our affection and loyalty.

I value transparency when it comes to the content of the books I read. Therefore, I've listed below any element of this book that may be of concern to you, whether you're a parent or a discerning reader. Below is a spoiler-free content advisory and to start, this book was written for mature readers.

Kingdoms is a fantastical series that depicts many ways of death as it is based in a fictional world, called Teros, during times of war. In *The Kingdom of Chaos*, we follow many characters of the race known as the Orken.

The Orken are brutal creatures whose entire lives revolve around war and subsequently: killing. Decapitation, crushing of skulls, death by axe, sword, hammer, and arrow are all featured in this gory beginning to the Kingdoms Saga.

Along with a violent society, the Orken do not marry as other races do. In the beginning chapters, we read that the Orken males take a “mate” and procure children through her. They are loyal to this mate until she dies, at which point they would find another mate to fulfill their reproductive duties. Other than these brief mentions, there are no sexual cautions for this story.

Family within the Orken culture is another thing to be cautious of when considering this story. We read of many instances of family members killing each other as their bonds are not enduring and love is not even an emotion found in the Orken culture.

A spiritual warning may need to be mentioned. A character introduced in the latter chapters of this book features abilities that some may view as sorcery: please note that the power of this character, and

characters introduced in later stories, does not stem from witchcraft, magic, sorcery, or divination. Teros is a fantastical world and thus the creatures and beings that live within it have access to abilities (gifts) that would be considered supernatural in comparison to our own definition of physics. Also, the lore of Kingdoms contains a Creator of the world and although we never directly hear from, see, or have direct encounters with this Creator, the presence of a higher power is quite evident as the series progresses.

Personal note: If you have seen fantasy films or read other fantasy novels, the violent content found in *Chaos* will be the same as, if not less than, what you, or your children, have experienced.

For my 2nd grade teacher, who asked me to dedicate my first book to her. Thank you for believing in me and encouraging this talent even at my young age.

May I be simply one of many inspired by you.

And for my wife, who listened to every single word of this story while it was being built. This would not be the story it is without your enthusiasm, support, and input.

“The eyes of the LORD are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good.”

Proverbs 15:3

Prologue

DEPRAVITY IS A WIDELY AFFECTIVE AND yet seldom understood nor appreciated concept. Its scope is grand, and it saturates even the unliving and unbreathing things of the dirt and sea. It wanders about hearts in the shadows, making itself known only in times of war or lust or chaos. And yet, the deeply tragic state of all life, acts as a directive point. Not life itself being such a beacon, but the depravity with which it carries. As the dark sky makes all widely aware of the absence of sunlight, or as winter reminds land and life of summer. For depravity to be known, experienced, and hated, there then remains the need for a wholeness; for perfection. For without perfection, the want and disgust and despair of the darkness within has no power. Indeed, all would do what was right in their own eyes with no will for the contrary nor appreciation for beautiful things like peace.

And so, this tale befalls within a kingdom abounding in such depravity. To first learn of those who are chief among most others as being in a poor state, is no simple thing. Being creatures of war and brutal in their conduct with others, cruel even, the red-skinned Orken are considered vile beasts by most neighbouring kinds for their predisposition to violence and lack of care for life and sacred things. They are of the larger kinds of those with intelligence, standing near twelve feet for the average male and weighing a great sum. Their harsh appearance aids in the disdain others feel for them; all are bald and adorned with horns on their heads and faces, with small dark eyes. The Orken have a single mindset: war. They are born into it, raised by it, and led by it. War rules their society. These are they that occupy the depraved kingdom of which this tale is written. While the kingdom's name is Kru'aka, named after its founder, the true name of it, if it were to be called according to its dealings and people, would be the Kingdom of Chaos. And amidst this kingdom, hope and light, the inverse of its depravity, began to rise within the hearts of a select few. And indeed, this grand tale of kings and kingdoms, begins with these; the chosen and the redeemed.

Presently, within the grand forested region of Kru'aka that borders the northernmost reaches of its

middle, a small red foot pressed into white snow. The girl to whom the foot belonged dwelt in the Forest of Fal'kir; the region that began at the heart of the land and stretch northward until the mountains the shouldered the country. The girl was an orken child, called an orkling in her culture. Being of a race replete with depravity, the child's future was bleak. Strong orken males were typical to join in warfare, the females being they that reared orkling and provided for the various economic needs of the kingdom. This child, however, was of a savage sect within the kingdom. Indeed, the kingdom itself was fractured. Four tetrarchs reigned within the land, each claiming to be king of their followers. The worst of which, in practice and governance, was called the Hagronen kingdom: to which the child in the snow belong.

She stood, awed by the frozen white neath her. Being young, merely two years without the female that birthed her, for orkling are born large and walking, she had never experienced that which was before her. The Hagronen, the orken folk she was born unto, dwelt exclusively within the forestry of the Fal'kir region which, despite its northern position, was protected from the elements of winter. The trees kept out the density of the sky's frozen offerings, and the great fires that the orken built and sustained

perpetually destroyed the power of the cold winds that beat upon the trees from the surrounding plains.

The child had wandered from her clearing and the fire that blazed in the middle. There, she had a tent wherein the two that had begotten her lived also. She was the youngest of that pair's orklings, the rest of whose whereabouts were unknown to them. The males were likely dead in battle, the females mated with and elsewhere or killed in the various conflicts about the wood. Despite being at a slowly waged war with three other sects, all orken were violent toward their own. Indeed, an orken could live to one thousand years or more if battle had not prevented any recorded orken from accomplishing such a thing.

The child stood in the snow, still within the reaches of the trees, gazing at the wall of white before her. She faced south and the winds were blowing wildly about the land, sweeping up the snow that was falling. The air was frigid, and she shivered for it. But something had beckoned unto her and drew her near. Such a beckoning was not a thing of childish wandering, but something placed upon her heart to come nigh. And thus, doomed with a poor fate in the years before her, the child stood still, examining the unknown.

For her call, she had felt fear enough to keep herself from coming into the snowy land before her.

The trees were all she knew and thus, she stayed for some time before collapsing from the cold and sinking into the snow. Her red face had preceded the rest of her and she neared death for she was young and weak.

It was then, as if for the affirmation of her helpless estate, that two outstretched arms reached into the snow and, wrapping around the downed orkling, caught her up, out of the cold mire. She then dangled in a close embrace, the stranger that had come to her carrying her deeper into the forest, beyond the unknown that had overwhelmed her. Walking with haste for a while, the stranger came upon a small clearing and, laying her gently upon the ground, formed a fire. He took off his cloak and swaddled her, bringing her as near the fire as was needed. And sitting upon the twigged ground, he placed her in his lap and held her through the night that had come upon them.

In the morn, when the sun began to rise from behind the mountains in the east, the child had awoken and was restored, being warmed by the evening of care. She was startled upon the sight of the stranger, for he was of a different kind than her and she had only even beheld the sight of orken and beasts. She gasped and threw off the cloak that was about her. She struggled to stand so she could flee

from his embrace and, helping her become free so she would not fall into the fire, the stranger turned and released his grip upon her. She fled swiftly from him, running into the darkness of the morning forest. Yet he stood and patiently came behind her, walking with long strides so that he kept her running pace. Noticing the futility of her fleeing, she took to a nearby tree, scaling it in a manner taught her by being a dweller of the forest. Upon seeing this, and not for his inability to climb after her, the stranger subsided in his pursuit and returned to the fire, which could be seen from the tree the child then clung to.

All that she observed that following day was of great wonder to her. The stranger had sat by the fire until the sun was high, its heat undisturbed from the previous night's storm. Once light was upon the dealings of the forest, the stranger vanished from her sight for a few minutes before returning to the fire with the body of a hare. He peeled the skin and fur from its flesh and then cooked it over the fire, sending the aroma of meat into the nostrils of the child who then became aware of her great hunger. Although orken warriors could last a fortnight without sustenance, she was weaker and frail; childish in the ways of her kind, having yet to partake of the malice and cruelty of her kinfolk. And yet, such a path was before her, undeniable for her to walk. Thus, the

stranger came to her for many things. But presently, he brought the smell of his cooking. And with it, the child descended.

He was hunched over the fire, grinning at her which was an odd thing to behold. His smile was wide, stretching from either side of his head for his mouth was large and pointed as if he had a beak of flesh. Neath his white hood, his skin was blue but darkened by the shadows of the trees and discoloured by the fire. She saw before her one glowing with the orange of flames, and he frightened her still. But for the gnawing in her stomach, she drew near and sat expectantly. The stranger was pleased by this and offered her the beast. She took it and ate, like a critter would upon a sacred morsel after many days of hunger.

“What is your name?” asked the stranger. His voice was soft and low. He had spoken to her in a language she knew not, and for such, she only gazed at him a moment before returning to her meal. Laughing, the stranger spoke with words she had heard: the Orken tongue. Harsher than many others, it took effort to speak it and the stranger felt it difficult to speak tenderly with such speech. Nonetheless, he asked again, “What are you called?”

The child shook her head while whispering, “Orkling.” Her voice was timid and sweet. Silence

prevailed for a great while after she spoke, for she returned to her eating and the stranger thought deeply of the girl before him. He understood that her having no name was not due to her youth, as if it would come later, but it was a proof of the deep state of depravity her culture had sunk. The Hagronen folk seemed beyond the hope of redemption.

“You called?” asked the child once finished with the hare. The question startled the stranger and he smiled for her young speech. She was merely four feet in height and looked even smaller when sitting.

The stranger sighed. “You may call me Ru,” he said.

“Ru,” she responded effortlessly. He knew it was a word her tongue could speak with ease.

“I go back,” said the child as she stood. “Hail, Ru.”

Ru stood, laughing. “Come to me again, will you?”

The child looked up at the great being before her. “If hungry,” she said with a smile, before darting into the brush and out of sight. Upon the sun’s setting, she at last returned to her camp. Despite her young age, she knew the forest well enough. She came into the clearing, which was filled with hagronen warriors and orkling, and found her tent. She had eaten her fill earlier from Ru’s meal, but there awaited her what was

left of a carcass nearby. She came to it and toyed with the flesh to see if anything of worth was upon the bones. It was the uncooked corpse of a beast and only bones and tendons were upon it. She decided to rest with the satisfaction of her solitary meal and entered her tent. The female that had birthed her was present, although she spoke nothing to the child upon her entering. The older female sat in the corner of the tent running her red hand up and down the canvas, staring thoughtlessly at her own skin. The child lay upon the ground and watched as her elder engaged in motions that seemed to have no purpose.

After a short while, the sound of conflict filled the clearing. Two males were fighting with their hands and biting each other, having forsook their axes some time ago. Such was nothing strange to the onlookers nor to the child in her tent. Her mother left the tent, however, and entered the fray. Once the noise of the commotion had settled, the child's mother returned with cuts and bite marks all over her body. And with that, filled with no concern or fright, the child fell asleep.

Ru began to breathe heavily once the child had left him. His first task was to find her, which had

proved quite pleasant to him for she was a beautiful child. Not beautiful upon the eyes, for she was red and hairless, but her speaking and her innocence were greatly adored by the stranger for he loved the purity of children. Although she was born into depravity, and held it within her, she was yet to participate in any of its sorrows and that adorned her with a sweet purity.

Ru's second task, however, was much less pleasant to him. His presence within the lands was then known by only one: the orken child. But there was another whose role in the coming conflict was needed: the lost one. Named such for his malice and twisting of good gifts, this being was not an orken nor was he of any folk still living, save for himself.

Thus, once the child had left him, Ru came to the lost one's cave which sat high in the hills of a stony country, east of Kru'aka. The cave was not the only place he dwelt, but it was one, and Ru knew him to be there for he could feel his hatred. Coming unseen and unfelt, when Ru spoke, the mountain before him seemed to shake as if his voice were an unwelcome yet long awaited thing.

"Hear now, ye of darkness," spoke Ru, his voice echoing through the stone valley in which he stood. "Thine allotted time is nigh. Do what you must." And with that, before the lost one could slither from his

cave and cast before Ru's feet assaults and curses, Ru fled from the land in a white cloud coming up from the ground so that when the yellow eyes peered from the darkness in the cave, only a white fog could be seen drifting upward from the ground and into the sky with the haste of lighting.

Returning to the clearing in the Forest of Fal'kir, Ru appeared and fell to his knees before the fire he had made which was then embers and smoke. He wept bitterly for all that he felt and all that his words meant.

Having slumbered, when he awoke, the sun was coming up again and before him sat the orken child. Seeing her returned happiness to him and he looked upon the fire which was low and near dead. "Awaken," he said, and it burned again. The sudden outburst of flames startled the child and she fell backward, lying on the twigged ground. Upon realizing what had happened, that fire came from the very mouth of the stranger, she laughed an innocent and childish laugh. Ru loved to see such a strange thing come forth from an orken, for they were too harsh a kind for such jubilation, even laughter. It caused him to laugh also, forgetting the pains of the that day's eve.

The child grew as the years passed solemnly in the Kingdom of Chaos. She came, as often as she ought,

to Ru's clearing, which had become a pleasant dwelling for him and a peaceful escape for her. The two had fashioned a hut for him, built in the trees. The child would scale the trunk and come to his door, spending the proceeding day with him in conversation and play. Although some foreign thing had drawn her to the edge of the forest that fateful day when her helplessness had overtaken her, presently, her own desire for Ru's fellowship drew her often.

The war outside the forest continued to rage as the tetrarchs toiled for regions and the loyalty of the inhabitants of Kru'aka. But more fierce was the war waged within the forest. This was the battle that had come upon the Hagronen many years prior. But then, nearing eight years since the stranger's arrival, it had come to a heavy culmination where the fate of the folk themselves was to be determined. The battle was not that of axe and sword, nor kingship and loyalty. It was the decision to forever seal the fate of the Hagronen kingdom in their depravity, or to cling to the hope of a better way. And yet, the king of the Hagronen, the orken sect that dwelt in the Forest of Fal'kir, had decided upon the hideous option.

To him had been given a foul gift of healing. It was the ability to heal most wounds gained in battle. All orken could heal wounds naturally, faster than any other kind, for their design to be a kind for warring.

However, the healing which was given unto the Hagronen king was drastic in its potency. Such was granted to him, and any of his subjects, if he ate of a creeping creature which had lived deep within the heart of the forest. Yet the cost of such a power was sanity. And thus, a society already cruel and harsh made void of reason or loyalty, would collapse into chaos. Knowing this, the king had formerly kept most from it, including himself. But slowly, as the four fractures of the kingdom grew, including his own, he shared the gift. And with his sharing, spread the insects' dwellings further out from the heart of the region and into the outskirts of the forest so that more could be found, more could be consumed, and the Hagronen kingdom could be poisoned with the savagery that ensued such consumption. Clearing by clearing, depending on the closeness to an upcoming battle, the king had previously distributed the gift, granting near invincibility to its consumers.

Years prior, the king had come to the child's home clearing and her own kin had consumed the things. This led them to debased thinking, and the child remained unnamed for it. Another of the tetrarchs had assaulted the woods in hopes to gain a foothold for future warring. Having poorly setup his kingdom for replenishment of armour and weaponry, the Hagronen king gave forth the maddening black

creatures. Consuming them caused one's vision to fade into a trance of red so that one was guided by impulse. Whatever came upon them, had a mind of its own and the orken could see well and fight viciously and knew which limb to tear from an enemy, but the warrior themselves knew not of what occurred and often awoke confused yet hungry for more.

Coming upon their enemies with unmatched savagery, the battle had been won, but at the cost of the child's father. And her mother had ran into conflict that night, as she had prior, retaining the red gaze and unbridled mind, and she never healed from her wounds, as she had many times prior. Madness terrorized the clearing and the dozens of orken that dwelt within it, despite their victory over their enemy. Each saw the other as the enemy and they turned against each other in their savagery.

However, the child had the retreat of Ru's camp, and she was thus saved from the self-slaughtering that besieged her home that dreaded night. Elsewhere within the forested kingdom, similar events had occurred and thus, the king had decided to withhold the creatures and their consumption for a time. Yet the folk failed to recover fully, but the population at least steadied and horrid rumours of their savage ways spread throughout the other three Orken kingdoms.

Presently, alone and without kin, save for Ru, the child aged ten years and was still sanctified in her innocence. But it was her being such an age and being still innocent, that brought trouble to her. For although the king had withdrawn the insects from his followers years prior, for his madness and the rampant killing that lessened his forces, he began to redistribute them again.

The Orken culture is one of war and death is part of such. Most have killed another by the age of ten and if not, one sought to do so. Separated from the other orken kingdoms kept not such a cultural rite from permeating the Hagronen society. Thus, when others saw the age of the child, she would join the war efforts soon. If proven capable of fighting, she would join the warriors in battle, if not, she would be slain in training or become the mate of an orken to rear orkling. Although, if she had dwelt within one of the cities in Kru'aka, she could join cookhouses or tend to crops. However, the Hagronen kingdom had continued their deepening in their horrid state over the previous decade and no such practices remained. The life then that lay before her was even more bleak than it had been when Ru had first come to her. Her future was to fight, mate, or be slain.

Another ill fate came to her when the king in the forest had tasked those in her clearing to continue

consuming the creature. It had been many years since the last hagronen dwelling there had done so for the king had seen the death and madness it had caused. Yet the victory it granted him in battle was far too great for him to heed the consequences of its continued use. The child's clearing, repopulated in recent years, was in the southern reaches of the forest, east of a great valley that plunged southwest. Another orken kingdom had begun to come upon the coasts of the southern forest, hoping to claim more territory in the kingdom. That kingdom was the strongest kingdom in the land, and indeed was the very kingdom that the Hagronen king had originally usurped from. The sect of orken, which reigned from a large city in the west, was called the Draken kingdom. They dwelt in and controlled the great valley also, and moving eastward, along the coast of the forest, provided a great advantage in warring against the other kingdoms who dwelt in the eastern plains of Kru'aka.

The Hagronen king however, thought ill of the Draken's increasing presence in the forest. Yet the kingdom remained seldom defeated. Their army was larger, their weapons sharper, their armour stronger, and their king was ferocious. The Hagronen king knew his only hope in evicting the Draken presence

from the forest was to attack them with the savagery and invincibility consuming the insects offered.

And thus, one dreaded, yet fateful day, he came upon the child's clearing. She was young but old enough to fight and pledge loyalty to the king. Being creatures of war and monarchy, the Orken's strongest emotion, for they felt few, was loyalty. Such loyalty dictated their every thought and action and was given to whomever they deemed the strongest orken. In the four kingdoms that warred against one another in Kru'aka, the four kings were deemed the strongest. Neath them were elders and commanders and captains who could also hold the loyalty of lesser orken. However, each rank stretch loyalty upward unto the throne itself.

The Hagronen king, his mind slowly eroding with madness, allowed a great hubris to well up within him. He branded each of his subjects' arms with the sap of a foul tree that grew in the woods. The markings were a stain upon the skin, unremovable and permanently identified all Hagronen as the king's loyal followers. With several orken males who were dressed only in cloth around the waste, the Hagronen king stood himself in the middle of the clearing, having a flask of the sap, and a large sack which was writhing with the black horrors within. Gazing around at all those who stood attention, he spotted the sweet child whom Ru

had befriended. Seeing her bare arms, he pointed at her and grunted in summoning. Two large orken came at her and seized her, throwing her before the feet of the king. He instructed another to take a rusted blade, dipped in the sap, and carve into the child's arms, branding her as his for the remainder of her life.

Although most young females of any kind would weep for the brutality shown her and the pain she felt, the child did not. She lay on the forest floor and her own heart thrilled at what had happened to her. Being depraved, she trusted the wickedness within her and her loyalty was cast upon the king for the show of strength over her. She was helpless against him, branded by him, and would be a servant of him from then on. She would be proud of and loyal to the Hagronen king until she met another that was greater than he.

Being grounded and still for the pain, the child was passed by the other hagronen warriors and not fed the insects that shrieked inside the sack. The others who were in the clearing were older or too young to be branded and fight. Thus, those of age were fed the large black things with many legs and bid to rush upon the draken warriors that had come into the forest not far from there. The king went with, staying at the rear for he consumed the insects sparingly, understanding their effect upon his mind.

And he had consumed them for many years so that the healing power granted him stayed with him longer than most. From the decades, he had learned a fair balance, but even he, being of a strong bloodline, was prone to succumbing to the red-eyed madness that would never fade.

Alas, that battle was won, leaving few draken left alive; a true feat for the hagronen warriors. But for their madness, they failed to strip the bodies of armour and axes, surging around the woods as their crazed state dwindled before returning to tents.

Before then, Ru had beckoned for the child to come to him. So strong an urge came upon her that she rose from her stupor and ran until she came to him. He stood at the base of his tree, looking upon her with sorrow in his eyes.

“How do you fare?” he asked.

Upon hearing his words, she wept. The pride she felt for her king choosing her faded and the graciousness she felt from Ru caused her to know the hideousness of what had happened to her. She fell to her knees and said a thing an orken would seldom ever say, “I am sorry, Ru.” She continued her weeping.

Ru came to her, kneeling in the dirt and embraced her. The two stayed in each other’s arms for a great deal of time and Ru spoke to her mind, as if speaking

aloud but just to her so that if one were watching the two, all that could be observed was a silent pair embracing.

“Now you shall not know sorrow, nor shall you know shame. For these are the things of your way. But soon deliverance will be granted you and you shall see thineself made anew. For now, weep not. For such tears will soon be turned to laughter.” The words came upon the child and comforted her, although she understood little of them. Not for her poor understanding of language, for she was older then and fluent; but for the hope her depraved heart could not fathom. Still, the words of life came upon her, soothing her as they ought, and her weeping ceased.

That evening stretched long as the sounds of battle and savagery filled that region of the forest. Most of the draken that had come upon the forest were slain and a few fled the beastly fighting of the Hagronen. However, such fleeing in the Orken culture was prohibited, being against their nature. Thus, those who fled ran unto other kingdoms and lands or, if they returned to the city from where they had come, they were slain in the streets by other militants.

Not a week later, the forces of the draken came again to the forest. That fateful day would be the last time in a long while the child and Ru would see each

other. Sensing the approach, Ru rose early and had come to the child's own clearing. Those dwelling there seemed accustomed to the dark effects and the red sight that the king's gift had caused. Ru gazed upon many as they slept, lying about the forest floor, mostly unclothed like animals for the thrashings they endured from one another. Yet their red skin was spotless, for their wounds healed just as soon as they were made. Coming into her tent, Ru sat next to the girl who had been forgotten by the king and allowed to return and dwell.

“Rise, my sweet child,” said the stranger. And she did, obedient to his whisper. “What if I told you the age was nearly finished?” he said unto her mind, speaking in such a way so none else would hear.

Lying back down on her mat and closing her eyes, the child replied in thought, “I would wonder what you meant. I would wonder what such an age was or what its end might be.”

Ru stretched out his hand and placed his long blue fingers on her bald head, stroking her forehead with his thumb where small horns would eventually grow as she matured. “Well,” he began, “what is now shall no longer be. And so stirs such that I have come to you. Not now, but then, all those years ago. A blink to me, your life to you.”

“Hmm,” said the child aloud. “I cannot say I understand your strange speech, Ru.”

The stranger laughed one last time. He then began to speak things to her which, to her, were utter nonsense. She neither understood the words then nor would she remember them later for her juvenile mind could not comprehend his speech. He spoke long and quiet, sometimes in thought, other times aloud. He said things like, “He” and “Him” and “Granted” and “Wisdom” and “Redeemed” and “Chosen” and many more words and phrases and parables and things that she heard only as foolishness. And with each mysterious word spoken presently, a former word he had once told her, within her memory, vanished. As if confusion could not dwell with the knowledge of Ru, the grace of their time together faded from what the child’s heart could grasp. Indeed, as the mist of the morning flees from sunlight, so did the thoughts and memories of Ru flee slowly from the child’s mind. Such was a thing the stranger had prepared for, and he wept for it.

Alas, the sun was in the sky, and the camp stirred. At the silence that came upon her mind, the child opened her eyes to behold no friend in front of her. But she missed him still. Although she no longer knew of most of what he had said unto her and done for her, there remained the warm memory of his

touch and his love. But it was merely a shadow of memory, soon darkened by the life that lay before her. A life without Ru.

Suddenly, a roar filled the forest, followed by dozens more. These were the roars of orken, deep and growling like beasts and thunder. The roars of orken in battle. The sound of great stomps and shouts followed and coming outside the tent, the child saw the swarm of warriors entering a fray that was brought on by a draken assault. With great number and vigour, the draken army's commander surged into the forest, downing as many as he could. One of his captains came further into the forest and saw the child busying about the wood, fleeing, her arms mark afresh with the black markings of his enemy. With hatred in his eyes and loyalty unto his king, he wished to slay her, even a child.

But speed came upon her feet, and she outran her foe, fleeing deep into the forest. Despite their advantage, the hagronen fled deeper as well. The wounded stirred and were beheaded or snuck away. Alas, by nightfall, the whole of the Hagronen kingdom had rallied further into the forest and their draken pursuers returned to the coast, where the woods met plains.

The Draken kingdom then shortened the coastline and built structures of the wood in the

following months, making well-suited buildings for defending their expanded territory.

The king of the Hagronen fumed and slew many in his rage. But being deeper in the forest brought a plenty of the insects and the kingdom continued to consume them so that their healing prowess was strengthened, and their madness intensified. Slowly, and ferociously, the king in the forest determined to regain his wooded kingdom, even to capture the great valley and perhaps the plains surrounding.

The child, raised mostly by the tender stranger, whom she no longer knew of, was spared from the depravity engaged in by the other hagronen. For the stranger's presence remained with her and guarded her and guided her, even throughout the horrors of an orken life, although she knew not of his touch. As another decade passed, she neither consumed the insect, nor was taken as a mate, nor did she take the life of anything. She went about the forest with her fellow orken, her innocence going unnoticed and untainted. Yet her loyalty to her kind and king increased, and she was in darkness, yet being spared from being of darkness.

I

THE SHRILL SOUND OF METAL ARMOUR

rattling from the cold winter's breeze could be heard far from the scene of battle. Standing in an unbroken line, hundreds of orken gazed across the icy Valley of Kal'ka. One orken, a male standing close to twelve feet tall, showed his blackened teeth as a deep growl rumbled from his throat. He let out a fearsome roar of challenge.

The trees on the opposite side of the Valley began to sway. Yet it was not from the cold breeze that had swept by. The orken who roared in hope to bring out his foe, named Ful'kag, after his father whom he slew when he was young, knew what the swaying meant: they were coming. Those who dwelt amongst the trees were a far lesser kingdom than the one he represented.

He was proud to be of the Draken kingdom. The Orken kingdom that reigned over those who were loyal with a strong and fierce grasp. Their warriors

were always clad in tough metal armour, wielding heavy axes that could easily break any foe. And their king was stronger and mightier than any living orken. The tales tell he crushed the skull of his older kin, a fellow offspring of those who sired him, when he was a mere orkling, not three years of age. Bred for war and a seemingly perfect leader, Kul'drak and his army were undefeated. This filled Ful with the fire of pride; it burned fiercely in his chest. Long ago, there were tales told of the Orken having a literal fire ablaze within their body for their fierceness and ferocity. He felt it in his eyes as he watched his enemy burst through the treeline.

A far lesser Orken kingdom they were, indeed. The Hagronen kingdom survived in a Forest north of the Valley, called Fal'kir. The superstitions of the Orken tell all creatures in the woods are deadly and could kill even the most powerful of kings. The hagronen berserkers, however, eat the creatures and all those who enter the forest. With no laws, no honour, no armour, and no weapons; these ruthless warriors surged across the Valley toward the Draken.

Ful and his army had stood on the cusp of the grand Valley for almost half a day. Their intent was to intrigue their foe into engaging them in battle on the rocks of the Valley rather than in the unknown and thick terrain of the Forest beyond. Their goal had

been achieved, and as Ful confidently believed, their victory was soon to be as well. The tree line of the Forest had been lost in prior years and no warriors were recovered. Once there were structures to house and defend, then used for kindling, the Draken were expelled from the Forest and even the Valley, which offered the defence of far sight and ambush against eastern kingdoms. Thus, the present battle was of great importance and would be fought valiantly.

A roar left the warrior once again. Ful lifted his weapon toward his enemy: a large axe, designed for all forms of destruction. He charged forward to engage in battle. His fellow draken followed closely behind him. With a killing rage, he leapt into the crowd of berserkers and with one swing of his weapon, sent many to the ground.

The two forces collided aggressively. The sound of flesh being slashed by axes and torn by hands filled the air. No distinct duel between two orken could be heard, rather, all the noise merged into one sound: the sound of battle. Ful listened to it carefully as he hacked his way through the swarm of hagronen.

A few minutes into the battle, Ful raised his axe against a charging hagronen. He swung harshly toward the ground, with the hagronen in his axe's path. However, despite the gaping wound in his chest caused by Ful's axe, the hagronen leapt onto Ful. The

strength of that orken was incredible and Ful was taken aback by his resilience. Two large red hands, with distinct black markings on them, took hold of Ful's head and smashed it against the Valley's rocky floor. As Ful lay still and concussed on the ground, that hagronen rushed on to attack another draken.

The two armies fought for quite some time. By the end, hundreds of orken were dead. But, contrary to expectation of skill, ability, and terrain; the Hagronen overpowered the Draken and won the battle. Their stored angst and ferocity came upon the battlefield to defend their captured Valley and their way of life. It would be historically noted by the other tetrarchs that the Draken were becoming lesser in prowess and the Hagronen threat increased. That battle was one of the few times the Hagronen kingdom had, led by their king, Kil'hagron, won an organized battle against another Orken kingdom. It was also a devastating loss for the Draken kingdom, who had failed to regain Fal'kir and Kal'ka.

The great King Kul'drak sat on his throne carved from a single stone and decorated with various weapons and skulls of all sorts. The throne, from top to bottom, ranged fifteen feet tall. Down the long,

dark steps from this great throne knelt the commander of the Draken army: Ful'kag. He knelt on a wide patch of stone, serving as a walkway from the entrance to the throne. The walkway was in between two chasms that led down to a dark pit. The throne room was a grand, circular hall. The king's throne sat in the middle like an island, while the Elders of the Draken kingdom sat on balconies, each lit by a fire signifying that elder's presence, forming a perimeter around the room. There were two guards at the base of the throne, and two at the entrance.

With his head bowed, sweat mixed with blood dripping from his forehead, Ful told his king something no orken in his kingdom had ever reported.

"Madness!" the king exclaimed in the Orken language, his red skin burning with rage. "You were defeated?" He stood, the tips of his sharp horns almost reaching the top of the throne.

"Kill this failure!" he roared to the two guards at the base of the throne. The elders gasped and the two guards hesitated for a brief moment. They prepared themselves for the slaying of their commander, whom they revered and respected. Ful looked up at them and nodded, indicating his acceptance of his fate. Merely seconds later, the two orken stepped forward raising their axes.

The king roared again and jumped down the steps. In one swift, yet brutal moment, he seized the two guards by their heads and crushed them in between his massive hands and the cold floor. He then, whilst perfecting his posture, hoisted Ful off the ground by his neck. The king stood there, surrounded by anxious orken who had not known fear outside of the great Kul'drak for some time.

“How...” he began in his deep, thundering voice, “did you, my greatest warrior, the only one I could ever see succeeding me as chief, fail?” He gazed into the eyes of his loyal commander with burning rage and desperate confusion.

“My great king,” Ful began in reply, squeezing the words out of his collapsing throat, “they were unlike any foe I have faced.”

The king released his grip, causing Ful to fall three feet to the ground. He steadied himself and stood before his king.

“How?” the king asked, turning away from his soldier. “What made those forest-dwellers different?”

“My great king, as you know, in the past we have crushed the Hagronen swiftly and with very little loss. They fight like pathetic orklings, without armour or weapon. However, my great king, this time they had great strength.” He paused, recalling the battle and his fallen troops. “They tore the limbs off my draken and

bit into them like animals. At first, it seemed as though we had the advantage and the victory; I can recall ten orken I had brought to the ground with my axe within the first few seconds. Yet, the Hagronen rose from the ground and..." He stopped. "My great king... Their wounds healed moments after I made them."

Kul'drak paused for a moment. "This report," the king rumbled, "is disturbing... But it will not strike fear in the heart of your great king, Kul'drak!" He turned to Ful and seized him by the throat again. "Your failure," the king screamed, "is unacceptable!" The king pulled Ful closer and whispered: "I am sorry, Ful."

The great King Kul'drak threw his warrior into the chasm plunging from his throne room. Ful fell for a few moments before his body disappeared into the darkness.

"Elders of the Draken!" The king stood tall with his arms raised. "You have besieged me for many moons to rid the Forest of Fal'kir of the Hagronen kingdom and to reclaim those woods as mine." He lowered his arms and paced slowly. "As you have heard just now, my army was unable to defeat these forest-dwelling orken. Thus, I shall march to the woods of Fal'kir in three nights. And I will return with the head of Kil'hagron, the defective orken who has

made for himself a rival kingdom.” He stopped and looked at the two bodies before him. “I also require new guards.”

“My great and powerful king, may your kingdom be everlasting,” spoke an orken female seated on an elder’s balcony. “Are you not leery of their new-found power? They shall surely hear the clanking armour from your warriors and strike you dead in the Forest!”

The surrounding elders gasped and roared in disbelief. They turned to their king, expecting a death sentence for the blasphemous suggestion.

“The great Kul’drak fears nothing!” the king shouted in response. “I intend to travel into the Forest alone. I do not need an army to defeat those *lars*!” He glared at the orken female. “If, as you suggest, I do fail and am not able to bring back the head of Kil’hagron, I will present your head before this council!” He turned toward the door and marched forward.

“Dismissed!” he roared as he smashed the doors open with his fists. He exited the chamber; unaware it would have been the last time he sat on his throne.

The room was dark and cold. Ful’kag lay completely still in a shallow body of water, about five

feet in depth. His head rested against the sharp, rocky wall. His breaths were slow. He could feel a throbbing sensation run through his leg as streams of agony flowed through his body. It had only been a few hours since his great king, Kul'drak, threw him into the pit he lay in. Ful presumed it was to his death, however, despite his severe pain, he was alive.

A loud sound echoed through the bottom of the pit. It was as if a large door had been unlocked. Ful stared at the wall as it slowly creaked open. The light cast from the other room nearly blinded the orken. He turned his head away and covered his eyes with his weak arm. He looked again as the light dimmed and saw a large silhouette breaking the casting light. It was clearly of an orken. The orken was tall and large. The horns on his head were nearly a foot long and stuck out in all directions upward. Ful recognized him immediately; it was his king. Ful struggled to stand, the water made it easier for him as it bore some of his weight. He slammed his right fist against his chest and bowed his head.

“My gr—” his voice cracked as he attempted to speak. “My great king,” he said, nearly choking. He felt a different kind of fire in his chest. It flared not from pride, rather, from agony. He felt as if a large critter was inside his lungs attempting to tear its way

out. He coughed loudly, his black blood spewing into the water.

“Rest, warrior,” Kul’drak said insistently. “I need you to be in the best of strength. For in three nights, you and I shall march upon the Forest of Fal’kir and claim it as ours. Once we control its borders, the centre of Kru’aka will be ours and the other Orken kingdoms will be easier to wage this war against. From there, we may reclaim my kingdom with ease,” he said with confidence.

“My great king,” Ful began, the pain still flowing through him. “I deserve death. Do not grace me with this mission. Finish what you started and take my head,” he said with his head still bowed.

“No greater warrior has the Draken kingdom than it has in you, Ful’kag. You have ascended to the highest rank, devoured all your enemies, and fought bravely for your king. I will not allow one failure to stain your record.”

“I,” Ful began with confusion, “I do not understand, my great king. Earlier you declared my failure to be without excuse and you sentenced me to death, as I should be; for I have survived a lost battle. What will you gain from sparing my life, and deceiving the Elders of the Draken?” Ful coughed violently again.

“Reputation, my great commander,” Kul said, turning around to face the open door behind him. “All orken must fear me, their king. If I spare the life of a warrior, even if you are the commander, that fear would diminish and my rule would come to an end.”

“Then do not spare me!” Ful yelled in reply. The action caused his lungs to cease, and he fell into the water. Kul stepped into the water and hoisted his soldier out of the pool. Ful coughed out even more blood than before.

“Your wounds will heal,” Kul began. “Stay here and rest. In three nights, I will come for you again and we shall march upon the Forest. Take off this heavy armour, it will allow your muscles to heal with more haste.” The king stood and walked out of the room, closing the large door behind him.

Ful lay completely still in the shallow body of water. His head rested against the sharp, rocky wall. His breaths were slow. The pain he felt was so great it kept his mind off his dire confusion.

The female orken who was on an elder’s balcony, and spoke against the king’s capability, walked slowly through the great Orken city of Krag-Ma’ak. She stepped along the high walls, surrounding the moonlit

city. Through the barracks, inspecting hundreds of young orken males desperately training to serve their king in battle. Finally, she reached the Hall of Legends, a grand room, ranging one hundred feet in height, six hundred in length and three hundred in width. The Hall had massive pillars running all around it. Along the walls were statues of the great Orken kings from the past.

She stopped walking. "This was the capital city for all orken in the whole land of Kru'aka," she began saying aloud. "A rallying point for all to look upon. And the great kings of old ruled a united kingdom, the greatest in the history of the world of Teros. And now, since the division, this great city belongs to one Orken kingdom: your kingdom, Kul."

Kul'drak stepped out from the shadow of one of the pillars. "Your words should be watched. They could have meant the death of you earlier today," the king said in an irritated tone.

The female sharply turned to face the king. She was much shorter than the king and like all other orken was bald. However, unlike most mature orken, she lacked horns on her head and her skin was a very pale red. "And you!" she exclaimed. "Your words should be watched as well!" she yelled, her voice echoing through the Hall. She calmed herself before speaking further. The king shifted his stance, slightly

stooping his head. “Do you not remember who made you king?” she asked. “It was I! You will not threaten me the way you did in the throne room. I will not stand for such speech.” She lifted her head and turned back to the statue she looked at before.

“My apologies,” Kul’drak said humbly. “I shall concede to your demand if you hear mine: question not my rulings when the Elders are in session. No orken can ever speak down to the king or his decrees in front of the leaders of the Draken,” he said in reply.

“I agree. Your sovereignty is above my immediate opinion,” she said. “You have my apologies, my great king. However, on the matter of my opinion: I do not see the sense in going to Kil’hagron. He is a berserker and has denounced you as his king, thinking of himself as a worthy rival of your command. He has now created a kingdom for himself and refused to hear our demand to vacate Fal’kir’s coast,” she turned back to face the king.

Only a few days prior, she had suggested to Kul’drak that he send forth word to the Hagronen that their growing presence in the southern regions of the Forest was not to be tolerated by the Draken. There had been no reply and thus the Draken army set out to stand at Kal’ka and coerce the Hagronen to fight. The Draken did not know of how deep the Hagronen had developed into Fal’kir, but they

assumed, as the depths of the Forest were so hostile, that their encampments were limited to the coastal regions of Fal'kir. This, however, presented the Draken with the disadvantage of not being able to attack the other two kingdoms in Kru'aka as easily; Fal'kir lay in the central northern region, therefore, it provided a military advantage to the kingdom that dominated it.

“All that transpired in the Valley of Kal'ka,” she began, “is a tragedy to this great kingdom's reputation. Do not try and reason with Kil'hagron. He has brought dishonour to your army and to you. If you are to go, kill him swiftly in the night,” she said in a demanding tone.

“Did you not hear me in the chamber?” Kul'drak began in reply. “Did I not say I would bring his head before the council?”

“Kul...” she began, looking up at him. “I know you and I know you mean to speak with him and try to convince him to vacate the Forest willingly. I assure you Kul: he will not. He will kill you if given the chance. I dare not see this fate fall upon you.”

Kul'drak, the great king, stepped forward, passing her. He stood before the statue, almost making eye contact with the stone figure. He was a large orken, clad in full iron armour, wielding a massive axe.

“I wish he were here to guide me,” Kul’drak said. “No king of the Orken has had his kingdom divided. There has always been one king and one order. Now, in this sovereign land, there are four orken kings. If he were here, he would grant me the wisdom to triumph over this time and unite the Orken again.”

“Kul,” the female orken began, “the time for a unified Kru’aka is over. The time for a Draken kingdom to destroy all its rivals has come. Crush the other three usurpers, who have sworn themselves your enemies, before they march against these walls and crush you. And perhaps other enemies will hear of your defeat and come against us. Imagine a world where the very power of the Orken is looked down upon? Could you allow such a tragic end to the fearful reign of the Orken? Could you allow any creature in Teros to doubt the fear that has been instilled within them for countless ages?” she asked, staring at the kings back. She looked beyond him to the statue. “Your father is gone. And the only wisdom he would give you is this,” Kul’drak turned around and faced her, “fight,” she said, “kill, destroy, and crush all those who oppose you. You have the power.”

She turned around and began to walk away. She stopped and turned her head back to the king. “Do you understand what you have to do, Kul?”

“Yes...” the great and mighty King Kul’drak replied. “I understand, mother.”

II

THE DARKNESS OF NIGHT HOVERED over the land of Kru'aka. A muscular stag-like creature, referred to as a *truکا* by the Orken, stalked through the dark, moonlit Forest of Fal'kir. Its long body slowly moved forward as it gazed upon its prey: a small animal with white fur crouched by a red plant growing from the forest floor. It ate, completely unaware of the truکا's plan to kill it. The truکا opened its mouth revealing long, blood-stained fangs. It crouched on its hind legs, readying itself for the pounce. A truکا is capable of running faster than any other forest-dwelling animal and can jump great distances. Just before the truکا leapt for its prey, it dropped to the forest floor, completely limp. The truکا lay still on the ground breathing slowly, each breath getting further from the next. A large black insect, about a foot in length, sat still on the truکا's stomach.

That insect was not known to any other kingdom except the Hagronen kingdom. They did not have a name for this creature, but it was one of the most dangerous in the Forest. Disguised in the shadows, this creature would wait until its prey, usually the larger animals in Fal'kir, walked into its view. As soon as it did, the insect leapt forward at an untraceable speed and lodged its venom-coated claws into the stomach of the prey, paralyzing it instantly. That then allowed the insect to siphon the still active blood from the prey, into its own body.

Just before the insect had finished siphoning the now dead truka's blood, a large red hand, with black markings, quickly grabbed the insect. The orken, before allowing the insect any time to react, bit the creature's head off. He then put the rest of the insect into his mouth and chewed it vigorously before swallowing.

That orken was around eleven feet tall, with four stubs of bone on his forehead. They were what remained of his horns, all broken during battles with other orken. His most recent battle had led him to an altercation with Ful'kag of the Draken kingdom. His newly found strength had allowed him to be victorious over Ful. This seasoned warrior was loyal, as much as he was willing to be, to his king, Kil'hagron.

He picked up the truka carcass and continued his journey through the woods. About an hour later, still under the cover of night, he approached his encampment. Unlike the other Orken kingdoms, the Hagronen kingdom did not have a great city built of iron and stone. The Hagronen lived simply in the forest, without structures or shelters. The orklings were, more recently, never given names and they were not bound by any laws, save for the following of their king. All orken, despite their bloodthirsty and war-driven predisposition, were not selfish and knew nothing of greed nor jealousy. This contributed to their being the perfect warrior. Their emotion was war; they lived for it and trained every day.

That hagronen, who fought Ful'kag, had sired eighteen orklings with three different mates in his time. The Orken have no concept of love, the closest they can achieve is loyalty. An orkling will remain loyal to its parents until another calls for it: a king or a captain. Once their loyalty is given to this new prospect, all ties to the ones who sired them, are cut. Two orken will come together and remain mates until a death occurs, at that time it is in their nature and instinct to source another mate through which they may have strong offspring. That hagronen's first mate was killed by one of his offspring close to two hundred years ago. The thought of this did not disturb

the hagronen; his loyalty was not with his previous mate, nor his current one. It was with his king. His chief, the ever-living Kil'hagron. A berserker and brute of an orken; incapable of dying, or so he believed. Whatever Kil'hagron commanded, that hagronen would be honoured to obey, as would all hagronen living in the Forest of Fal'kir.

The hagronen stepped into his camp, immediately being sized by other hagronen males. One, a massive orken with dark red skin, sat on a fallen tree, gazing intensely. The hagronen turned his gaze away, hoping to avoid conflict. Not for the reason of fear, nor from the thought of failure. He carried news he wished to give to his king, a fight to the death with one of his fellow hagronen would only slow down the delivery.

Suddenly his thoughts and reasoning for avoiding combat changed. He dropped the truka and charged toward the seated orken. He violently roared as he leapt through the air toward his foe. With his knee landing on the other hagronen's face, he grabbed his foe's head with his strong hands. The two struck the forest floor abruptly and the hagronen, who had battled Ful'kag, landed on his feet and instantly took hold of his grounded challenge. He hoisted him upward and swung him back down toward the fallen tree on which the other orken had sat. A red film covered his eyes as he slammed the orken's head

against the fallen tree. The other orken now lay still on the ground, breathing very slowly. The hagronen stood, hunched over and panting. He shook his head and the red film disappeared. He looked around and realized what had happened.

He saw his mate and his three orklings not far from him. He quickly grabbed the truka again and approached his group of orken swiftly and tossed the truka on the ground. “Eat,” he grunted. The three orklings pounced on the corpse and tore into it. They tore off massive chunks of flesh with their teeth and ate it vigorously.

The hagronen walked away from them and made his way into the woods again. It was only a few minutes before he reached the king’s encampment. It was a clearing in the Forest with a large fire in the middle. Dozens of massive hagronen warriors filled the clearing. The hagronen passed through them all, being recognized as a close servant to the king. The hagronen approached the tent that was set up at the end of the clearing.

“My king,” the hagronen began, “two draken are approaching the Forest. It is very likely they have already breached our borders. One bears the resemblance of the weak king, Kul’dre—”

Before he could finish his statement, the tent flap was lifted by a massive red arm, painted with dark sap:

the substance used to create the markings all hagronen bore on their hands and forearms. The hagronen dropped down on one knee and bowed his head. A large orken stepped out from the tent and stood before the hagronen.

“At last,” Kil’hagron, the king of the Hagronen, said with a grin.

Kul’drak and Ful’kag walked silently among the dark trees. The snow, through which they had previously wade, tapered off as they found shelter among the thick boundary of trees. Ful attempted to walk swiftly, limping as he went. A bone in his leg had cracked when he plummeted to the bottom of the pit below his king’s island throne. It caused him great pain and he was unsure if the pain would ever cease.

Ful, unlike every day before, was not adorned with metal armour. He had only a few patches of leather armour covering his shoulders and chest. The rest of his body was covered in a cloth tunic and trousers. This made him feel exposed. Taking the blow of a weapon never concerned him before, now he would need to take caution when entering a battle. Fear was never something to take hold of any orken. However, older orken develop, through many years

of experience and changes of their loyalty, a sense of caution. This allows elders to have an unbiased approach to the king's commands and offer sound advice, although never an objection.

Ful was at an age where wisdom and the sense of caution began to accompany the boldness that would lead him to die for his king, Kul'drak being the second king he had been loyal to.

Ful, at least, held firmly to his large axe. He had every intention of using it when the opportunity arose. His confusion about the king's behaviour in letting him live was clouded by the thrill of facing the Hagronen once again.

"My wish is for all of us to depart without the shed of blood," Kul'drak whispered to Ful, as if aware of his thoughts.

"I am not afraid of either outcome, my king," Ful replied in truth.

The king laughed shortly, an uncommon thing for an orken to do. "I know you have not a drop of fear in your heart. I will give Kil'hagron one final opportunity to clear the southern regions of Fal'kir of his orken. I know he will hear me, but only if it was I who came into his presence."

"My king," Ful began in reply, "if I may offer my opinion: why give him the opportunity? Why not

strike him down? He is a lesser king with a lesser kingdom.”

“I am bound to Kil’hagron in a way I cannot expect you to understand,” the king said, walking ahead of Ful.

The confusion flooded Ful’s mind once again. He quickly dismissed it in order to maintain his focus.

The two orken walked through the Forest for not even a quarter of an hour before reaching the Hagronen camp. Most of the Hagronen lived on the outskirts of the Forest, being ready for battle at any moment. However, there were a few tribes that dwelt deep within the woods. Many of them had not been seen for ages.

Kul’drak and Ful came upon a large clearing, one of many wherein the majority of the Hagronen army dwelt.

As soon as the two draken entered the fire-lit clearing, dozens of hagronen stood. They knew who that was: the great king of the Draken kingdom. With this knowledge, all the hagronen remained dormant as the two draken walked through the camp. A young female orken stood only a few feet from Kul’drak.

“You!” he shouted while pointing at the trembling female. “Take me to your commander, Kil’hagron,” he said fiercely.

She nodded, keeping her head bowed. She was no more than eight feet tall. She had small shoulders and wore a loose wool dress. She walked in front of the two draken as she led them through clearings and patches of trees.

“By the way,” she said still walking forward, “Kil is not my commander. He is my king.”

Ful’kag looked at Kul with surprise. His king simply grinned and kept moving forward.

Finally, they approached a clearing with a large fire burning in the centre. There was only one hagronen in the clearing; a large male stood by the fire, gazing down at the flames. He wore nothing but a loincloth wrapped around his waist. He had no weapons around him and looked absolutely defenceless. Ful knew this was not the truth. He knew that hagronen needed only his massive muscles to tear through other orken, as he had recently witnessed.

“Welcome,” he began in a deep, raspy voice, turning to face his visitors, “to my kingdom.” The large orken spread his arms out boastfully.

Ful's muscles flexed as he gripped his axe. He stared at his foe, the commander of the army whom he failed to defeat. Kil’hagron was alone and could easily be attacked. He felt the fire in his chest blaze and roar as it grew, encouraging him to end his foe. Ful, despite his nature, stood still. For there was one

thing greater than his desire to kill that orken: his loyalty to his great king.

Kul'drak stood, looking at Kil'hagron. Conflict filled him as he spoke. "My army is the greatest army this land has seen in many ages. How did you, a forest-dwelling *lar*, defeat me?"

Kil'hagron laughed hysterically. "The greatest army?" he began loudly. "What defines greatness? Weapons? Armour? Numbers?" he questioned, "What about immortality? I would say an army that could not be killed would be known as the greatest army! Ask your failure of a commander why he could not defeat me!" the king in the Forest boasted.

Ful shifted his stance, being filled with dishonour and confusion as he heard those words again.

"I know of what happened," Kul'drak began, "but I know not of how. That is the primary reason for my coming." he said, taking a few steps in front of Ful and the young female.

Kil'hagron closed his eyes slowly and his body hunched over revealing a jagged spine. A low growl surged from behind his black teeth. He opened his eyes and looked at the other orken. His eyes were red, instead of the usual black. He crouched down and growled even louder. A few moments passed. Kil stood up straight, seeming to be well, and opened his

eyes. They were black. He turned to face the fire again. “You mad,” he said. “I not tell you!”

Kul’drak, confused by his mannerisms, approached the troubled king.

“What has happened to you in this Forest?” he asked.

“Is that why you want us to leave?” Kil’hagron blurted in reply as he turned to face Kul’drak. “You want, we have!” he yelled. “You not take Fal’kir!” He screamed, his eyes becoming red again.

“Brother!” Kul’drak yelled, his voice thundering through the trees. Ful grunted in surprise. He stared at his king in disbelief, replaying the word in his head: *brother*.

“What has driven you to this state? Why are you frenzied so?” Kul’drak yelled, gazing intently at his deranged brother.

“I not brother!” he yelled in reply. “I King of Fal’kir!” Kil’hagron charged Kul’drak. His eyes entirely the colour of red. Foam spewed from his mouth as he leapt toward his brother. Kul’drak swung his arm at Kil’hagron as he was in the air. Hit by Kul’s mighty arm, Kil plummeted to the forest floor. Kil’hagron writhed on the ground as he attempted to bite Kul’drak’s feet. Kul stomped on Kil’s head and then knelt down to seize him. He turned the flailing Kil’hagron over, grabbed his entire upper body and

squeezed him close to his own chest. Kul'drak had Kil'hagron pinned to the ground, with his face in the dirt.

"Enough, brother!" Kul'drak yelled. The great king moved so quickly, Ful did not even have the time to react. Kil'hagron slowly calmed down, his breathing lessened and his muscles eased. The red film over his eyes disappeared once again.

"Kil," Kul'drak began, "what illness has overtaken you?"

"The insects..." Kil said, catching his breath. "They allow us to heal if we eat them. But when we feed, soon after the world becomes red and we lose ourselves. And I have consumed this insect for many nights now; its effect is staying with me longer and with more strength," he said, closing his eyes, breathing heavily through the foam still in his mouth. "And even still, the colour of a creature's red blood will fill my sight if I rage or combat."

Kul'drak released the strong grasp he held on his brother and walked toward the fire. Kil'hagron stood up. "You cannot ask me to leave this region of the Forest, Kul. My orken will suffer without—" Kil'hagron grunted loudly. His sentence was stopped due to a severe pain in his back.

The abrupt halt in his brother's speech caused Kul to turn back and look. He saw Ful holding his axe

horizontally. The axe head was wedged deep within Kil'hagron's spine. Ful pulled the axe out of his foe quickly causing black blood to spew from Kil's back. Kil began to laugh as the wound started to heal. He turned to face Ful but before the two saw each other's eyes, Ful had swung his axe again. The blade cut smoothly through Kil's neck and his head toppled to the forest floor. Ful stood staring at the body as it soon collapsed to the ground. He looked up and saw Kul'drak standing still with a surprised expression on his face. Ful straightened his back and put the axe to his side.

The young orken female stood back some ten feet from the scene. Her body trembled. She knew little of the world and that which she knew, she forgot, and that which she remembered, was depraved; yet in one moment most of what she did comprehend, changed. Her king, the one whom she was loyal to, was dead.

Loyalty is not something the Orken are trained or raised into, it is something that lies deep within them. This young female had never killed before, nor had she ever felt rage. Her lack of experience with, and protection from, war and vengeance caused her to look not on Ful with hatred, rather, with admiration. He had slain the strongest figure in her life and he then had her loyalty.

Ful stood gazing at Kul'drak as thoughts flooded his rage-filled mind: orken abandon the sense of loyalty to family when becoming loyal to a new commander. No orken could have felt the way the king felt. Unless the king, being subject to no one, could retain loyalty to his family? But perhaps this Kul'drak has compromised what gives the Orken race strength. Perhaps this king is not fit for his kingship, nor the loyalty of any orken...

"My great king," Ful began, "you should strike me where I stand for my thoughts betray you."

"Of what do you speak?" the king replied staring at his brother's decapitated body.

"No orken has ever spared the life of an attacker. No orken king has spared the life of a commander who has failed in battle. And yet you have done both."

The king turned away. "Ful," he began slowly, "I felt something I cannot explain. I felt a sense of loyalty to Kil, therefore I could not kill him. And I could not kill you," the king said quietly.

Ful began to breathe heavily, his stomach churned and he started to allow his anger to take hold of him.

"My gr—" Ful stopped himself. "My king," he said, as he witnessed the greatness of Kul'drak fade from his mind, "I cannot return to Krag-Ma'ak with you," he said. "I do not understand what madness has driven the Orken way from you, and for that, I cannot

submit to your rule,” Ful said this with great remorse. He could feel the fire in his chest weaken. He felt cold as he stood before his once-respected king, hoping to be killed by him.

“I had plans to restore you, Ful. I would give you a new name and you could ascend to the rank of commander once again.”

“It is not the dishonour of my loss that has driven me to desert you. It is my lack of faith in you as my king. My lack of faith in you as an orken.” Ful closed his eyes, knelt, and presented his neck to Kul’drak. “If you have but a spark of the same fire I once felt in my chest, do me the honour in executing me,” Ful said loudly.

The young orken female gasped at the sight. She realized Ful’s submission to Kul’drak and she watched as it drifted away in that cold forest.

“I will not take your life,” Kul said in protest. “It is to my dishonour that I have lost your faith. I am lost in my soul. I feel things no orken has felt and I have done things no orken has done. I wish you well on your journeys. Travel east to the kingdom of Gan’marak; you will find a place there. Perhaps Gan will be a worthy enough king for your loyalty. And if not with him, go to your former commander, Dal. Although he is said to have left our lands long ago.”

Ful felt cold at that moment. He knelt by Kil'hagron's body, completely stiff.

"Leave, my old companion," Kul'drak said. "Take the female with you; for no orken within Fal'kir will survive the night."

In the Orken culture, if an orken doubted his king's power, he had the right to challenge the king in a duel: a fight to the death. Yet, Ful stayed his weapon. He knew his duty and right. He, however, did not perform it. Ful stood and turned around to leave the Forest. He saw the young female standing in front of him, her head bowed. "Come with me," he said shortly. The two of them stepped into the tree line and walked into the darkness.

Kul'drak stood by the fire alone, overlooking his brother's corpse.

"*The insects*," he heard his brother's voice resound in his mind. He turned toward the tent at the back of the clearing and approached it and entered. There was a table with a map spread across it. A half-eaten truka carcass lay on the floor, next to a large wooden cage. Kul opened the cage slightly, yet enough to get a glimpse of what was inside: dozens of black insects, about the size of his hand, wrestled at the bottom of the cage. He swiftly reached in and took hold of one. It screeched and squirmed as Kul lifted it out of the cage. Kul gazed at the hideous insect for a few

moments before closing his eyes. He opened his mouth and ate the insect. Almost immediately he felt the effects. The conflict within him disappeared. He felt as if his bones had become denser and his muscles stronger. He clenched his fist and grinned as he opened his eyes. The pain he felt from the loss of his brother was gone and all of his thoughts, foreign to the orken, vanished. All he saw was red.

Ful and the young female were not even out of the Forest before they heard the sound. It was of iron meeting flesh, flesh meeting lumber, and lumber meeting iron. The sound was filled with grunting, screaming, and yelling. The sound had the breaking of trees and the breaking of bones. It was not the same sound Ful had heard in the Valley of Kal'ka; it was the sound of chaos.

III

THE THRONE ROOM WAS DIMLY LIT BY fires burning on four of nine different balconies; only a few members of the Council of Elders were present. Overlooking the island of rock on which the throne sat, the elders studied maps as they kept track of the territories their kingdom controlled. Unfortunately, the range of the Draken kingdom had been decreasing. The loss of the most recent battle in the Valley of Kal'ka caused them to lose an influential portion of the middle of Kru'aka. It was proven by time and record that the Orken kingdom that ruled the three central regions of Kru'aka: the Valley of Kal'ka, the Forest of Fal'kir and the Hills of Krom, was able to confidently declare Kru'aka as theirs. Being able to ambush from Fal'kir at any time, having the high ground and cover of the hills, and using Kal'ka as a strong divider for attacks on Krag-Ma'ak, made for easy victories in battle. The elders sighed as they grieved losing a place in the centre of Kru'aka, as

it most likely meant they would not be able to foresee an attack from a rival kingdom and may lose their great city to those they hated. Their grievance vanished quickly. Word of the king's return was sweeping through the streets of Krag-Ma'ak. Soon after, all the fires on the balconies were lit and all elders present.

Kul'drak's mother slowly crept her way onto one of the balconies.

"Jul'drak," an Orken elder whispered to her, "I had not expected to see you again. I presumed you had fled the realm in order to avoid the wrath of the king." The elder was close to nine hundred years old. He had served as an advisor to Kul'drak's uncle when he had previously been king. At this time, he served his king by managing the city and the Draken alongside the other elders.

Jul'drak remained silent, her eyes fixed upon the large doors, anxiously waiting for them to burst open. She feared her son might not enter through those doors. She also feared he would. Moments later the doors slowly opened. It was nearly dawn and the black sky was beginning to brighten. Snow flew its way into the throne room as the doors remained open.

A tall shadow appeared on the stone walkway that led to the throne. It was cast from fires behind him and the shadow clearly belonged to King Kul'drak.

He entered through the doorway and into the throne room. The elders quickly scanned his body, being filled with wonder as they noticed he was covered in blood. The cloth on his body was torn, there was ice on his horns, and dirt spread all across his frame. He had something in his left hand, which he held close to his hip. He stiffened his neck and raised his head to look at each elder as he stretched his arm out to present the object. The elders gasped as they realized what he had returned with. Kul opened his hand and Kil'hagron's head dropped to the floor. Something then occurred, which had not happened in a very long time. The elders stood on their feet and gave their king *talo*.

The act of giving *talo*, translated into the common language, was best described as giving someone one's approval or gratitude. Often, and in this particular instance, *talo* was expressed by the elders striking their hands together repeatedly. Giving *talo* in such a way was invented by the Gizon; a race the Orken drove to near extinction some one thousand years ago. The Gizon would have referred to what the elders did as applauding.

Kul'drak was taken aback by this response. When he entered that room, his intense stance was brought on by a whirlwind of emotions raging inside him. Guilt, pity, grievance, and shame were among the

emotions an orken would normally not feel; yet he, indeed, had felt. Anger, pride, and courage were among the wrestling emotions an orken would feel, and the conflicting emotions beat strongly inside Kul's chest. The talo he received caused them to quickly vacate his mind. Only pride remained; an accumulating amount of it as the elders continued to give him talo.

Jul'drak looked around her, perplexed by the scene. She was some six hundred years old and had never, not once, witnessed such an expression of talo. Many of the elders, however, had. Some eight hundred, some nine hundred years of age, the elders had gained their titles, not from their status amongst the Orken, rather, from their age. An orken living beyond three hundred years of age was unusual. Achieving nine hundred was all the more rare. None present had seen a gizon, but the memories and tales of them were still very active when these select elders were orklings.

The elders stood in unison giving that rare expression of talo. This was brought on by a deep emotion: pride. That emotion brought forth the memory of that expression, thus they gave it to their king, Kul'drak. They too, as the king had, felt pride. They were proud, not of their king but to be under the king's great rule.

“Hail, the mighty Kul’drak!” one of the elders shouted.

“The greatest living Orken king!” another cheered.

“May his kingdom be everlasting!” yet another elder exclaimed.

“Defeater of his enemies, and slayer of the weak,” the elder, whom Jul’drak had sat with, said. His speech brought silence to the room as all longed to hear what he, a highly revered orken, had to say. “You have, yet again, proven your kingship over us. You have protected our borders and increased our lands. You have our loyalty!” The elders began applauding again. “You have our axes!” he yelled as the applause filled the room. “You have our lives!” the revered elder yelled in finality and let out a roar.

Kul’drak stood still, recalling his slaughter in Fal’kir. He was torn into, bitten, scratched, and hit with logs more than he could ever have imagined. And yet he sustained no injuries. The blood dripping from his hands and running down his body was not his own. He recalled what Kil’hagron had told him about the insect. The previous night had proven its validity; the consumption of the insect brought incredible strength and the ability to heal. Only by being beheaded, did the Hagronen, who also consumed the insect, perish. And for Kul’drak, it also

allowed him to have his mind cleared of all his troubles and emotional wrestling. He was an orken, driven by rage and ready to kill, with nothing to stop him.

“This is my victory!” the king shouted boastfully, silencing the applauding elders. “I alone brought the Hagronen to their knees and ended their pitiful kingdom. Too long have we been carefully waging our wars against our foe.” He slowly paced along the walkway glaring at each elder as he spoke, never stepping onto the throne. “Considering borders, consulting maps, taking censuses of our troops: vanity!” He yelled so loud the flames on the balconies flickered.

His voice rang throughout the room and down the dark pit below the throne. “We are the strongest kingdom in all of Kru’aka! I am the strongest king in these lands! I am declaring a state of total war against all surrounding nations! We will attack the Geerum first. Elder Kag’jun!” The king turned toward a balcony, on it was the highly revered elder who had just previously addressed Kul’s victory. “Your age has not deterred your ferocity in battle. I will see that power unleashed. March north and begin an assault on the Geerum’s border immediately. We will storm their mountainous stronghold and destroy those who

have opposed the Orken rule and shared our land for far too many years.”

“Yes, my great king,” Kag’jun replied.

“You are dismissed, Kag!” the king stated loudly. “I will convene with you in the War Hall shortly.”

Kag turned around and exited the balcony immediately. Jul’drak remained on the balcony, her gaze fixed on the king. Kul’drak looked at her shortly, he knew of her disapproval; however, that time he did not care for it.

“The rest of you,” he said resuming his pace and address to the remaining eight elders, “send word to all those loyal to Kul’drak: their time to fight for their king has come.”

“My great king,” another elder began, “do you mean to involve orken who are not members of the Draken army in this battle?”

The king met the sight of the elder. He grinned as he began. “Every orken capable of wielding an axe will fight. Females and orklings too. You Elders have sat here, all these two hundred years, plotting and planning on how to preserve the kingdom’s way, whilst those who have sworn themselves our enemies have been allowed to establish themselves! I am doing what I should have done long ago when I first became king. I will personally kill the king of the Geerum.”

The king felt a hot flame burn in his chest as he spoke. "In fact," he began again, "this Council has done nothing to bring us forward in this time of war. You have acted as if we are not at war! I hereby disband this Council until all those who live in our lands, and are not subject to my rule, are dead!" The king roared in triumph and finality.

The elders gasped in disbelief. The Draken kingdom, even before Kul had become its king, had never known a time without the Council of Elders.

"Go!" the king yelled. "Reclaim our lands and make known to all draken that we are at war!" Kul'drak marched toward the doors and shoved them open. He walked tall into the icy winds that blew about. The doors did not shut, and snow poured onto the walkway. The wind rushed in and the fires on the elders' balconies, lighting the grand room, went out.

It was an early morning on one of the final days in winter, the season referred to by the Orken as the season of ice. Every tree was whitened with frost and the leaves on the ground were a colourless grey, stung by the cold night they previously endured. Snow heaped up against every boulder and the Hills of Krom were laden with layers of white. Beyond the icy

clouds, shone a grand sun, its heat barely giving warmth to the orken female travelling with Ful'kag. She shivered violently and slowly walked behind her leader.

Ful felt the cold as well. Under normal circumstances, the stinging chill of the wind would offer him no discomfort. That prideful fire within his chest had always kept him ablaze with courage. However, since his loyalty was shattered in the Forest of Fal'kir, that flame had diminished, and the cold had made itself known to him.

The two orken had been walking eastward since they left the Forest. Ful's limp, caused by the fall that he presumed would kill him, seemed to have faded. He was evenly distributing his weight amongst both legs and no longer felt the pain in each step. If Ful had thought of it, he would speculate the lack of pain was from his leg being partly frozen due to the severe cold during their walk at night. Since the beginning of their trek, they had not spoken a word to one another.

Suddenly, the young female stumbled to her knees, gasping for air.

"Hunger..." she mumbled with a small, weak voice.

Ful turned around and looked at the female. She was small to him and had very little muscle. Ful guessed her age to be near twenty years; merely

nothing compared his three hundred. He scanned the immediate area for a place to rest. He saw a large grey tree standing atop a small hill. A small series of large rocks formed a mound at the foot of the hill. The tree swayed in the direction of the pile of rocks, proving to Ful the rocks would give shelter from the wind.

“This way,” he said shortly. He began walking toward the tree. However, he did not hear the sound of the young female's feet pressing into the snow behind him. He turned his head and noticed she was still kneeling in the snow, shivering. Her small red hands tightly clasped her shoulders. He noticed the black markings that she bore, putting a distasteful feeling in his mind as he recalled her origins. She had grown up in the Forest where there was always a fire nearby to offer warmth. And unlike Ful once had, she had not the passionate flame inside her chest to offer her any sense of warmth.

Ful stepped toward her and knelt on one knee beside her, his massive frame encompassing hers as he hoisted her from the snow-laden ground with his arms. He carried her to the pile of rocks and placed her on one of the larger boulders. He knew that all the lumber he could possibly find near them would be frozen and beyond the ability to burn. He climbed the rocks and reached the top of the hill. The tree stood next to him, five times his size. He took hold of its

branches and pulled himself up. He climbed the trunk of the tree in an attempt to gauge the landscape ahead. Beyond a vast number of hills, the snow seemed to taper off. He could see a settlement of some sort too. Tents and fires littered across a grassy plain. And in the far distance, far enough he could barely see the form of it, lay his supposed destination: the city of Maraka.

In the orken language, *maraka*, translated best into the common tongue, meant refuge or spared. The city was certainly not as grand as Krag-Ma'ak. It seemed to Ful, although the distance could not give him assurance, to be less than a third of the size. He grunted. He was still filled with regret from Fal'kir and he knew not of what he would gain from joining that lesser kingdom. He simply knew not of how to proceed. For most of his life, his loyalty was pledged to Kul'drak, and before him, it was Dal'drak, presently called Dal'torr: Kul's kin and the former commander of the Draken army. Ful had thought perhaps Dal was better to go to, for he knew him well and better than Gan'marak. Yet Dal had usurped from Kul'drak and Ful had not departed with him all those years ago. Ful knew not of any bitterness held toward him for not choosing to follow Dal unto his new kingdom. Perhaps death would await him, or a kind of shame an orken could not fathom nor describe.

Thus, presently in those icy hills, his loyalty lay with no orken. He felt lost and purposeless and an unsurety that could not be cured. He looked down at the base of the hill he was on and saw the young orken female sitting on the rock. She seemed to be in a better state than previous moments. He realized his new task, a momentary one, close enough to act upon and forget the larger concerns of his life: feeding the female.

Orken males have a tendency to provide protection and sustenance for their females and orklings. This tendency is commonly present in orken males who have chosen a mate; Ful, however, had not. He had served in the Draken army relentlessly for the majority of his years in maturity. Ful was like most other orken: loyal, brutal, and true to his nature even if not required of him.

“We are only an hour’s walk away from a settlement,” Ful spouted down to his follower below. “You will find food and a fire there.” He jumped off the tree, past the pile of rocks, and landed on the ground at the foot of the hill. His landing instantly reminded him of the brokenness within his leg. He could feel all the healing his body had done shatter. He winced and grinned his teeth, clamping his jaw tightly, as he attempted to mask the pain.

“Have you a name?” he asked, attempting to distract himself from his pain and her from the intense hunger and cold she felt. She looked at him puzzled, shivering as she sat.

“Name,” Ful began again. “What is your name?”

The young female simply shook her bald head and kept staring at him in silence.

“My name is Ful’kag; Ful is my name,” he said slowly, flustered and confused. He gestured toward himself and then pointed at her. “What is your name?” he asked again, hoping the signing would help.

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“No? No name?” Ful asked, soon recalling the berserk and savage kingdom from whence she came. “Lar... I will call you Lar, then.” Ful stepped toward her, grabbed her arm and brought her to her feet. He started walking in the direction of the settlement he saw. Lar was not following him. She had barely the strength to stand and no way to communicate with him. All she had was her desire to follow him.

Ful grabbed her by the waist and slung her over his shoulder. He marched on, limping with each step, knowing once she was fed, he could leave her behind.

Kag'jun walked briskly through the streets of the Draken city Krag-Ma'ak, on his way to the War Hall. The War Hall was a grand building near the centre of Krag-Ma'ak, dedicated to, as its name suggests, war. It held several armouries filled with thousands of massive axes and fearsome metal armour. It was attached to the barracks, where young orken would prepare themselves for the glory of battle. The War Hall was in the shape of a circle and had a massive arena in the centre of it. That arena was used as a place for orken to spar and fight in great numbers, often for training, and to the death. Surrounding the arena were seats, lined on an ascending angle, for orken to spectate battles. Behind and above the rows of seats, on the north-east side, was a massive room that overlooked the arena. This room, called the war chamber, was Kag'jun's destination. All planning, mapping, and details pertaining to the Draken's warring took place in that room. Only an elder, a captain, the commander of the Draken army, and the king could enter this room. As war was the focus and crux of the orken lifestyle, the contents of that room were sacred to them.

Kag'jun took the east road from the king's throne room to the War Hall. He was just outside the Hall of Legends, merely a few minutes south of the War Hall, when he was intercepted by another elder.

“Hail, Kag’jun,” the elder said.

“You heard of my task, I have little time to spare, Du’kan,” Kag’jun replied shortly.

Du’kan was an elder who had served Darg’drak, Kul’drak’s uncle, along with Kag’jun, as the king’s advisor: a prestigious position amongst the elders. Du’kan was smaller and younger than Kag. He was close to seven and a half centuries old and, some two hundred years ago, was demoted from being an elder to being a captain in the Draken army, after Kul’drak became king. Kul required Du’kan to prove himself worthy of being an elder. Thus, fifty years ago, Du’kan led his regime of elite warriors into the Valley of Kal’ka, which had been heavily populated by Maraken forces. He slew all of them, pushing back the Maraken territory vastly. That victory caused Du’kan to earn respect from Kul’drak, and he returned to his position as an elder.

“I will get to the reason for my speaking with you if you follow me, it will only take a moment.”

Kag’jun reluctantly followed; he was eager to fulfill his duty to the king and make ready the plans for invading the Geerum border. However, his respect for Du’kan gave him the allowance to follow him behind a nearby building.

“I am appreciative of your hearing me,” Du’kan said.

“Speak.”

“Kag, you are highly revered amongst all draken. Many orken within the Draken army have placed their loyalty with you. You are well beyond Kul’drak in age and might and could easily overthrow him as king.”

Kag was stunned by Du’s statement. “What is the meaning of this?”

“No king has ever disbanded the Council of Elders!” Du’kan shouted at first but quickly lowered his voice again. “Kul’drak is making decisions that compromise the Orken way. He is marching against the Geerum when our kingdom has been weakened by the Hagronen.”

“The Hagronen are dead. Kil’hagron was beheaded by the king you so easily are speaking treason against. I should kill you where you stand!” Kag exclaimed ferociously.

“The holocaust of the Hagronen is a great victory for the Draken and Kul has my respect for that. But moving north, to attack an enemy whom we have not current strife with, when we ought to focus our efforts on reclaiming the centre of Kru’aka, is absurd. The king is clearly enraged and has not the ability to think about what is best for his orken! The disbanding of the Elders gives proof to his madness! Who will rule the orken and keep this great city functioning?”

“This great city will not be populated, nor will need ruling,” Kag began in reply. “Do you not recall? The king, your king, declared all orken to ready themselves for this state of war. All orken; meaning we will all bear arms under the leadership of our great king and crush our enemies. All of our enemies.”

“Kag... Why do you not see reason? I have briefly spoken with a few of the other elders, and they agree. Kil’ron, Dem’ku, Kon’kra, and even Krom’jun are in accord with this plea. Challenge the king, kill him, and take his place as king of Krag-Ma’ak. Begin a strong Junen kingdom.”

Kag knew he would prosper the kingdom if he were at the head. “Du’kan... You remember the great King Darg’drak. He remains to be the mightiest orken I have known. I sparred with him regularly and was never able to defeat him. His kingship was true and he was far stronger than I could ever be. Do you remember?”

“I do,” Du’kan replied.

“Then you would do best to remember that it was Kul’drak who killed him. Kul’drak took the throne from Darg and became our king. If I could not defeat Darg: I certainly could not defeat his killer.”

“Kul’drak assassinated Darg in the shadows like a coward. No orken witnessed the battle. You have heard the tales of an assassin running on the rooftops

of this city. Perhaps Darg's death was not by the hand of Kul but by a mysterious force we have yet to confront. Kul could have stepped in and claimed the king's death to have been caused by him."

"That orken just slaughtered an entire kingdom. Hundreds of enemy orken killed. And Kul had not but a scratch on him. He has earned his kingship and he will keep it," Kag'jun replied in finality. He walked back onto the road and headed toward the War Hall. However, he greatly contemplated Du's suggestion as he walked.

IV

THE ICY WINDS THAT SWEEPED THROUGH

the centre of Kru'aka calmed in severity as Ful, carrying Lar on his shoulder and struggling to balance his own weight due to his injury, made his way through the Hills of Krom.

The Hills were named after a legendary orken: Krom'jun. Like most of southern Kru'aka, the region was once flat, save for a few slopes and minor inclines. In his youth, some eight hundred years ago, Krom led a rebellion against Hal'drak, a mighty orken and the first of the Draken kings. Krom rivalled Hal'drak in strength and vigour. Hal'drak ruled a united Kru'aka. Unlike the present time, almost all orken were loyal to Hal'drak as their king and he ruled a prosperous kingdom from Krag-Ma'ak. Krom attempted to challenge Hal'drak's kingship and called for a fight to the death in the arena at the centre of the War Hall. That challenge caused outrage amongst all orken in the city. Krom was attacked and chased out of the city

before he could fight Hal'drak. However, despite his exile, his desire to overthrow Hal'drak's reign did not stop. He travelled south-east and found that after the Valley of Kal'ka, there was a vast plain. This was where Krom decided to build. He gathered outcasts, rebels, and mercenaries, those who were not loyal to Hal'drak, from throughout the land of Kru'aka. He piled hundreds of heaps of large stones in the plain. However, he piled these rocks to form structures: buildings he and his orken could dwell in, yet the structures looked simply like mounds of boulders.

Krom sent spies into Krag-Ma'ak who told tales to the Draken of Krom building for himself a fine city; one that rivalled the glory of Krag-Ma'ak. This rumour spread its way into the throne room and into the ears of Hal'drak. The news infuriated him. Hal intended on disrupting the building of that rebellious city by destroying Krom and his followers. Hal assembled a great army of his loyal warriors. His orken count was close to thirty-four thousand, whereas Krom merely had an army of two thousand. However, Hal marched to the plain in hopes of crushing his opponent and was, himself, defeated.

Once Hal's troops were deep within the hills, Krom and his forces attacked. The surprise was great and each of Krom's orken had slain five of Hal's troops before the Draken were able to retaliate. The

battle went on for two days. Krom's orken scurried their way through the hills; entering and exiting at opportune moments, giving them the advantage to move through the battlefield, at little risk to themselves. The Draken forces dwindled slowly, but they dwindled nonetheless. The Draken knew not of how many of Krom's orken there were at the beginning of the battle, nor at the end of it. When the last enemy fell, only four, aside from Krom himself, remained. Hal'drak did not die in the battle but was severely wounded and thought to be dead. Due to the vast number of orken, Krom never faced Hal in the battle and believed him to be dead. The final casualties of the battle were: twenty-four thousand draken dead and ten thousand wounded. Most of the ten thousand eventually found their way back to Krag-Ma'ak, while some succumbed to their wounds and bled out over the course of a few days.

Hal found his way back to the city and never ventured out to attack Krom again. The news of the battle in the Hills of Krom spread throughout Kru'aka and Krom'jun became a revered orken. Tales were told that Krom commanded an army of one hundred thousand elite orken and that was how he defeated the Draken army. Krom lived in the Hills for many decades after the battle. He intentionally did not accumulate another army in order to maintain the

rumours of him having a great force. As time went on, Hal'drak's kingship was doubted and eventually challenged by his own offspring: Kal'drak. Kal defeated Hal in a duel in the arena in the city of Krag-Ma'ak and was made the next king. Kal admired Krom and journeyed to the Hills of Krom. He invited Krom to return to the orken city and join the Council of Elders.

Ful, formerly being the captain of the Draken army, knew Krom'jun well. He revered him and had sparred with him on many occasions, however, he had never won. As he recalled the history of the Hills through which he walked, he spotted the settlement he had seen earlier. He was relieved the Maraken did not inhabit the Hills at that time; due to his state, he may have been killed. Ful was so deep in thought he had not noticed he was walking on brown grass. He looked behind him, turning slowly so as not to lose his balance, and saw that he was well beyond the snowy hills and had passed into the eastern region of Kru'aka. He frowned. The East had been the harbourer of his enemies for a very long time. And now, to those he had sworn to fight against, he would look for refuge.

Ful limped his way toward the settlement. The sun was sinking behind him and in the sky glimmered a pink light, drowning in dark clouds. Ful could see

movement in the settlement but he could not decide what it was from. As Ful closed in on the settlement, the movement tapered off and everything became still. Ful was then close enough to see the details of the settlement. Many small fires burned underneath pots of various smelling foods. One of which, he recognized and admired as he drew near. Tents scattered their way throughout the settlement in a seemingly unorganized manner. Ful knelt beside one of the fires and placed Lar next to it, her head smashing against the ground as he released her. The jolt awoke Lar from a slumber brought on by her hunger and exhaustion. She shivered violently as the fire thawed her icy body. Ful struggled to his feet, feeling the sting of his injury. He looked at a tent nearby but as soon as his gaze met the door of the tent, the ragged structure shifted and the opening was closed. Ful felt a chill run from his lower back to his neck. He quickly turned to face another tent and before the opening was closed, he met the glance of a pair of large green eyes. Ful knew immediately these creatures were not orken.

Ful roared in challenge. "Come out!"

"Yes, master. My apologies, master," said a small voice from behind him. Ful swung around, his fist clenched tightly to his axe. He saw before him a small greenish-yellow creature kneeling with its head bowed

to the ground. The creature's neck swelled and expanded, only to quickly deflate while letting out a loud croaking sound. Ful recognized this being. It was a troagan.

The Troagan species are small in size, averaging around four feet in height. They have a nimble bone structure but are covered in fatty flesh. Their strength lies within their thick thighs allowing them to quickly leap short distances, giving them a speed advantage. They have webbed hands and feet, which enable them to swim quickly underwater as well. They are intelligent creatures but are practically unable to fight. Their species has been used for cooking, planting and harvesting crops, and gathering materials.

“Troag! Why are you camped here?” Ful demanded.

“We are your servants, master,” the troagan replied seeming to speak the Orken language flawlessly.

“How many are you?”

“We are many... This pod has close to fifty of us. Additionally, there are dozens like it around the city.”

Ful looked up from the short creature and glanced at the city before him. It was small and ragged and completely unlike the glory of Krag-Ma'ak.

“This female requires sustenance,” Ful demanded.

The troagan looked down at a limp Lar. “What illness has befallen her?”

“No illness, she froze during the night and I know not of when she last ate.”

The troagan, confused by Ful’s diagnostic, quickly scurried toward a large pot resting on hot coals. Another troagan, without being spoken to, ran toward him with a wooden bowl in hand. The first troagan’s two green hands with yellowish palms and webbed fingers took hold of the bowl. He then dipped it into the pot and scooped up some hot broth. “If you could,” the troagan said, gesturing with his head for Ful to bring Lar to him.

Ful carefully balanced his weight as he bent down. He grabbed Lar by the arm and dragged her toward the troagan. The troagan squat next to Lar and with one hand lifted her head and with another, he gently poured the broth into Lar’s mouth. A croak left the squatting troagan again. The second troagan ran over, took the bowl from the first and continued the process. The first troagan stood up and stepped toward Ful. “Her hands bear the mark of the Hagronen, however, you do not,” he said as if asking a question.

“I am from the Draken kingdom. I have come seeking refuge amongst the Maraken. Nurse the female until she is well and then send her to the city.

Her fate will be the same as mine, whatever that is,” Ful began to walk on toward the city.

“Master,” the troagan interrupted, “I think our meeting is not a coincidence.” Ful turned and met the green eyes of the troagan. “If you are not a maraken then you will not know the terrible conditions my kind are in. We are slaves and have been treated as worse. Our kind is not like the Orken; we barely survive the winter. As the ice crept its way down from the north, we could not perform our duties as well and have not been able to meet the quotas Gan’marak has placed on us... Please be our protector and guide us out of the land of Kru’aka.”

Ful snarled. “Your cares are not my own!” he yelled as he turned toward the city again. “You may keep the female lar,” he said in finality.

Kag’jun entered the magnificent War Hall. He was met with many bows of respect from training orken as he walked swiftly through its corridors. He ascended many flights of grand steps on his way to the war chamber. Once outside, he was recognized immediately by the four guards posted by the large metal door. Normally, there would only be two guards outside the chamber; the additional two were the

king's new personal guards. Kag spotted them instantly and found amusement in their nervous state. He recalled what happened to the previous two in the throne room; he served a fearsome king indeed.

The guards opened the door and Kag entered the chamber. It was a grand room, rivalling that of the throne room. The ceiling was close to twice the height of any orken and the vast width of the room seemed unnecessary when considering its contents. A series of shelves ran across one of the walls. The shelves contained many scrolls, intentionally picked from the city's library. The scrolls were previous war accounts and battle tactics. The Draken frequently referred to these scrolls for inspiration. The only other content of the large room was a massive table situated deeper into the chamber, closer to the window overlooking the arena. At the table stood the great King Kul'drak peering down at a map spread across the table. Another orken stood across from him. That orken was a captain in the Draken army and oversaw all training and he specialized in military tactics. When he saw Kag enter the room, he bowed his horned head.

"Hail, King Kul'drak. Hail, Grom'tul," Kag said as he approached the table.

"Kag," the king began, "I gather you did not make haste. Grom'tul has devised a plan of battle for our

raid on the Geerum.” The king gestured to Grom as if inviting him to continue.

“Yes, my king,” he spoke in growling voice. “The Geerum, as you have experienced in the past, win their battles by hiding in their mountainous fortress and drawing their enemy in. The fortress, with the Geerum waiting inside, is impenetrable. However, due to the war we have been in with the traitorous Orken kingdoms in the east, they have stretched their reach south. They have set up an encampment on our border, right next to the north-western reaches of Fal’kir.” Grom pointed to the place on the map. “Kag’jun, my suggestion is you take a few hundred orken and get close to the encampment. Kul’drak will then sound the call of a horn. At that moment you and your orken will attack the encampment. Be sure to sound your war horn, drawing the attention of the fortress. They will send out a retaliation force to defend the encampment. Allow your forces to be beaten back slightly. Once they see you are but a few hundred, they will send out a smaller force. At this time Kul’drak will have reached you. He and his armada of two thousand will join the battle from behind and, due to his recent victory over the Hagronen, will burst forth from the tree line of Fal’kir, circling the Geerum forces. If they send more of their forces out at that time, we will be able to

defeat them. Because their defences at the entrance of their city will be destroyed, we can surge through their gate.”

“That is a mighty, yet bold plan Grom,” Kag began in reply, “however, do we have twenty-three hundred Draken warriors at the ready?”

“I have five hundred warriors in the city. The loss of Ful’kag’s garrison in the Valley of Kal’ka has spread us thin. However, if I have until this time tomorrow, I will have the remainder of the forces ready,” Grom replied looking at the king.

“You have until tomorrow,” Kul’drak replied.

“Grom,” Kag began, “are we aware of the number of Geerum that are battle-ready?”

“No. However, we know their numbers are similar to our own. Based on an extended scouting from a few moons ago, their city is within the mountain and there is another entrance on the north side of the mountain. The entrance leads to what seems to be a network of roads leading toward other mountains in the distance. It is assumed these mountains are also other cities. But it is unlikely their full army will be able to mobilize due to the harsh winter we have endured. The snow is melting in Kru’aka but their country will take a longer time to thaw.”

“Due to the scale of the mountain itself,” Kul’drak began in addition, “I would be very surprised if they could get the northern defences at their south entrance before we had entered the mountain.”

“Very well,” Kag agreed. “I will leave the city with my warriors in the darkness of this coming night. We will hide in the Forest of Fal’kir until we here the blow of your horn, Kul.”

“Good,” Kul’drak replied. “Grom’tul, have those forces ready by dawn. Kag will leave as darkness falls and I will leave at the sound of the horn at first light. We will see the end of equality in strength between the Orken and the Geerum at last. And Grom, leave the raid to Kag and I.”

“My king?” Grom questioned.

“I have lost trust in the Elders and I will need you to ensure the city is properly being prepared for war. See to it the Draken villages to the west are readied as well. Once we have crippled the Geerum we will move eastward and reclaim Kru’aka.”

“Yes, my king.”

“Kag, send for Du’kan. Have him join your forces tonight. Go and prepare your three hundred.”

“Yes, king,” Kag said.

Without a cloud in the sky, the warmth of the sun soothed Lar's red skin. Ful had not been gone for more than a few hours before she had recovered from the freeze of the previous night. Having now consumed a large portion of the Troagan's broth, she slowly gained in strength and awareness as she lay next to the fire.

"I have never heard of an orken freezing," the first troagan, who had spoken with Ful'kag, said.

Lar stared back at him with a blank expression. The troagan took the opportunity to study her face; he had never seen an orken that young before, though she was twice his own age. Despite her age she still had sharp bones piercing through her cheeks and small horns on her bald head. "I suppose you are too young to have killed," the troagan said aloud but continued the rest in thought. He was always told the orken had a fire burning in their chest, which caused them to kill. And the more they killed the hotter the fire burned. That myth persisted for so long: some believed the Orken did not even have a physical heart, rather, just an open flame that ignites when they have shed blood for the first time.

"*Perhaps she is the one,*" he thought. Lar lay before him still, as if unaware of his question. "*Perhaps being*

raised in that forest has led to her being of a lesser mind,” he thought.

The Orken were an incredibly astute race. Their broad selection of words and sentence structure allowed for very little misunderstandings amongst their ranks. More recently and for reasons unknown to most, the sect of orken led by Kil’hagron did not educate their young as extensively as other Orken kingdoms. The savagery brought on by the consumption of the black insect, found in the Forest of Fal’kir, led the Hagronen to apathy toward such things. The consumption gradually led one’s mind to sheer madness.

“What is your name?” the troagan asked, breaking the silence.

Lar perked her head. “My name is Lar,” she said for the first time. Identifying herself brought a feeling of content to her. She sat up quickly. “Where is Ful’kag?” she pressed the troagan.

“He left a few hours ago. He is on his way to the city.”

“Which way?”

The troagan pointed east toward the city. “Please,” he began, “I do not think our paths crossing is a coincidence. My name is Noma and I need your help.”

“Your cares are not my own!” she yelled as she frantically scrambled to her feet and ran off in the direction of her leader.

Her muscles were weak and sore but she pushed herself forward. Her bare feet were incredibly callused from the harsh terrain inside the Forest of Fal’kir.

With the combination of Ful’s limp and her determined sprint, she caught up with him within less than half an hour.

She saw his silhouette in the distance, the city gate but a mile in front of him. “Ful’kag!” she shouted as she began her final sprint toward him.

Ful turned around and growled with anger as he saw Lar approach. “Go back!” he shouted.

Lar toppled before his feet and bowed her head low to the ground. “Please,” she began panting heavily, “I am your servant; you have my loyalty.” She continued panting, taking deep breaths as she knelt before him. “I wish to follow you,” she said.

“No!” Ful yelled furiously. “I refuse your loyalty. You shall not be loyal to any except to your own survival. You shall exhaust your life doing deeds for those to whom you have given your loyalty. And sometime after you have given all you can give, you will discover this: no one is worth your loyalty. Not the mightiest of kings and not me!”

Lar gazed up at him; she felt a shattering wave flow through her chest.

“Go back to those troagan. They require your help and I have given you to them.” Ful stooped down, took hold of Lar’s arm and hoisted her to her feet. She was still and looked up at him, standing three feet below him.

“Will I see you again?” she asked.

“Never,” he replied fiercely. “Now leave.”

The command brought forth conflict within Lar. As she despairingly watched her leader walk away from her, she felt a strong urge to turn the other way and head back to the troagan, and she did, not out of kindness for them, rather, in obedience to Ful.

The long walk had taken its toll on Ful’s leg. He felt the burning sensation of blood pumping toward where his bones were broken. And at the same time, he felt the icy chills of pain thrust their way up his spine.

He found a place to rest for the remainder of the day in a small patch of trees with a series of large rocks mingling within. It was only midday, but he was limping so severely he would not dare present himself that weak before the Maraken. He would wait until the next morning, allowing his leg adequate time to continue its healing.

The clouds had made their appearance offering Lar some shade from the beating of the midday sun. She was not used to experiencing it in such force as the Forest of Fal'kir had always offered protection from all the extremes Kru'aka had to offer. When a severe wind swept in and smashed against the land, Lar was never moved. When heavy snow or rain poured down relentlessly upon other Orken kingdoms, Lar found shelter under the thick canopy of leaves. And when freezing air murdered all possible comfort for those dwelling in cities, the vast network of fires kept Lar warm. She had now faced only a few of the elements and longed for the Forest. Her longing was drowned by the shattering truth of her abandonment. Her abandonment was triumphed by her new command: to aid the troagan.

When Lar had found her way back to the Troagan camp, the pots of broth were still bubbling over the fire. She caught wind of the smell and only then did she realize her hunger. She found a bowl and helped herself.

"It is interesting such an uncultured orken, like yourself, would still have a taste for *broanta*," Noma's voice softly sounded from behind her.

Lar turned and faced him, still sipping the broth. “Broanta?” she managed to ask.

“It is a broth made from the bones of truka. You must know that word.”

“Yes, I do,” Lar replied gently.

“This broth is favoured by most orken. It must be something of an instinct if even you enjoy it.” The troagan gestured for her to sit down with him. “But I suppose you would have eaten your fair share of truka meat while being raised. You have probably even killed one before.”

“I have never actually spilled the blood of anything yet,” Lar replied.

“Never? You truly are a different orken, indeed.” Noma stood up swiftly. “Perhaps you are exactly the way you are for a purpose: to lend your aid to my kind. For which other reason would you have returned?”

Lar was taken aback. Did Ful speak with this troagan and inform him of his command for her? “What kind of aid do you require?” While she asked, a murmur broke out amongst the camp. Troagan spilled from and ran into different tents. Vast amounts of croaking accompanied the rush as well.

“You must come with me immediately,” Noma said while taking hold of Lar’s hand. When she rose she towered over the small Troagan and almost had to bend over to keep holding his webbed hand.

“What is happening?”

“The broth,” Noma began, “it was never meant for you. We have been expecting a visit from the Maraken all day. It is only now that they are arriving.” He led her quickly to a nearby tent. “If they found you, they would either kill you or take you from us.”

Lar got on her knees and crawled into the tent. Noma closed the flap and whispered, “Please stay here and do not make a sound. I cannot afford to lose you. I will explain everything to you once the inspection team is gone.”

The croaking immediately stopped. Noma ran toward a pot of broth and waited.

Seven orken, all close to eleven feet tall, marched into the camp. They were wearing full metal armour like the Draken; they were, however, from the Maraken kingdom.

“Report, troag,” the head of the group gnarled to Noma.

“Yes, my master,” Noma said bowing his head low to the ground. “We have harvested the crops from last quarter. Our yield is far greater than that of last year’s. In fact, it seems the winter has not affected our production.”

“Is this the truth?” another orken spouted.

“Yes, master. The early winter caused for an earlier melt, which saw an increase in moisture for our crops.”

“I wish to see the stores of yurka,” the first maraken demanded.

“Yes, master, of course. But first, you must know: an orken was here not long ago. He seemed to be of the Draken military.”

“What?” the first orken shouted. “Where is he now?”

Lar overheard the conversation. She cringed as she mourned the secrecy of Ful’s approach. She feared for his safety, knowing these orken could take advantage of his injured state and kill him. She didn’t know of the political differences between the kingdoms, she just knew they were all enemies.

“He left for Gan’marak half a day ago. He came with news from the Forest of Fal’kir regarding the Hagronen.” Noma knew exactly which strings to pull when it came to the tensions between the Orken. He was old, for a troagan, and wise and knew his way around the truth. “He was injured; he could not have ventured very far.”

With that, the seven orken were off, charging in the direction of Ful’kag.

The croaking broke out again. Lar crawled out of the small tent she hid in and stood to her feet. She saw

dozens of troagan scattering off in all directions, leaping great distances as opposed to running.

“What is happening?” she asked Noma, who had just made his way to find her. “I have lied,” he began. “We have not yielded a very good crop this year; no Troagan pod has. It is likely this very team has slaughtered many troagan today because of it. I could not see the same fate befall my pod. As I mentioned, I need your help. We are slaves of the Orken and until now, have not had a way of freedom. But now our way is you! You are an orken and you can guide us to a land of peace, where those who seek refuge from war are said to find it!”

“Guide?” she replied. “You must be mistaken for I know nothing beyond those woods over there.” She pointed to Fal’kir.

“You do not need to know where it is, Lar. Krag-Ma’ak is the oldest Orken city. It has a library of sorts, which will contain not only a map of Kru’aka but of all the lands surrounding it. Because you are an orken you can enter the city and steal such a map and with it, we can find our way to the peaceful land.”

Lar gazed into the green eyes of the being before her. She had previously been of no importance to anyone. She was merely another mouth to feed, with the hope of one day becoming a hunter and a mate to any warrior that should choose her. Not only did she

long to help out of her obedience to Ful, but now for her own sense of purpose.

“I will help you Noma. Your pod’s fate will be my own.”

“Lar... I could never thank you enough. However, it is not just my pod you will be helping. You will save us all. That is where those troagan went to; they are going to the other pods to inform them of our departure and to invite them.”

“Where will everyone hide while I venture into Krag-Ma’ak?”

“Depending on our numbers...” he began but stopped himself. “To tell you the truth, I have not thought of that part of the plan yet. We may have to answer that question when we are faced with it.”

Winter had released its grasp upon the area where Ful had taken rest. The grass was dry and the breeze was warm. Ful had peacefully slept for close to two hours now.

Under extreme circumstances an orken could go an entire week without resting, contributing to their being the perfect warrior. However, due to Ful’s injury, he knew the only way his body could heal itself, was if he slept.

The clanking of metal boots stomping against the ground awoke him. The noise of several orken approaching was still far off. Ful sprung to his feet, his axe still in hand, and located those who were approaching. He counted seven orken each being of a smaller build. They were dressed completely in battle armour and carried large axes. He recognized the symbol engraved on their breastplates.

“Maraken,” he whispered in disgust, his old allegiances still in his mind’s forefront.

His first instinct was to climb one of the trees and wait until his attackers were below him. He would then descend upon them and end their lives before they were even aware of his presence. He ruled out that possibility, knowing the landing could very well cause his leg to be permanently wounded. He had hurt it enough that past day and any further strain could solidify the damage. He surveyed the area, hoping to find inspiration for his ambush. Nothing came to him. He looked back at the orken, then only half a mile away. Finally, the idea arrived in his mind.

The maraken had arrived at the small patch of trees. They had not come across the orken they were searching for on their way from the Troagan camp and they could not see him approaching the city. They deduced he must have been hiding within the trees.

They poised their axes and slowly walked toward the patch of trees, ready to attack.

“At ease, orken,” Ful said as he stepped out from behind a tree. “I surrender.”

Surrender: an act Ful had sworn he would never do. Yet, the past few days had been filled with actions and thoughts Ful would never have imagined.

“I am Gon’mak, the lead warrior in the resource division of the Maraken army,” the same orken who had spoken with Noma said. “I demand you tell me who you are, where you are from, and why you are here.”

“I will only speak with your king,” Ful replied. “Take me to him now.”

The seven maraken moved closer, holding their axes tightly.

“You dare command me?” Gon’mak yelled. “You will die for this!”

With that, the seven orken attacked Ful, without care for keeping him alive.

V

DARKNESS HAD TAKEN A DISMAL HOLD

on the land of Kru'aka. Any advancement made by the approaching spring was pushed back by the cold that crept its way into the night. Kag'jun and his garrison had made it to the border of Fal'kir and were entering into the very Forest that once harboured their enemy.

“Be on guard,” Du'kan's voice slid its way through the lines of orken, “there could still be hagrone survivors in these woods. Not to mention the deadliness of anything that moves in this Forest.”

Kag'jun led the march. “Du'kan,” he summoned, “draw near.”

“Have you seen something?” Du'kan asked.

“No. Have you still your doubts about the king?”

“Yes, I do. Do you not? He has disbanded a sacred part of our culture. He being king for the past two hundred years does not mean he can undo what millennia of kings have done before him. His madness

is being revealed in that, he has accused us of pouring over old maps when *he* besieged us to. We were the ones who set in motion the battle that brought the end to the Hagronen. It was our messenger who challenged Kil and his army to fight in the Valley.”

“We lost that battle, remember? And we honour Ful'kag in his death and his contribution to the cause of the Draken. However, despite his faithful service, his garrison was destroyed. No credit for the Hagronen's defeat belongs to us.”

“That does not change the fact that he has mocked our efforts to this war!” Du'kan raised his voice in anger.

“Quiet,” Kag whispered sharply hitting his arm against Du's chest to stop his movement. “Ahead. Do you see it?”

“I do,” Du'kan replied, his gaze fixed ahead at a small fire still barely lit. It was weak as it sent bright red light against the surrounding trees.

“A Hagronen camp,” Du'kan whispered.

They slowly approached the small clearing wherein the fading fire lay.

“Or what is left of it,” Kag said as he came into the clearing. Dozens of hagronen lay scattered across the forest floor, their bodies beheaded and dismembered in every way imaginable. “The wrath of the great King Kul'drak manifested,” Kag declared

loudly so as to encourage the loyalty of the draken he led.

“Or, rather, the chaos...” Du’kan’s voice drifted away as he stared in bewilderment at the corpses before him.

“We keep moving! We must be ready to attack by dawn!” Kag commanded his garrison as he marched past the bodies and headed north toward the Geerum.

“A few dozen? That is all willing to join us?” Noma frantically asked.

“Yes; the rest fear the risks are too great,” another troagan replied. That troagan had just returned from speaking with all those who ventured to the other pods around Maraka.

“Risks? We will die if we stay. The Orken are even more unforgiving than this winter has been!” Noma looked up at Lar. “It matters not. The important thing is that we gave them the opportunity to save themselves. It grieves me to ponder that so many troagan will perish, but the arrival of these few dozen marks our time to depart.”

“I think it would be best if we ventured to the Forest of Fal’kir,” Lar said to Noma. “My orken are dead and that leaves the coasts of the Forest a good

enough place for you and the rest of the pod to hide while I get the map.”

“That may work. However, is the Forest not a dangerous place even without the Hagronen threat?”

“Because of our presence,” Lar began, “not many of the dangerous creatures have ventured toward the tree line. It has only been a day so I imagine the coastal region will be safe for you.”

“Very good... very good,” Noma walked passed Lar and began croaking loudly to all the other troagan in the camp. They stopped what they were doing and watched him as he croaked on. He raised his small green arms and paced as if giving a grand speech. Lar stood behind him, completely oblivious to what he was saying.

Noma’s croaking came to a halt and was followed by one loud, unified croak from the pod. With that, they all started on their way. A few finished packing their belongings into small bags and a few began to leap in the direction of Fal’kir.

Troagan survive off of insects and due to the winter’s melt, there would soon be an abundance of insects cultivating in the pools of melted snow. The Troagan were able to journey with only minimal supplies brought, as they required very little.

Lar was amazed at how the troagan travelled. They were not bound to the two legs she was. They

crouched down and sprang forward travelling many feet through the air. The Troagan pod, with Lar running next to Noma as best she could, hopped along at a steady pace on their way to the southern reaches of Fal'kir.

Ful walked through Maraka's gate with confidence. He knew what he carried meant no one would challenge him. The layout of the city was similar to that of Krag-Ma'ak, yet it lacked in detail and grandeur. Krag-Ma'ak was engraved with history's markings brought forth from thousands of years. Maraka had not even aged itself two hundred and that was easily seen by Ful. The structures were mainly made from wood, not stone, and when they were, it was of compiled bricks as opposed to being carved.

Ful saw a larger structure that resembled that of the king's throne room. Krag-Ma'ak featured a large pillar that rose above the city's walls. The natural hill Krag-Ma'ak was fashioned on allowed for an inclined walkway to lead to the base of the pillar. That pillar housed the throne room wherein the king and the elders sat. Maraka's mimic was a tall, square, wooden

building and, because the city was built on a plain, had not the grand slope to bring forth any anticipation.

Ful'kag found his way to the entrance and faced two guards. Their fate was similar to that of the inspection team that had been searching for him. Ful did not feel it necessary to explain himself to the guards. They also were not fond of what they saw him dragging.

Ful kicked the doors open. He was met with a dozen or so orken gazing at him in surprise. One of them, sitting on a throne, was Gan'marak.

"Ful'kag, formerly of the Draken military," Ful began in an introduction. He threw seven breastplates on the floor before the king's throne, each chest piece bearing the mark of the Maraken. "At your service," he said with a sort of grin as he bowed his head.

"What is this?" Gan'marak exclaimed, standing up from his throne. "Ful'kag, why have you come here? Surely you are foolish for thinking I will let you live after killing seven of my orken!" Gan took a few steps toward Ful.

"Nine, my king. You require new guards."

"Outrageous! Kill this orken!" The king turned around and walked back to his throne. As the king commanded that, several other maraken began to approximate themselves to Ful.

“Gan’marak, do you wish for the count to rise? You know who I am and you know that I am a far greater warrior than anyone in your military,” Ful said this as he raised his bloodied axe.

The maraken threatening Ful stopped. Gan turned to face him once again. “Why have you come?”

“I have abandoned Kul’drak and have come to you for refuge.”

“I imagine your abandoning had something to do with your failure in the Valley of Kal’ka. I believe Kul would have killed you had he known you survived.”

“That is not entirely how events have occurred,” Ful replied. “Yet, you may ponder what you wish. The truth beheld is that I need a king to serve, and you need more military members. Or should I remind you that you just lost nine of them?” Gan growled at Ful. “I was commander of the Draken army,” Ful continued. “You know your warriors would benefit from my training. I am not requesting a position of command. Simply, I ask that you take advantage of my experience and give me purpose once again.”

“Agreed,” Gan said quietly. “But I will need time to consider your offer. Prove your sincerity by going to the stockade. You will stay there until I have decided.”

The light of the morning was in full illumination causing a pink glow to tangle itself within the blue canopy of sky. Kag'jun and his regime had reached their destination. They crouched amongst the thick brush in the tree line of the western reaches of Fal'kir, a quarter of a mile from where the snowy grass began. Kag, ready to charge at any moment, stared at his foe: the Geerum.

The Geerum are a stout and hearty race who dwell within fortresses carved into and within mountains. On average, they are nine feet tall with long red hair usually tied into knots. Their skin is laced with thick, onyx-coloured scales that offer them protection from the blows of weapons. Their eyes are a vibrant orange and they have large tusks protruding from the sides of their mouths. Their weapons of choice are often large hammers that, with their incredible strength, are used to crush their enemies.

There were close to two hundred Geerum lined up against the north-western border of Kru'aka. They had set up large wooden structures to form barricades. Their goal was not to attack the Orken just yet, rather, push against their borders and develop a series of such encampments, before mounting a larger

strike. That encampment was situated close to the entrance of their fortress.

“The call should come any time now,” Du’kan whispered to Kag. “Remind me again of Grom’s plan?”

“Once the horn blows, we attack. At that time Kul’drak and two legions of Draken warriors will charge from the city. The Geerum will also send their reinforcements, however, due to the small size of our group, they will only send enough to counteract. They would not risk leaving their fortress vulnerable. But they will do just that for Kul’drak will arrive before our battle is done. The sheer force of our numbers will overwhelm them, and we will be able to storm the fortress.”

“Do you believe this will work?”

“I have my doubts about the plan,” Kag said. “However, should the Geerum respond the way we anticipate, and based on previous battles they will, then we should be able to achieve victory.”

“How long will it take Kul’drak to arrive?” Du’kan asked.

“Close to half of an hour at a full sprint.”

“That is a very long time when in battle, Kag.”

“I know,” Kag’jun replied. “We ought to do what we must to serve our king and better his kingdom. For if we do not, Du’kan, are we better than him?”

The blackness of night had faded, and dawn lit the Hall of Legends. The vast series of windows crowning the perimeter of the structure allowed for luminous cascades of light to dance through the grand Hall.

Kul'drak stood facing a king's statue. It featured the king who reigned before him, Darg'drak.

Kul, at one time, revered Darg and served in his military. Darg was a brute of an orken; he stood fifteen feet tall and was a fierce warrior. He was the younger brother of Kal'drak, Kul's father. Darg, having no regard for family ties as an orken should, challenged and killed his brother, taking his place as king. He also took his brother's mate Jul'drak as his own. From that relationship came Gan and Dal; both of whom previously carried the clan name of Drak. Upon Darg'drak's unforeseen death, Kul took the place of king and, being encouraged to do so, his half-brothers challenged his claim to the throne. They usurped from his kingdom, taking their loyal orken with them. Kul'drak abandoned his clan name and adopted Hagron, the orken word for hunter. Gan'drak abandoned his clan name and adopted Marak, the orken word for refuge. And Dal'drak too abandoned the clan name Drak and adopted Torr, the orken word for victory. Each of these three built for

themselves rival kingdoms in opposition to Kul'drak's reign. The Orken of Kru'aka had been at war with themselves since the death of the king, Darg'drak.

Kul'drak mournfully recalled the event when the unity of the Orken shattered. He felt rage burn within him as he considered the thousands of orken who lived throughout Kru'aka and refused to serve him.

His thoughts stretched north toward the Geerum country: an entire country resting upon the border of Kru'aka. It was a country filled with weak beings who thought themselves above the power of the Orken. It was a kingdom whose king's very breath defied the strength of Kul'drak.

He felt his thoughts thicken as if they were wading through mud. The maddening rage swelling within his mind imprisoned all that may have granted Kul rationality.

"How dare you, Kul," a voice stabbed through the bustle of the king's mind. He turned around to see Jul'drak approaching him. "I told you to destroy the orken usurpers who are challenging your rule. Yet you have sent a regime of Draken north to fight the Geerum! And I have heard you intend to take two legions more with you this very morning!" She yelled at Kul, furious and confused.

"Silence!" Kul yelled. He stepped toward her and hit her with the back of his massive red hand. The

force of his strike sent her to the stone floor. She gasped in utter surprise.

“How dare I?” Kul began. “How dare you! I am the king! Yet you have spoken to me as if I were still your orkling!” He towered over her, filling the grand hall with his thundering voice. “None of these great kings would have ever stood for such blasphemous behaviour toward them, even from their mothers. Even yet, Orken have not the care for any bond beyond that of their loyalty to the king. And a king to his kingdom! How is it that you have loosened my mind to be pliable to your suggestions?”

He gazed at her and even if her skin were as white as snow he would have seen it as red for the swelling madness had returned. Kul’drak had kept his late brother’s crate of black insects and had continued to consume them regularly.

Jul’drak stared at her son and king’s now red eyes. She felt her schemes and plots crumble as she faced the impending reality of her coming death. The rage she saw in Kul was unlike anything she had ever seen.

Kul bent down and grabbed her by the neck. He hoisted her high into the air, well off her feet, and held tightly. The light that danced its way into the Hall began to fade from Jul’s vision. Her eyes closed as she felt the last measures of life fight to stay within her.

At that very moment, the echoing sound of the city's horn filled the air. It was a sharp call, deep in nature but thundering in effect. It filled the entire Hall and paused every activity in Krag-Ma'ak.

Kul released his grip on Jul, causing her to collapse back to the stone floor where she lay gasping for air as Kul ran toward the sound of the horn.

It was still dark when Lar, Noma, and the rest of the Troagan pod reached the Forest of Fal'kir. No one perished but some came close to it on the journey through the night. The freezing air caused many troagan to begin freezing. The cold blood within them became layered with ice and caused their limbs to stop functioning. Most of the larger troagan were still able to travel and carried the disabled the rest of the way. For the majority of the journey, Lar carried four tadlings, young troagan, in her arms. The very moment they were able to find refuge in Fal'kir's trees, Lar began building fires. She was well seasoned in this ability, having been a hagronen. She created dozens of fires offering warmth and salvation to the entire pod. Their plan to have Lar travel alone into the city of Krag-Ma'ak then became the only possibility as, even Noma, required rest from the tasking night.

“I shall waste no time,” Lar whispered to Noma. “I fear we will not survive another night; we must travel south as soon as we can.”

“Agreed,” Noma replied shivering as he attempted to smile.

Lar, unfamiliar with the facial expression of smiling, copied him. Noma laughed at her humorous attempt. “Where is the library you spoke of?” she asked.

“I have never actually been in the city; thus, I am not sure. You speak the same language they do. Once you are inside, find an orken who does not look like they wish to kill you and ask them.”

Lar scowled at Noma. “And how will I get passed those guarding the entrance to the city?”

“You are a clever girl,” Noma replied. “You will think of something.”

“Girl?” Lar asked, unfamiliar with the word.

Noma laughed again. “It means young female. As in yourself. Now go, Lar. It will be light soon.”

Lar nodded at Noma and then ran off. They had entered the south side of the Forest, north of the Hills of Krom. A mile to the west plunged the Valley of Kal’ka and half a mile passed there, sat Krag-Ma’ak. The spiked hill that composed the west side of the Valley blocked the sight of the city from Lar. But once she had run through the Valley, she saw the city for

the first time. It was unlike anything she could have imagined and grand beyond her ability to describe.

She narrowed her view down to the gate; a grand entrance with large iron doors which seemed to be attached to either side of a massive, hollowed boulder. The outer sides of the boulder were attached to the large wall. The wall ran as far around the city as Lar could see.

She saw, at the foot of the gates, a large crowd of orken entering the city. She quickly ran toward the crowd. They had all made their way into the city by the time Lar had gotten there. The doors were still open, however, two dozen Draken soldiers stood guarding the entrance.

“Have you answered the king’s call to join the fight?” one of them bellowed to Lar.

“The fight?” she asked as she quickly put her hands behind her back. She remembered Noma mentioning the black markings on her hands being an identifier for those of the Hagronen kingdom. She did not want to risk them learning of her being an enemy.

“Kul’drak has called all those loyal to him to join in a fight that will end our war between the Geerum and the pathetic orken in the east.”

Lar immediately thought of Ful and how he planned on joining the Maraken, if he were still alive, he would soon not be if that kingdom was attacked.

“Yes, I have,” she replied confidently. She had never told a lie before that day.

The Orken know nothing of lying. It is against their nature to avoid honesty. Honesty amongst the military ranks of the Orken leads to clear communication, which in turn, creates a more unified army.

Lar, however, had observed Noma lying to the Maraken patrol and in turn, they did not kill the entire pod. She was able to disobey her instinct and listen to her experience.

“Enter,” the draken said as he stepped aside.

Lar walked past the guards and into the city. As she entered through the gateway she looked at the thickness of the doors. They were almost two feet thick.

She continued on, the feeling of guilt haunting her as she realized she had doubted Ful’s ability to protect himself. The distance she had from him began to contribute to her decathecting from him.

After the entrance of the city, there lay a large courtyard with a dozen or so roads leading from it. The courtyard was lit by several large fires burning in large metal baskets throughout the area. The place was filled with orken who had journeyed from the western reaches of the kingdom to join the war. The centre of the courtyard featured a massive stone

statue of an orken, about forty feet tall. Orange light from the fires displayed the bottom of the statue while the dim light from the coming dawn revealed the top of the statue. A large plaque at the foot of the statue read:

THE GREAT AND MIGHTY KING MA'AK,
NOBLE FOUNDER OF THIS GLORIOUS CITY.
A MONUMENT TO REMIND ALL OF THE
UNITY FOUND IN WAR AND UNDER OUR
SOVEREIGN KING.

Lar gazed in wonder at the magnificence of the statue and the city beyond. She stood still for a few moments, captivated by the grandeur.

With her mind back on its path, she took hold of the bottom of her dress and tore two wide strips off. She used these strips of wool to wrap around her hands and forearms, covering the markings.

She scanned the courtyard looking for someone who may be able to direct her to the library. After a few minutes, she spotted someone wearing clothing that was different from the others. All the other orken were wearing armour and holding weapons but that one was not. That orken was wearing a long brown cloak with a blue sash draped over his shoulder.

Lar made her way to the orken. “Hail,” she said. “Are you able to direct me to the library?”

The orken turned to face her. He had an old face that was wrinkled and faded. He was certainly the oldest orken Lar had ever seen. “And why would an orkling like yourself find interest in the old library at such a time as this?”

“I am interested in finding a map of Kru’aka, to better familiarize myself with the land... This will aid me as I join the war.”

“It is indeed a different age if female orken are joining the ranks of warriors. However, this is by the order of the king,” he replied gazing at the crowd of orken in the courtyard. “The second road to the right of the gate will lead you to the library. It is one of the buildings attached to the War Hall.”

Lar nodded and turned toward the direction of the road.

“Orkling,” the elder said. Lar turned her head to face him.

“What is your name and clan?”

“My name is Lar and I have not a clan. What is yours?”

The elder, puzzled by her response replied, “My name is Krom and I am of the Jun clan.” He said this as if it were to be of meaning to Lar. And it would, to almost any orken, except her. She turned back in the

direction of the library and quickly walked through the courtyard and onto the second road.

It was a strange fate that brought Lar and Krom's paths to cross that day, for Krom'jun himself was about to depart on a very long journey. One that would, in many years to come, have a devastating effect on Lar.

Lar made her way up the road with haste. She gained a broad understanding of the breadth of the city as she journeyed deeper within it. She was stopped by no orken and did not seem to raise any attention. Noma's plan was proceeding smoothly.

By the time she reached the library, the sun had risen over the land of Kru'aka, offering its guidance. She stood before the massive arena stretching a mile in either direction. The large structure had many buildings attached to the outside of it, one of them being the library. Lar found it almost effortlessly for it had a large image of a scroll carved into its wooden doors. The building was of medium size and accessible from the road and from within the Hall itself.

"You are different, are you not?" a small voice asked from behind her.

Lar turned around and saw a male orkling, half her size approaching her. His stance was bold, and he had his hands were behind his back.

“How do you mean?” she asked in return.

“Take the cloth tied around your hands off,” he demanded.

“No,” she replied. “Why should I?”

“I am almost ten years of age and have not killed. If I am to please the king, I must spill blood soon,” he said, stepping closer. “And you behave differently from other draken orklings. I have followed you since you left the courtyard, and you look at this city as if you have never been here before.”

“Many of us from all over have come to answer the king's call to fight.”

“All of whom would have ventured to this city before,” he replied. Lar started to take steps backward. She felt anxious as the orkling continued to walk toward her. “The cloth around your hands,” he began, “are they hiding your Hagronen markings?”

Lar gasped.

“I knew thus! Imagine how proud the king will be when he learns of my killing a hagronen!” The orkling pulled his hands from behind his back revealing a large stone. He charged at Lar and leapt on top of her. She fell to the ground beneath him as he mounted his legs on top of her, pinning her down. With one hand he held the stone and with the other, he tore the cloth from her wrists revealing the Hagronen markings. He

raised his arms, preparing to crush her skull with the large rock.

Suddenly, a whistling sound pierced through the air and the orkling fell backward onto the ground. The stone dropped next to Lar's head, cutting into her bony cheek.

The orkling had a black metallic object Lar had never seen before, lodged in his chest. Lar could tell immediately the orkling was dead. She quickly looked behind her to see who sent the object. She saw a black figure standing on top of the arena, far in the distance. The figure vanished suddenly; Lar was shocked for it did not seem like they had moved. They simply disappeared from her sight.

She turned back to the orkling and crawled toward him. She took hold of the black object and pulled it out of the orkling's chest causing black blood to spit out and sprinkle on her dress. She held the object in her two hands; it was three feet long and seemed to her to be like a metal stick. It had feathers on one end and a sharp blade on the other. She knew not of what it was but gathered it was able to soar through the air and travel great distances and it was the black figure who had sent it.

She sat next to the corpse for a few minutes, disturbed by all that had transpired. Orklings killing

orklings for the sake of bringing pride to their king did not seem right to Lar.

It was not long before a patrol passed by her.

“Female,” one of the two draken began, “for what purpose did you kill this orkling?” He began to walk toward the scene.

“He attacked me. I merely defended myself,” she replied, standing up slowly.

“What form of weapon is that and where did you get it?”

“That is of no concern to you.”

The draken looked closer at the weapon, only to notice the markings on Lar’s hands. “Hagronen!” he yelled in a surprised fury.

Lar wasted no time finding out what he intended to do with her and ran toward the library. The draken, who had been questioning her, charged in pursuit. The other ran off in a different direction, with the intent of alerting more draken of her presence.

Lar burst through the library doors and slammed them shut behind her. A metal bracket was fixed to each of the doors and a large wooden beam sat in the entryway. Lar lifted the beam and placed it into the brackets, locking the door from within. Not even a moment later, a large crash shook the entire door, startling Lar. She stepped back and only a moment went by before the same crash occurred again. She

could hear the wood beginning to crack as this draken repeatedly slammed his body against the door.

She knew she did not have any time to waste. She turned around and scanned the library. Shelves ran through the room, stretching forty feet, however, it was not as she expected. As she hurried through the room, she found a few scrolls and books scattered on the shelves. The entire room was laced with dust and thick insect webs. It was clear no orken had been inside for a very long time.

As the smashing against the door continued, she quickly made her way to the other end of the room and had not found a map. One of the shelves had a book on it with what seemed to be a small map on the cover. She was sure this was not what Noma would want; however, she dreaded the idea of returning with nothing.

She found another door in the room that led into the arena's inner hallway. As she was leaving the library, she passed a small table with a satchel on it. She took the satchel, placed the book and one end of the black stick inside, and left the library.

She ran down the hall for a few moments before she heard the door in the library shatter. She ran even faster then, ecstatic fear and excitement pumping through her body. She happened upon another door and entered the room. The room was small and

housed some supplies, however, it did not have another door. Lar noticed a ladder attached to one of the walls, she looked up and saw the sky. She could hear the draken running down the hall, his metal armour clanking with each step. She knew her only option now was to climb.

She reached the top of the ladder and realized she was atop the boundary wall of the arena. She climbed up from the ladder and was taken aback for a moment at the sights that lay before her. She had never seen such a view, nor been at such a height. She did not have the time she wished to study the view before her; she knew the Draken would soon learn of her whereabouts.

Suddenly, she heard it; an echoing sound that filled the air. It was a sharp call, deep in nature but thundering in effect. It filled the entire arena and paused every activity in Krag-Ma'ak.

“There!” She heard a shout in the distance amidst the sound of the city’s horn. “The hagrønen!”

VI

A GOLDEN SUN HOVERED HIGH IN THE sky as the late morning heat beat upon the Forest of Fal'kir. Kag'jun, Du'kan, and the regime of three hundred draken crouched in great anticipation. Their axes were wielded and their muscles were tensed. Kag, positioned a hundred feet from Du'kan, looked over and gave him a nod signifying his readiness for battle. At that very moment, the distant sound of the city's horn filled the air. It was a sharp call, deep in nature yet thundering in effect. It pierced the Geerum barricades and bounced off the Forest's trees.

Kag'jun roared for all to hear and charged. The draken burst through the tree line, plummeting toward the Geerum encampment ferociously. The sound of the horn stopped but the air was filled with roaring and battle as the draken collided with their foe.

Lar ran atop the arena's wall looking for a place she could climb down. She hoped to find another ladder like the one she had ascended on. However, she had not been successful in finding one. She looked to the city's wall. It was clear she would not be able to leave the same way she came. The wall was about sixty feet tall: a boundary impossible to scale from the outside. Yet Lar noticed, on the inside, the wall was connected to a series of buildings. She continued to run along the wall as she studied the rooftops below. There was a connecting point from the War Hall to the wall itself. The rooftops of the building attached to the arena and the parallel building attached to the wall, were close enough for her to climb up and escape. She supposed the drop from the top of the wall to the ground would damage her severely, however, in her mind, she had no other option.

She could hear the rustling and clanking of draken below on the road and in the arena as they followed her progress. She made her way to the building that connected to the city's wall. However, she remained on the arena's wall, thirty feet above the rooftop below.

She heard a roar from behind her. A shivering chill ran up her spine. She turned around and saw an

orken she never thought she would see again: Kul'drak.

“Hagronen!” he yelled. “I suppose one escaped my holocaust!”

“It was you who allowed me to live,” Lar replied, desperately hoping for him to allow it again.

“You...” Kul said as he began to recognize her. “Has Ful’kag sent you here? Has he joined my enemy only to betray me by sending a spy?” he bellowed at her as rage filled him.

Lar stepped back, completely unable to respond. She wished Noma were there for he knew of the struggle between the Orken kingdoms and he may have been able to persuade the king.

“He will die for this!” Kul yelled. “Gan will die for this! You will die for this!” he roared as he charged toward her.

Lar knew she had one option; she jumped. She fell for a few seconds before striking the rooftop below. Her legs were not able to absorb the fall and her torso and head smashed against the stone surface. She crawled for a few seconds and then rose to her feet. She knew she had not the time to care for how much pain she felt or how, with each step she took, more pain arrived. Her will to live was strong and it drove her to keep running. She had a command to

obey and more than that: she had a friend who needed her help.

She limped her way along the rooftops until she arrived at the city's wall. It was six feet up from where she stood. She hoisted herself onto it, barely having the strength to do so. She rolled onto her back and groaned in pain. She started to hear yelling in the distance. It was the deep, thundering voice of Kul'drak. She knew she did not have the time to rest. She dragged herself to the edge of the wall and used the thick stone railing to lift herself up. She quickly looked over the edge of the wall to brace herself for the next fall she would have to endure. It plunged twice as far down as her last jump. Just as she doubted her survival, she saw in the corner of her eye a blue surface at the foot of the wall, half a mile north-west of her. As she grew closer, limping and pushing herself against the stone railing, she realized the surface was as she hoped: water. Perhaps it would be deep enough to catch her fall and save her life.

She had not realized no one was chasing her and that Kul'drak had let her go. She was in too much of a panic to try and find another way out of the city. She rolled onto the railing, closed her eyes and rolled off.

She plunged through the air, flipping and spinning. The clap from the sound of her limp body

hitting the frozen water was loud and echoed across the plain leading to Fal'kir.

Her plummeting body broke through the ice and sank into the small body of water. It was deep enough for her to survive the fall. Pain and aching consumed her body but the weightlessness brought on by the water caused slight relief from the wounds she acquired.

She began to gasp for air as she sank further down. She reached the bottom and began pulling herself up the slope of the pool. She reached the top but was still underneath a layer of ice. She struck the ice with her trembling fist until it broke and she could pull herself out. Once she emerged onto the shore she coughed, allowing the water she had swallowed to leave her lungs.

She breathed heavy breaths as she laid half in the icy water and half in the mud. She saw her blood streaming from her and leaving trails in the water. Her whole body stung as it attempted to recover from her traumatic falls.

She gazed with disdain at her arms. She managed to let out a cry while she quickly covered her markings with the mud she was lying in. She attempted to lift her body with her arms, only for them to collapse, causing her face to sink into the mud. She rolled over and lay there for a few minutes, desperately trying to

let her body heal so she could continue her journey. She began to cry, a thing she had never done before. But in her pain and shame, she could not help but gasp and weep.

Kul'drak watched as Lar jumped off the arena's wall. He charged toward her and just as he was to jump down after her, a fall that would have had little effect on him, he stopped. He stood watching Lar crawl from the spot where she had poorly landed. They were on the north-west side of the city at that time. He turned around and ran along the top of the arena wall to where he could overlook most of the city.

"Draken!" he yelled at all his followers below. His voice charged its way through the courtyard, ran its way up the streets, and pierced the doors of every living quarters. "Gan'marak has marked his own destruction by sending a scout to the city. If he wishes to know the breadth of our forces: he shall. We march for Maraka now!"

The orken below roared in agreeance; yet some had a seed of doubt planted in their minds as they considered the scout he spoke of possibly being, as the rumours had already spread through the city, a

hagronen: the very sect of orken Kul'drak claimed to have destroyed.

Kul'drak leapt into the arena and made his way to the war chamber. Grom'tul was inside waiting for him. "Hail, my great king," he said, so as to report to the king.

"Grom, take all who are at the city's gate and the two legions of draken ready for battle; begin the march toward Maraka. I will muster the rest of our forces and join you in the fight tomorrow."

"Of course, my king," Grom replied. "What of Kag'jun? His regime may have engaged the Geerum by now and will require our reinforcement."

"A necessary loss toward a greater victory," the king stated. "The Geerum will know that we are not idle and Kag'jun will be remembered as being a great service to his king. Enough talk of this. Go now and march toward Maraka."

"Yes, king, and what of the hagronen?" Grom said, aware of Lar's origin.

"Send a small brigade to kill her. Once she is dead, I will not hear of the matter again."

"Yes... my king," Grom said with hesitation, confusion creeping its way into his mind as it had with Ful'kag and Du'kan. A confusion toward the king's actions and intent.

Grom exited the chamber, closing the large wooden door behind him.

“Hunt down the intruder,” he said to the four guards at the door. “Bring her to my quarters in the barracks. Kill her if she resists.”

“Yes, captain.” The four draken beat their fists against their chests and ran out of the hall.

“Hud’mak,” Grom shouted. One of the draken stopped his running and looked at Grom. “Go appoint another guard for this post. I will remain until you arrive. The intruder is wounded; the three of them will not struggle with the task.”

Hud’mak nodded and then ran out of the hall.

Grom stood in front of the closed door, his axe held in his hands. The clanking of the draken running from his position faded and he was left alone. Not a moment later, a black figure slowly entered the hall.

They were less than six feet tall and held a weapon Grom had never seen before. The weapon was a bowed rod with a single string attached to each tip. The string was flexed back by the black figure’s right hand, which was also holding a three-foot long black metallic stick. The stick had feathers on one end and a sharp blade on the other.

Grom studied it quickly and knew not of what it was, but knew of what it was designed for. “You would kill your enemy with a cowardly ranged weapon

instead of fighting like a true warrior?" he taunted in challenge as he studied them.

The black figure lowered their weapon. They were fully dressed in lightweight ebony armour. A black hood covered their head and a dark mask hid their face.

"I know what you are," Grom said. "You are an assassin. I have never believed the tales until now."

"The best of deaths," a soft, feminine voice slowly crawled into Grom's ears, "is the one birthed from belief."

Grom jerked his head in surprise. "And a female at that. This will not prove to be a challenge."

The assassin unclipped a buckle that strapped a quiver of the sticks to her back. She laid the bowed rod and the quiver on the ground. The assassin also had two swords strapped to her back, one about three feet long and a shorter one to compliment it, about two feet in length. The assassin unbuckled the sheaths and laid the swords down. Her objective was not the killing of Grom'tul, however, she was confident she could defeat him in a duel without weapons.

Grom grinned and laid his axe down on the ground as well. He walked toward the centre of the hallway. "Let us begin," he said as he roared and charged toward her.

The assassin stood as the massive orken barrelled toward her in a rage. She began running toward him as well. When he was about to make his first strike, she quickly slid on the ground and intercepted his planted foot. The orken lost his balance and fell to the ground, grunting loudly. As he began lifting himself off the ground, the assassin jumped toward the wall, pushed off with one heel and stuck Grom's face with the other as she flipped in the air. The kick caused Grom to hit the ground again. He roared and quickly rolled away from her. Grom gained his footing and stared at her in rage. He charged her again, swinging his massive arm at her. She dove and rolled under the arm. Using the momentum from her roll, she pounced up onto the opposite wall and launched herself toward the orken. She flew a few feet in the air and planted a firm kick against the side of the orken's leg. His leg bent inward at the joint and a loud popping sound occurred. He roared and fell to his knees. The assassin landed closer than she had wished and was struck by Grom's fist. She flew backward and slammed up against the wall. She toppled to the ground and looked up at Grom, still kneeling and groaning from her previous attack. On all four limbs, she stalked around him, awaiting his next move. She knew with a creature that size she was to be

successful, not in an initial attack, but only by counteracting his.

Grom suddenly launched himself toward her, pushing off the ground with his still able leg. He extended his massive fist once again in an attempt to deliver another gruelling blow. She was not prepared for the sudden charge and was not able to dive away in time. She spun to her left dodging his attack and taking hold of the massive arm, and then she struck Grom in his face. Grom, barely flinching from the hit, lifted his arm, to which she clung, and launched her across the room. Her body slammed against the war chamber door. She lay on the ground, her breathing strained; she realized she had broken bones within her chest. She looked past the orken toward her weapons; she was not to let her pride interfere with her mission. *“There is no sense in my dying here,”* she thought, as she stood.

Grom laughed and roared, thinking he had defeated his foe. He slowly limped toward her. However, he was suddenly unable to see her. She had stepped into darkness and was hidden beyond the eye’s ability to see.

The assassin, cloaked by her stealth ability, dove and rolled past the orken. She ended her roll by landing her feet and leaping onto the wall. She pounced off the wall and sent her body upwards

toward Grom's shoulders. The assassin mounted the orken and squeezed his neck with her legs. She pulled a dagger from her boot and plunged the blade into the orken's neck. Grom tried to reach up and pull the assassin off him; however, he lost blood too quickly and fell to his knees. As the light in the hall began to fade and the sting of death crept its way into Grom'tul's chest, he fell face-first toward the floor and lay still.

The assassin leapt forward, off the corpse and reached her weapons. She re-equipped herself in preparation for the battle that lay ahead. She slowly walked past the orken corpse, catching her breath from her victorious battle with the beast. She reserved her ability to stealth for specific occasions. It required incredible focus and energy and she felt as if she had to hold her breath in order to maintain it.

She approached the door that led to the war chamber, wherein her target lay. She opened the door slowly, knowing Kul'drak had heard the fight and would be waiting. She calmly counted down in her mind: "*Five, four, three, two...*" she entered stealth and quickly ran through the doorway. She was invisible and incredibly light on her feet, making absolutely no sound. She, still unable to be seen, put her back against the wall to the left of the doorway. She crouched as she searched the room for the orken king.

Yet, he was nowhere to be found. She slowly crept toward the table in the centre of the room; the late morning sun was blessing it with light.

Moments passed and not a sound could be heard nor a movement seen. She realized he was not in the room; she let out a sigh as the air fled her lungs, scraping against her broken ribs. The shadowy cloak dissipated and she placed her visible, paw-like hand on the table.

And then she heard it: a sound so loud it nearly deafened her. Her spine curved at first but not a moment passed before she identified the sound and leapt across the table. She looked behind her and saw Kul'drak descend from the ceiling and a great thud was heard amongst his piercing roar.

He began his charge. Seven hundred pounds of sheer strength lunged toward her. She quickly took hold of her ranged weapon, which she referred to as a bow, and shot three consecutive times at the orken's chest. The attack did not slow the charging orken at all. She pulled the string back once again and, as the orken dove through the air roaring, she fired an arrow into his mouth. The blade sunk into the back of his throat and he lost control of his attack. The assassin dashed out of the way and Kul'drak toppled to the ground.

She was still feeling the pain from her previous battle but she knew in order to complete her mission she had to silence the pain. She leapt onto the table in the chamber and stood over the orken. She prepared one last arrow and just as she was about to fire, Kul'drak erupted from the floor, jolting upward and flipping the table backwards. The assassin fell onto the floor, landing on her damaged back. She brought her feet over her head and flipping backwards, she stood up. She looked and saw Kul'drak pulling the arrow from his mouth.

The assassin drew her two swords, for her bow lay out of reach. Kul'drak leapt over the table and swung his fist at her. She quickly inhaled, vanished from sight and rolled away. She marvelled as she noticed the wounds she had caused him were having no effect on the orken. She, still out of sight, ran behind her foe. She released her breath, reappeared and slashed the back of Kul's legs with her two blades. He roared and fell to the ground once more. She did not understand his healing ability, but she guessed him losing his head would suffice. She still had to jump to reach his neck, but just as she was about to swing, Kul's massive arm swatted her away. She flew back toward the window in the war chamber, shattered through the glass and flew through the crisp air. She tumbled down the rows of benches

surrounding the arena, finally coming to a halt in one of the pews. She lay completely still as brokenness consumed her body. She shook from the shock, covered in her own blood. The glass had torn into her clothing all over her body, revealing patches of orange fur.

Kul'drak screamed as he soared into the arena from above. He scanned all the rows of benches but there was nothing to be seen of the assassin. She had used what little strength she had left to slip into darkness and crawl away. She dragged herself into a small room in one of the arena's hallways. She closed the door and lay there, knowing she had failed her mission. As the now un-silenced pain flooded her entire body, she gasped for breath and began to weep, allowing the fullness of the pain to take over.

Lar lay still on the coast of the small pool of water at the foot of Krag-Ma'ak's wall. She was awoken, from the slumber forced upon her, by Noma.

"Lar," he desperately pleaded, "are well? I gather you fell. You truly are a remarkable young orken." Lar was lifted by three larger troagan and placed onto a bed made from cloth and branches. "We must not stay here, it is no doubt you will be hunted," Noma

said as they began to carry Lar across the plain toward the valley of Kal'ka.

The small party heard the roar of three draken warriors running toward them. They were still far from them, however, they were approaching from the eastern gate of Krag-Ma'ak, blocking the way to Kal'ka. The troagan team turned around and began to run north.

“What of the others?” Lar shouted to Noma.

“We will have to reunite with them by travelling through Fal'kir.”

“And the orken?” she said looking behind at their heavily armoured pursuers.

“I do not know yet,” Noma said as his mind raced, attempting to solve their problem. The troagan would normally be able to outrun the orken but with an immobile Lar, the orken were gaining ground.

“Noma,” Lar said, “let me run; there is no sense in all of us dying.” The brief rest she had in the pool allowed for minor healing to be done by her body; not much, but enough for her to feel confident she could travel on her own.

“Lar...” Noma began in objection, but Lar had already rolled over onto the ground and stood up. She began running alongside the four troagan. She limped as she ran but she pushed herself beyond what she

had even thought possible. Noma marvelled at her resilience.

They kept running north along the ridge of Kal'ka, toward the western reaches of Fal'kir. From there, they would be able to enter the forest, pass the ridge, and head south toward where the rest of the pod was waiting. However, their problem was the pursuing orken. The three troagan who had accompanied Noma had reached the tree line before him and Lar. Noma stayed back with the limping Lar and hopped alongside her. Lar was quick, but not quick enough; the draken had almost reached them by the time they entered Fal'kir.

Lar felt a surge of confidence enter her once she was in the Forest. It was her home and all she knew. "We cannot go back," she said to Noma as they ran through the trees. "If they follow us, they will discover the pod. You turn back and I will lead them away."

"Lar, no!" Noma yelled in objection.

"It is the only way! Take this," she replied and threw the wet satchel toward him. "I could not find a map but hopefully that book will help."

She kept running, slowing down with each step as pain fired through her body. Noma, despite Lar's persistence, remained by her side.

The density of the forest slowed the draken pursuers as they were in unknown territory. Their

sprint lasted close to half of an hour. However, they eventually caught up with Lar and Noma. They used the handle end of their axes to strike Lar and Noma at their legs, causing the two of them to collapse on the forest floor.

The very moment the commotion from the pursuit came to a lull, before the draken could poise their axes, they heard the sound of battle. The three of them immediately looked to find from whence the noise came and just beyond the tree line, a small distance north, they saw a Draken brigade fighting against a Geerum encampment. They struck Noma and Lar on their heads, hard enough to leave them unconscious for a few hours, and ran toward the battle to join the fight.

Kul'drak stood growling in the arena as he continued to search for the assassin, without any sight of her. After some time, he decided to give up his search and focus on the more pressing matter: the destruction of the Maraken kingdom that housed the traitor, Ful'kag.

He felt extreme hatred toward himself for allowing Ful'kag to live. It was a part of himself that he wished no longer existed, and with the help of

consuming the black insect found in the Forest of Fal'kir, he could suppress that dreaded side of himself. He could suppress the emotions he felt that compromised his orkenhood and kingship. The mercy he felt toward Ful after his failure, the compassion he felt toward his brother, Kil'hagron, and the submission he felt toward his mother, Jul'drak; all emotions he then no longer dealt with. He knew, as long as he continued to consume the insect, he could be saved from his inner conflict.

He entered the hallway that surrounded the arena and made his way to the attached barracks. With Grom'tul dead, he needed to select a new leader for the Draken army. With Ful'kag as commander, directly below him were four captains: Grom'tul, Hud'val, Keg'mak, and Sil'grum. At all times, one captain was to be in the barracks supervising the training Draken. With the city being in a status of war preparation, he remained hopeful that one captain would be in the barracks and ready to lead the first wave of troops against the city of Maraka.

Kul entered the barracks: a room that, like most orken structures, was grand and had a high ceiling. Every inch of the four walls was covered with weapons, armour, and training equipment. There were twenty small arenas in the room for sparring, several dozen large wooden figures to be used in hand

to hand combat training, and there was a sectioned off part of the room that contained dozens of bunks that would house new members of the Draken military.

After turning fifteen years of age, or after their first kill, an orkling was to report to the barracks where they would spend the next few years living. They would train every waking second in preparation for being stationed somewhere.

Kul'drak's presence silenced the entire barracks. All sparring sessions stopped, all slumbering orken woke, and all eyes were gazing upon their king.

"Have you not heard?" he yelled in question, his roaring voicing shaking the floor. "Where is your captain?"

Sil'grum emerged from one of the sparring arenas where a young orken lay unconscious on the sand floor.

"Here, my king," he reported.

"We are at war!" Kul thundered. "Armour yourselves and get to the eastern gate!"

The orken scurried around in the barracks; each draken frantically running to take hold of a weapon and put on their armour. After a few minutes, every orken was fully equipped and running out of the barracks toward the gate.

“Sil!” Kul yelled over the sound of the preparation.

Sil’grum dodged the racing orken as he ran toward his king. “Yes, king?”

“Captain Grom is dead. You must lead the primary charge against Maraka.”

Sil’grum, like most orken, but unlike some, did not bother himself with having to understand details. He cared not for how Grom’tul died or why they were now attacking the Maraken instead of the Geerum. Kul’drak, having been his first king, allowed for him to have unwavering loyalty; provided his king remained the strong and honourable orken so many believed him to be. “Yes, my king,” he replied.

“Grom had prepared two legions of draken,” Kul continued. “They should be stationed south of the city. Take those draken and all who are at the eastern gate and attack Maraka. I will muster the rest of our forces and join you in half a day. And I will also send for Krom’jun, he will aid you in navigating the hills.”

“My king,” Sil began, “I have heard that Elder Krom has left the city, he was seen leaving by way of the eastern gate not even an hour ago.”

The king paused for a moment. “This is of no concern to me. That orken is old and feeble. Go through the hills without him. We will not allow

Gan'marak to live any longer. The time for our enemies to burn has come."

Ful sat in a dark and damp cell. Three walls were of rock and one was of thick iron bars. There was a torch burning outside his cell in the stockade's hall. Snow had previously swept in and had since melted, leaving the entire floor flooded with a few inches of icy water. Ful had been in that dungeon since the previous night. It was then midday and as the door creaked open, the light shone into the stockade. The door closed, returning Ful's cell to its dim state. Gan'marak walked into Ful's view; his red and bony face lit by the nearby torch.

"Word has reached my kingdom of a Draken army marching our way," Gan said in question.

"I suppose after killing the Hagronen, Kul'drak wishes to claim the rest of Kru'aka," Ful retorted.

"I suspect the timing of your arrival and Kul'drak's sudden attack are too near for me to ignore."

"I ensure you," Ful began, "as a warrior, I knew nothing of his coming."

The king grunted. "You may yet prove your loyalty. I task you north unto Dal'torr to deliver him

this.” Gan extended his hand through the bars and gave Ful a small scroll that had been sealed. “Once you deliver my message and return, I will know you are to be trusted.”

Dal’torr. Ful’kag was to travel to him after all. The orken began to dread the task given him. He would face that which he had longed not to. “Very well, King Gan’marak,” Ful said while bowing; doing so out of obligation rather than respect.

Gan unlocked the door that led into Ful’s cell. “Make haste, Ful’kag of the Draken. Your army is approaching and I will need you to fight for me when they arrive.”

Gan and Ful left the stockade. Two orken stood, waiting outside. “This is Dun’ogg and Yur’drid,” Gan said in introduction, “they will accompany you to ensure you are successful in completing your task.”

Dun’ogg carried Ful’s axe on his back and was wielding his own. Ful’kag suspected the reality of his task to be beyond what Gan had shared. He, however, did not think he had a choice. His drive to regain a loyalty and make right with himself allowed for him to obediently embark on that delivery. Perhaps, if Dal spared him, the Torren king could have his loyalty. He knew the vigour of Dal’torr, but Ful had one thought that projected him onward, regardless of the danger and the unknown. The thought came to him amidst

the wrestling and dangerous thoughts of to whom his loyalty belonged and for what he existed for. In order for his confidence and strength to be reborn, he must kill Kul'drak.

VII

THE MOUNTAINOUS CITY THAT WAS OF stone built the Geerum, wherein Lar and Noma awoke, was not designed for aesthetics. It featured large stone bricks composing the walls and columns within. Those bricks mingled with the actual mountain itself. Jagged rock pointed down from the low ceiling and the floor was a hybrid of smooth stone and sharp rock. Despite having no access to the golden sun, every corner of the city was lit by a nearby torch. The vast network of burning fires allowed for a warm glow to resound throughout the mountain. The reach of the city extended far underground, and tunnels led throughout the mountain. The Geerum were a hardy race and over the course of decades carved the chasms they dwelt in with tools they fashioned themselves. In order to maintain the structural integrity of the mountain: every room was small and every corridor tight. It was not like the grandeur of Krag-Ma'ak, however, its beauty lay

within the very fact that it was made by and for the Geerum and had served as a safe dwelling place for many millennia.

Lar slowly opened her eyes and saw glimpses of the rocky ceiling. She could feel a swelling ache in her mind and a pounding on her forehead. She slowly rose to her feet and as she stood she remembered her recent fall. The pain had almost left her and a stiff soreness gripped her entire body; despite that, she felt well. Noma lay still on the other side of the small room. His neck slowly inflated and deflated as he took slumbering breaths.

Lar's thoughts quickly traced their way backward, recalling what had happened to them. As she remembered the orken pursuing them, her thoughts found the pod. She panicked as she wondered about their safety. If she and Noma had been asleep for a whole day, the pod may have been discovered.

She ran over to Noma and shook him. "Noma, you must awaken."

Noma slowly opened his large green eyes. At the sight of Lar, he smiled but at that of his surroundings, a similar panic Lar experienced plagued him.

"Where are we?" he exclaimed.

"I know not," Lar said as she looked around the room. Three walls were that of the rocky mountain

and one was made of stone bricks with a wooden door closing off an opening.

“Ee grun tuhh.”

Lar heard the foreign words, uttered by a strange voice, come from behind the door. Noma quickly turned his head to where the voice could be heard. “We are not alone.”

“Someone must have brought us here,” Lar began. “But it could not have been the Draken for that was not the Orken tongue we just heard. Whose words were they then?”

“In all honesty, Lar, I have never heard them before.”

A loud clank interrupted them. The door swung open and smashed against the wall. Two geerum stormed into the room and seized Lar and Noma. Lar tried to struggle her way out of the geerum’s grasp.

“No, Lar!” Noma yelled. “If we are alive, then we must go with them. To struggle would be to die.”

The two of them steadied themselves and began to walk out of the room with the geerum tightly holding onto one of their arms. They walked for several minutes through the mountain’s small tunnels and Lar, being some eight feet tall, had to constantly bow her head to avoid the jagged ceiling.

Upon exiting the tunnel, they entered a large cavern-like hall. It was composed of, like most of the

city, a hybrid of Geerum-made stone bricks and the natural rock. A path led from where the four of them stood over a black chasm. From the chasm rose hot steam that was comforting to Lar's red skin. They walked across and reached the other side where the floor was of designed stones and led toward a pedestal on which the king of the Geerum sat. The pedestal was a large rock with a seat carved into it, serving as his throne. Lar looked around in underwhelmed awe at the dark hall and its architecture.

"Un hai gemba?" the king, a thick and scale-covered male, yelled. Lar was startled by his outburst. She looked down at Noma, unsure how she should react.

"Na..." Noma began in another foreign language. "Na hjee cannu Teera bah?" he asked the king. Lar looked intently to see if the king understood what sounded like nonsense to her.

The king stared at Noma with a surprised look on his face. He slowly smiled and then thundering laughter burst forth from his mouth.

The horn in Krag-Ma'ak sounded again. It pierced the early evening air three times: the third blast signifying a call for all Draken to fill the arena. It was

a strange call to be heard, for the kingdom was preparing for war.

Kul'drak had returned to the war chamber when he heard it. Furious, he gazed out the broken window at the arena below as it filled with orken.

"Who dares to call for a challenge in this time of war?" Kul'drak roared at all his subjects below. He looked to the centre of the arena and saw an orken standing in the sand; it was Kag'jun.

Kul leapt down onto one of the stairways and walked into the arena.

"Kul'drak," Kag began, "I challenge you for kingship. You deserted us, leaving three hundred of your loyal draken and two elders to die! You have called for a war that is rash and the sense of which is unfounded! You have disbanded the very leadership of this great Orken kingdom!"

"I am the leadership! I am the king!" Kul yelled in response. "I accept your challenge."

"As the only survivor of the attack on the Geerum," Kag continued, "I will kill you in vengeance for those who have senselessly given their lives to you!" Kag charged the king with his axe poised. He was older and more experienced than Kul, but not as strong. He limped as he ran, due to injuries he incurred from his recent battle. Kul'drak met his axe with a fearsome strike from his own weapon. The two

blades sparked and deflected off each other. They continued to swing their axes at each other, parrying and dodging each blow as the duel grew in intensity. Finally, Kag swung his axe hard enough to hit Kul's axe away from his chest. Kag, rather than swinging, stabbed the tip of his axe into Kul's chest. Blood continued to spew out as Kag drove his axe deeper into the king. Kul grunted and then grinned. He quickly grabbed Kag's axe and took a long step backward. Kag attempted to maintain his grip, however, Kul's strength ripped the axe from his hands. The king removed the blade from his chest and continued to grin as he stared at his foe. Kag marvelled as the gaping wound he had just caused, healed over. The bleeding ceased and the gap in the king's flesh closed.

“What is—” Kag began in wonder, but was interrupted by the two axes Kul wielded landing on each of his shoulders. Kul had swung them down in a swift chop. The rods to which the axe blades were attached, sat on Kag's shoulders, while the actual blades were just behind his back. The king jerked the axes toward him, pulling his arms back and driving the blades into the back of Kag's chest. The elder's black eyes widened as he was pulled toward the king. Kul lifted his knee and planted it on Kag's chest. Kag

stood, dazed as his life drained out of him, his black blood covering the sand below.

“Know this, Kag’jun:” the king whispered, “as you enter into the abyss, I wish for you to remember that you die without honour. You die in rebellion to your king and your kind.”

Kag slowly sank to his knees. He could not breathe and the pain he felt was excruciating. “I—” he began, every word barely exiting his blood-filled mouth, “I lied.” Kul’drak gazed at him in confusion. “I was not—” he gasped for air, though he found none, “the only survivor.”

In his aged strength, Kag’jun’s final act was letting out a roar. Despite being on the verge of death the roar filled the arena, thus proving his might. He had, over nine hundred years of living, served many kings and won many wars. He was indeed a wise and strong orken and the roar heard by those around, proved only that.

Several roars followed. Kul'drak looked up and saw close to two dozen orken charging toward him; all survivors of the failed ambush on the Geerum.

Kul ripped the axes from Kag’s corpse and started swinging. He had many blades take chunks of his flesh, but he ultimately defeated all of those who had attacked him. The bodies lay scattered on the arena

floor. The wounds he incurred healed as he looked at all the orken in the arena.

“Blasphemy!” he yelled. “You all stand witness to the very cowardice that plagues our city! We are at war and I will not stand for such mutiny. Are there any others who wish to die?” The arena was silent, the echo of the king's shouting was all to be heard. “So be it. Prove your loyalty and march for Maraka!”

“You, young troagan, speak the common tongue?” the king of the Geerum asked, in the same language Noma had spoken, as he gathered himself after his outburst of laughter. The laughter was not in mockery of Noma, rather, it sprouted from absolute surprise toward Noma’s ability to speak the common language.

“As is clear about yours; my kind has preserved the law of the Grand Alliance: that all officials and leaders should know the common tongue,” Noma said.

“My kind has done the same.”

“This proves we are still allies!” Noma exclaimed. “I have a duty to your people and you to my pod!”

“Pod?” the Geerum king began in reply. “I thought a group of troagan was referred to as an army?”

“We were... however, we found that term to be misleading,” Noma said with a sort of chuckle. “You see; we have no use for fighting.”

“Then what have you use for?” the king asked.

“Until recently we were slave farmers for the Orken. But Lar here has freed us! She is going to lead us to a land of peace.”

“Peace? Where shall you possibly find such a thing?” the king asked almost rhetorically.

“I believe it's called: the Kingdom of Peace.”

The king burst into laughter once again. “You do not believe in that place do you?”

“I do! For the very sake of my pod’s survival I must! I request your help in releasing us. And perhaps we could have a map that would lead us there?”

“You have no means of finding this mythical place? You surely are doomed!” the king shouted. “I desire information. This female here,” he said gesturing at Lar, “is an orken. If she can tell me something about the Orken: defences, numbers, tactics, or anything of use, then I will let you go. But if she cannot, I will kill you right now.”

“Please, my lord! We require your help and we have nothing to offer you!” Noma replied.

“Why should I?”

“To encourage kindness in your heart perhaps?”

The king laughed once more. “I have a heart of stone! And this is a time of chaos and war. Not charity!”

“Gru mak tel neel!” Lar shouted in the orken language at the king.

He looked at Noma. “Do you speak this?”

“I do.” And then turning to Lar, he said: “Tua kan Orken, Lar.”

Lar began to speak in the orken tongue while Noma translated her words into the common language. “The Hagronen are dead,” he said, carefully watching Lar’s lips. “Fal’kir lies empty and the Draken are assembling their army to attack the Maraken... they are in a state of civil war! If you attack Krag-Ma’ak, their defences will be low and you may be able to crush them!”

Lar stopped, anxiously awaiting the king’s response. She had learned a lot in the short time she had known Noma, including the ability to point out a kingdom’s weakness.

“Is this true?” the king asked Noma.

“I swear by my life it is!” he replied.

“This pleases me. I know not of where the Kingdom of Peace is said to be. However, I know the direction of the great city of the Alliance. Journey

south for two months and you will see a large mountain. Go toward this mountain and you will find the city. From there, you may be able to find a map that will lead you to peace.”

“O great lord of the Geerum,” Noma said bowing his head in honour, “we are in your debt. But may I plead just one last request?”

“Speak it, troagan.”

“My pod awaits our return in the Forest of Fal’kir and with the great army of draken heading into the centre of Kru’aka: I know not of how we will leave this land.”

“Go retrieve your pod. Return here and I will grant you lodging for a night. In the morning take the west exit from this mountain. You will find a path that will lead you through the western farmlands of the Orken. If this war you speak of is true, it will be uninhabited.”

“Your grace is as an honour to receive,” Noma said, bowing his head once again.

The evening was cold and brought the reminder that, though southern Kru’aka was free from winter, the northern part of the country was not. Ful experienced this as he walked up snow-covered hills

and had a blasting wind throw ice at him from all directions. It was almost dark by the time he and his maraken escorts reached viewing distance of the Torren city. And to Ful's surprise, it was no city at all. Rather, a plain wooden building stood alone in the rocky landscape. It was of medium size and could not house more than a few dozen orken.

Ful'kag knew Dal'torr well enough, as his former military commander, to know: there was more to his kingdom than that. When fighting in a war, a kingdom was not to care for grandeur but for subterfuge. And Dal knew, when fighting the likes of the Draken kingdom, he would have to utilize any tactical advantage he could.

"That is it?" Yur'drid yelled over the howling wind as the three of them knelt in the snow.

"Do not be deceived!" Ful'kag replied. "I have no doubt a larger structure is hidden."

"Approach and deliver the message!" Dun'ogg ordered with a grin. He knew Dal'torr was as merciless as his king and would kill whomever delivered a message. That was the reason Ful'kag was selected for that mission; it meant no risk would come to a maraken.

"My axe?" Ful retorted.

"Indeed." Dun gave Ful his axe and Ful went on his way. He stepped through the shallow snow toward

the 'Torren structure. He thought of Dal'torr, his former commander. He was skilled in battle and—

Ful'kag's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an orken roaring and another creature's howl. He turned around and saw only a glimpse of the battle between Yur and Dun's attackers. He stared through the blowing snow and saw the two large beings collapse. A few moments of silence went by but were ended by a creature that appeared in the snow. He stood on all four limbs, unlike Ful, and was covered in white fur. He was about three feet tall and had large teeth showing at the end of his narrow snout. He glared at Ful with his squinted blue eyes. The creature opened his mouth and began yelling at Ful in his language. It sounded to Ful like nothing more than growling and deep yelping.

Ful'kag knew then that his chance of survival was slim. He could attempt to fight that creature, but he knew there were a few who had attacked the two maraken. If he were to go before the 'Torren, he would need all his strength. He slowly backed away from the creature, and to his surprise, was allowed to.

He turned and walked toward the small wooden building. As he approached, the door to the building swung open and six large orken burst forth toward Ful. They were wearing metal armour and held large axes. They surrounded Ful. Unlike the Maraken patrol

he had easily beaten, these orken were strong and thick, having trained their entire lives for battle. Not only that, but they had also trained under one of the best warriors Ful'kag had ever known. Ful put his axe on the ground and placed his hands behind his back. "I have a message for your chief."

"Tell me now," a prominent torren spoke, "and I will make your death swift."

"We have not the time for this!" Ful yelled.

"You dare—" the torren stepped forward as he began to rebuke Ful for his insolence; he was, however, interrupted by an attack from Ful'kag.

Despite his original desire to avoid confrontation, Ful realized that if he had been in their position, an audience with Kul'drak would never have been granted. Thus, he would have to fight his way in. Ful'kag's foot kicked his axe upward in the air. He caught it and spun, allowing the blade to glide above and below the axes that were pointed at him, tearing through the metal and flesh on his enemies' chests. And before those who held the axes could retaliate; a large cut across each of their chests and upper arms caused them to drop their weapons and fall backward. Some were struck at the waist and legs, for Ful had crouched amidst his spinning. Those he approached swiftly to drive the blade of his axe in their necks.

Some swung in defence, but before long, all six torren were disarmed and defeated.

Ful'kag walked into the small building where he found a few bunks and a pot of broanta cooking. And in the centre of the room, there was a large stone opening with an iron door that lay horizontally. Ful unlocked the latch and lifted it open. The heavy door slammed against the ground while still attached to the opening with hinges.

“Dal'torr!” he yelled down the dark chute. He could see the flicker of orange candlelight dance across the bottom of the ladder that descended. He could hear murmuring and the slow approaching of footsteps. Dark faces showed themselves in the depths and more scurrying occurred. Before long, a response came forth.

“Who beckons for me?” a deep and raspy voice called.

Ful's chest tightened for he recognized the voice, despite it being centuries since last he heard it. The time he had dreaded and wondered about had come. “It is I,” he began, “Ful'kag. The former commander of the Draken army.”

A laugh ran up the iron ladder and into the Ful's ears. “You may enter.”

The words came to Ful not just in welcome but as a warning too; he understood his decent could

mean his death. When Ful reached the bottom of the ladder he was met by several orken who seized him. They threw him on the ground and beat him. After a few moments, they ceased and Ful'kag was brought to his feet. He barely stood and was dragged into another room with nothing but a large table in it. The torren released him and he landed on his knees.

"Ful'kag," Dal'torr began, his black eyes wide and fixed, "it has been some time." Dal'torr said such as he circled the bloodied Ful. "Wherever shall I begin?" he asked.

"I bring a message," Ful said as he looked up at his captor. "But I suppose I also come to inquire of you and how you fare."

"Leave us, warriors," Dal said to his torren. "I fare better Kil'hagron, I should think." A smile came upon his face as his subjects left Ful'kag and the king alone. "A message? As a deserter of the Draken, whom could this message be from?" Dal asked sharply.

The realization of Ful's ill quest came to him fully then and he felt regret for having formerly been a servant of Dal's chief enemy and was again serving another. Alas, he whispered, "Gan'marak."

"Gan?" Dal exclaimed. "You are here from Gan?"

"My allegiance is not with him. I am without a kingdom. I am simply delivering this." Ful pulled the

scroll out from inside his tunic and handed it to Dal. He opened it, his eyes quickly reading over its words.

“Summarize it for me, captain.”

Ful twitched from hearing a title he had not been referred to as in some two hundred years. And yet his mind fogged from it for he could have felt reinstated. He squelched his hopes so as not to desire things beyond possible.

“I do not know the letter’s contents.”

“Then read it!” Dal threw the open scroll at him.

Ful spent a few moments reading the letter. He understood Dal’s ferocity. “He requests your help,” Ful said confused.

“Have you known an orken to ask for such?” Dal began in question.

“It is indeed unlike a king to do so,” Ful said; the phrase brought the memory of Kul’drak and Kil’hagron’s confrontation in the Forest of Fal’kir. “*Brother*,” the word once again echoed in Ful’s troubled mind.

Dal took a deep breath. “With regard to this subject, I have been meaning to ask you a question, Ful.”

Ful looked up at him. “And what would that be?”

“I am...” Dal paused and said the next word in the common language, for it was not a word found in the orken language. “*Curious*. You were once a captain

under my command,” Dal continued. “You were the strongest and most loyal draken there was. Once I left the kingdom, you naturally succeeded me as the military commander. That was some two hundred years ago. And it all came to an end only a few days ago with the battle at Kal’ka. My question is this: why did you not die in battle?” Ful continued to stare at Dal, confused. “You could have died an honourable death. And yet here you are, a dishonourable deserter of your king.”

Ful wished to launch upward to attack his accuser. Yet he knew Dal’s prowess and he felt subdued in his presence. Relief did come over him for he felt for all their conversing and the question asked of him meant Dal would not slay him. Perhaps this king would even have him again.

“Why did you go back to Krag-Ma’ak, and not do your duty by dying in battle?”

“I was...” Ful began slowly. “I was—”

“*Curious?*” Dal said the word in again the common tongue. He laughed and then knelt beside Ful. “If the word is not in the orken language,” he whispered, “why are you and I experiencing it?” He laughed again, stood up, and walked back to the table. “And Ful’kag, what were you *curious* about?”

Ful stared at the stone floor. Confusion raced through his mind as he pondered all that his former

commander had just said. “The Hagronen could heal themselves.”

“As can all orken, Ful.”

“This was different. Their wounds healed moments after my draken and I made them.”

“And you wished to report this because you did not understand it.”

“Yes.”

“Long ago, during Hal’drak’s reign, the first of the Draken king’s, a foreign enemy came upon the land and made war with the Orken. They were very few in number and all had incredible power. After many battles, with no surviving orken, the enemy relented and left the land. To this day, we know not of who they were, why they attacked, and what their power was.”

Ful glared at Dal. “I have never heard this tale.”

“It is reserved only for the kings of the Orken, along with many other historical tales. But is it not interesting that no orken reported back from the battles? None tried to escape and tell of the enemy’s power.” Ful continued to stare at Dal, anger beginning to swell within him. “The reason is, and it is depicted by our language not even holding the word; they were not *curious*. Unlike you, they died without care for an understanding of their foe, only the drive to honour their king.”

Ful growled as he resented the subtle accusations made against him. "Speak your mind!" he yelled at Dal.

Dal grinned. "I too, am *curious*. Orken should not be, yet here we are. Why does the unknown have appeal, Ful'kag?"

"I care not for this!" Ful yelled. "You have received Gan's message. If you intend on aiding him, allow me the opportunity to kill Kul'drak as it is my duty."

"I will not aid Gan. Orken!" Several orken, all captains within Dal's ranks, spilled into the room. They circled around the table and looked at Dal with anticipation. Ful'kag stood and joined the group around the table. "The Draken are moving east to attack Maraka. And I have heard word of the Hagronen being dead. Tuk'den, Hur'kol," Dal addressed two orken standing at the table, "you are to lead a third of our army and travel through the Forest. Seize Krag-Ma'ak and claim it for the Torren kingdom. Ful'kag here has joined our ranks and will lead a strike force into Maraka and assassinate Gan'marak. The rest of us will meet Kul'drak in battle. Aim only to kill him. Enough orken blood has been shed in this civil war. What is the purpose of becoming king if there are no orken left in your kingdom?" Dal saw no sense in the killing of the other

orken kingdoms; he wished only to kill their kings. "March!" he yelled in dismissal.

The captains left the room and ran into hallways that led away from the main chamber Ful had first entered into. Those hallways connected the bunker to a vast network of large rooms and armouries. The kingdom Dal'torr had built was not one of display, but truly of secrecy. He had, with the help of an eastern sect of geerum, built an underground city of sorts that ranged close to a third of Krag-Ma'ak itself.

"Dal," Ful said, still standing at the table. "I believe I made my intentions apparent. I wish to kill Kul, yet you are sending me to Gan!"

"The Draken are, as we speak, marching toward Maraka. Gan, as the poor ruler he is, has no doubt failed to amass his small army and awaits my assistance. If you leave now, along with my best soldiers, you will arrive at Maraka before the sun rises. Assassinate Gan and then join me in the plain south from here, east of Fal'kir. We will march out to confront Kul'drak together. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to slay him."

"Yet you have instructed your captains to kill Kul!"

"Your defiance is disturbing! When did you lose your loyalty?" Dal yelled in reply.

“When the very truths that define the Orken were shattered! Within you, within Kul, within Kil, Gan and myself! Shattered! We feel and act in ways we ought not!” Ful exploded in panic; the overwhelming confusion clouding his mind. Dal reached out and seized Ful by the throat. He hoisted him off the ground, causing Ful to dangle in the air as he struggled to breathe. He thought back to when all of his confusion and struggle began: when Kul’drak held him in that very position.

“Follow my order. If you are he who slays Kul’drak, so be it. But he must die at all costs and I care not for your redemption!” Dal finished his statement and dropped Ful. “Now leave. I will see you next on the battlefield. Take the six orken standing watch on the surface. They are among the best in my ranks.”

“They are dead,” Ful whispered as he strained to breathe.

Upon hearing of his slain soldiers, Dal’torr, unlike Gan’marak, grinned. Although he saw no sense in the war between the orken, he still enforced the Orken rite of succession: if one slew an orken of higher rank, the victor then assumed the position.

“Choose another six to accompany you,” he said. “Go now.”

Ful was proud to not have been arrested as he was by Gan. His respect for Dal grew as his former commander still enforced Orken law. As Ful was leaving the room he brushed past a hooded orken. Their shoulders collided and the hood fell down revealing the orken's face. To Ful'kag's surprise, it was the one who birthed his former king; Jul'drak.

VIII

CANDLELIGHT WARRED AGAINST THE cold night that plagued the underground bunker wherein Dal'torr and his army lived. A warmth from the conflict in the chamber Jul'drak entered struck her and her presence did not aid in soothing the tension. "I bring you news, Dal," she said as she charged into the room.

"And hail to you too, *mother*. Does this news concern Kul'drak?" Dal replied.

"Hail. It does; he is—"

"I am aware, and I have already responded," Dal said, interrupting her.

"Will you thus meet him in battle?"

"I will. I am also sending warriors to assassinate Gan and retake Krag-Ma'ak. My warriors and I will target Kul, kill him, and reunite the Orken of Kru'aka."

"No!" she yelled, her voice jolting through the compound. "That is not acceptable!"

Dal slowly breathed, soothing the anger that swelled within him. It was not for anyone to speak to a king in such a way. “I care not for this warring against our kind,” he began. “Too long have our numbers dwindled by our own hands, while our true enemies regain their strength. We will be facing a greater war soon. One, which, if Kru’aka is not united, will be lost.”

“You know nothing of kingship,” Jul’drak snarled.

“Perhaps, yet I know of command. Once my brothers are dead, I will have you rule. I have no desire to be the king.”

“Our desires are not the same. You will kill all those who have not sworn allegiance to your name!” she shouted the command in hopes to place her son in submission.

“Allegiance? Loyalty? What good is the pride of dead orken?”

“The Orken are a—”

“Enough!” Dal shouted, bringing an end to their conversation. He stormed out of the room and down one of the halls to aid in the gathering of his army.

The trek to retrieve the rest of Noma's pod proved to be of extreme ease for Lar. She had grown accustomed to each of her journeys having been quite gruelling. During her first one with Ful'kag, she barely endured the freezing night. Her second one was with Noma and the pod. She had maintained a moderate temperature but had to carry a few young troagan to ensure their survival. And her most recent one had involved her body falling off the wall of Krag-Ma'ak. She was also attacked by the Orken and captured by the Geerum. However, with the accompaniment of a few geerum soldiers, she and Noma were able to reach the pod and bring them safely to the mountain before the freezing temperatures of night had returned. She now lay on a comfortable mat in the guest quarters of the Geerum mountain. Her room was small but well heated. There was a vent on the ground that had small billows of steam rising from it. She pondered the previous few days and all that had transpired.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the door to her room slowly opening. She rose to her feet and hunched so she would not hit the ceiling with her head. She watched as the large Geerum king entered. "Hail, Lar," he said in the Orken language.

She was surprised to see him and hear him speak her tongue. She could not think of any words to say

in reply. Noma walked into the room from behind the king. “Hello Lar,” he said. Lar smiled again, that time seeming more natural than her first attempt. “If it does not bother you, the king seeks more information.”

“What may I answer?” she asked in the hope she indeed had the answer.

“The king looked through the satchel you brought back from Krag-Ma’ak and found this,” he pointed to an object in the king’s hand. It was the black stick that killed the orkling that attacked her. “He asked me how I obtained it, however, I do not know what it is. Do you?”

Lar remembered her disturbing altercation with the orkling. “It came from a dark figure in the city. It protected me.”

Noma translated what she said into the foreign language he and the king had spoken earlier that day. The king responded in the same language. “He says,” Noma began, “the object is called an *arrow* and he has seen it once before.”

The king continued to speak, pausing after each sentence allowing Noma adequate time to translate for Lar. “Many decades ago, when another geerum was king, he served as the king's army chieftain. The Geerum amassed their army in an attempt to attack the Orken. As the king exited the mountain he was

killed by a single black arrow. The battle was forfeit and the Geerum retreated. He still has the arrow that killed his predecessor.”

Lar watched as the king held out another black arrow, which was indeed identical to the one she had.

The king began speaking again. “Whoever did this,” Noma translated, “is a protector of the Orken and is of the highest enemies of the Geerum.”

Lar stood gazing plainly at Noma and the king. She had no idea what to say and she hoped Noma did. And to her delight, Noma began speaking to the king. They exchanged a few phrases with each other and shortly after a few moments of silence, the king left.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I apologized for any offence we may have caused and allowed him to keep the arrow. I also said that if we come across this individual in our travels, we will attempt to apprehend them and deliver them to face Geerum justice.”

“Noma—”

“Lar! We are dead if we ally ourselves with the Geerum’s enemies. Any friend of the Orken is no friend of ours. Understood?”

“Yes...” Lar said as she lay down and returned to her thoughts. Noma understood that as a goodbye for the evening. He left the room and closed the door behind him.

She lay still, staring at the jagged ceiling above her. Orken loyalty was a simple trait and yet brought forth much conflict within her. Her distance from Ful allowed for the loyalty to waver and decathect. She felt it slightly for the figure who had protected her from the orkling. She knew not of who they were, however, she understood that were it not for the mysterious individual, she would be dead.

“Why was I attacked?” she thought. She continued to ponder and recall her former life in the Forest. For as long as she could remember, her kind, the Hagronen, were always savage. The mature orken hunted and fought. That was the extent of their society. She always believed the orken who dwelt in cities to be of sophistication and not of savagery. However, her altercation with the orkling in Krag-Ma’ak changed her thinking. He tried to kill her even though he was an orkling. He looked at her as if she were an animal and she felt that way. The markings she had on her hands and arms brought great shame to her. She had never felt that way before and was greatly confused by it. She truly wished she was not what she was: an orken. She had no interest in the violence and hate that was found in every corner of Kru’aka.

“I get to leave,” she thought. Excitement filled her as she realized she no longer had to interact with the

orken. Her aiding Noma had led her to live a life apart from the orken. She would not need to be an orken.

She felt gratitude toward Noma for allowing her to go alongside him and journey far from Kru'aka. A sinking feeling waved through her chest. She felt a thing a normal orken would not feel: guilt. She had undoubtedly made Noma feel uncomfortable or unwanted by her previous conversation with him.

She got to her feet and left the room. The hall she walked down was like all the others in the mountain: short and rocky. She finally found another room; it was a larger room filled with Noma's pod. She scanned the warm room and saw Noma speaking with a few tadlings.

"Noma," she said as she approached him, "may I speak with you?"

Noma dismissed the young troagan and faced Lar. "What is it, Lar?"

"I am..." she started but could not think of a word to express how she felt. "I wish to apologize for my actions earlier, but I feel more than that."

Noma looked at her puzzled. He knew she was an uncultured orken, but could she be proving the orken are capable of feelings beyond that of hatred and loyalty? He wondered this as he stared at a speechless Lar. "It is fine," he said. "I understand your desire to be loyal to the one who saved you."

“It is not just that,” she replied. “This being killed an orkling who was attacking me. I am confused, for they were not protecting the Draken or being a friend to the orken like the Geerum claim. They saved me.”

“Lar, much from these past few days has been very confusing to me as well. I have met beings, like yourself, who seem to defy the—” Noma paused as he pondered for the appropriate word. “Rules,” he said.

“Rules?” Lar questioned.

“We have not the time for this, we must rest for we have a large journey ahead of us. Go back to your quarters and sleep.”

“May I sleep here?” Lar asked.

Noma smiled. “Yes, Lar,” he said, reaching up and taking hold of her hand. “You may.”

Blackness had covered Kru’aka for several hours. The distant light reflecting from the moon was shrouded by thick, water-filled clouds. The spring rain poured down heavily on Ful’kag and his six torren troops. They were just within viewing range of Maraka, on their way to infiltrate and kill Gan’marak. That battle tactic was seldom used amongst the Orken. An orken would rather fight face-to-face and

force-to-force. They were not beings of subterfuge or schemes; rather, they used their sheer brute force to win battles. However, the recent war between the orken kingdoms of Kru'aka had led Dal'torr to employ other, more foreign, tactics toward the war.

Ful'kag thought back to his many battles; that one was indeed the first of its kind. He and his team came to a halt as they saw the city. It was surrounded by heavily armoured maraken; their armour reflected the many hundreds of torches that were lit and wielded.

The glorious sound of Draken war drums could be heard close by. Ful looked to his right and witnessed, emerging from the Hills of Krom, a legion of draken. The clanging of rain against the armour of the few thousand orken that were about to meet in battle resounded even to Ful's position.

"This presents a problem," one of the orken with Ful said.

"The weak King Gan will undoubtedly be within his city," Ful began, "heavily guarded as opposed to on the frontline of battle. We will simply have to wait until the fighting begins before we can attack him."

"Is this all of Gan's army?" another orken asked.

"There must be more in the city and many thousands more in the eastern villages," another replied.

“And what of the Draken army, Ful’kag?” one of the orken asked.

“This legion is likely the first of many to come. We often send a fraction of our forces in to draw the enemy out. Kul’drak will likely be half a day behind and will arrive with the rest of the Draken army.”

Once Ful had finished saying this, he spotted a figure he recognized at the frontline of the Draken. It was a captain formerly under his command, Sil’grum. His red face was lit by the surrounding torchlight. He lifted a horn that was strapped to his chest and sounded the call that would begin the battle.

All the heads of the maraken turned and faced the fearsome sound piercing the air. Both forces poised their weapons, roared, and charged.

It was near ten minutes before the two enemies engaged in battle as they surged across the plain. The colliding forces rendered that familiar sound to Ful: the sound of battle. With the chaos of battle raging in front of the city, he and his team ran toward the gate. They went unchallenged and undetected as the Maraken, unseasoned in battle, attempted to hold off the skilled Draken.

The wooden city was in a state of disarray. Females and orklings ran into homes and males were running toward the scene of the fighting. Ful’kag knew exactly where the king would be. The team

hurried toward the throne room, outside of which stood a dozen heavily armoured maraken. Ful remembered the previous time he approached that particular building. Pride surged within him as he recognized his strength and unmatched ability in combat.

However, in that instance, he knew the more important battle lay behind the closed door. If he succeeded in his mission to kill Gan, he would have gained the respect of his former commander and might even consider Dal as his king.

“Attack the guards,” Ful told half his team. “Draw them away from the building.”

As if he were still a commander, he watched as the three torren charged toward the guards. He and the rest ran alongside another building and behind the battle. Ful kicked through the wooden door and stepped into the room. Their entrance was immediately welcomed by several orken charging toward them. The three remaining torren engaged the maraken in battle while Ful slipped passed them and looked toward the throne. Gan had already stood and gripped his axe in anticipation of fighting the intruders.

The fight between Ful and Gan was swift. Ful was certainly the stronger and more determined of the two. Gan’s body lay still on the ground when the

other torren finished their battles. Although having the lesser number, they prevailed against their foe. The six of them stood at attention before Ful'kag as they awaited his order. Despite him having just joined the torren kingdom, they understood their king had appointed him the leader of this task.

At that very moment, a large orken barrelled into the room. With one brutal swing, he killed three of the torren. The other three attempted to fight back but were easily brought down by another strike. The sheer power of that orken did not cause Ful to marvel as he knew him well. Ful had indeed trained that orken: Sil'grum.

Sil paused, mid-sprint, the moment he recognized his former commander. He stood still, lowering his axe in shock. "Ful?"

"It is I."

"You are dead. Kul'drak executed you in front of the Elders."

"The king had mercy on me," Ful said, "to my shame, he allowed me to live."

"Kul'drak is far to glor—"

"He has deceived us!" Ful yelled. "I begged him to kill me but he did not. He is weak and he is no king of mine!"

Sil'grum's unwavering loyalty wavered. The one exception to his respect had been made: Kul'drak

proved himself unworthy. “Whom, then, do you serve?” he asked Ful.

“Dal’torr. As we speak, his forces are moving to capture Krag-Ma’ak. I have just killed Gan and will now go to kill Kul’drak. Should you oppose me; I will kill you. We know who is the stronger. But should you join me: my victory is assured.”

Sil’grum hated Ful’kag and what he was hearing. It was absolute blasphemy, but he did not know if it were the truth. He stood, stilled from the shock of Ful’s survival. Sil allowed Ful, whom he would normally kill on sight for being an enemy of his king, to walk past him.

“Ful...” said the troubled orken. “What can explain the king and his actions?”

“I know not,” Ful answered from behind him. “But if even doubt has been cast on you, does that not prove the truth? I am alive. And for my own honour: Kul’drak must die. Join Dal and I as we aim to duel him. Dal only wishes for our efforts, as Orken, to be directed outward at our enemies. We will be in the plains north of here, should you decide to aid us.” Ful left the building and entered the chaos that consumed the streets of Maraka.

Sil’grum’s arrival at the throne room meant the Draken had breached the city, and they had indeed. The slaughter was gruesome. The Draken had plowed

through the Maraken and would have soon taken hold of the entire city. Ful'kag knew the battle would still rage on for another few days as the Draken forces attacked the Maraken countryside and the villages outside the city. He was fortunate enough to still be wearing his Draken tunic and easily slipped through the battle. He exited the city and headed north-west toward the eastern side of Fal'kir. From there, he would await the arrival of Dal'torr and his garrison and join the attack on Kul'drak.

Of all the landscapes and areas in the world of Teros, the Forest of Fal'kir proved to be one of the harshest. And it would need to be if even the Orken were endangered by what lay within. Named after one of Kru'aka's famed kings, Fal'kir was an unexplored and uncharted region. Its expanse of trees reached far into the northern parts of Kru'aka and housed some of the most dangerous creatures in all of Teros. Yet some creatures that dwelt within were not as dangerous, such as the truka.

However, deep within the forest, savage creatures lay. No orken who had previously witnessed such creatures had survived. Fal'kir himself was believed to

have been killed and torn apart by those savages. That took place long before the Hagronen settled there.

Fal'kir had briefly reigned over a united Kru'aka. The Orken had recently settled in the country and they had not discovered any surrounding enemies. Fal'kir was intrigued by the depth of the forest and made a homestead for himself there. He would not be seen for months at a time and naturally, a new king stepped into power. That new king, in an attempt to secure his throne, hunted Fal'kir down. He, however, found only his shredded remains.

The two regimes of torren, one thousand strong, led by Tuk'den and Hur'kol, ventured through the Forest on their way to Krag-Ma'ak. Their goal was to arrive at the city before sunrise. In order to do so and abating the superstitions, they travelled through a deeper section of the Forest, intending on covering more ground. Never before had such a number of orken travelled through the Forest. The number of their group led the captains to believe they would be safe from the dangers that lay within.

Dawn had not even arrived before the creatures attacked. The light of the moon could not pierce the thick clouds that lay overhead. Heavy rain fell but was dampened by the thick canopy of leaves.

Tuk'den ordered all his orken to stop after he heard the first scream. A high-pitched howl that

bounced off the tree trunks. It sounded distant and yet near at the same time. Hur'kol paused his regiment as well.

The second scream was even louder than the first. The silence that followed brought great discomfort to the torren. They gripped their axes and stood listening for even the slightest ruffle of a leaf, but no such sound could be heard.

The third scream was followed by dozens more and as the noise got louder and closer it turned into growling and shrieking. Suddenly the branches of the trees began to shake and large, dark figures burst forth from the brush. They attacked the orken without restraint. Hur'kol managed to view a glimpse of his foe in the light of a torch that had fallen to the ground.

It was not much shorter than he was and had just as much brawn. It was covered in thick, black fur and its hands and face were of black, leathery skin. Its eyes were a piercing red and the creature was truly savage in nature. It swung its long arms at Hur while shrieking. Hur cut its flailing arms off and slashed its chest. A wound that would have normally killed an orken merely caused this creature to cower slowly back into the trees.

The assault lasted several minutes and close to two hundred orken died. They were able to wound

enough of the creatures to cause the savages to retreat, dragging the dead orken along the forest floor.

Tuk and Hur led their regiments in a full sprint through the Forest to avoid another attack. They veered slightly in the direction of the tree line to try and get away from the deep parts of Fal'kir.

Tuk'den knew the Orken were a strong race. For the sake of his pride, he convinced himself they were fleeing to serve their king and that by pursuing the savages; he would not have followed the orders he had been given.

The clouds had dissipated, and the sun had risen by the time Tuk and Hur arrived at the tree line of Fal'kir. Hur looked up and noticed the sun was sitting in the middle of the sky indicating it was midday. They exited the forest, bringing great ease to the torren, and ran through the Valley of Kal'ka. Upon seeing the great city of Krag-Ma'ak, and to their abhorrence, they saw the city already under siege.

The eastern gate had been torn down and they could see an army of warriors attacking the city. Only a few of the torren present had seen those warriors before, including Tuk'den. "The Geerum!" he yelled.

The army was grand. The fullness of the Draken

military, combined with every matured orken under his reign, was behind the great king, Kul'drak. He and his captains, Hud'val and Keg'mak, rode large grey beasts signifying their leadership. The beasts were three times the size of an orken, walked on four limbs as thick as trees and had a large horn at the end of their snouts. Unlike his two captains, who were fully clad in their armour, Kul only had a cloth covering his waist and upper legs. His chest and arms fully exposed his red skin. The confidence he placed in his ability to heal led to him appearing incredibly intimidating.

Thousands of orken marched through the Hills of Krom on their way to Maraka. Kul did not know if the city had already been captured by his preliminary attack and if so, he would march through the countryside and slaughter the rest of the Maraken. He left behind only a few hundred orken to stay in Krag-Ma'ak. With the massive force he had gathered, he also planned to find Dal'torr's city and destroy them too; once and for all claiming the kingdom that was rightfully his.

The march had been slow and the first portion of the army had exited the Hills of Krom at midday. In the distance, they could see the usurper city. Kul grinned as he noticed the pillars of smoke rising from the city and into the cloud-filled sky.

“Well done, Sil’grum,” he said. He turned to another of his captains. “The city has already fallen, now we—” Kul’drak was interrupted by the piercing sound of an Orken horn. It was not the tone that belonged to the Draken, but that of the Torren.

“Look to the north!” a call came from an orken nearby. Kul looked and saw a large force approaching from the north; they had just cleared the edge of Fal’kir and came into sight.

Hud’val rode his beast, called by the Orken: a rhunka, up the side of a rocky hill nearby. He reached the top and thus, was able to see much better. “A small group is approaching apart from the army,” he reported. “At this moment, their army seems to be only two legions.”

“Keg’mak,” the king began, “you, Hud’val and myself will approach. Grek!” he called for a militant named Grek’hid. “You are now a captain in place of Grom’tul. Stay with the army and be prepared to attack on my command.”

The king started forward accompanied by Keg. Hud charged down the hill and joined them in the gallop toward the Torren. Just then, a cloud drifted over the plain they were in and heavy rain began to fall.

The entirety of the Torren army had passed into view by the time Kul and his captains arrived. Dal’torr

stood, clad in his war armour and wielding his two axes. The stems were shorter than that of a regular two-handed axe but the blades were just as large. To his right, stood Sil'grum and to his left, stood Ful'kag. Ful poised his weapon as the three draken dismounted and walked closer.

"Traitors!" Kul'drak roared at Ful and Sil.

"You are the one who has betrayed us," Sil'grum said. "Hud, Keg," he continued, "I present to you Ful'kag, our former commander. He is alive only by the allowance of our king. He spared—"

"Enough!" Dal'torr yelled as he stepped forward and walked toward Kul'drak. Kul walked forward as well, tightly gripping his axe.

"I never wanted any of this," Dal whispered to Kul as they neared each other. "It was our mother who orchestrated my rebellion. And she perhaps did the same for Kil and Gan, who are both dead."

"By my hand," Kul responded, then but an arm's stretch from him.

"No, by Ful's hand. I know why you did not kill him. I know what you are feeling."

Kul flexed his brow in confusion. He felt a pounding in his chest as he heard his brother's words. He remembered back to the confusion he felt as he spared Ful's life and obeyed his mother's command. He recalled the moment some two hundred years ago

when she came to him and handed him the king's axe. "*You are the king now,*" she had told him. Weeks later, she told him his brothers had betrayed him and had taken hundreds of orken loyal to them and started their own kingdoms.

Kul'drak looked at Dal and closed his eyes. The confusion left him and the chaos flooded in. He opened his then red eyes and took hold of Dal'torr's throat. Ful'kag charged forward in response to the attack and chopped off Kul's outstretched arm. Hud'val charged toward Dal and Keg'mak charged toward Sil'grum. The three duels broke out with intensity and the sudden battle alerted the surrounding armies. The Torren and the Draken began charging toward each other.

Kul roared as his right forearm fell to the ground. He swung at Ful with brutal ferocity. Despite Ful being able to parry the attack, the sheer force of the swing caused him to fall to the ground, paining his bad leg.

Hud'val leapt toward Dal and swung his axe horizontally. Dal used both of his axes to deflect the attack. While deflecting, he kicked Hud's leg as he landed. Hud stumbled sideways from the blow but lifted his axe to swing at his foe again.

Sil'grum ran toward his charging foe and watched for Keg's attack. Keg pulled his axe behind him

indicating he was about to swing. They were only a few feet from each other when Keg'mak swung. Sil, as soon as he saw the attack begin, used his momentum to slide on the ground, passing directly underneath Keg's axe. Sil's own axe followed behind him and the blade drove right into Keg's ankle.

Kul'drak's axe swung toward Ful, but he leapt backward to dodge it. He landed and immediately launched himself toward Kul. Holding his axe with both hands, he leapt high and quickly swung at Kul. Kul's arm was still extended from the previous attack and did not have enough time to deflect Ful's swing. Ful's axe sliced into Kul's chest. He landed and turned to see if he had killed Kul. Ful had barely noticed the axe swinging up toward his face. He quickly leaned back but the tip of Kul's axe sliced up his entire torso and through his lower jaw. The axe blade exited through Ful's cheek, and he fell backward.

Dal put his two axes together and absorbed Hud's chop. With one axe, he pushed his foe's weapon away, and with the other axe, while spinning, he cut into Hud's side. The attack made Hud'val lean and lose his balance. He sank to the ground and Dal finished him by chopping his other axe into Hud's shoulder.

Keg'mak flew forward and landed on his side. Sil got up from the ground and beheaded his fellow captain. He looked over just in time to see Ful'kag fall

to the ground. And before Kul'drak had the chance to kill him, Sil charged. He took advantage of Kul's one arm and, after deflecting an attack, stepped to the side and drove the tip of his axe into Kul's chest. Seeming as if nothing had happened, Kul swung his axe back toward Sil. He chopped into Sil's side, the ferocity of his swing piercing Sil's armour. Kul stepped back, pulling Sil's axe out of him and then kicked Sil to the ground. Sil'grum was dead before his body landed.

Kul'drak turned back to Ful'kag who writhed in pain on the ground, still gripping his axe. Kul lifted his axe over his head, his right half-arm rose instinctually as if holding the axe, and just as he was about to chop downward, Dal threw both his axes at him. The short axes soared through the air and lodged themselves into Kul's back. He then stood there, paralyzed by the weapons wedged into his spine.

Ful'kag stood as quickly as he could, ignoring pain in his face and leg, and plunged his axe up into Kul's chest. The blade pierced right through him and exited behind his shoulder. Kul's arm swung back down, but Ful caught the king's axe. He released his grip on his own axe and let the king's body fall backward.

The rain ceased pouring. The roaring and charging orken from the two armies suddenly stopped shop, and many stumbled and fell, but the sight of the slain King Kul'drak was bewildering. It was as if all of

Kru'aka stood still for a moment. The Draken and Torren armies were only a hundred feet from each other by that time and Ful'kag and Dal'torr then stood in between them, the duel having ended.

Ful slowly limped toward Dal. He looked ahead at the orken who, until recently, had been his enemy, but before then was dear to him. Dal stood without a weapon in his hand and Ful could easily kill him. By doing so he would become the new king of Kru'aka. He had previously thought himself unworthy to live, for he could not find it within himself to kill Kul'drak in the Forest of Fal'kir. But presently, he had proven himself to himself. He had slain Kil'hagron, Gan'marak, and now Kul'drak himself.

He reached Dal and looked him in the eye, blood streaming from his gouged face. As if pondering the same, Dal stood still, gazing intently. Ful held out Kul'drak's axe and thus fell to his knees. With his head bowed he said to Dal'torr, "Claim your kingdom."

Ful's action of submission and their slaying of Kul'drak, not by a single duel but by the combined strength and effort of the two orken, served as a monumental moment for the Orken; reminding all of the unity found in war and under a sovereign king.

Dal'torr reached out and took hold of the axe. He turned and looked at his army and then at the Draken army. He raised the axe into the air.

“Kul’drak is dead!” he shouted. “And I claim your loyalty as the new king of a united Kru’aka.”

The Torren army all knelt before him and placed their right arms against their chests signifying their continued allegiance.

Dal turned to the Draken. “What say you?”

Grek’hid stepped forward from the clamouring line and, putting his right arm against his chest, he knelt down too. The immediate lines of the Draken army did the same and the news of their new king spread quickly down the ranks until every orken had heard and was kneeling. Amazement at the lack of warring, bloodshed, and widespread battle came upon all and most wondered how the day was won so swiftly for the other side. But to be called draken or torren, most cared not of the name; for it was strength that earned loyalty and pride. And if Kul’drak was dead, even such a fierce and terrible orken, his slayer ought to be of the greatest kings. Many would not see the remains of the duel, nor Dal for some time, but the doubt they had toward Kul’drak and yet the fear they had felt for him allowed their loyalty to be swiftly given to Dal’torr, their new king.

IX

BLUE SKY COVERED THE CENTRE OF Kru'aka. Dal'torr had given his first orders as king of the entire country. The orders were given to secure his kingship; many villages to the east of Maraka were inhabited by loyal maraken.

“Fet'kan, Gur'val, and Tul'nuk,” he summoned his Torren captains, “you will take one legion of Draken and a legion of Torren and travel east to the Maraken villages. In addition, take with you Sil'grum's two legions that, as he informed me when he joined my ranks, is stationed in the ruins of Maraka. Inform them and the Maraken villages of their new king and summon them to Krag-Ma'ak in one moon from today. On that day, I shall address all orken in Kru'aka and claim their loyalty.”

“Yes, king,” they replied and ran, with a perfect understanding of their orders, in different directions to muster their troops.

“Ful’kag,” Dal said, turning to his captain. “I will be leading the rest of these orken to Krag-Ma’ak to take the city. You will join me soon, but first, you must do something to ensure my kingship: burn that body,” he said pointing at Kul’drak. “I know not of how he can heal the way he has and I will not see him rise again.”

“Yes,” Ful said placing his fist against his chest, “my king.”

Dal’torr turned to Grek’hid. “You were one of Kul’s captains?”

“Yes, king,” he replied.

“You are now a Torren captain. We will march to Kra—”

“Dal!” a frantic voice interrupted the king. He turned to see Hur’kol running toward him. Hur collapsed on his knees before his king. “The Geerum, sire,” he began while panting, “they have sieged Krag-Ma’ak! Tuk’den has engaged them in battle, but I thought it best you should know. Their numbers are great.”

Dal looked at Ful’kag and grinned. “*Curious?*” he asked Ful rhetorically, reminding him of their conversation during the previous evening. “I am appreciative, Hur. The time for reckless honour has ended. We Orken must adapt to the intelligence of our enemies. Your fellow captains, Fet, Gur and Tul

are heading east. Go inform them: their orders have changed. Ful'kag," he said turning to Ful once again, "your orders have not changed. Go now."

Ful walked toward Kul's body, grabbed him by the ankles and began dragging him to Maraka. He hoped to find a fire still burning, despite the heavy rain that had fallen.

"What are your new orders for the other captains?" Hur asked his king.

The villages in western Kru'aka, just beyond Krag-Ma'ak, were all but inhabited. The remnants of living remained, yet not a life was found for all had answered the demanding call of Kul'drak to fight in the Orken civil war.

Lar, Noma, and the pod of troagan had left the Geerum mountain by way of a western exit. Lar and Noma had never been so far from their places of birth, even though where they had gone would have been within eyesight if not for the rocks and ridges that ran through Kru'aka. The road was barely travelled and was quite swamp-like, due to the rapid melt. They had a three day journey in front of them, just to simply leave the land of Kru'aka, for the western plain was vast and stretched far. From there,

they would be safe from the Orken; but they knew not of what trials and foreign races lay ahead. Yet still, they pressed on, knowing whatever lay before them ought to be greater than whatever lay behind.

“Noma,” Lar said, breaking a long period of silence, “what did you mean when you said: ‘beings who seem to defy the rules?’”

“Well, dear girl,” the troagan leader began in reply, “every race is bound by rules; laws instituted. I am a troagan. Thus, I am clever and resourceful, but extremely submissive. I may be the leader of my pod, but I could never command another group of any race. That is what made my ancestors so susceptible to the slavery imposed on them by the Orken when they migrated to the eastern land of Echrum one hundred years ago. And, as I mentioned to the Geerum king, we cannot fight. Yet, in an almost humorous contrast, the Orken were made for war. They were designed to be a perfect warrior. You do not need to eat or sleep as often as other races, you can heal with great haste, and you are strong. You are of the larger species in Teros and, like the Troagan, were labelled a...” Noma struggled to think of the Orken word. He knew the word as *class* in the common tongue, but such a word, meaning what he purposed it to mean, existed in the Orken tongue.

Finally, thinking of an appropriate translation, he said, “Rank two species.”

“Rank two?” Lar asked.

“Perhaps another story for a different day. But in short: rank two species are capable of a limited number of emotions. Orken hold to hatred, anger, pride, and loyalty. Greed, dishonesty, shame, and love are emotions found in many other races that cannot be found in an orken. But, as I mentioned in the mountain, I have seen many things that stand against these rules.”

“Like me?”

“Yes, Lar.” Noma laughed. “Like you. You are kind and gentle and I could not imagine witnessing hatred inside you. That is why I am honoured you have joined my quest. I am honoured to be a part of your extraordinary life. There is an exciting future that awaits you.”

“Noma...” Lar could not think of any word valid enough to convey her thoughts and feelings.

“Do not worry, Lar. I know.”

Lar walked alongside him, blushing for his kind words. “Would you also be an exception to the Troagan rule?” she asked.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you have not submitted to your former masters. And you did not tell the truth on a few

occasions. You even used the weaknesses of those stronger than you for the benefit of your pod. This does not seem like a submissive one to me.”

Noma pondered her observations for a few moments and then smiled. “I suppose you are right,” he said with a sort of chuckle. “We have both worked against our laws. I suppose what we are does not define who we can become.” And after saying such, Noma felt a flush come upon him, as if becoming aware of something he had never pondered of. Suddenly he felt eyes watching him, as if the very wind was a presence. He wondered, if such laws existed, was there a lawgiver? And if there was such a thing or such a one in existence, was Noma working against that very thing? Or did whatever, or whomever, set forth all things into being contain the kind of heart and will that took pleasure in calling lesser beings out of darkness and into light? The questions surged in his thoughtful mind, but he found no answer within himself. Thus, he continued on, further though the last stretch of Orken land.

Nightfall covered Kru’aka with a dark shroud. Cold air staled the grass and the white light of the moon overhead shone down on the leafless trees. The

darkness stretched east, beyond Kru'aka and into the neighbouring land: Echrum. A vast plainland that still harboured snow from the winter. Echrum housed many creatures, few of which lived in the southern mountain range that shouldered the land. In that mountain range there were, carved by history, many caves; some small and some grand. One cave was home to a dark and twisted being. That was the being to whom the assassin, who failed to kill the Orken king, Kul'drak, would have to report.

It had been a few weeks since the altercation with the king. She had received her assignment and foolishly underestimated the power of the Orken.

She had stayed in the small storage room for nearly an entire day. She knew it would take some time for her wounds to fully heal. If a patrol came by, she would hold her breath and remain stealthed until they were out of sight.

She heard the Draken leave the city, toward the battle, and knew her chance to escape had come. She slowly found her way to the war chamber, retrieved her weapons and gathered her arrows. She searched through the scrolls and books on the bookshelf in the chamber in hopes to find something: a name. She quickly read through all the lists of names that were registered militants of the Draken army. Yet the name she hoped to find, was not there.

She held her breath as she slowly crawled through the city gates and every broken bone in her body sent waves of pain. By the end of that day, she had arrived only at the Valley of Kal'ka. Her progress was discouraging for her and she knew it would take a while until she recovered properly. She found a small inlet in the rocky walls of the Valley that offered her shelter and concealment for a few days.

When well enough to walk properly, she started her trek toward Echrum. She dreaded reporting that she had failed, but she knew no other option. She depended on the one she served: Sylderus.

Her heart was beating violently as she looked at the cave from below. She used her wide paws to climb up the rocky mountainside. Once she reached the ledge, she crawled into the cave.

A sharp hissing sound echoed as she entered. She cautiously stood still, the hood from her cloak concealing her face.

"Talerim, you are foolish if you have come to face me," a raspy voice slithered its way into her ears.

"You have heard."

"I know most of what occurs on Teros. And how do you expect this is possible when fools like you are killed before they even engage their target?" Sylderus' voice thundered in rage. "You have proven yourself not ready to oversee the Orken of Kru'aka."

Slowly, in the black cave, two yellow eyes appeared, glaring at Talerim.

“Please, Sylderus,” she began, “do not reassign me. I will not allow for this to happen again.”

“I will not allow for this to happen again.” he replied. “I am not reassigning you.” As he said this, two shadowed figures appeared behind Talerim with their swords drawn. She had soon realized the fate that had supposedly been assigned to her. But there was a passion driving her that would not allow her to submit to death.

She quickly drew her two swords and flipped them in her hands so they pointed behind her. As she leapt into the air and flipped backward, she drove the blades into the chests of the beings. Her momentum caused them to fall backward as she flipped. Just before she landed, she let go of her swords and took hold of her bow. Her two feet landed on the ground just as she drew the arrow and launched it at the pair of eyes in the darkness. A small whirlwind composed of black mist manifested in the cave and the pair of eyes disappeared.

Talerim grunted as she looked into the empty cave. She sheathed her swords, retrieved the arrow she had fired, and left the cave. She stood on the ledge and overlooked the moonlit plain before her. She yelled in frustration as she realized the danger she now

faced: she would undoubtedly be hunted by her fellow assassins. She knew she had to get far away from the cave, as Sylderus would, most likely, have already dispatched the nearest assassin to the area. She carefully lowered herself down the mountainside and began her journey back to Kru'aka for her business with the Orken was not finished.

Dal'torr, mounted on the grey beast the former king, Kul'drak, had ridden, rushed to the back of the Draken army toward Krag-Ma'ak. When he arrived, Hur'kol's claims were confirmed: the Geerum had taken the city. By the time Dal had arrived, Tuk'den and the two legions he had with him were dead. Near the pile of bodies, there was a flock of large reptilian mounts known as eendwin. Those eendwin served the Geerum by granting them extremely swift travel over most terrain.

Dal looked at the downed city gate, growling at his new city's state. He cursed his brother for allowing that sacred and ancient city to be captured. If Kul were in his position, he would have roared and led his new subjects in a frontward assault on the city. He would have foolishly assumed the grand army at his

disposal would easily overwhelm whatever numbers the Geerum had scraped together.

However, Dal valued wisdom and tact. He dismounted from his rhunka and began to advise the surrounding militants of his plan.

Maraka sat still and empty as pillars of smoke rose from the burned down wooden buildings. All of the stone structures still stood, as did a few of the wooden structures. As a whole, the city was in a salvageable state.

Ful'kag walked, dragging his former king behind him. Dal'torr's axes had been collected from the body, but Ful's large axe remained buried in Kul's chest. Ful pondered deeply about the previous few days.

He had a military mind and deduced his way to a conclusion: Kul'drak had been eating the insects Kil'hagron had accredited his healing powers to. When Ful leapt over Kul and slashed at his chest, there seemed to have been little impact. Ful's face and chest stung as he recalled the event that led to his own wound. The rapid healing ability Kul possessed reminded Ful of his most recent battle with the Hagronen in the Valley of Kal'ka. His thoughts led him back to the throne room and down into the pit

he had been cast. He remembered the confusion and frustration he had in the Forest of Fal'kir as he lost his Draken citizenship and his loyalty to Kul.

His thoughts then arrived at Lar. He had carried her through the Hills of Krom and left her with the Troagan. Curiosity found itself in his mind as he wondered where she had gone and if she was still alive.

Ful's thoughts and pondering were interrupted by a groan. It was not that of an injured maraken nearby or of a torren searching through the rubble; it was that of Kul'drak. Ful quickly turned to assess the noise. Kul's remaining arm twitched. And Ful witnessed, frozen from awe, Kul's leg slowly bend and his knee lift off the ground. Ful had severed Kul's right forearm and the stub that remained lifted off the ground as well as if the arm was trying to reach for something.

Kul grunted again. Ful realized he was still alive, yet disabled by the axe wedged into his chest. Ful quickly dragged him to the stockade and brought him down the steps. He passed the cell that he had stayed in the other night and dragged Kul as far down the hall as he could. He brought him into the last cell and propped him against the rock wall. He found the bracelet and chain, meant to hold down the prisoner,

and fastened it to Kul's left wrist. Ful, to his dismay, removed his axe from the former king.

A few minutes passed before Kul'drak awoke. The wound in his chest remained and did not heal as quickly as the other one had.

"The effect must have worn off," Ful whispered to himself.

"You..." his voice was strained and distant as if having been imprisoned for a long time. "Ful?" the former king asked.

"It is I." Ful quickly rushed toward Kul and struck him in the head with his fist. "Why?" he yelled in rage. "Why can I not kill you?"

Kul groaned and let out a sigh. It was a few moments before he took another breath. Ful realized the injury Kul had would take some time to heal. He left the cell and locked the door behind him. With rage and confusion firing through his mind, he left the stockade and placed a large stone in front of the door.

Every moment that passed filled him with more rage toward himself. He was perplexed as to why, after all that he thought he had accomplished, he indeed could not kill Kul'drak.

The Geerum king stood in the war chamber overlooking the turned over table. The moon in the clear night sky let down its silver light, illuminating the contents of the room. He hoped to have gained some knowledge by viewing the Orken's status of warring with one another: weaknesses and strengths. But the maps were scattered across the room, caused by what seemed like a violent duel.

The Geerum are vengeful and do not easily release the bitterness they feel toward others. When the Orken had first arrived in Kru'aka, they were unaware of the Geerum's presence. The Orken had come from the southern Fire Lands: a place scorched by the intensity of the sun on that particular part of Teros. Kru'aka, unnamed at the time, was the first viable land they found. Their king, Ma'ak, had begun building his great city almost immediately. A few weeks after their arrival, an orken hunting party and a geerum hunting party crossed paths. Having a naturally aggressive nature, the orken attacked and killed the geerum hunters. They then sent scouts to locate the Geerum's city, but the scouts could not find it.

The Geerum, at that time, dwelt far in the northern reaches of the mountains that bordered Kru'aka. Only as they grew in population, over the many thousands of years, did they draw near to Orken

territory. But as they drew near over the ages, more and more altercations between the two factions occurred. Finally, their contention led to war.

The Geerum amassed their army and assaulted Krag-Ma'ak. They defeated a great number of the Orken in their assault and then retreated as more orken flooded in from the western villages to aid in the defence. The Orken king's authority was challenged by Hal'drak, the first of the Draken kings, and the Orken kingship was taken.

Hal'drak responded to the Geerum's assault and, with the full force of his army, attacked and slaughtered thousands of Geerum in several mountains they had carved into. The Geerum stayed dormant for many years and did not have any interactions with the Orken until a great Alliance was formed. They joined the Grand Alliance along with dozens of other races, seeing the benefit of common trade between them.

When the Alliance broke apart and ended in war, the bitterness harboured by the Geerum toward the Orken returned and festered for centuries, before rounds of attacks resumed.

The Geerum king stood, gazing out into the arena, the sound of battle having faded, and recalled the history between the Orken and the Geerum. That attack was his first attack as king and he knew he

needed to flee the city within a few days as the entirety of the Draken army would likely have conquered Kru'aka by then. He hoped to exact vengeance by ravaging the Orken's prided city. He had instructed his troops to destroy, but not to burn; he knew the smoke would raise the army's attention.

Suddenly, he heard the blast of an Orken horn. He ran out into the street below to hear word from those guarding the gate. He quickly made his way to the east gate, where they had entered. "What do you see?"

"Nothing, sire!" a guard reported; and immediately after, another call was sounded. It originated from a small metallic flute; one which all geerum carry. The high-pitched sound echoed from the western side of the city. When the call faded, the sound of fighting vaguely reached the Geerum king's ears.

Confused, he ran toward the sound. Unfortunately, he had only just captured the city and had not the time to establish a perimeter of scouts on the city's walls. "*How could they have come back so soon?*" he wondered to himself.

His sprint was intercepted by a group of geerum. "The Draken have returned! Their numbers are in the thousands!" one of them said as they blocked the king's path.

“And they shall be like smoke to us!” the king replied. “Sound the call to retreat!”

With that, the group ran toward the east gate. Four long calls from the Geerum flute sounded, besieging all to flee. Numbers of geerum amassed at the gate. They mounted their eendwins and fled north toward their mountain. Krag-Ma’ak was soon swarmed; all remaining geerum were pummelled and slaughtered.

As the geerum assault team fled, a few hundred mounted warriors, they were pursued on foot by an equal amount of Torren that had emerged from Kal’ka. The pathetic pursuers were simply a rouse; Dal’torr had delivered, through Hur’kol, orders for his three captains, along with the two legions they commanded and Sil’grum’s two legions, to sprint toward the Geerum mountain. Along the way, as they were instructed, each orken, Draken and Torren alike, picked up as many stones they could carry or as heavy of a boulder they could bear. Maintaining their sprint throughout the late evening and into the night, they had finally reached the mountain.

The Geerum king led the charge of fleeing geerum. To his dismay and bewilderment, as he approached the mountain he knew as home, he noticed the entire entrance was buried under rock.

And in front, stood some four thousand united orken waiting.

To his left stood a steep and jagged ridge and to the Geerum king's right: the Forest of Fal'kir. As his gallop slowed and his gaze set toward Fal'kir, he noticed the trees began to sway. However, it was not from a spring breeze sweeping by. Fear gripped his heart of stone and sent its tremors upward. He felt it in his eyes as he watched his enemy burst through the treeline.

"A truly powerful and united kingdom they are," the Geerum king thought; he had fled the city from Draken and now was ambushed by Torren, led by the Orken king, Dal'torr.

"To the ridge! Climb! Climb! Climb!" he shouted, turning toward the wall of rock. The king hoped his eendwin could scale the ridge with its agile and powerful body. Dozens of the creatures, with geerum atop, leapt up onto the wall. Despite their efforts, the ridge was too steep and its rocks were loose causing many to fall and crash against the cruel plain. Those who landed were met by the charging orken.

When his eendwin's webbed feet finally gave in, the Geerum king leapt off and soared. He gripped his massive hammer and struck the heads of a few orken as he landed. He smashed his way through many

more; most of his own troops, however, not having such luck.

Orken fell, as did geerum. The numbers staggered down on both sides, but the horde of orken eventually won. Dal'torr approached the Geerum king, who had made for himself a clearing in the chaos, and Dal, with a roar, raised his two axes.

The duel broke out in intensity as the last of the other geerum fell. Dal was unable to parry the strikes of the fierce geerum. He threw his axes from a short distance only as a distraction. As the Geerum king deflected the soaring blades, Dal stepped in and took hold of the hammer's shaft. He kicked off of the geerum's chest and side flipped through the air. He landed on one hand and his two feet as his other hand then held his foe's weapon.

The Geerum king yelled but before he could take hold of his enemy's grounded axes, his own hammer struck his head. The blow was so sharp and powerful that the snapping of his neck looked as though a twig was tossed in a prairie wind. His body sank to the ground and remained motionless. Some five hundred lay dead in the plain that separated the two kingdoms.

Dal'torr raised the Geerum king's hammer in the air and let out a roar. And though his victory there could warrant an assault on those in the mountain, although Dal knew not of how else to enter, he cared

only for the restoration of his own city; the one he had just made claim to as its king.

The red sun began to descend in the sky as the afternoon waned. It had been three days since, as Ful'kag had named and popularized, the battle of the Plains of Dal. Ful hastily rode on a rhunka, headed south. He had long since left Kru'aka and was sprinting through the southern forestlands. That vast forest housed many creatures and made up the majority of the Thralnan country. There would have been many safer routes for an orken to travel as Thralnan's inhabitants once warred against the Orken of Kru'aka.

When the war with the Geerum had come to a halt, the bloodthirsty Orken set south and harassed a race called the Felnir. The Felnir were segregated into different tribal species, but their combined numbers proved much larger than that of the Orken. Nonetheless, the Orken were stronger and slew countless thousands in the centuries of their warring. When the four factions of Kru'aka were formed, shortly after Kul'drak became king, the Felnir were allowed to repopulate and recover in peace. But the

hatred for the Orken remained thick in the hearts of the remaining felnir in Thralnan.

Ful'kag knew this and even expected an ambush along the way, but he had less than a month before Dal'torr addressed the entirety of the Orken of Kru'aka and Ful was personally requested to be in attendance. Yet he needed to go where he had set off to and he knew, if he pushed his rhunka's speed, the goal could be achieved.

He was, in fact, travelling to the very place Lar and Noma were also venturing to; the city of the Grand Alliance. He navigated through the southern lands, to which he had seldom been, with the aid of maps he had found in Elder Krom'jun's chambers. Although the city to which he was set would undoubtedly be in ruins, he was led to believe there remained an extensive library of documents. He hoped to find an explanation for all his confusion.

He had come upon this information and theory of the city after returning to Krag-Ma'ak. His reappearance was not as he expected but near what he hoped; as all the orken were focussed on the repairing of the city, he was able to enter the city undetected. He still felt as though he were a fugitive and he likely would never be able to call the place his home again. He sought out an elder in the hopes of gaining guidance for his feelings. Krom'jun was the orken he

sought specifically as he was the oldest and wisest of the elders. However, he happened upon Kon'kra who informed him of Kul's disbanding of the Council, of Du'kan and Kag'jun's deaths, and of Krom'jun having left the city. There remained six elders in the city, yet their status had not been changed. Ful'kag, with this new information, pondered to himself where a wise and truly loyal orken such as Krom'jun would have gone. Krom was loyal, not singularly to a king but, having served many kings in his time, he was loyal to the Orken as a whole. Thus, his decisions and thoughts were toward the welfare of the Orken. Ful took it upon himself to investigate and he hoped to find Krom in order to question him.

Ful had entered Krom's unguarded quarters and searched the room. Aside from a suit of armour strung up on the wall and the two pegs that held Krom's mighty axe, there was only a long wooden bed and a table in the room. Ful examined the contents of the table: a few maps and a scroll labelled: "*Lineages of the Orken.*"

Ful considered it interesting, quickly looked upon it, and searched for his name. He found his family name: Kag, but neither his name nor his father's, were present. He presumed the scroll was out-dated and grouped the maps in as well. One showed a Kru'aka that did not have the city of Maraka labelled, dating it

back some two hundred years. Another map was of a country named Shatheria. The map showed the country immediately north to it was Thralnan and Ful knew Thralnan was just south of Kru'aka. On the map that displayed Shatheria, a city stood in the centre. It seemed to be quite large and had the words hovering above it: "*the city of the Grand Alliance.*" Ful found this intriguing and saw that the city itself was outlined by a circle of black charcoal. He looked to his right and found a charcoal pencil on the table.

From his observations, Ful deduced that Krom went on a journey where he expected to have no conflict and he was heading south for the grand city in order to search their records for Orken lineages. He felt confident enough to pursue Krom, yet some things lacked their logic: the country to his south, Thralnan, was hostile to Orken and Krom would likely have needed to equip his axe. Yet it remained on the wall.

"*Why would a dead city be of use to Krom?* " Ful thought. "*Not a soul has been there for a thousand years. Or perhaps so...*"

Ful's pondering continued as he galloped through the forests of Thralnan; travelling to the very place Lar had already begun her journey to.

The days were getting warmer, and the sun stood in the sky longer, bringing much relief to the troagan Lar travelled with. She wondered how they ever, even if in the southern regions, survived the harsh winters Kru'aka had to offer. Yet presently, they were nearing the end of that dreadful country. The villages ended and a marshy stretch was trudged, and at last, the sight of a tapered treeline came into view. The land declined slightly as they proceeded south, so the moisture of the melted winter followed them, and the first row of short trees stood in shallow water. The sunlight and blue sky above reflected off the water and each tree looked twice as tall, standing as they did and being reflected at their feet, so the forthcoming land looked erroneously beautiful. And it was. For all the unknown terrors it beheld, nothing seemed worse than what had preceded the pod and the orken girl.

Upon passing a short tree, Lar looked to Noma in question. "Is it a good time for you to explain more about my being a rank two species?"

Noma smiled, as was becoming his custom whenever Lar spoke. "Yes, it is. I will start by saying that I care not for such designations. However, as you may have gathered, long ago there was an alliance of kinds. The Geerum, Troagan, and even the Orken were all unified. Many other kinds too! Yet there

remained obvious tensions. The time of peace brought forth many innovations: a common language, measurement, and even a form of currency. But one race, unlovingly referred to by the Orken as the Gizon, invented a ranking system to determine a kind's standing in the Alliance. The Gizon, as well as the Geerum and others, were considered rank three races due to their range of intellect and emotion. The Orken and the Troagan were considered rank two. For we are limited to only a handful of emotions, or at least we should be. Beasts such as the truka and the rhunka and hares and other sorts were referred to as rank one species."

"Are rank three races better than those of rank two?" Lar began in question. "It seems rank two would be of higher ability than rank one if you were to compare us to hares."

"That was the thought behind the ranks."

Lar crossed her bare brow. "That seems... I fail to think of the word."

"Rude, malicious, and..." Noma himself paused as he recalled the word, "arrogant."

"How is it you know all you do, Noma?"

Noma laughed. "We rank two species," he began mockingly, "are gifted with the memories of our ancestors."

"How do you mean?"

Noma's head perked up. He enjoyed the many questions of Lar; never had he met such an inquisitive orken. "When I seed an egg, my memories and the memories of the mother are carried down into the tadling. It is the same with you; those who sired you have passed knowledge to you. Therefore, an orken may awaken from birth and not require meticulous training like other races need, such as the Gizon."

"That seems a great advantage for building a species," Lar said.

"I agree. It is merely a difference in design, I suppose. And the Orken agreed too. They were outraged by the claim that they were lesser than all gizon. So, in a show of their strength, the Orken slaughtered every single gizon. And it proved easy as the Orken were twice in size and four times in strength. And not only the Gizon; the Orken attacked many kinds in this land. Thus, the Alliance was shattered."

"Did not other kinds wish to keep peaceful relations and the common things founded?"

"Yes," Noma replied, "but the Gizon were natural leaders, and they were the ones who initiated and funded the Alliance."

"Do many other races hate the Orken now?"

"It would be difficult to find a place in Teros where the Orken are not hated," Noma quipped.

Lar focused her eyes on the ground, being quieted for a while. She noticed the markings on her arms and thought back to the horror they had brought her in Krag-Ma'ak.

Noma realized his comment had downcast her and spoke to comfort her. "Fret not, my dear child," he said as he took her hand again. "You are no orken and anyone could see that."

The two laughed at his statement. They thought it such a foolish and childish thing to say for it was plainly false, but never truer to the pair.

Then the trees were taller, coming above Noma's height and reaching Lar's chest so that she could see well behind her, but her view was limited ahead for the heights continued and leaves were thickening and the green of the foreland was beginning its encompassing display. There was no clear beginning to the next country, Thralnan, as there was no clear end to Kru'aka. The rising trees were the border and soon a dense treeline was before them, and then they knew they were out of their former country.

Passing through the forest, Lar grinned with each step in Thralnan. Though she did not know the name of the land she was in, she rejoiced in it. For her twenty years of life, she had spent every day, except for the last few, protected by trees. The thickness of the Thralnan forests reminded her of her old home.

She thought of Noma and how he was brave enough to leave his home and seek a better one. She had remained beside Noma the entire journey so far. And thinking of her old home, brought her mind to wonder of things that had happened to her in the previous weeks. Life had changed entirely for her. And as if some shroud was lifted off her, leaving Kru'aka allowed much to occur within her mind. One thing of which was worth inquiring of: the symbols upon her arms. She remembered when she had received them and was forced to the forest floor, degraded like property. She remembered loving them then for what they meant of her, although she knew not their literal meaning. And then she remembered something that was bleak to her: a blackness in her mind of memories she was not allowed to ponder of. Feelings she was disallowed from feeling for some purpose she knew not. But standing at the door of her heart, were things she wished to recall.

Alas, she spoke again to her troagan companion. "What even do these cursed symbols mean?" she asked holding out her arms, ripping her hand out of Noma's.

"They are Orken. An older writing to be sure, but they are Orken still. The symbols on your right arm read: Hagron, the Orken word for hunter and the

name of the king. And the symbols on your left arm are derogatory for one who is enslaved.”

“I hate—” Lar began but was stopped. As she spoke, thoughts flooded. In a moment she was filled with the memories of a life she once lived. Not prior to her birth, for nothing of the sort could ever occur, but prior to the grip of depravity wrought her. Somehow, somewhere, sometime, there was a time when she clung yet to innocence, clinging not by her own will or anything of herself, but by something external. Someone. Now came to her the memory of a being who sought her in the woods of her youth. Such a one had come to her and sheltered her from the darkness that reigned about her and such a one had done for her things too wonderful for her to fathom then. And thus, despite the flooding memories, all such light was then hidden neath the shadows that still covered her. But feelings welled up within her from the sealed memories. Finally, she continued softly and in a whisper, “I think I hate them.”

“And you have reason to,” said Noma quickly, thinking nothing of her sudden quieting. “But I admire them a little. They will always remind me of how you came to save my pod from certain death, being a slave yourself. Now the both of us, and all those about us, can say surely we were once slaves.

Now free. Unto what? Ha! Peace is what I hope. But even death in the pursuit of liberty is sweeter than life in slavery, I should think.”

Lar let out a small smile, supressing further the strangeness that had come upon her. Curiosity of her sudden light heart and soft mind barely bothered her. For the grace that had been bestowed upon her found its home within her again. Not for its departure, but for Lar’s deep realizing of it, so far buried that it was not a thing to ponder of. “We are not there yet,” she said softly, knowing the phrase was neither crass nor lovely.

“True,” Noma began, “but every step we take in the direction away from Kru’aka, is a step further down the path of our freedom.”

Noma took Lar’s hand once again, and that time she held on. The two marched forward as their pod followed behind.

“Journey south for two months,” thought Lar, recalling the king of the Geerum’s words to her, *“and you will see a large mountain. Go toward this mountain and you will find the city. From there, you may be able to find a map that will lead you to peace.”*

Peace. She wondered if she had ever felt it, or if even she deserved it. And yet, for all her wondering, and for the grace that was then hidden within her, she knew she had felt it and that she did not deserve it,

but her unworthiness did not make anything of the sort beyond reach. For she knew, although she did not know presently, but could remember at least the feeling of what it was to know such, that if grace was a gift, the only act of the receiver was to receive.

X

A FORTNIGHT HAD PASSED SINCE FUL'S departure from Kru'aka. The forestry of 'Thralnan proved to be as hostile as he had suspected. He rode through every night and, despite the hostile threats of lurking creatures, he arrived at the city of the Alliance unharmed. On occasion, his rhunka halted for a few hours of rest or because some fearsome creature stood in their path. But none were more fearsome and ferocious than Ful'kag. With determination birthed from confusion and anger, he raced through the forest, hacking at anyone who wished to see an orken fall by their hand.

When he arrived at the city he was underwhelmed by its lack of splendour and glory. Huge stone columns lay in pieces and what remained of the structures were covered in centuries of weed growth. Not a single corner of the city seemed as if it had been useful for any purpose, other than housing critters, for a millennium.

Ful dismounted his exhausted rhunka and walked toward the scathed city. He had arrived at a northern entrance where the wall surrounding the city was crumbled as far as his eye could see. He entered into a sort of bush-filled courtyard and walked amongst tall grass and atop a thick layer of moss, covering what once was a grand marble floor. He arrived at a staircase that, from many years of sweeping wind, had almost become a subtle ramp as opposed to having defined steps. He reached the top of the steps and gazed upon a shattered door. The door remained massive in size, stretching up four times his height, yet it had been splintered down the middle and rotted wood had made several holes in it. He walked through one of the holes and into the large structure. It was hollow and without a single piece of furniture or decoration. There was a foul stench that filled the air from ages of critters taking shelter in the city's abandoned halls.

Ful'kag walked on in hopes of finding the library. Every sign barely remained legible and was written in the common language, which he was fortunate to have been taught by Krom'jun.

It had been only a few hours when Ful spotted the first one: a small brown creature that ran along the floor. The creature was about the size of his fist and quickly scurried away from him when he noticed its

presence. Thinking very little of it, Ful searched on. However, as another hour passed, a small group of the creatures approached him. In the common language, one of them said, “Welcome, orken.”

Ful, startled and puzzled replied, “Who are you? Where might I find the...” Ful struggled for a moment as he attempted to recall the word; he had not spoken the common tongue frequently since he learned it after becoming a commander. “Library?”

“We are gophelian. Who are you?” the same gophelian who had welcomed him earlier said with a soft and squeaky voice.

“My name is Ful’kag, I am of the Torren kingdom in Kru’aka.”

“Ah yes, yes! Kru’aka has been very busy as of late. Dal’torr has just become king, yes?”

“Yes... how do you know this?” Ful replied curiously.

“We are gophelian and I am Gerh. We are to record all that takes place in Teros.”

“Record?”

“Yes! Surely that is why you have arrived here today? You have come seeking information like the orken before you.”

“Yes, I am here for information. Was the orken you speak of Krom’jun?”

“Ful’kag of the Torren kingdom in Kru’aka, everyone’s affairs are our affairs. But we do not let others know of another’s affairs. If this Krom’jun was here, you will need to ask that of him. Is this the information you have come to seek?”

“No, I wish to see any recent documents you have on Orken lineages.”

“Recent documents?” the small gophelian said in a surprised tone. “Now Ful’kag, do you truly not know who we are?”

“Should I?”

“I would give you a tour and show you the ‘library,’ as you so call it, but you would never fit... explaining will have to do! Come with me!” The gophelian, along with the few others with him, ran off down the hall they were in. Ful’kag walked behind them. “We record everything that happens in Teros. Our reach of recorders stretches as far as any map could lead you. Every week the recorder is replaced with a new gophelian and the other travels back to file their findings.”

“File?” Ful asked.

“This city is on top of our city! Every path leading to and from other countries leads here and our entire operation is beneath the surface! This ensures we do not need to interfere with the happenings of a country or village in order to observe.”

They turned down a few halls and finally arrived at a room with a large table in it. “Now, Ful’kag, you have come seeking information. But I must ask that you offer me something in return. If you give me some information I do not know, I will give you some information you do not know.”

Ful’s chest flared as annoyance built up in him. “What do you want to know?”

“Well, you see, Ful’kag. Dal’torr has lived in an underground bunker that was created by the Geerum and finished with iron by the Orken. Thus, we have not been able to penetrate it. If you could give me some information on those living there, I would greatly appreciate being able to update their lineage scrolls.”

“I only know the names of a few captains in his army.”

“You told me you were of the Torren kingdom... surely you must know more than a few names?” Gerh asked accusingly.

“Until recently I was of the Draken kingdom.”

Just as Ful said this, a gophelian ran out of a hole in the wall and entered the room with a small scroll in his mouth. The gophelian Ful was conversing with took the scroll, opened it, and read it. “Ful’kag of the Draken! You fought the recent battle in the valley of Kal’ka?” he asked in excitement.

Ful grunted with discomfort. “Yes.”

“What can you tell me of the Hagronen and their king? They were victorious in the battle but there are tales not a single Hagronen remains alive! We have no information on them and what happened to them. If you are able to tell us about how they all died we will gladly give you any information you need!”

Ful grinned and felt as though he too had just been victorious in a battle. He began to tell Gerh all that had happened to him in the previous week; starting with the battle in Kal’ka, Kul’drak’s slaughter of the Hagronen, and the battle in the Plains of Dal. Being a weaker species, the Gophelian were unable to venture into Fal’kir on foot for fear of death and neither underground due to the thick network of roots. They were delighted to hear Ful’kag’s knowledge of the matter.

When he finished detailing the recent events in Kru’aka, Gerh, the gophelian he had been speaking to, asked, “You have requested recent documents pertaining to Orken lineages; are there specific clans you wish to follow?”

“Kag,” Ful said. “I wish to see the lineage of my clan.”

“Of course,” Gerh bowed and then ran off into a hole in the wall. A few others remained in the room and simply stood on their hind legs and stared at Ful.

After a few minutes of the uncomfortable scene, Gerh returned along with several others holding scrolls in their mouths. “Here are our records for the Kag clan, starting with the most recent: Gun’kag, birthed five years ago,” he said.

Ful opened the first scroll; it contained hundreds of names with lines connecting them in sequence of birth. At last, he found his: Ful’kag, with lines stretching upward connecting him to those who sired him: Ful’kag and Har’jun and from there, upward stretched the lines that connected them to many other orken. However, as his eyes ran up the scroll, he spotted a name that was different from the rest. About six generations before him, there was the name: Jamnon. That Jamnon was connected via a horizontal line to a Nul’kag suggested the two were joined and produced offspring, Ful’kag being a descendant of them. Ful looked up and met eyes with Gerh.

“Who is this Jamnon?” he asked, showing the gophelian the name on the scroll.

“I do not know offhand,” he replied. “May I take this scroll and reference the name Jamnon? My search should not take more than an hour.”

“You may.” Ful gazed upon the other scrolls of the Kag clan while the gophelian was searching. No

such similar name was found. All the names were that of an orken.

The hour passed but felt like an entire day to Ful. To his impatient relief, the gophelian returned with a few more scrolls. “Jamnon, male, commonly used exclusively by the Gizon, as you have called them.”

Ful’s neck jerked as he heard the astonishing words. “The Gizon are dead...”

“Perhaps. But this Jamnon in your clan’s lineage lived close to a millennium ago. Around the time the Gizon were slaughtered by the Orken.”

“This Jamnon,” Ful said slowly and softly, “was a Gizon?”

“It seems as such. Nothing else of him I know.”

Ful’kag felt his legs weaken. He braced himself against the table. His weight caused it to slide a little.

“Then I am not—”

“Fully Orken. Correct,” Gerh interrupted, himself being shocked by the news.

Ful’s mind ran faster than the rhunka had taken to get to the city. He ran through his life and his thoughts lingered on his experience in the Forest of Fal’kir.

“My great king...” Ful had said to Kul’drak. “You should strike me where I stand for my thoughts betray you... No orken has ever spared the life of an attacker. No orken

king has spared the life of a commander who has failed in battle. And yet you have done both."

He remembered Kul'drak's response: "*Ful... I felt something I cannot explain... I could not kill you. I feel things no orken has felt and I have done things no orken has done.*"

The confusion that had filled Ful then, seemed to be distant now as clarity began to reveal the truth.

"I do not understand what madness has driven the Orken way from you, and for that, I cannot submit to your rule... It is not the shame of my loss that has driven me to desert you. It is my lack of faith in you as my king. My lack of faith in you as an orken... If you have but a spark of the same fire I once felt in my chest, do me the honour of executing me."

The shame he felt drifted away as his thoughts stretched toward Dal'torr. He recalled the scroll Gan'marak had sent to Dal with Ful.

"He requests your help..." Ful had said in confusion.

"Have you known an orken to ask for such?" Dal had begun in question. *"It is indeed unlike a king to do so... Why did you go back to Krag-Ma'ak, and not do your duty by dying in battle?"*

"I was..."

"Curious?" Dal had said the word in the common tongue. *"If the word is not in the orken language, why are you and I experiencing it?"*

The anger Ful had felt swiftly fled as he came to the conclusion his thoughts were leading to: he was not a full-blooded orken.

“May I see the lineage for Kul’drak? For the clan of Drak?”

“These records,” Gerh said in reply while running toward the hole in the wall, “were recently accessed and have not been refiled. I will return momentarily!”

Ful stood in absolute silence as Gerh was retrieving the scroll. He returned with several scrolls and gave Ful the one in which the kingly line was recorded. Ful read the scroll; the same structure applied to that scroll as his clan’s. He read through the names of the Draken clan. He found Kul’drak’s name and next to his was Kil’drak, later renamed Kil’hagron. Another name was connected to the pair: Gur’drak, killed by Kul at a young age. The three orken kin were linked by vertical lines to the mated pair: Kal’drak and Jul’drak. However, to Ful’s surprise, Jul’drak was also connected by a horizontal line to Darg’drak, and the scroll suggested their offspring were Dal’drak, renamed Dal’torr, and Gan’drak, renamed Gan’marak. Ful curiously read upward in great anticipation. Kal’drak and Darg’drak were the offspring of the same two orken. He read on and stretched back to almost a dozen generations but did not find any name that was unusual. He had

expected, based on the similar peculiar behaviour of all four kings he had recently experienced, to find a name belonging to a gizon in the Draken lineage.

He paused for a few moments and then his mind led him back to his conversation with Dal'torr, particularly when he had left the room; he had passed Jul'drak. He knew that female to be the one who birthed Kul'drak. However, he had just learned she was the mother of all four kings in Kru'aka.

"This female," he said to Gerh, "Jul'drak. Do you have the section of the Draken lineage her birth is recorded in?"

"It will most likely be one of the scrolls I have already brought out," Gerh said this and then began to squeak and chirp to the other gophelian in the room. As though they had understood the sounds, they began opening the scrolls and scouring through them. One of them raised their arm, ran to Gerh, and handed him the scroll.

Gerh approached Ful and showed him Jul'drak's name on the scroll. Ful crouched down, took it and quickly read upward. To his surprise, even though it was what he searched for, he found the name: Sulos. Sulos and a female named Val'drak had mated and produced Rag'drak, who sired Jul'drak.

"Sulos," Ful said cautiously. "What form of a name is that?"

“Sulos...” Gerh began thoughtfully. “It is structured the same as most Gizon names. And look,” he said as he examined the scroll, “his appearance is near the same time as Jamnon’s in the Kagen lineage. Ful’kag! It is clear to me now! At this time, a millennium ago, there was the Grand Alliance. Two of the races in that Alliance were the Orken and the Gizon. It must have been that for a period in history, during that time of peace, the two races joined together and mingled!”

“You suggest there are more orken with Gizon blood in them?” Ful questioned.

“There is but one way to learn.” Gerh began chirping to his fellow gophelian. The several others in the room ran through the hole and went underground.

“To where are they going?” Ful asked.

“They are going to search the Orken lineages that date back one thousand years for any names that are of the Gizon. Oh, how have we never known of this?”

“I suppose this is the reason for which Krom sought this place,” Ful said to himself. “*Yet what has he done with this information?*” he thought. “*Does he intend on returning to Kru’aka? If so, what would be his intent?*”

“I suppose you have a lot of pondering to do, Ful’kag of the Torren kingdom in Kru’aka,” Gerh began. “My gophelian will require several hours to go

through all of the records. I suggest you breathe some of the wondrous Shatherian air while you wait. Do you need me to show you the way?"

"I will find it on my own," he replied and then left the room. He slowly walked down the halls he had journeyed before. The questions he had been asking himself and raging for lack of an answer, no longer plagued him. And though he had learned the truth of himself, he had never felt more displaced.

One month had passed since Dal'torr became the king of Kru'aka. The warm sun commanded the season of awakening in the land. Green covered the land as life bloomed. A crisp breeze brushed across southern Kru'aka as Ful gazed upon the grand city of Krag-Ma'ak. Dal had restored its glory and revived the war-struck city. Ful entered through the gates; wooden replacements hung as the thick iron originals were still being repaired. He looked at the large statue of King Ma'ak: it still stood despite the Geerum's assault. Ful admired the grandeur of the city; he had been there countless times and had explored every corner. Yet he looked at each stone on the ground, each outline of the buildings and the great arena in the War Hall as if he were exploring a foreign place. His

newfound clarity set upon him eyes with which to see old things in a new light.

Ful found the king where he was expected to be: on the throne. Thousands of orken had been arriving at the city from all across Kru'aka in the previous few days and Dal was, for most of the days, situated on his throne to accept greetings from each village's respective leader.

"Ful'kag," Dal said as Ful walked through the throne room's tall doors, "with but one day left to spare, you have returned."

"Yes, my king," Ful said as he kneeled in a familiar spot. He looked up and saw six of nine fires burning on the elder's balconies. Dal had restored their positions, yet Krom'jun had not yet returned.

"Rise, Ful," Dal said. "Was your quest successful?" he asked.

"It indeed was, my king. I have this to return to you." Ful stood up and approached the throne. He extended his arm and in his hand he held a small scroll. Dal gestured with two of his fingers for Ful to hand it to him personally. Ful walked up two steps and placed the scroll in the king's hand.

"Its contents are for you alone, my king," Ful whispered and then walked back down the path and out of the building.

Dal opened the scroll and read its words:

MY GREAT KING, DAL'TORR. I REQUEST THAT YOU MEET ME AFTER THE SUN'S SETTING IN THE WAR CHAMBER. I WILL ARRANGE FOR OUR PRIVACY. PLEASE ENSURE YOU DO THE SAME AS I HAVE DISCOVERED A MATTER OF GREAT IMPORTANCE PERTAINING TO THE ORKEN.

Blackness swallowed Kru'aka. The sun had set and Ful awaited his king's arrival in the war chamber. He had an adequate amount of time to ponder the life-altering information he had discovered. He had yet to find his purpose or an answer about Krom but his mind did piece together certain things concerning Jul'drak.

Orken do not hold the ties to a mother or a father as another race may. Their sole loyalty is to their king, a more powerful orken. The only time this loyalty wanes is in the case of an elder or in a weak king. Elders serve many kings in their time and thus their loyalty is drawn toward that of the orken beneath them, as is the king's. The exception to having unbroken ties to one's family, and Ful had never

considered this possibility before, was not being entirely of the Orken.

Kul'drak displayed loyalties to his brother Kil'hagron and even, as Ful had realized, to Dal and Gan: they had been allowed to flourish and grow under his reign. Ful had never witnessed any dealings between Kul and Jul'drak, yet her appearing to Dal'torr was proof of her connection to the conflict in Kru'aka. He did not know of how any proof of such a suspicion could come about, but his discovery of her having a large portion of Gizon blood in her led him to guess her own struggles were much more severe than his. And he wished for such struggles to not plague the Orken as Kul'drak's and his own struggles had plagued him.

The darkness had seized the sky, yet Krag-Ma'ak remained lit by the many torches and fires that burned. It was a sign of strength to have an ever-awake city. Dal walked its streets on his way to the war chamber.

He had recently rebuilt the damaged areas of the city and had been meeting with the village leaders, previously from both the Draken and Maraken kingdoms. He ensured them that him having the loyalty of all orken rested not only on his strength, but also on their allegiance. He boldly reminded them that if their loyalty was not given, he would take their lives.

He had also reinstated the Council of Elders. Upon discovering two members were dead and one had left the kingdom, he met with each elder to gain insight on recent dealings in the city and whom they might see as successors for the definite two empty balconies and the possible third. Each member voiced their impression of Kul'drak. Although they were impressed with Kul's apparent victory over Kil'hagron, their frustration for his decisions remained. None of them could explain his recent erratic behaviour and his ability to heal. However, all six informed Dal of Jul'drak's appearances in their sessions. Kul frequently allowed her access to the throne room and even allowed the voicing of her opinions. She almost held the status of an elder, despite her being female.

Dal recalled the day, some two hundred years before, when he was approached by Jul and she coerced him to abandon the Draken line and form a kingdom of orken under his leadership; it was no more than a week after Kul had declared kingship. He had obeyed her then, but his thoughts led him to when he had not. It was just before the battle of the Plains of Dal. The rage he had felt toward her began to swell within him again as he recalled her words: *"Our desires are not the same. You will kill all those who have not sworn allegiance to your name."*

Her words had angered him then and they continued to anger him as he pondered her dealings with his and Kul's former kingdoms.

The door to the chamber creaked open and Dal'torr walked through. Ful'kag awaited his arrival, overlooking the arena below. He turned and greeted his king. "Hail, Dal'torr."

"Hail, Ful. What is the meaning of such secrecy?" Dal asked.

"I have discovered a truth about the Orken in Kru'aka. Kul'drak, Kil'hagron, Gan'marak, myself, thousands of orken, and you, are partial descendants of the Gizon."

"Madness!" Dal yelled after a single moment of pondering.

"A few generations ago," Ful began, "about a millennium of time, the Gizon and the Orken produced offspring and we are of such offspring."

"How... how can you know this?" Dal asked.

"The city of the Grand Alliance is where I ventured. I met those who trace the lineages of all races. Upon requesting my own, I discovered a gizon six generations before my birth. I then requested Kul'drak's and found your name, along with Gan's and Kil's, listed as Kul's kin. The grandsire of Jul'drak, the one who birthed you, mated with a female of the Gizon."

“This is an outrage, Ful!”

“This is indeed the truth! It is the reason for our being plagued with confusion and feelings that are foreign! Additionally, I have been pondering, my king, about this to great extent and have a suggestion: has Jul’drak incited you, at any time, to consider thoughts an orken would not?”

“Speak clearly.”

“I am suspicious of Jul’drak’s role in this war. I was present when she visited you and I am *curious* if she had an influence on Kul’s kingship as well. If this were so, I would advise you, as a captain under your command, to expel her.”

“Your words should be watched, Ful’kag. But it is our near equality that allows you to speak as such. Regardless, I have not the time for this care. I have the loyalty of a kingdom to command and declaring myself as anything less than an orken would surely be my undoing. Pursue what you may and ponder what you wish; but this is your affair, not mine.”

Dal turned and just before he exited the chamber he looked back and said, “And with regard to your being a captain under my command; I have plans to change that status tomorrow before my kingdom. Stand by my side when I speak.”

He walked down the hall and out of sight. Ful’s words, however, brought forth a similar clarity. His

own struggles and confusion, regarding his mind, were explained. Yet he attempted to suppress the clarity in order to maintain his firm grip on Kru'aka. However, the elders' mention of Jul'drak's dealings with the Council and Kul remained on his mind's forefront. His conclusion, after all the information gathered, was that Jul'drak was responsible for the usurping of the tetrarchs: Kil, Gan, and himself. She thus was responsible for the war that had been waged for two centuries causing many deaths of orken. His loyalty to his kingdom triumphed over any Gizon-like feelings toward his mother. He knew what action he had to take: Jul'drak must die.

The midnight hour brought forth a cold wind in the land of Echrum. Jul'drak had journeyed there to seek one she had only heard whispers of in her several hundred years of life. One whose shadow stretched over the land of Kru'aka in an undetectable way. Yet one she had never seen nor knew of to be real.

She had, at one time, witnessed the strike of an assassin and, being intrigued to learn of its origin, she investigated. And only by whisper and rumour did she learn of Echrum being from whence they had come.

She walked then, having done so since her meeting with Dal'torr, deep into Echrum along its southern mountain range. Her time spent wandering there had been alerted to the attention of the one she sought: Sylderus.

A thick fog poured down from the slopes and surrounded Jul'drak on that cold and dark night. She heard a distasteful whisper and a quiet hiss that slid its way around her.

"Jul'drak," a cruel voice crept out from the fog, "the queen of the Orken. To what do I owe this pleasure?" As he finished his saying, he appeared. From behind the fog and uncloaked, he revealed himself to her. She gasped and shuttered at his sight. He was long and narrow. His skin was pale and clothed with dark scales. He had a tail that seemed to seamlessly form into his peculiar body. He stood on two thick legs like that of an orken and had thin arms that bore three claws at the end serving as his hands. His body thickened at his chest but narrowed again for his long, tubular neck. And finally, he had the head of a snake and small, glowing eyes peered at Jul'drak as she marvelled in terror.

"I have come to seek your aid," she said as she trembled. The warmth orken carry with them fled from her in his presence.

They stood, gazing at each other in the midst of that foggy plain.

“What may I aid you with? And what do you have to offer in return?” he said as he slithered around her. When he moved, he lay down and used his hind legs, arms, and muscular stomach to maneuver.

“The Orken,” she replied. “I want them dead.”

“Dead?” he screeched. “My darling, you know not of the effort I have invested to keep the Orken alive! Do you suppose a kingdom divided could stand warring against each other for two hundred years without a superior guardian?” he yelled ferociously. “The Orken will live only until my purpose for them has been fulfilled.” He halted his slither and stared her in the eye. “And why do you wish for the Orken to die, being one yourself?”

“I...” she hesitated from revealing the greatest secret she kept.

“Or perhaps,” Sylderus said, slithering around her again, “you are not an orken. You may look like an orken but I know what lies within you.”

“Of what do you speak?” Jul’drak was unaware of her being partially of the Gizon.

“It matters not. I have decided to aid you, Jul’drak of the Orken.” Jul’drak was relieved, but before she could say anything more, he spoke again. “In

exchange for my killing the Orken; you must help *me* with something.”

Jul’drak was confused as to what she had to offer such a powerful being. “What must I do?”

Sylderus continued to look into her eyes. He slowly smiled, revealing a few dozen sharp teeth and four large fangs at the end of his mouth. A long, black, forked tongue left his mouth along with a dreadful hissing sound.

The assembly was grand. Every street in Krag-Ma’ak was filled and every seat in the arena had an orken. Even outside the city, camps of Draken from the west and Maraken from the east had standing orken listening for every word that would fill the air.

Dal’torr stood on the wall of the arena, to be seen by as many as possible. With him were the six remaining elders and Ful’kag.

“Kil’hagron is dead!” Dal yelled. “Gan’marak is dead! Kul’drak is dead! All those who thought themselves worthy enough to be called king of Kru’aka, are dead! But I remain, as your king! And I command your loyalty and denounce you Draken and Maraken! We are all the Orken in Kru’aka! We are all Torren! As per the rite, any who wish to challenge me

may step forth on this day. But know this: you will die.

“Here with me are the six elders. They will enforce my will by the way they govern our land. And I present to you Ful’kag. Many of you may have known him as the commander of the Draken army. But today I elect him an Elder of the Torren! He will not live here in Krag-Ma’ak, but the city that was once home to our common enemy, Maraka, will be his home. From this day forth Maraka will be renamed, to honour this loyal servant of mine: Krag-Ful! All those who are of the eastern realm will report to him as if he were their king! And I wish a new age for the Orken to rise: an age where we do not rival each other as we have done in the past. We will rise in unity against the Geerum who have so fearlessly assaulted this city! We will destroy any who dare challenge our kingdom! I will destroy any who challenge my kingdom! The Orken have a single mindset: war. We are born into it, raised by it, and led by it. War rules our society. And now we will war against each other no more!”

Dal raised Kul’drak’s massive axe into the air as a sign of his leadership and dominance. Ful’kag roared in acceptance of his claims and the six elders joined him soon after. In but a few moments, the entirety of the Orken in Kru’aka were roaring and the sound

filled the air. The trees of Fal'kir shook and the roar was heard by the Geerum in the north and by thousands of creatures in the southern country, Thralnan. The ferocity of the Orken was reminded to all who had forgotten.

The land of Der'grah was warm and lush. A great network of green hills connected a towering mountain range to a long and dense forest. Within that forest, about a day's journey in depth, there was a sequence of thick trees. These trees stretched high into the air but massive branches began early along the trunk and created a vast canopy of green leaves. Through the leaves of one tree shone a few beams of the midday sun. And on that tree, there was a thick rope tied around one of its lowest branches. The rope dropped just a few feet and at the end of the rope, bound by his ankles, there hung an orken. All he wore was leather pants, boots, and a belt around his waist. His exposed, muscular chest revealed his green skin.

He awoke from a slumber forced by a strong strike to his head. He jerked his body but there was no response. He slowly opened his eyes and noticed his feet and hands were bound. As his mind cleared

from being unconscious, he recalled what had led him there.

“You must give me your loyalty,” an old, raspy voice echoed in his mind as his memory returned.

“There is a dagger next to the rope on the tree branch,” the same voice said again. “Free yourself and attack me.”

The upside-down orken bent his neck and saw the dagger stabbed into the large branch. With incredible strength, he raised his body upward so his hands could reach the dagger. He freed his hands and then cut the rope from his ankles. He began to fall from the branch, but he rotated himself and landed on his feet.

He quickly looked at his surroundings; he was in a small clearing in the forest and nearby there sat a red-skinned orken: Krom’jun. He was dressed in a brown robe and had a piece of cloth tied around his head, blocking his sight.

“Remember, Tehoram,” Krom began, “I may not have my sight, yet that does not warrant a successful frontal attack.”

“I would be weak if I attacked any other way!” Tehoram yelled. “I am no coward!” He charged Krom with the dagger poised.

Krom, waiting until the precise moment, quickly stood and used the staff he had behind his body to

stab forward and strike Tehoram in the face. Tehoram's charge and the force from Krom's attack caused Tehoram to fall backward and twist, landing face-first on the ground. The dagger landed a few feet from him. Krom spun his staff in the air and swung it in a downward motion, brutally striking Tehoram's back.

"Listen, you foolish orken!" Krom yelled as he took off the cloth around his eyes. "I have lived for over nine centuries! I possess more knowledge than you could ever hope to and I have fought more battles than there are trees in this forest! If you are to surpass me in strength and wisdom, if you are to liberate a kingdom: you must submit to me!"

"No!" Tehoram roared.

Krom struck the back of his head. "Surrender your loyalty to me! Submit to me as your master and you will become the greatest orken in this age!" Krom struck his head and back three times. He then kicked Tehoram in the head, causing him to roll onto his back.

"How long must I continue to prove I am your superior?" Krom continued. "You cannot defeat me for I am stronger than you!"

Tehoram growled as he looked up at Krom in defiance.

“You disagree? Then strike me!” Krom taunted as he backed away. “Go on; rise! Strike me!”

Tehoram ferociously got to his feet and charged the elder. Krom swung his staff behind his head to gain momentum and then swung his arm out. The staff whistled through the air as it circled around Krom and struck Tehoram’s face. Tehoram plummeted to the ground, landing on his side.

“Again!” Krom yelled. “And here,” he said as he tossed Tehoram his staff. Tehoram caught the staff and rose. He lifted it and ran toward Krom again. In a quick and brutal motion, he chopped the staff down, but Krom stepped out of the way. Tehoram’s momentum caused him to run past Krom, who then struck the back of Tehoram’s leg with his foot. Tehoram stumbled slightly but was able to steady himself.

Tehoram turned and began another charge. Krom had stepped near the dagger and he used his foot to fling it upward and catch it. As he dodged Tehoram’s next assault, he drove the dagger into Tehoram’s side. Tehoram roared and fell down again. Krom had taken hold of the staff as Tehoram fell and ripped the dagger out of him. Krom stood over the enraged orken holding both the dagger and the staff.

“Enough!” Krom yelled. He struck Tehoram with his staff again and then rolled him onto his back. He

stepped closer to him and stomped his foot on Tehoram's chest. "I demand your loyalty!"

As Krom continued to press his foot down on Tehoram's chest, a word escaped the young orken's mouth. "Yes," he whispered.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes... master."

Krom stepped off his chest and looked down at the submitted orken. "Good," he said. "Now I can make a king of you."

THE
END

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed this and feel free to share this with friends or link them to my sign-up page.

Writing is my hobby, but I also want to share these stories with anyone who cares for clean fantasy. I only write in my spare time (which is not very often) so book releases don't happen very often.

The paperback version of this book has loads of bonus content that adds to the richness of this fantastical world. My desire was for you to sample this book series without paying any money. If you've enjoyed this first book, check out my amazon page to see what else I've written.

Blessings,

Elijah M. Buchan

[Click here to shop](#)