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WARCRAFT
WARLORDS of DRAENOR

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BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Code of Rule

by Ryan Quinn

The orc messenger with the scarred face hiked toward Highmaul's gates, struggling her way up stone steps half her height.

Highmaul's ogres stopped to watch her. Rank brutes leered at her from the darkness looming over the path to the summit. Wealthier Gorians looked out from mound-homes ornamented with trophies from their dead enemies.

Another observer watched the messenger's approach from a tower, disgust filling both of his minds. This *orc* trod atop the mountain the ogres' blood families had shaped over lifetimes, pressing and tearing the very rock until it became city and palace and fortress and home.

Still, she had been permitted on the lift to Highmaul's second rise with a wordless lowering of spears. It was custom to treat lone visitors with curiosity. They could always be killed later.

When the lift shivered to a stop, the messenger saw a dozen haggard orc slaves manning the pulleys. They slunk off one by one, casting glances at her over their shoulders.

The messenger peered farther up the mountain. Just visible, jutting forth from Highmaul's peak, was the outline of a vast balcony—the Throne of the Imperator, where

dwelled the ogres' sorcerer king—but it was a long climb from where she stood, breathing hard in the dusty open between filthy-smelling slave hovels. Her nose crinkled.

A cadre of enormous, elegantly robed ogres tromped toward her, moving with surprising quickness. The tallest and largest among them (clearly hurrying to be first on the scene) was near in seconds, reeling to a stop like a downhill pushcart regaining control. He reeked of grease and animal fat mixed with perfume, though his straw-colored, sleeveless robes were immaculate. (They had been cleaned more recently than his body.) The ogre's huge belly hung out of his clothing, and he hefted it with one hand to scrub beneath, not breaking eye contact with the messenger.

His voice was silken. "I am High Councilor Vareg. I speak for the king. You may share your message until I am through with my meal, and then you may depart Highmaul with your soft bones intact."

So saying, he produced a pungent-scented hunk of elekk shoulder and took one crunching bite, spraying webs of white fat. It was half-gone, meat and bone alike, and he immediately pursed his lips for another bite, a proven means to elicit haste.

The messenger looked at each of the ogres in turn. "I bring a message from Grommash Hellscream, warchief of the Iron Horde, to *all* ogres of Nagrand." She paused. "If you wish to draw breath upon Draenor one day longer, you will earn your lives."

The ogres—all of the ogres—laughed. By the time they were finished, grit was trickling off of the lift in response.

"Oh?" Vareg demurred, worrying gristle out of his yellow teeth with a fingernail, not looking at her. "Speak further. How?"

The messenger stretched out her words, annoyed. "Crawl before the Iron Horde with your eyes down. Empty your coffers into our hands. Roll on your bellies and beg. I do not care. Prove your worth, or be made *extinct*." The last word came out in a snarl.

Vareg leaned forward, body curling as though he would fall upon her like a cave-in. "Little one, we hold a hundred orc families in chains." He gestured with the chunk of meat at a slave plodding behind a feed cart. "Hellscream may not value your life, but will he behave so flippantly with theirs?"

The messenger looked straight up at the ogre. "They are dead already."

She turned to leave.

Her phrasing was particular. (*Prove your worth, not submit or surrender.*) The orcs of the Iron Horde were confident enough to be impudent, but they made no precise demands for tribute or territory restored. The ultimatum was open ended. Agency was the listener's.

The sorcerer king had phrased similar demands so himself.

Imperator Mar'gok, two-headed sorcerer king of the Highmaul, he whose ancestors had tamed avalanche and wind to build the first keeps and colonnades and reservoirs upon wild Nagrand, did not move from his balcony.

The emperor had been watching the day unfold at a distance, his vision stretched down to Highmaul's streets through a lens of carved quartz. Four natural eyes normally

provided him with plenty to take in, but the hours he'd spent staring had begun to make one of his heads swim. (Was there more to see? Should he stop?) It was strange feeling conflict within his minds, when he had always felt his brains working together as two legs should.

Mar'gok squinted, trying to imagine how one of his subjects—a two-eyed, one-headed, one-brained ogre—would peer down at the splendor of the city. Would he focus his entire gaze, all his thoughts, on a single point at a time? It would be impossible to rule that way. Everything would seem blurry.

Mar'gok saw the baggy blobs of his councilors walk back from their meeting, stopping among the gardens (likely to argue). Then he watched the russet-brown dot of the messenger as she left.

The attack was not long off. (Such a message was always delivered as an afterthought, not a prelude.)

Howls echoed through Mar'gok's streets from every direction, as though Draenor itself had been surrounded by wolves. Beyond the western parapets, spheres of smoke and flame tumbled through the air toward glorious Highmaul. If they impacted the outer walls, drum towers would topple, clogging pathways down the mountain. The forces of Highmaul's upper rises would be cut off from supporting the lower; the lifts were too slow. Relief forces rushing through the breach were likely to lose their footing among the rubble

and get slaughtered in droves, their bodies transforming from instruments of war to hurdles for their fellows.

Or the Iron Horde would bound up the eastern sculpture path on the backs of their deft wolves, whose jaws would drip red as they bit open ogres' stomachs. Highmaul's eastern line of defense was nearly all brutes, and they had a habit of responding to charges by tossing their spears aside in the hope of cracking puny jawbones in their hands before dying. (Had they been lashed recently?)

What if the orcs sped past their lines and gained access to the slave pens? Could they arm the slaves, raise a revolt?

The risks were many. Emperor Mar'gok contemplated them as the patter of arrows grew audible on his balcony. He decided—commanded.

He had ordered all slaves to be barricaded in their pens; any who were unruly were to be slaughtered on the spot. The bodies, lent to flies, would be locked inside with the living.

The lowest tier of Highmaul, where dwelled smaller, poorer, unproven Gorians, would receive the immediate assault. Mar'gok ordered a throng of sentinels there, seasoned warriors, to halt their enemies' ascent. The sentinels carried the emperor's standard of purple and gold, and their bellowing shook rocks from the hills.

At the vanguard, red-skinned Gorian magic breakers charged unharmed through their enemies' glowing spells, crumpling orcish bodies beneath the sweeps of mighty clubs and stomping throats flat. Yet more of the Iron Horde came on.

Ragtag Warsong riders fought side by side with other orcs: painted howlers who decorated their faces in whirls of blood, squads of helmeted infantry without a hint of muscle exposed beneath sooty steel plates, maimed fanatics sworn to the gladiator Kargath, with blades in place of their hands. The only characteristic they all seemed to share was an insignia, a spiky red scrawl adorning banners and shields.

And *weapons*. Every drop of ingenuity in the Iron Horde had gone toward its means of killing. (How had they invented so much so quickly? It was as if generations of progress had fallen into their laps.)

Teams of orcs, straining behind their catapult chains, sent wheels of fire screeching through the sky, setting alight ogre flesh and melting walls into mortar.

In the orcs' hands, dual-pointed blades spun like wheels; steel wagons, staggering forward on spiderlike legs, carried soldiers over the moats that had once made Mar'gok's city so impregnable. The Iron Horde was surrounding Highmaul's defenders, even on the narrow pathways that ogres filled shoulder to shoulder.

Five orcs stood inside a metal ram topped with a fire-spewing fist, charging up a livestock path toward the city. Ogres fell before the ram like great burning effigies until it squelched to a stop against one hammer-wielding brute in a gush of sparks. He toppled off the path with half of his chest bored through and the exit hole sputtering ash.

The orcs took no prisoners. Even atop Imperator's Rise, at the pinnacle of Highmaul, the smoke and charnel scent of dying ogres reached both sets of Mar'gok's nostrils. His belly burbled eagerly.

As the Iron Horde ate up his city from its toes, the sorcerer king of the Highmaul stood far above the carnage, surrounded by the wrought shale pillars of his first great project, the halls of the Gorthenon.

Mar'gok's council spanned the wide floor. They were great, ancient ogres, hunched like resting tigers or posing godlike atop huge stones they'd carried up several flights. At a respectful distance from the council, stock-still rows of military advisors and champions waited, bearing bludgeons and worn armor. A few exhibited the strange red, blue, or gray coloration and archaic tattoos that marked them as magic breakers, warriors subjected to rituals and training that rendered them immune to spell schools, a decree the sorcerer king had levied on one in twenty Gorians during his reign. The breakers' faint success in holding back the Iron Horde was evident in their posture; they looked fully prepared to spring from the discussion and maim Highmaul's enemies at a moment's notice.

There were no places to sit. Several councilors paced the Gorthenon's floor, orbiting the imperator, the largest ogre among them, a gargantuan creature whose muscle and fat took turns dominating his image. A long horn punched up from his right head; a purple sash puddled around his feet. Beneath his hoods, Mar'gok's jaws were clenched in study. He held callused palms open toward the assembly.

Of all in the room, only High Councilor Vareg looked more eager.

"Our primalists will shatter the north slope," he spat. "The north peak will fall, and it will slide down upon them and squish their small heads all at once." The grease on his face twinkled.

As they listened to Vareg, a few of the council members looked ready to swallow his blood, but most, particularly the magic breakers, stamped in agreement. This was a hall of both governance and violence; those who disagreed too long would bash in one another's skulls to support their points. Finding common ground was crucial.

Mar'gok growled, his voices echoing in the chamber. "No."

Impatient, hungry (low-born) Vareg, his thoughts ever on rising, rising, rising, looked as though he had been sent to die in the coliseum.

Staring at Vareg with one head while the other scanned the council crowd, Mar'gok let their mumbles dwindle. "The orcs and their weapons are too great in number. They will not be destroyed in one strike, and you risk the foundation of the city. No. Our legions at the front will retreat to the Path of Victors and force them to ascend. If they need ropes to climb our steps, they can be slowed."

Highmaul had squashed every attempt to settle within leagues of her majesty. The enemy would be tired from marching, riding. A true siege of the city could take days. (The Iron Horde's supply trains would need to be substantial.)

Vareg was powerful, a mage-lord with many victories and an unusual knack for both disobedience and survival. "By letting them enter the city, you give them the initiative. Even

if we cripple their supplies or cut their ropes, they will leave our warriors with little hope of escape."

"Escape?" mused Mar'gok. "You think, then, that Highmaul will fall?"

Silence.

Mar'gok rolled a stone in his palm. It had been worn smooth by his calluses. "You think"—he clicked one tongue—"preventing deaths among our army is more valuable than preventing the death of Highmaul?" No one had said so, but no one spoke up to deny it.

The pitch of Vareg's voice rose. "Imperator, you are far from the battlefield. You cannot see our soldiers or our enemies. If you will not let us bring down the mountain, then let us meet them with our full force. If we retreat, our losses will be great. You will regret each after we have won."

Vareg's words echoed, and most of the councilors moved away from him to stand beside their imperator, their support no quieter for being wordless. Noticing them, Vareg looked even more irate. "The orcs are so small that they will not even be able to remove our dead!" he snarled.

Mar'gok's faces remained outwardly stolid. "Perhaps it is simpler than I thought. Join me, and use your vast knowledge of the Iron Horde to bring us victory."

"Join... you, Imperator? You will fight?"

"No. While our forces pull back and stymie the orcs, we travel to the Iron Horde warchief and make him show us peace. By sending his messenger, Grommash Hellscream has all but promised us safe passage."

A few centurions and one additional magic breaker would serve as the emperor's personal guard; he did not dare borrow more from the front lines. Swiveling his heads toward the magic breakers, Mar'gok boomed, "The strongest among you will accompany me."

Mar'gok was dismayed to see a blue-marked breaker, covered in messy runes that looked as though they had been scraped onto his body with a rock, promptly shoved forward by his fellows. Apparently, the breaker shared his emperor's dismay.

"Emperor," he intoned gravely, "I have crushed four shaman skulls tonight. I am not fit to trade sweet words. Let me stay and fight for the glory of Highmaul!"

"What is your name, breaker?" Mar'gok asked, slowly, softly, as though speaking to a meal.

"Ko'ragh, Emperor."

"Ko'ragh," Mar'gok continued. "You may not stay. Your death will buy Highmaul less than your life. Further"—Mar'gok cut off the possibility of objection, and the breaker's maw slapped shut—"the time and manner of your death are your emperor's to choose. Do you understand?" At that, Ko'ragh saluted, one meaty fist thumping his chest.

Vareg—never one to let others be the focus of attention for more than a moment—was quick to raise his voice. "And how will I serve, Emperor?"

Mar'gok allowed himself to show smiles. "You will drag my cart."

The high councilor gaped openmouthed. A few in the assembly chuckled nervously, the sound like two rocks dragging against each other.

The emperor had long encouraged his council to show non-violent dissent at any time: they merely had to spit at his feet. None of his living councilors ever expressed disagreement in the discourteous fashion he suggested, but the offer had been made nonetheless. He was magnanimous.

Mar'gok looked pointedly at his bare toes, then back at the assemblage. Roiling fire passed by a window, spraying hot melted pebbles onto the rise. He furrowed the brows of his left face, then his right.

The emperor looked down at his feet again. No spit.

Mar'gok scanned his retinue with both heads going back and forth expressionlessly, as though he were appraising a series of banquet selections or a palmful of betting rocks.

High Councilor Vareg, pulling an eight-wheeled, cloth-covered cart twice his size, had already benefited immensely from his pain-learning. Though his face was downcast, he voiced no further gripes, even as his yellow robes were spattered with tiny flecks of mud. He was, for the moment, assisted in his labors by Ko'ragh.

Unlike Vareg in his robes, the breaker was dressed for war, bearing piecemeal metal armor and a wicked, skull-topped war club. His bare head and heavily muscled, tattooed

arms remained exposed, as it was with all in Mar'gok's band; a fashionable display among the Highmaul would not be neglected for the threat of extinction.

Unable to reconcile himself to a diplomatic mission while Highmaul lay besieged, Ko'ragh had frowned until Vareg, unprompted, ordered him to make a better face. Vareg's pain-learning benefited others, too.

Vareg might be ambitious, and Ko'ragh willful and dull, but both were mighty, highly placed ogres who performed exceptionally in battle drills, rose early, and had survived grievous wounds (Ko'ragh: disembowelment; Vareg: a cut to the thigh that he allowed to putrefy to prove his strength), with dozens of kills behind them.

The emperor had selected the rest of his traveling retinue from centurions outside the council, listening attentively to their accomplishments (if not their names). One slumbered inside a lava dome for years until its magma was at his beck and call; one was a coliseum favorite who tore the claws from ten great predators and sewed them into his fighting gloves; one had a connection with the mountain so strong that no arrow could pierce his skin. All could carry a two-ton stone to the rise without rest.

The centurions had never seen the emperor in the flesh before; to be traveling with their king set their tongues abuzz. Mar'gok led them lumbering from the front, trying to ignore the distraction of their chatter, his heads occasionally turning inward to peer, annoyed, at each other until he grew dizzy. (Silence them? Let them gawk.)

The ground melted into soft mud where he trod, permitting his entourage to trudge off the rise and down the hillside without falling, their makeshift ramp returning to stony

impassability behind them every few steps. Then they walked faster, the cart tearing muddy furrows in the ground. Vareg remarked that now the orcs would have their first road, and even the imperator permitted himself one head's small smirk.

With mountainous strides, the ogres reached their destination after a sunrise. Though the imperator remained quiet, his retinue's banter was proud throughout the journey. His people were born at the beginning: when the great Forgers squeezed the light from the enormous ball of fire that would become Draenor, they made ogres from the same smoking clay and gave them dominion over stone and earth. The very world was theirs; their capital was tall atop the scaffolding of the past.

None among them doubted that Highmaul's defenders had fought through the night, that the empire yet stood, until they laid eyes on Grommashar.

When last Mar'gok had seen the Warsong camp, it had been flimsy. Movable. Wood and leather, huts and shanties, placed gingerly atop the earth. He had pictured the orcs' downcast faces when wind and rain knocked down their homes and they reacted with dumb dismay, wondering why it had happened.

Now it aspired to be a citadel. Razor-sharp palisades encircled it; ferociously armed orcs of many clans patrolled walls with murder holes carved into their capstones; and everywhere were the terrible clanking machines, belching more smoke and fire than they had flung over Highmaul's ramparts.

The ogres lumbered openly through Grommashar under an ersatz flag of parley. Mar'gok ripped one of his own purple-and-gold standards down the middle, but the orcs had raised no alarm at their entry, as though the ogres were expected. Only the immense, cloth-covered cart drew stares.

"What is that?" asked a burly armored orc standing at the head of twenty, all with handheld cannons pointed, burnished metal glinting in the sunlight.

Vareg worked crusty snot free from his nostril and rose to his full height, his palms black and ragged pink from a day burdened by the cart. Ko'ragh excitedly shifted his grip on the skull-headed club he carried. They were far outnumbered. The terrain was unfamiliar; the enemy, eager.

(Wit? Openness? Misdirection?) "It is but tribute," Vareg muttered before Mar'gok could say anything.

It sufficed. A few of the Iron Horde stood sniffing guard over the cart, lifting the cloth, inspecting what lay beneath. (What could they possibly see?) The ogres' enormous weapons were heaved into the Zangar Sea, though several spearpoints still poked out of the water despite the Grommashar soldiers' best attempts to bury them. The orcs were infuriatingly small, with minuscule veins visible in their arms, tiny droplets of sweat beading on their faces, everything about them taut, compressed, close to the surface, as though they had no room in their bodies.

The emperor demanded inaction from his retinue as they suffered the indignities of diplomacy; only his gazes maintained obeisance while they were led before Grommash Hellscream.

For all that his home had changed, Grommash had not. The scourge of Nagrand looked no different from when Mar'gok had last seen him at the head of a war party, mane of thick hair flowing, muscled like an animal, lips peeled back and teeth flashing in a snarl.

What did surprise Mar'gok was the throne that Grommash now leaned against, a gnarled tree whose thick wood seemed uncomfortable and unlikely to persist for even the next generation of Warsong chieftains. He recognized this particular tree and the pains the orc must have gone through to retrieve it.

Grommash had spent quite some time tied to the tree during the reign of the last sorcerer king. After a failed raid against Highmaul, Grommash had been captured, beaten, and starved within an inch of his life. (And then...)

A brown, rot-necked ogre head stared down from the boughs of the tree with empty eye sockets. Even with only faint bits of identifying flesh still clinging to the skull, Mar'gok was fairly certain he recognized it. It would have been impossible to anticipate his predecessor's death for so long without imagining, with reasonable accuracy, how his head would appear if removed.

"Imperator," Grommash intoned in his liquid bass. "What do you think of the last ogre lord who opposed me?" He did not give way to theatricality, did not even move from his spot (though the gesture of dominance was clear). His eyes were intent, focused.

Feeling the needles of a few moments' silence, the ogres looked to their king.

"I think he was a fool," boomed Mar'gok.

Vareg relaxed his hands. They unclasped, went to his sides.

"He was a fool for not killing you."

A low hiss came from an orc near the throne, and Vareg and Ko'ragh both tensed, hands reaching instinctively for absent weapons.

"If I had held your life," Mar'gok continued, "I would have slit your throat in front of my prisoners and dumped your rotting body in the ocean. Then I would have dumped them beside you." He pointed at the orcs behind himself. "Your people were broken. The Highmaul would rule all Nagrand by now." (Rule all Nagrand *again*.) Mar'gok always gave way to theatricality when it was warranted.

Grommash did not flinch, unfazed by the casual discussion of his murder. His was the luxury.

From behind the throne stepped several more orcs (now numbering two dozen within eyesight alone). One, broad-shouldered, with a face full of tattoos barely distinguishable beneath his brown hood, leaned to whisper something in Hellscream's ear. (When had he ever taken advice?)

"I see," Grommash returned, empty. "Then, tell me of the worth of the Highmaul. Tell me of this *tribute* you have brought me, and the value of your lives."

It was not lost on the emperor that the position of the sun was forcing him to squint and slightly incline his heads. He resisted the urge to tear out a tree and shade his eyes with it. (Grommash rests every day on a relic of his grudges. Any bargain must be simple and to his obvious advantage.)

Mar'gok snorted. "Very well. The gift I bring you is knowledge. The Iron Horde is *weak*."

Now Grommash smiled. "You say this as we shatter the walls of your home." He motioned at a spot behind the ogres as best as their size permitted. "Tell them what you have seen."

Another orc darted to Hellscream's side, and Mar'gok recognized the scar-faced messenger who had first pronounced war upon his people. A pity; he had hoped she had been killed in the siege.

Her face was fiercely proud. "We've broken the Highmaul line at the entrance of their city. The mountain is surrounded. They fall back to their homes."

Mar'gok had suspected that might happen, but not nearly so fast.

It was a ruse. It had to be. For just a moment, while his people argued among themselves and the orcs relished the chaos, Mar'gok closed his eyes, trying to imagine the scene: the ogres losing ground, fighting in the streets, melted rock from ruined mound-homes pooling around the legs of Gorians in formation.

He did not have to tax himself to picture the orcs surrounding his legions, the teeth of their weapons buzzing as they sheared off ogres' legs, sent them toppling onto the stumps. He had seen it too many times already.

Next, the orcs would pull his statues down. His men, women, and children would roar and rally, fight back, chanting for him ceaselessly, *Da king. Da king.* The more they said it, the less it sounded like a fitting death cry.

Surely they had clung to those syllables for so long because they were easier to holler than *imperator*, not because they couldn't pronounce his title, his name.

Surely they would hold.

Mar'gok grew tired of imagining and opened his eyes. Exhaling, he turned to Ko'ragh and Varg, who were murmuring audibly. Their posture was defensive. Judging by their faces, they, too, believed the messenger; they became quiet when Grommash spoke up.

"Now, explain to me, Imperator," he said, as confident as though he had seen through Mar'gok's minds, "how the Iron Horde is weak." (Finally.)

"Do not misunderstand me, Warchief. You are great in number. Perhaps your orcs will eventually fight their way to the very top of Highmaul." The imperator began to pace, gesturing animatedly. "But you will not do it without cost, for you lack our greatest strength. You face the army of a sorcerer king. Our traditions are as old as Draenor."

He raised both arms to the crowd, squeezed behemoth fists. "We will call down rockslides from inside our homes, terrify your wolves with fire, rust your metal with mud. The magics of your shaman cannot touch us. We will laugh at their false thunder and

squash their skulls into dust." At this, Grommash looked almost... intrigued. (The orcs worshipped elements. How typical of little beings to look for something outside themselves to praise.)

"And," Mar'gok could not resist adding, "you are small. Even if you claim Highmaul, you would lose a year simply removing our dead."

Mar'gok put down the chisel of his words and shut his mouths decisively. The mighty praised their physical prowess and stature above all others; the quick-witted, their limitless and enduring minds; the charismatic, their leadership and persuasiveness. But true strength had always been *all* strengths (this was why he was king), and Grommash would be haunted by the thought of any strength he did not possess. Mar'gok knew nothing else intimately enough to chance that it would spare his empire, his life.

Hellscream's retort was swift. "We do not want your city. We want your corpses." As he stood, his left hand tightened around the handle of a jagged axe nearly as tall as he was, with same-day blood darkening to umber on the edge. "All in the Iron Horde are willing to die in battle. We are winning. Your threat is empty."

Ko'ragh became riled at that, but Mar'gok held a hand in front of him as Grommash's snarl curled into contemplation.

"You speak but one truth. Your magic *is* powerful. Teach it to us, and some of you will live."

There was more fluid in a glob of Varg's spit than in an orc's spilled belly.

The emperor had requested a few minutes to take counsel and had adjourned away from Grommash's throne. Now he stared with all of his eyes. The spit sizzled in the dust, inches from his toes. Bubbles struggled to the top and burst; it looked as if it could move on its own.

Such blatant disrespect had erupted only recently, after Mar'gok had casually mentioned that refusing Hellscream's "offer" was the reasonable course of action. None of the centurions had seen the spit yet. He nudged rocks over it to no avail.

Vareg was near howling as he barreled back and forth. His animal pacing seemed increasingly likely to agitate the orcs into using their weapons.

Ko'ragh dumbly fought to understand. "Emperor, you cannot mean it. You... will stall for time, to trick Grommash into..."

"No!" Vareg shouted, his normally sleek voice peaking. "You vowed before the council with both voices. You said you would make peace. Now you cringe at the cost."

Mar'gok raised his eyes from the spit, indignation and amusement mixing in the palettes of his faces.

Vareg had not stopped ranting. "What value are our traditions if none of the Highmaul exists to continue them? Is your sorcery more precious to you than our lives?" (Lazy. More an invitation than a question.)

Mar'gok took a single step toward Vareg, putting his leg down hard enough to raise dust. "You talk of survival like a slave who cannot see beyond his chains. You have the heart of an orc, happy just to have the bad moments end."

Vareg's face was nearly purple. He growled, loudly enough for the whole camp to be in earshot. The other ogres tromped closer to their leaders.

Mar'gok continued. "Gog Gronnslayer knew that to be free, to live, was a mere beginning. When he broke the bodies of the gronn, opened their bones and ate their marrow to prove that they were not gods, he raised their skeletons up so others could see his victory. He desired more than simple survival, so he built his hall to be too large for any one blood family to fill. Others gathered, and soon his home was an empire. He did not simply flee into the mountains to wallow in existing."

Some sense seemed to have stayed with Vareg, for he kept quiet while the emperor spoke. (To Vareg? To the others? Where there were two minds, it was always necessary to have three speeches.) "The world belongs to us. Its vastness is tamed, its greatness revealed, only because *we* master it as the Forgers did. If you would share our power with slaves, would let them mold the earth, you are no ogre."

In response, the high councilor landed another hunk of spit atop the first. What talent he had where it mattered most.

Vareg had ceased his stalking. He snorted. "Highmaul is an empire *no longer*. It is but one great city. I wonder if all in our clan agree that it is worth dying over." (Vareg's voice was heavy with mucus, but it barely concealed his eagerness.) His eyes darted back and forth among the other ogres, never meeting Mar'gok's, as though he was on the brink of denouncing the emperor, of roaring the challenge he had likely rehearsed several times before his turn as a cart pusher.

Ko'ragh spoke up, drawing attention away from Mar'gok and Vareg glaring at each other. "Imperator, the orcs say they are winning. If you will not strike at Grommash now, then we must submit to him." His eyes blazed.

Mar'gok crossed his arms in unconscious imitation of one of his favorite statues. "Then the legacy of ogre rule, of *my* blood family, becomes cheap barter. What will *you* sacrifice? Your fortunes? Your honors from the coliseum? Your lives?"

Vareg did not hesitate, though he looked at the centurions, not at the imperator, while he answered. "*I* will give anything to save our people. While we dither, the clan dies."

Of course. Vareg hurried to voice his solidarity, aligning himself with *our people* before Mar'gok could, reaching for the rest of the retinue's support. Could he sway them to murder? In Highmaul's history, more debates had become spontaneous revolts than the imperator cared to count.

Mar'gok looked around quickly, careful not to let any emotion show. Vareg's eyes were wolfish, erratic; at any second, he could erupt in a smile or a howl. The others had their naked fists pressed against their chests in salute—but to whom? They were five, and he was one.

He gifted them all with twin nods of assent. "Very well. I will sell our magics. Slaves cannot take slaves. What can orcs do with the power of the Forgers that we have not already accomplished?"

Grim-faced but assured, the ogres marched back toward Grommash.

Mar'gok lingered behind, fighting with his smiles. Vareg had revealed himself. Mar'gok had been "convinced." It was as close to a humble relent as he had ever offered to one of his advisors. Champion a fool's position and the masses could not help standing together to fight it.

It suited them—just as it suited all graspers, all peasants—to believe that the one who loomed above their lives was vain and self-important, would choose death before sacrifice, would sooner lead his people into the whispers of history than down a low path loudly.

This, too, was why Mar'gok was king.

The sun had long gone out, and the thick fumes from yellow torches illuminating Grommashar commingled with the smog that hung above its walls. Mar'gok breathed deep. The stench relaxed him.

He kept his voice soft, one of his heads inclined farther than the other. "We will teach you the ways of magic breaking, Grommash Hellscream."

A smile, enthusiastic and genuine, crept over Grommash's face. There was a unique sweetness to an enemy beaten and acquiescing a few feet in front of you, his eyes open and knowing.

"Call off your army and send ten of your keenest minds back with us to Highmaul. I will instruct them personally. They will be capable within a year, perhaps sooner."

One of Grommash's eyebrows rose at that. He scowled, four meaty fingers drumming on the axe haft, but his voice was measured. "Do not taunt me, Imperator. You will teach *all* orcs who have the capacity to learn, and you will do so here."

Mar'gok threw his arms wide and grinned, both mouths open. They were smiles of abundant promise, usually reserved for kin he planned to slaughter. "Once I share our magic with your entire army, you will have no need for my people. What will you do with ogres who are useless to you?"

If the ogre skull sagging from Grommash's throne had kept its eyelids, it would have winked.

Grommash sneered back at him. "Your worthy will live. Trust the value of your magics, ogre. You have no other option."

From behind came the sound of a foot march; seconds later, a few more orcs approached unheralded, sheathed weapons slapping their legs. The messenger was first among them, and all eyes—ogre and orc alike—turned to her. Grommash held up a hand for silence.

"Yes?"

"They attempted to bring reinforcements by sea, Warchief Hellscream. Four ships sailed toward Highmaul, but we turned our cannons on them. None reached the shore." Her movements were ebullient. "The remains of their armies are holing up in their towers. We will overrun their stronghold shortly." She looked as though she might sing.

Mar'gok glanced down at his right hand. It was knob-knuckled, big enough to take down an elekk, to squeeze an orc's ribs through his chest. It was also trembling.

He willed it to stop, first lazily and then wholeheartedly, but it did not.

The ground pitched. Shouts of fear met the scrape of blades. From the corners of his eyes, Mar'gok saw Ko'ragh charge toward Grommash's throne, knocking two orcs bodily on their backs and trampling over them, his pillar arms stretched wrathfully. A thin spear whistled through the air, lodged wobbling in his shoulder. The breaker's blood pumped out and over the wood, but like a boulder rolling through mud, he kept crashing forth.

And Mar'gok wrapped one arm around him, palming Ko'ragh's throat and slamming him backward onto the ground with such force that nearby trees lost their leaves in puffs and orcs fell onto their backs.

As the wind whistled out of the breaker's lungs, Mar'gok planted a foot on his gut, watched his face contort in pain. "Idiot!" he yelled down.

Grommash shot to his feet. Dozens of orcs aimed blades and spears at Mar'gok. Easing his foot off of the breaker's abdomen, Mar'gok rose to his full height and met the warchief's eyes, wary, his breath sucked in and body knotted in anticipation. He was bigger. Hellscream was faster. (If Mar'gok could awaken the slumbering stone before the orc got within an axe length, then lean into the swing with his shoulder—)

"You would *dare* try to kill me in my home?" Hellscream roared, and it truly was a roar; no nearby sound presumed to be louder. His fingers flexed: tense, release. Both hands

gripped the axe. He looked at the other orcs, breath heavy with rage, and they seemed to seethe in response as one body.

The premise of diplomacy wilted. He would need to sprint for the cart. (Had they moved it?)

Four orcs advanced on Mar'gok with ferine, padding steps, spreading into two groups, raising their weapons, flanking him. He clutched the smooth stone that had found its way into his palm. Both sets of teeth champed at his tongues so hard he tasted blood.

"Wait." Grommash's voice was lower, more consistent.

Mar'gok watched a bit of that twisting fury, the curled lips and stretched knuckles, ebb from the other orcs when Hellscream spoke. "This was not the imperator's doing." The warchief looked at where Ko'ragh lay. A few weapons lowered, but only a few.

Yet Grommash's cold eyes remained slits. He panted, not out of weariness but wrath, at the simple promise of violence. "It does not change my demand. You will agree to teach us now, or you will all die."

Four bull-shouldered orcs kept Vareg pinned, their spears inches from his chest. On the ground, the breaker groaned, moved his head back and forth with orc boots on his arms.

"Then let us speak of the terms." Mar'gok replaced the stone in his robes, held his palms up. Those who relied on weapons to kill were often reassured by the sight of empty hands.

Grommash Hellscream said nothing.

"Pick him up." Mar'gok gestured carefully, and the centurions dragged Ko'ragh into a squat, yanking the spear from his shoulder with a shiver and a spurt of red.

The orcs exchanged curt nods with their leader. The distractions of quivering blades and spears aimed at eye level grudgingly receded, but the sheer number of armed orcs staring at Mar'gok was oppressive. Sweat began to speck his horn, and the imperator rubbed it away, sneaking a moment to gather his thoughts.

Grommash had calmed quickly, much faster than his legendary anger would suggest, and without slaking his bloodthirst. Did he mean to leverage the attack in their negotiation? Or was it... These new killing machines, appearing as if from nowhere; the glint in Grommash's eye when magic was mentioned; the breaker left alive despite attacking a warchief? (*Prove your worth*, the messenger had said.)

"Our magics are not merely part of the bargain." Mar'gok's lips pursed conspiratorially. "You *need* them. Why?"

Grommash remained quiet.

"What power do you fear?"

The warchief did not react with the canine spittle that Mar'gok anticipated. Instead, he settled back down on his throne.

"It is true," Grommash spoke slowly. "We cannot know all who will ever stand in our way."

He continued, looking at a few orcs who were watching intently from near his throne. "But I have seen much, and it is... wise to prepare. I believe that we may soon face magics unseen on Draenor. We will not fall before them. If your clan aids us with your magics, if you pledge yourselves to the Iron Horde, then you will earn your lives."

Mar'gok nodded with both heads. "Done."

"But"—and here the animal aspect flashed in Grommash's eyes—"if you falter, if you do not dedicate yourselves entirely, I will give you to Kargath Bladefist."

Bladefist. The chieftain of the Shattered Hand clan had strutted around the coliseum as though he owned it. Then the Highmaul had chained Kargath beneath its walls. Famous slaves could be dangerous.

Kargath had removed one of his hands (left? right?) to escape, but he still cut crooked wounds into his captors on the way out. One-handed, he had even freed other gladiators and coerced them into joining in his mad reprisals. Apparently, the orcs of the Shattered Hand now mutilated their own flesh in remembrance of their founder's crowning achievement.

Mar'gok pondered how long they would try to keep him alive with one head.

Grommash was finishing up. "*You serve us.*"

Bile began climbing up the insides of Mar'gok's throats. He did not look at his retinue. "I understand," he said flatly. "But you must know from the beginning of this... partnership... that some forms of magic simply cannot be taught, and not for a lack of will." The messenger rolled her eyes. (Perhaps she would slip from a cliff on the march back to Highmaul.)

"The magics I speak of shape bodies and minds as a chisel shapes stone. As they empower us, they remove slivers of our being. This can kill even those who have spent their entire lives training for it." He pointedly shot a glance at Ko'ragh (alive, still).

Grommash rested his chin on one hand; he did not seem moved. The imperator rushed to fill the silence. "You doubt my sincerity, but I have brought you proof. Vareg, the cart."

Vareg glowered openly, but he dragged the cart over. No doubt he had assumed it was to be used during a surprise attack on the Warsong camp, not offered in trade. If there had been a hope of catching Grommash unawares before, no such chance remained.

Mar'gok whisked the cloth off, and the faint whiff of upturned soil caught his noses.

A dull chunk of stone stood monolithic in the cart. It did not wobble an inch as it was rolled before Mar'gok's audience. Most of the orcs seemed unimpressed: it was a big rock, ragged and unshaped. Several of the intricate spirals and whorls decorating its face were duplicated, in rough outlines, on Ko'ragh's skin, but otherwise (for an artifact riven from the belly of the world by the noblest blood families in Highmaul after a decade-long feud) it appeared unremarkable.

The smooth stones secreted in Mar'gok's pockets grew slightly warmer; he felt their heat radiating out in pinpricks. They squirmed, almost as if trying to get free. Surely any shaman among the orcs would notice.

"When awakened," the emperor said with a flourish, "this great slumbering stone can dampen any magics it has felt, even those of your shaman. But it has more significance: it is the means by which we mold our most accomplished breakers."

Pride danced on Ko'ragh's face. Mar'gok continued. "They are chosen for resilience. They are scalded by heat, crushed by rocks, denied water, food, and air. Even the hardest can die in the process."

Grommash nodded.

"First, they learn the signs and patterns of a school of magic. Then, they must be struck by controlled infusions of that magic, like stitches or carvings, in the presence of this stone. Eventually, some of their life essence is peeled away, and a small part of it is replaced by the magic branded into their very being. They become immune."

"To only one type of magic?" Grommash growled. Mar'gok had experienced the same disappointment long ago.

"Only one school," the emperor replied. "We have tried to empower our most gifted breakers with immunity to more schools. All die in the process." Terribly. One had caught fire from the inside out.

Mar'gok continued. "The sorcerer kings have gathered artifacts like this one for hundreds of years. Many affect the workings of magic on living beings, but others defy

description. There are more here in Nagrand, buried deep. I would share their power with you."

The warchief was walking around the artifact, squinting at it with renewed interest. "And this will make *orcs* immune to any magic? Not just ogres?"

Mar'gok held back a small smugness that demanded to show on both of his faces. "Eventually, yes. Your warriors are not as hardy as the greatest of the Highmaul. It will take time—generations—for you to learn to adapt, even *with* our tutelage. But it can be done."

A weighty grunt was Grommash's only response. Any reply without snarling or yelling was to be interpreted as acceptance.

Satisfied, Mar'gok steepled granitic fingers. "Then we are agreed. The Highmaul clan will"—there was spit in his throats—"serve the Iron Horde." He said nothing about their armies, territories, mutual defense. *Let Grommash ask for each favor on its own.*

The imperator looked down at the scar-faced messenger. His now. "Send word for your legion to leave Highmaul and return here." He did not even notice that he was breathing more easily. It was done. Sour, but done. Clan and city both remained, and in time—

"No," Grommash interrupted. "The siege ends once you demonstrate the workings of this artifact. Not before."

Mar'gok's heads snapped around.

"If I am to rely on your power in battle, I will witness it in battle," Grommash continued. "Are you not veterans of the arena? It is a simple fight against a few of my champions. If your claim is true, it should be quick."

(Bladefist. There could be no doubt.)

"Warchief Hellscream, every ogre slain in Highmaul is one fewer who can instruct your warriors—"

The look Grommash returned made Mar'gok's blood race hot through his ears. Both of the warchief's hands wrapped around his axe like a neck, and instantly, Mar'gok understood how deep the orc's hatred ran. "Do you refuse, Imperator?"

Mar'gok's minds went black. Inside them, he stalked, swore. His palms pooled sweat. This was peace with the Iron Horde—not an accord but a cage. (Or had Grommash simply entertained the negotiation for a chance to humiliate him?) He looked around for his retinue, trying to keep his movements slow and measured. (But would they be?) Orcs were everywhere, seeming to occupy the whole of his vision.

"No. I accept."

Grommash Hellscream led them to the fighting pit.

At no time were ogres more at peace with one another than when they conspired to murder. As they rooted through the piles of off-size weapons the orcs had provided, carefully selecting hauberks and spears, the company's enthusiasm was as palpable as that

at a grand show in the coliseum. At last, there would be no further discussion, only the unreflective simplicity of bloodletting. Kill. Win.

Using Mar'gok's ragged banner, the centurions had constructed a makeshift flag atop a halberd, and they now bunched their hands around orcish swords like fistfuls of knives. Even Ko'ragh, the wound on his shoulder feculent under mossy bandages, was on his feet and hefting a pair of too-small clubs.

They did not even know what they faced. (Idiots.)

Only Vareg seemed tenuous. (More comfortable with arcane than metal weapons? Certainly.) He played with a shield, picking it up and putting it back down again as though waiting for an omen. Mar'gok beckoned to them, his words lifetimes old.

"You are prepared to lay down your lives for the glory of Highmaul, your council, and your imperator?"

All feet stamped; fists were raised.

"Succeed today, and you earn us a thousand years more on the mountain." He looked at Ko'ragh. The breaker beamed back.

Again, Vareg tilted, ever so slightly, against his fate. "Will you not fight alongside us, Imperator?" It would have seemed an honest question were he not attempting to catch the eye of every centurion at once.

"I will fight *with* you, but my weapon will be the slumbering stone. Hellscream must have his demonstration." (*I will give anything, Vareg.*)

Mar'gok drew himself up. "We do not know the nature of our opponents. You two," he said, pointing at Vareg and Ko'ragh, "are our defense against any magics, while the others seek the kill. Do not prolong the fight. Hellscream is interested in the stone, not in your deaths."

The ogres hung the standard of Highmaul at the edge of the fighting pit, a shallow, rock-rimmed divide filled with sand and splotches of purplish-black blood. It was plain that the Iron Horde did not have anyone to clean it (or did not think this fight was worth the ceremony), despite the presence of dozens of orcs hunched or standing around, barking at each other. There were no seats for the audience.

As the orcs watched him, Mar'gok slowly wheeled the artifact to the farthest edge of the pit, opposite where Grommash stood. Vareg followed, grabbing on to the back of the cart to help push it.

"Imperator," Vareg whispered, "you must have support with the artifact. Let me assist you."

"No," Mar'gok said, waving him off.

"What if you are injured in the fight? Or killed? No one else has invoked the slumbering stone." His eyes were big and manic. He reached toward his king; he could be pleading or preparing to choke—

Mar'gok slapped the hands away. "No. Your place is in the pit. Go down."

Miraculously, he did. If they were both going to die, at least Vareg would die first.

There were no entry gates on either side of the fighting pit. One at a time the other ogres hopped down, kicking up gusts of sand, and they began checking the walls, taking positions, tapping their weapons on the ground, using the floor as their shared drum, bashed at speed without any change in rhythm. More sand billowed up. Guttural battle hums echoed from their throats, only occasionally harmonizing.

"You are ready," Grommash said, and the talk suddenly shut off like rain sealed in a cloud. It was not a question.

Mar'gok crouched in front of the artifact. Its warmth was comforting, though he had already begun to feel enervated in its presence.

"Bring out the prisoners!" Hellscream bellowed.

A dozen bedraggled figures were led in chains to the southern edge of the pit. They were orcs, none bigger than the warriors by Grommash's side, but their moth-bitten violet robes and unkempt hair and beards made them seem far smaller. To a one, they were unarmored and unarmed.

Their only unusual characteristic was their green skin.

Grommash spoke softly to one prisoner, whose responses were inaudible. "I will not give you freedom, warlock." The warchief raised his voice, meant for Mar'gok's troops to hear. "But any among you who kills an ogre may choose a reward: a clean pallet or a quick death."

What was a warlock? Mar'gok had never heard the word before. What was their crime? The emperor felt a twinge of suspense stabbing at his spine. From their pitiful

look, the orcs were likely thieves, but would Grommash let thieves keep their hands? The ogres in the pit puzzled at the sight of their tiny foes, and Ko'ragh scratched his head and snickered while the orcish prisoners had the chains around their wrists and ankles removed.

As they got closer, Mar'gok noticed lumpy whip marks on the prisoners' arms and shoulders. (Some of their cuts were still fresh.)

They weakly clambered down into the pit. When their feet hit the sand, a dozen against five, the spectators began craning their necks to watch. Mar'gok sucked a breath down each throat. Certainly they would use magic, but what kind? They held no trappings, showed no signs.

"Begin!" Hellscream shouted.

Before the warchief opened his mouth, Vareg had already planted both of his feet and swept back one massive leg, drawing a half-circle in the sand, palms out. The prisoners were caught unawares as ice surged up from the sand like a wave, engulfing two of them entirely, crushing them, and dragging down the reddening wrecks of their bodies.

Mar'gok's fingernails scraped against the base of his palm, and then he pressed it on the artifact. The spells he wove around himself each morning retreated: his invisible arcane shield slowly dissipated; his clothing grew lighter and looser as it shed its imperviousness to fire. He was vulnerable, but he could feel the stone's power stirring. He met the orcs' eyes and saw that they were glazed and unfocused. (Their magic was no communion, then.)

The other ogres charged across the pit in a tight herd, gripping multiple smaller weapons in each fist, mammoth feet flinging sand and ice. They swiftly closed the distance as the orcs, moving in unison like marionettes tied to the same string, began to invoke their magics. There were indications of their schools but no sureties. (Not arcane or shamanic traditions. He would have recognized such magic by now.)

Long-dead words slithered from their lips.

"Scatter!" Mar'gok thundered. His retinue obeyed with wordless coordination, fanning out to reduce the chance that more than one would be hit by a single attack.

(If the orcs varied their magic, striking each ogre with multiple spells, a few among Mar'gok's companions would survive, and that would be enough.) He began to brush the whorls on the lower half of the artifact.

The orcs twitched their fingers faster in recondite movements. The imperator squinted, trying to read their magic as they called it down, but it was alien. He grinned as Ko'ragh busily smashed a club through one of the orcs' throats—and stopped when the breaker's skin flaked off of his body like leaves under boiling water.

Ten orcs loosed the same invocation. Mar'gok had never seen its like anywhere. Baleful greenish-yellow flame, burning the very air it hung in, drawing scorched breaths from the lungs of everyone watching, whirled through the fighting pit. (No.)

It struck the ogres with the force of a hurricane, scalding off their skin in an awful instant. The champions of Highmaul were withered lumps, their featureless bodies folded

into the sand, a few strands of hair catching fire as the only evidence that they had ever lived. (No. *No.*)

Mar'gok slammed both of his hands against the artifact. It did not respond.

The sorcerer king had lost. Mar'gok's faces took on the slack look of the grave. He watched Vareg (perhaps) smolder and melt, and even the routine glee at a rival vanquished was beyond him.

Grimy yellow torchlight and phosphorescent green flames sizzling in midair reflected in the orc warlocks' blurred eyes. They turned toward Hellscream and, one by one, made (mocking?) attempts at a salute.

And Mar'gok saw movement behind them. In the thiol-scented muck that the Warsong fighting pit had become, Ko'ragh was slowly, dazedly struggling to his feet, body scorched, skin hanging off in shreds.

For a second, the imperator's foot tapped in anticipation of attempting the impossible. He reached one arm toward the artifact. He had already failed. There was no risk in gambling with Highmaul's corpses.

The gray stone of the artifact burned hot where he touched it. He had only known this magic's like for seconds, but perhaps that would be enough to parrot, to imitate. Clenching his teeth, the sorcerer king drew in air as gingerly as if he were scraping a mural onto splintering wood.

Thin lines of green fire began to etch themselves on Ko'ragh's skin, rasping across his body, threatening to peel away his life. Mar'gok's inscription crossed over a blue, rune-scarred patch of flesh, and the breaker screamed in pain, sinking back down in the sand.

With wolfish swiftness, the orc prisoners turned. One pointed a cruel, long-fingered hand at the breaker. Mar'gok's heart dropped, harder this time for the tiny hope of reprieve, as the frothing bright flames shot out again, wrapping around Ko'ragh like a robe.

Mar'gok pulled the flow of his inscription upward, blindly, toward his starting point. He couldn't see Ko'ragh. His finger hung outstretched.

Then the flames floated off, vanishing into air.

Two schools of magic. The breaker was now immune to both. It was impossible, until it wasn't.

Gradually, as Mar'gok held blistering air in his lungs, Ko'ragh's shadow stretched along the wall of the pit, looming over the orcs. He stood up straight, his markings now blue and green beneath dark burns. The sorcerer king's hasty inscriptions were visible on his body, mingling with runes like writing in ash.

Teeth gritted and eyes frantic, the breaker advanced on the orcs. Burst after burst of blazing green energy evaporated against his skin.

Ko'ragh's weapons had been destroyed, so he fell upon his enemies bare-handed, crushing them beneath his girth, breaking their paper-thin bodies, pounding them to reddish-black pulp with hands and elbows like stalactites.

One of the orc prisoners fell back from the avalanche consuming his fellows. Abandoning his spells, he grabbed a weapon from the ground, swinging it about in an attempt to ward off the gigantic ogre. Stepping away from the gore in his wake, Ko'ragh let the bite of the pitted steel find his shoulder, barely breaking skin.

He gripped the orc's skull in one fist, squeezing and twisting. The prisoner's hands scrabbled and clawed, trying to find purchase anywhere sensitive, anywhere that would loosen the grapple, but he was too small. Slowly, agonizingly, the orc's eyes began to protrude out, distending past his brows. The breaker treated his audience to the sound of cracking wood and then, with a final shake, flicked his burden to the ground.

As the orcs of the Iron Horde roared their approval, the breaker held a single fist, bloody with the excess of victory, toward his imperator. Mar'gok folded his arms against his chest.

Grommash Hellscream looked joyed and alive as he shouted along with the other orcs. Across the pit, he yelled, "Soon, our warriors will ignore warlock magic!" and the cheers grew. "Congratulations, Imperator. We may be able to use your clan after all." He turned to the scar-faced messenger, speaking loud enough for Mar'gok to hear. "Send word to the army. End the slaughter. The Highmaul are servants of the Iron Horde."

The scattered cheers took minutes to fade. The Highmaul, servants. They would change, on pain of death. But Grommash had called Mar'gok by his title. He was king still.

Hellscream's voice, close by, snapped the imperator from his thoughts. "I know that you have many slaves in your city."

Because he had to, Mar'gok leaned down to answer. "Yes."

"You will deliver any orcs to Kargath Bladefist. They are now members of the Shattered Hand clan. If you speak against me, if you dare to rebel," Grommash sneered as he walked past, "it will be Highmaul slaves I send for your blood."

The emperor did not respond.

As the orcs filtered away from the pit, Mar'gok saw Ko'ragh approaching with a weary, self-satisfied smile on his hairless face, the smile of one who knew not only that he had achieved, but that he would achieve again.

"Emperor." He saluted.

"Ko'ragh." Mar'gok did not raise his hand in congratulations. The breaker hardly noticed. He was elated.

"Emperor, I think I can do it again."

Mar'gok snorted. "Do what?"

"Become immune to even more magic."

"I see. And when would you have told me of this... hidden talent, Ko'ragh?"

Ko'ragh seemed confused. "I did not—"

Mar'gok hit him. Hard, in the face, crunching bone, knocking him backward. Sudden fury boiled up from the very core of the emperor's being; flecks of spit flew from his

mouth as he pummeled Ko'ragh in the head, chest, shoulders, blows cascading down like hail.

His fist ached. The breaker, on his knees, raised both hands to cover his face but didn't strike back. His eyes were fearful, then dismayed. Then, when it became clear Mar'gok would not hit him any longer, hateful. He drooled a bloody white tooth into the dust.

Mar'gok ignored him. Winded, he pulled his hoods off, scratched the clammy bald crowns of his heads.

Spotting the scar-faced messenger calmly filling her pack with provisions, Mar'gok snapped at her. "Take him to your healers." He indicated Ko'ragh with a quick twist of his hand.

The messenger smirked. She said nothing, gave him no other acknowledgement, continued idly lacing up her road boots.

"Now!" Mar'gok roared.

She glanced at Mar'gok, mildly annoyed, as if his voices were simply too loud. After a second, she turned back around.

He watched, seething, as she walked off alone.

Mar'gok's balcony was quiet. The stones slumbered.

He had added two more to his throne room since returning from Grommashar. With service to the Iron Horde came the ability to roam Nagrand with greater impunity, at least from the orcs. Surely Grommash had him watched, but would he begrudge a few rocks so long as his armies were trained?

The orcs were learning the principles of magic immunity slowly. In all likelihood, it would take years, and years could be stretched to generations. Mar'gok would command Ko'ragh to teach two ogres for every orc.

Vareg's spot on the council stood vacant, to be filled when Mar'gok deigned to. He would choose a replacement who presented no risk at all. The two hulking, neckless ogron—evolutionary steps between ogres and mud—who stood guard outside his halls were too dumb to disobey. It was refreshing.

Mar'gok would wait. He would endure the Iron Horde. Grommash Hellscream knew only how to charge into battle, to kill. The warchief would never stamp out the traditions of the Highmaul clan while they were useful. He was merely the warrior with the greatest weapons. What did he know of empire? Nothing.

The Iron Horde called them servants. And Mar'gok's people would serve. They would appease Hellscream, make a lie of their size. For now.

It was even possible for a king to play at peasantry if he kept his crown hidden.