

THE PRICE OF A CROWN

THE GOBLIN KING



MICHAEL KAHLER



A CHRONICLE OF LATHMAR

The Price of a Crown

A dark fantasy novella

Michael Kahler

Sabnock Works

First digital edition, 2026

Imprint

Michael Kahler
Kattrepel 7
27404 Zeven
Germany
Lathmar@t-online.de

Published by Sabnock Works

Copyright (c) 2026 Michael Kahler. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. No part of this edition may be reproduced or transmitted without the publisher's permission, except for brief quotations in reviews.

Contents

Chapter I: Slaves

Chapter II: The Temptation

Chapter III: The Liberation

Chapter IV: The Crown

Chapter V: The Grey Geese

Epilogue: Death Is a Door

From the Library of the Fallen Depths

Chapter I: Slaves

The cage had caught on the turn again.

The overseer heard timber scrape against stone before he saw the obstruction. The old mine carried the strain of wood and the slip of bare feet on grit. A short cry rose above the noise and stopped.

He rounded the bend. Six goblins leaned into the hauling ropes while a Skarn pushed from behind, his shoulders braced against the reinforced frame. Hides covered the cage, although something inside had torn two long slits through them. Its movements rocked the load from wheel to wheel.

One of the goblins lay beneath the front runner. The others had kept pulling. That showed progress.

The overseer approached. An iron bound wheel had passed over the goblin's ankle, and the foot now rested at an angle that settled the question of future use. The creature whimpered when his shadow crossed it.

He looked at the nearest handler. "Remove it."

The handler caught the injured goblin beneath the arms and dragged it towards the wall. It clung to the hauling rope until its fingers slipped free. The column lurched forward and the cage cleared the turn.

A Skarn team would have moved the load faster if the passage had allowed for their shoulders. They could pull twice the weight of goblins, yet the Ithrax trusted their obedience more than their strength. Even when one could have broken a handler, the habit of submission usually held.

Humans learned a routine quickly, then learned its weaknesses. Given responsibility, they counted what they handled and listened to what passed nearby. Familiar doors invited questions.

Goblins caused fewer such problems. They fitted the narrow workings, and correction kept them at simple tasks. When one broke, another took its place.

The Ithrax had found their tribes scattered through abandoned parts of the mountain. The first raids wasted too much labour. Later expeditions killed enough adults to end resistance and took the young alive. Training required patience and repetition.

At the next junction, the overseer raised a hand. The handlers halted.

"Little Hand."

A goblin emerged from beside a stack of empty feed baskets. He was smaller than most labourers and considerably cleaner. Faded cloth covered his hips, and a leather pouch hung from a cord across his chest. Years of cuts had left pale notches along both ears. One ear twitched whenever the cage shifted.

He stopped before the overseer and lowered his head. "Master."

The overseer pointed at the damaged wheel. "Pin."

Little Hand knelt. The locking pin had slipped almost free when the cage struck the wall. An Ithrax claw could have forced it back, but the gap between the wheel housing and lower brace was too narrow for easy reach. Little Hand slid his fingers inside.

The creature in the cage moved. The wheel jumped, trapping the goblin's hand beneath the housing.

Little Hand froze. The overseer waited. No instruction was necessary.

After a moment, the goblin reached farther. His fingers found the pin and drove it through the bracket. "Done, Master."

The overseer tested the repair. It would hold.

"Good."

Little Hand stepped back. At the word of praise, he bent his shoulders and fixed his eyes on the floor.

"Thank you, Master."

He was a useful creature. The name had arisen because so many necessary places lay beyond the overseer's reach. Little Hand retrieved instruments from old machinery and worked between cage bars without requiring their removal.

Once he had crawled into a collapsed ventilation shaft and tied a line around a trapped surveyor. Two goblins before him had never returned. Little Hand brought out the surveyor and himself.

The overseer continued towards the junction. Little Hand followed three paces behind, as he always did unless ordered otherwise. When the overseer slowed, the goblin shortened his stride. A passing cart forced them towards the wall, and Little Hand changed sides before the overseer had to look back. No one had taught him these movements. They had formed once training took hold.

They entered one of the older dwarven galleries. Its blocks fitted with such precision that centuries of damp had scarcely opened the seams. Ithrax lamps hung where dwarven metalwork had once stood, casting pale light over stacked crates and feeding troughs. Crude iron fencing divided the sleeping pens.

A work gang came up from the lower shafts. Little Hand glanced at them, then looked again.

One labourer cupped something in both hands, perhaps a piece of pale cave fungus. The overseer saw no reason for interest, yet Little Hand slowed. The other goblin met his gaze.

Against Little Hand's thigh, two fingers opened. The labourer answered with the same small motion.

The overseer struck Little Hand across the back of the head. He dropped to one knee. The work gang continued without turning.

The overseer waited until Little Hand raised his face. "You were called."

His breath came faster. "Yes, Master."

"And you stopped. Why?"

The pause lasted too long. The overseer set one claw beneath the goblin's jaw and raised it.

"Why?"

"I was wrong, Master."

The response evaded the question but showed that correction had taken hold. The overseer released him.

"Better."

Little Hand rose and resumed his place behind him. The matter required no further attention.

Punishment had value only until correction took hold. Some handlers continued after a slave understood its error, an indulgence the overseer did not permit. Fear was useful. Injury carried a cost.

Shouting came from the receiving pens. The overseer's tongue touched the back of his teeth.

Three handlers had brought in fresh stock. About twenty goblins crowded behind a barred partition, their legs caked with mud. Dried blood marked several faces. An older male clung to the bars and hissed whenever an Ithrax came near. Behind him, a female held two young against her chest.

Primitive loyalties were useful during capture and inconvenient afterwards.

The handler responsible for the pen saluted. "Taken from the eastern burrows."

"How many lost?"

"Five."

"Of ours?"

The handler looked surprised. "No."

"Then none were lost."

The old goblin spat through the bars. The handler lifted his staff, but the overseer stopped him.

"Leave it."

Hatred remained in the prisoner's stare. The overseer had seen it often enough. In some it lasted for weeks, in others for months. The young seldom required as long.

He glanced over his shoulder. Little Hand stood in his accustomed place, and the prisoners had noticed him. Their noise faltered. The female lowered her head. One of the young stared openly. The old male looked from Little Hand to the overseer, and something in his face hardened.

He spoke a word the overseer did not know. Little Hand's ears moved.

The prisoner repeated it. "Brother."

That word the overseer understood. Little Hand lowered his gaze without answering.

The old goblin gripped the bars. "Brother."

The overseer felt a small satisfaction. He gestured towards his servant.

"This one came from a burrow like yours. He scratched and bit. He hid when he was called." Little Hand showed no reaction. "Now he is useful."

The prisoner growled something in his own speech.

"Separate the large one tonight," the overseer told the handler. "Do not kill him. Let the others hear."

The handler smiled. The overseer did not. There was nothing amusing in the proper training of livestock.

He walked on, with Little Hand behind him. The old goblin shouted another word after them. The overseer did not understand it, but his servant missed a step before recovering his proper distance.

At the end of the gallery, the overseer entered a service room. Little Hand followed and closed the door.

The chamber had once belonged to dwarven engineers. The Ithrax had replaced most of its fittings, although a row of brass gauges still occupied one wall. None worked. Removing them would serve no purpose.

The overseer sat at the stone table and reviewed the day's inventory tablets. The goblin injured beneath the cage would need replacing before the next shift. He marked the loss in the wax and reassigned another labourer to the hauling crew. Little Hand waited beside the wall.

After a while, the overseer pushed a bowl towards him. Strips of meat lay inside, scraps from the handlers' meal.

Little Hand looked at the bowl, then at his master.

"Eat."

He picked it up. "Thank you, Master."

The overseer returned to his tablets. Little Hand ate quickly and made no sound.

A personal servant learned faster because his rules did not change. Little Hand knew when he might speak and which tools he might touch. He slept beside the storeroom instead of the common pens. Meat and an old blanket cost less than training another servant.

A heavy impact sounded beyond the eastern wall. Little Hand stopped chewing.

The next blow rang through metal. A low rasp followed it, strong enough to travel through the stone. Little Hand tightened both hands around the bowl.

"Eat," the overseer said. The goblin obeyed.

The noise came from the lower holding rooms. One of the Daragons had been restless since its arrival. The creatures were troublesome to keep underground, but their scales were needed for several preparations, and alchemists paid well for the glands beneath the jaw. An adult could survive repeated harvesting if handled correctly. Getting close enough was the difficult part.

Another impact shook dust from a seam in the ceiling. Little Hand stared at the wall until the overseer tapped a claw against the tablet. The goblin lowered his eyes.

"Not for you today, Little Hand."

"Yes, Master."

The overseer studied the thin arms and small shoulders. The Daragon pen had a service hatch beside the restraining frame, too narrow for an Ithrax shoulder. Little Hand could crawl through while the main cage door remained shut. His fingers were thin and marked by old work scars. They could reach between the fixed chains and the inner bars.

He looked back to the tablet. "Tomorrow."

Little Hand asked nothing. He had learned better.

*

That night, Little Hand lay in the recess beside the storeroom with one hand tucked against his chest. The wheel housing had bruised his fingers. The blow in the gallery had opened an old split above his ear. He touched the blood once and wiped it on the blanket.

Chains moved somewhere deeper in the complex.

He knew what waited beyond the eastern doors. Not long before, the handlers had carried another goblin past the service room beneath a stained cloth. One bare foot dragged along the floor until they turned the corner.

Little Hand was what the master called him. He stared at his fingers until the darkness blurred them.

The word from the receiving pens had followed him into the dark: Underhill.

He saw a ceiling blackened by cooking smoke. Fungus lamps filled shallow clay bowls, and small bodies crowded around a stone pot while an old female slapped reaching hands with a wooden spoon. Someone laughed. For a moment he could smell wet earth and roasted beetles.

Faces came less readily now. Sometimes he remembered a voice without knowing who had spoken. One remained clear: the old female calling to him through the smoke. She called him Grik.

The name felt strange in his mind, like a word overheard in another burrow. He tried to hold it, but the chains moved beyond the eastern rooms and the first rule came before he had decided anything: obey.

For an instant he pictured the service door and the gallery beyond it. Do not run answered the thought. When he pulled the blanket closer, another rule followed: do not hide. They rose in the master's voice and settled into Grik's own.

Pain follows disobedience. He repeated the last rule until the old female's voice fell silent.

Beyond the wall, the Daragon pulled against its chains.

Chapter II: The Temptation

Grik was awake when the overseer opened the service room door.

The blood above his ear had dried during the night. It pulled at the skin when he raised his head. He had lain listening to the chains beyond the eastern wall, and each time they fell quiet he had waited for the next blow.

The overseer looked once at the empty bowl beside the blanket. “Come.”

Grik stood and followed him into the eastern passage. It descended below the sleeping pens and lower workshops. Damp stone and fungus smoke gave way to hot iron and bitter oil. Beneath them lay old blood and the rank breath of animals kept too long underground.

Grik kept three paces behind his master. Too close put him within reach of a claw. Too far meant delay.

Two handlers waited at the lower gate. Each carried a hooked staff. A third Ithrax stood beside the winch with keys at his belt and leather straps looped over one arm.

The gate shuddered before they reached it. Dust fell from the lintel. One handler glanced at the iron pin that held the winch, then wiped his palm on his apron.

The overseer did not slow. Fear brought the rules with it. A place entered by command could be left only by command.

The handler unlocked the gate. The chamber beyond had been a dwarven loading room. A corroded lifting wheel still hung beneath the ceiling, though the Ithrax had threaded its spokes with chain and fixed the chain to iron rings driven through the old floor. The dwarven drain had been widened into a dark channel between the cages. Water moved sluggishly through it, carrying scraps of grey flesh towards a grate.

Three cages stood against the far wall. Two were empty. A stained cloth had been thrown over something beside the nearer one, and a bare goblin foot showed below it. The third cage held the Daragon.

Grik had seen such creatures hauled through the upper galleries. Hide had covered their cages, and handlers had beaten anyone who came near. This one was larger than a hunting hound and thick through the shoulders. Chains bound its hind legs, neck and tail to separate rings. The arrangement left enough play for it to cross half the cage in a single rush.

It lay close to the stone. Its scales looked black until the lamp caught bronze and deep green beneath the dirt. Bare patches marked the right flank. The flesh there had swollen around old wounds, and a pale fluid shone between the remaining scales.

The Daragon watched him. Its yellow eyes did not wander towards the handlers or the open gate. They stayed on Grik.

The overseer took a pair of iron tongs from a table and offered them handle first. Grik hesitated just long enough to see his master notice.

He took the tongs. The handles spread his fingers until the joints hurt.

“Only the marked scales,” the overseer said.

A handler pointed with his hook. Chalk paste marked four scales near the Daragon's shoulder and two lower on the flank.

“Take each at the root,” he said. “A broken edge lowers the price.”

Grik looked at the cloth beside the other cage.

The handler tapped the hook against the floor. “Go.”

No Ithrax entered with him. The Daragon lifted its head. Its ribs opened slowly, and air scraped through its throat. A thread of vapour escaped one nostril. It smelled of hot stone and meat gone sour between teeth.

Grik stepped inside the reach of the chains.

The creature struck. Its jaws closed where his chest had been. Grik threw himself back and landed on his left elbow. Chain tore through the ceiling wheel. An iron ring shifted in the floor with a sound like a tooth coming loose. One of the handlers laughed.

“Again,” said the overseer.

Grik rose. His elbow throbbed, but the arm still bent. He watched how far the jaws reached and how the right foreclaw swept across the stone. On the second rush he stayed beyond the claw, waited for the neck chain to tighten, then moved beside the shoulder.

The first marked scale was within reach. He fitted the tongs around its rim, but the Daragon twisted before he could close them. Iron scraped over scale.

“Again.”

The next attempt caught the edge, but the creature's weight tore the handles from his grip. Grik snatched them up and tried again. The scale lifted. Blood gathered beneath it.

The Daragon cried out, and heat filled Grik's face. For a moment the cage was gone.

He crouched beside the hearth in Underhill, close enough for the stone to warm his knees. Beetles cracked on a flat pan. Smoke gathered below the roof and made every eye water. A small goblin reached past him for the fattest beetle, and Grik struck the hand away.

Someone seized his wrist. The grip was firm, though it did not hurt. An old female said his name and pressed the beetle into a smaller hand.

“Little Hand.”

The overseer's voice restored the cage. Grik found himself holding the tongs without pulling. Blood ran across the Daragon's hide and fell beside his foot.

“Master.”

“Finish it.”

Grik leaned back. The scale resisted, then came free with a wet crack. He fell hard and kept hold of the tongs.

The Daragon's scream filled the chamber. A handler took the scale and carried it to the table. He washed it in a bowl before the blood had stopped running from

the wound.

“Clean,” the overseer said. “Continue.”

The next mark lay lower on the flank. The Daragon no longer wasted its strength against the far chains. It waited until Grik came near, then turned with a speed that brought one horn past his cheek. The broken tip brushed him. He smelled old blood in the filed bone.

Grik retreated and studied the restraints. A scar crossed the Daragon's muzzle, and the collar had rubbed its neck raw. Its scales protected it from teeth and steel, yet the chains made them something the Ithrax could harvest.

The creature watched the tongs. Grik understood that look. He had seen it in the common pens when a handler chose someone for correction.

He approached from behind the foreleg. The Daragon gathered itself for another rush, then stopped.

Its head lowered. The muscles along its flank remained hard, but it made no attempt to turn.

Grik waited until the handler struck the cage bars with his hook. “Take it.”

Grik closed the tongs around the marked scale. The Daragon's eye followed his hands.

He pulled. Blood appeared beneath the rim, and the creature flinched without trying to escape.

Its surrender frightened him more than its teeth had done.

He dragged the scale free. The Daragon released a long breath through its nostrils, and a voice spoke close to Grik's ear.

“You hate them.”

Grik turned. The handlers stood at the table, wrapping the first scale in oiled cloth. His master examined the edge of the second. No one had come near him.

The Daragon's mouth remained open. Its tongue lay dark between the teeth.

“You hate them,” the voice said again.

The words were calm and exact. They carried none of the rasp of Ithrax speech or the quick, rough sounds of Underhill. Grik could not tell whether he heard them in the cage or inside his head.

“No,” he whispered.

A handler looked round. Grik lowered his eyes and wiped the tongs against the stone.

“No?” asked the voice.

“They are my masters.”

“Who made them so?”

The answer should have been easy. Masters owned the pens and the food. Their punishments proved what they were. Grik looked at the overseer.

“They feed you,” the voice said.

“Yes.”

“What do they feed the Daragon?”

Grik glanced at the stained channel. Bits of gristle clung to the grate.

The handler struck the bars again. “Work.”

Grik moved to the next chalk mark.

“Who gave you that name?” the voice asked. His grip tightened.

“Little Hand,” it said.

“My master.”

“Did you have another?”

Smoke darkened a low roof. The old female stood over him with the wooden spoon tucked into her belt. Her grip circled his wrist. Grik could not recover her face, but he remembered the annoyance in her voice and the smaller child

clutching a beetle in both hands.

“Grik,” he said.

The Daragon blinked once. “There you are.”

The words stirred anger in him. He set the tongs and tore the next scale loose too quickly. It split near the root.

The Daragon jerked against the chain. The handler snatched the broken scale from the tongs and showed it to the overseer. Grik lowered his head before either of them spoke.

“One more like this,” said his master, “and I will put your fingers in the hinge.”

“Yes, Master.” He returned to the flank.

The voice waited until the Ithrax had turned away.

“What do you want, Grik?”

No rule answered that question. “I want to finish.”

“Why?”

“So he will not hurt me.”

“After that?”

Grik looked down at his hands. His knuckles had begun to swell around the broad handles.

“Sleep.”

“Where?”

The recess beside the storeroom came to him first. It had a blanket in winter and a door between him and the common pens. Until then he had thought of it as good fortune.

“Underhill,” he said, and the word scarcely carried beyond his lips.

“Is Underhill waiting for you?”

He did not know. Years had passed without measure. The burrow might be empty, the old female dead, the child in iron elsewhere. The tongs slipped in his hands.

“Perhaps you do not want the old place,” said the voice. “Perhaps you want a place where no one calls you without leave.”

Grik saw a fire. No master sat beside it. A full bowl waited within reach, and no hand could take it from him.

He shut his eyes, but the image remained.

“The Ithrax are not the strongest beneath this mountain,” the voice said.

Grik thought of Skarn shoulders beneath the cage and an Ithrax handler dragged by a smaller Daragon. Both had worn chains in the end.

“Others obey them,” he said.

“Yes.” The answer held quiet approval.

Grik looked towards the table. His master spoke without raising his voice. One handler left the room before the order was complete. The other placed the clean scales in a wooden case and waited for the overseer's hand to point again.

“They rule before they strike,” the voice said. “You have watched them do it.”

The tongs were still sticky with the Daragon's blood. The Ithrax had never touched them.

“You could be heard as they are heard,” the voice continued. “I can put their command upon your tongue.” Grik's ears drew back.

“I can harden you against the strength of the Skarn. No chain born in these halls need hold you forever. The Daragons will know your voice, and the wealth beneath the mountain will pass through hands that answer to you.”

He had seen each kind of power at work. He imagined the overseer listening when Grik spoke and the Daragon rising without chains. Food waited behind a door only he could open.

“What are you?” Grik asked.

The yellow eye caught the lamplight. “I have been called Buné.”

“Are you this creature?”

“For now, this is where you hear me.”

The reply gave him nothing he could trust.

“What do you take?” Grik asked.

“Service.”

Grik waited for the rest. None came.

“Serve me.”

A laugh escaped him, small and bitter. He bent low as one of the handlers glanced towards the cage.

“That is what they say.”

“Who?”

“Masters.” Grik looked into the Daragon's eye. “You offer another chain.”

Buné let the sounds of the chamber fill the silence. Water passed through the drain. Leather ties creaked as a handler bound the scale case. Somewhere behind the empty cages, a captive animal scratched twice at stone.

“You have always served, Grik. I merely offer you a choice of masters.”

Choice belonged to those outside the bars. A handler chose the tool and the hand that held it. Even the weak chose when someone weaker stood before them.

Grik had once taken the largest beetle from a smaller child.

The old female had made him give it back.

He remembered that. He also remembered wanting it.

“Little Hand.”

The overseer stood beside the table, one claw resting on the closed case. Grik straightened.

“You are wasting time.”

“Forgive me, Master.”

“Finish.”

The Daragon surged against its restraints. Its claws scored the floor, and its jaws snapped at the tongs. Whatever had occupied its gaze was hidden behind panic.

Grik waited for Buné to speak again. Only the chain answered. He set the tongs around another marked scale. The creature twisted and nearly caught his wrist. Grik shifted his weight, tightened the iron jaws and pulled. The scale came free. He placed it in the handler's waiting hand.

He took the last mark without breaking it.

When the overseer declared the work done, Grik could scarcely close his fingers. The Daragon lay on its side. Fresh wounds shone among the old ones, and each breath moved blood across its flank.

The handlers packed the scales. His master checked every edge.

“Acceptable,” he said.

That judgment had always loosened Grik's breath. This time he kept watching his master.

The overseer turned his wrist. The gatekeeper opened the way, and the handlers moved to the winch and case. No command was repeated.

Grik watched his master's hands. He listened to the measured voice. The overseer was not the largest Ithrax in the chamber, and nothing about him could have held the Daragon without iron or other bodies. Yet each creature in the room had moved according to his will.

The overseer walked towards the gate. “Little Hand.”

Grik followed. His feet found the old distance without instruction.

Later, in the service room, he was given water and ordered to clean the blood from the tongs. He worked until no dark trace remained between their teeth. The overseer checked them, then sent him to his recess.

Grik lay down. Something pressed against his hip.

He reached beneath the cloth at his waist and found a sliver of scale no larger than his smallest fingernail. Bronze showed beneath the dried blood. It might have broken from the ruined scale and caught in his clothing. It might have been placed there.

He closed it in his palm. Underhill remained somewhere behind him, perhaps empty. Its hearth still warmed a place the Ithrax had failed to reach, but memory was no road home.

He looked at the hand his master had named.

He wanted no one to call him Little Hand again.

Beyond the eastern wall, chain scraped once across stone.

Chapter III: The Liberation

The first door opened upon the wrong room.

Grik was carrying lamp wicks through the upper supply gallery when an Ithrax quartermaster unlocked the pitch room. Grik knew the smell behind its iron plated door. Tar clung to the hemp, and sour dust kept cave lice from the ropes.

The quartermaster drew the door towards him and stopped.

Beyond the threshold ran a passage of fitted grey stone. Its ceiling descended out of sight, following a slope that could not exist behind the pitch room. Small lamps burned in niches along one wall. Their flames were yellow, unlike the pale Ithrax lamps, and the nearest niche held a clay figure with four folded arms.

The quartermaster did not enter. He shut the door, tested the key and opened it again.

Shelves of rope and sealed pitch jars filled the room beyond.

Grik had halted with the basket against his hip. The quartermaster looked at him.

“Did I tell you to stop?”

“No, Master.” Grik continued along the gallery.

When he returned, guards stood outside the pitch room. An officer had marked a white line across the floor and sent slaves around by the lower passage.

The door opened six times before midday. Five times it revealed the pitch room. On the sixth, there was no room at all.

A rough tunnel began beyond the sill. Its floor bore the grooves of sledge runners and the prints of broad bare feet. The officer crouched without crossing the white line. He touched one print with the end of his staff, then examined the dirt left on the metal tip.

He ordered a goblin from the nearest work gang to enter.

The goblin looked into the tunnel. “What do I do, Master?”

“Walk to the first bend. Return and report what lies beyond it.”

The goblin crossed the sill. The tunnel swallowed the sound of his feet. He reached the bend, glanced back once and disappeared.

The officer counted beneath his breath. When he reached sixty, he sent a second slave to the threshold. Before that goblin could enter, the door swung shut by itself.

The guards pulled it open. Pitch jars stood in orderly rows. The first goblin was gone.

The officer sealed the door with cord and wax. He posted another guard and ordered the gallery cleared. No one raised his voice. Work resumed by the lower passage.

Grik carried the next basket where he was told.

Since the Daragon chamber, Grik had watched the Ithrax. Their claws still cut, and their keys opened every barred gate. Yet he noticed what happened before a blow. A glance lowered a slave's eyes. A hand near a hook quickened a work gang. His master needed only to pause beside an unfinished task before someone confessed.

The Ithrax did not carry obedience as a Skarn carried a stone. Other hands lifted it for them.

Once a handler ordered three Skarn to shift a fallen support thick enough to crush him. They could have torn him apart. Instead they bent at his word.

Buné had said they ruled before they struck.

Grik still woke when called, kept three paces behind his master and ate only after permission. At night he held the sliver of Daragon scale in his recess.

It had no warmth. It gave no answer when he whispered Buné's name.

Sometimes Grik thought the voice in the cage had been his own. He had seen pain make a starving slave speak to his dead brother. The scale proved only

carelessness, but he kept it.

The next wrong door opened below the sleeping pens.

At the evening bell, a door below the sleeping pens opened into a mine. Cold wind drove grit through the chambers. Timber braces crowded a shaft beyond the threshold.

A slave near the door cried out. He knew the mark burned into one of the braces. His brother worked in that mine. It lay two days away through the western galleries.

The guards dragged him back before he could cross.

Voices answered from the mine until the door closed. When it opened again, the sleeping chamber stood where it belonged.

That was when the bells began.

Measured strokes called guards and handlers to their stations. Officers took reports and marked every door that had changed.

The overseer returned to the service room before the last bell ceased. He gave Grik a coil of red cord and a jar of paste.

“Come.”

They marked doors from the eastern workshops to the lower pens. Grik tied cord across each opening after his master inspected it. The overseer sealed the paste and recorded the time. Guards checked the marks without delay.

At the washing room, a sealed door opened before they reached it.

Water struck the opposite wall. The room beyond had vanished, replaced by a natural cleft filled to Grik's knees. Something pale moved beneath the surface. A handler thrust the door shut while another drove an iron wedge beneath it.

“Mark it,” the overseer said.

Grik tied the cord. His fingers obeyed, but his attention stayed on the wet line spreading from beneath the sill.

Farther down, the air changed. Heat rolled through one passage, followed by the smell of burned hair. A slave came running from the turn. He wore a forge gang collar, although the nearest forge lay four levels above them.

The guard at the junction caught him across the throat with a staff.

“Station.”

The slave pointed behind him. “Gone, Master.”

“What is gone?”

“The floor. The steps. I opened the ash door and came here.”

The guard struck his knee. “Station.”

The goblin crawled to the wall and folded his hands behind his head. His fear and the truth made no difference to the order.

The master moved on. Grik followed.

They reached the main supply junction as a barred gate opened into daylight.

Grik had no word for what he saw at first. White light crossed the stone in a clean bar and touched the ceiling high above him. Beyond the gate lay a slope of grass wet with rain. Trees moved in the distance beneath a wide grey space.

Several slaves had gathered before it. No guard stood between them and the light.

One goblin pressed himself against the bars beside the opening. His arms shook. He could have stepped through without touching iron. Instead he stared at the grass and whispered the rule that held him.

“Do not run.”

A female took his wrist. He pulled away from her.

“Come,” she said.

He shook his head. “Do not run.”

The passage beyond the gate bent towards open ground. Nothing waited there with a hook. No chain tightened at his neck, yet he did not move.

Grik felt the basket against his bruised hip and understood what Buné had shown him. The Ithrax could leave the gate unguarded. They had placed the guard inside the goblin years before.

An officer arrived with six soldiers. He did not beat the slaves away from the opening. He stopped where all could see him and planted the butt of his staff on the floor.

“Listen.”

The word passed through the noise without force. Goblins turned towards him.

“The passages are changing. Some lead into flooded caverns. Predators have entered from unrecorded workings. Three groups who left their stations are dead.”

Grik did not know whether that was true. The officer spoke as if truth had already been weighed and entered on a tablet.

“Stay in the marked galleries. We know which routes remain safe. Food and shelter are being prepared in the northern pens. You will be protected there.”

The female at the gate tightened her grip on her companion. Now she looked into the light as if teeth waited beyond it.

“Come away,” the officer said.

His voice softened. The words settled where Grik measured the distance to a master's claw. The northern pens had walls. The Ithrax knew the safe passages. Returning was sensible.

The female released her companion and crossed towards the soldiers. Others followed. One goblin picked up a dropped hauling bar and offered it to a guard before kneeling.

Grik had heard Ithrax use Charm on new captives but had never known the moment it took hold. The officer's counsel simply grew more reasonable than the evidence before them.

The scale sliver pressed against Grik's skin beneath the cord at his waist.

The officer looked at him. "You. Join them." Grik's feet turned.

"He is mine," said the overseer.

The pull released so quickly that Grik stumbled.

The officer's gaze moved to the overseer's seal. "Keep him close."

The soldiers closed the gate. Iron bars met before the strip of daylight, and one guard bound them with chain. The grey sky narrowed to a blade. Then a door elsewhere slammed, and darkness stood beyond the gate.

The officer sent the slaves north.

Grik followed his master back towards the service rooms. Behind them, the Ithrax recovered the junction without shedding blood.

For the first time, Grik was certain they would win.

The certainty frightened him more than the wrong doors.

At the next crossing, stone cracked beneath their feet.

Every lamp went out. Pressure struck Grik behind the eyes. He smelled wet leaves and sealed dust together. A hammer rang beside his ear while someone screamed far below.

When the lamps returned, the eastern wall contained three doors instead of one.

The overseer seized Grik by the shoulder. "Service room."

The central door had always led there. Grik reached for its handle.

It opened on a crowded sleeping pen. The goblins inside stared back at him. One had been halfway through climbing a barred partition and now hung above a corridor he had never seen. Grik shut it.

The master chose the left door. A wind struck him with the stench of deep water. He closed it before Grik saw more.

The right door led into the service room.

They entered. The overseer locked it and pulled the brass handled cabinet across the threshold.

“Stay.”

Grik stood beside the wall while his master counted what they could carry.

Outside, the work bells lost their rhythm.

A rapid alarm sounded in the lower galleries, stopped in the middle of a stroke and resumed from somewhere above. A second bell answered through the ceiling from the animal rooms. The Daragon roared.

Grik's master looked up. “Take the water skins.”

Grik lifted them from their pegs.

The roar came again. It was weaker than he remembered. Iron scraped stone. The animal gave a coughing cry and fell silent.

The master unlatched a tool case. “Two skins. Leave the rest.”

Grik placed one water skin across each shoulder.

Something heavy struck the other side of the eastern wall. The brass gauges trembled in their mounts. The narrow door towards the holding rooms stood open.

His master had locked it after every use. Grik remembered the click because it had ended the sound of the chains each night. Now the passage beyond waited in darkness.

He expected an order to shut it. The overseer continued sorting tools.

The lower handlers had been called away. A changed room might cut off the animal's air or fill with water, but that was not his task. The order to stay held his feet beside the wall. He waited for Buné and heard only chisels on the table.

The Daragon gave a low, ragged call.

Grik touched the scale beneath his clothes. It remained cold.

He set down the water skins.

The overseer turned. Grik crossed the service room before either of them spoke. He passed through the eastern door and pulled it shut behind him.

No command followed, which was worse for several steps.

The holding passage had changed. Its worked floor ended at a flight of broad stairs that climbed where the old gallery had descended. Grik took them two at a time. A dwarven arch stood at the top, half filled by a slab of rough limestone. He squeezed through the remaining gap and found the lower gate hanging open.

The animal chamber had been divided across itself.

One half remained as Grik knew it. The ceiling wheel leaned above the drain, and the three cages stood against the wall. The other half opened into a cavern filled with red stone columns. Warm water ran between them. Torn chain disappeared across the new boundary, its far end lost among the rocks.

One empty cage now held pale eggs. The other contained darkness that did not lessen near a lamp. Scratching came from inside as Grik passed both.

The Daragon lay beside the third cage. A section of wall had cut through the bars, leaving them twisted apart. Two leg chains had snapped. The tail restraint vanished into the cavern, but the iron collar still held. Its chain ran from the throat to the old lifting wheel and had wound tight around one spoke.

Blood covered the creature's shoulder where new scales had torn free. Its breath stirred the grit in short bursts. Grik stopped outside its reach.

“Buné.”

The Daragon opened one yellow eye.

“Buné.”

Its lip lifted from the teeth. No calm voice answered him.

Grik could leave. Buné might never have existed, and the animal remembered the tongs in his hands.

He searched the abandoned table. Most of the tools had fallen into the drain. A pin hammer remained beneath the scale washing bowl, and a narrow pry bar lay near the gate.

The Daragon watched him take the tools and enter the cage.

The creature lunged. Its horn struck the wall beside his head and shed a chip of stone. Grik dropped beneath its jaws. The neck chain stopped it, but one foreclaw raked his shoulder. Cloth tore. Three hot lines opened in his skin.

He rolled beyond the claw and pressed his back to the cage bars.

“I know,” he said. The Daragon gathered itself again.

Grik held out his empty hand. “I know.”

The words did not calm it, but the strike had spent what strength remained. Its forelegs trembled.

Grik moved towards the lifting wheel. The collar chain passed through a locking jaw fixed to the rim. He had cleaned such jaws but had never opened one under tension. The pin could not be driven out while the chain pulled across it.

He wedged the pry bar between two wheel spokes and leaned his weight against it. The wheel shifted a finger's width. Chain links grated through the locking jaw. The Daragon rose behind him.

Heat touched the back of Grik's neck. He could hear fluid moving in the creature's throat.

He kept his weight on the bar and set the hammer against the pin.

The first blow bent his wrist. The pin did not move.

The second freed rust from the jaw. Behind him, claws crossed stone.

Grik struck again. The pin jumped halfway from its socket. The wheel tried to turn, tearing the pry bar from his hands. He caught the rim with both palms. Iron

edges cut into his fingers.

The Daragon's muzzle closed around his upper arm.

Its teeth rested through the torn cloth without piercing him.

Grik could not look round. If he released the wheel, the locking jaw would close again.

He leaned his shoulder into the rim and kicked the pin free.

The wheel spun. Chain whipped through the jaw and struck sparks from the floor. The Daragon pulled its head free. Its teeth left Grik's arm untouched.

The collar still circled its neck, but no chain joined it to the room.

The Daragon stepped over Grik. It moved stiffly into the open part of the chamber and drank from the warm stream between the red columns.

Grik wrapped his bleeding hand. The Daragon could reach the cavern by following the water, yet it returned.

The animal stopped close enough that its breath moved Grik's ear. Dried blood marked the ridges around its nostrils as it lowered its head.

Not as the Skarn lowered theirs before a handler. The yellow eye stayed level with Grik's, watchful and without surrender. Grik stood.

The Daragon turned towards the gate, and they left the chamber together.

The stairs no longer led to the service passage. Their upper end opened upon a wide transport gallery filled with smoke. Ithrax soldiers held the nearest junction behind overturned ore carts. Slaves ran between side passages carrying stones, tools and anything that could serve as a weapon.

A dead Skarn lay across the rails. Two handlers dragged a wounded soldier behind the carts. Whatever pressed from the smoke had not broken the Ithrax formation.

Grik kept to the wall. The Daragon's claws rang on the rails. An archer saw it and raised his bow.

“Hold,” called the officer. “The pens first. Do not loose into the workers.”

Even then, the Ithrax measured what they could afford to kill.

Grik found an unguarded side passage. The Daragon followed him through. Behind them, something struck the barricade and the gallery filled with the sound of steel.

The side passage joined an old feeding route. If it still obeyed its former shape, it would meet the upper stores.

His master waited at the next turn.

The overseer held a short blade in one hand. Blood marked one sleeve, although Grik could see no wound. His eyes moved from Grik's torn shoulder to the Daragon behind him.

"Little Hand." Grik stopped.

The name reached him more quickly than thought. His feet placed themselves at the old distance. His chin lowered.

The Daragon's claws came to rest behind him.

The overseer showed no anger. His tongue touched the back of his teeth, the small sign of annoyance Grik knew from delays at work.

“You left your station.”

“Yes, Master.”

"Come here." Grik took one step.

The master extended his empty hand. It had offered meat and tongs, and its slightest motion sent others to work.

“The beast will kill you when its pain returns. Come here. We will secure it, then go north.”

The words fitted every rule Grik possessed. The Ithrax had soldiers and food. The Daragon was an animal with his blood on its claws.

Grik looked over his shoulder. The Daragon had offered nothing and could leave him at any moment. That was the difference.

The overseer's hand remained open as Grik touched the sliver of scale at his waist.

"No, Master."

His voice was scarcely louder than the chain settling around the Daragon's neck.

The overseer stared at him. Grik had seen surprise in a handler struck by a Skarn. This was less than fear and more than anger. A tool had moved after being set down.

"Come here," he said. The corridor grew quieter.

Returning would be simple. The recess waited beside the service room, and the master knew the safe ways. He could correct Grik's confusion. Grik's foot shifted.

A growl rose behind him. It passed through the floor and into his legs.

Grik's fingers closed around the scale. Its edge cut his palm.

The master's voice lost its hold.

Grik did not know what had broken the Charm. He stepped backwards until the animal stood beside him, and the overseer lowered his hand.

For the first time, Grik saw him measure a loss he had not chosen.

"You will return," the Ithrax said. Grik turned away.

The Daragon did not attack. It followed Grik into the smoke.

The feeding route ended at a door that should have opened into a salt store where Grik had once worked until his shoulders failed.

The door before him was not the salt store door.

Dark wood filled the dwarf cut frame. Green stains spread around its iron studs, and the latch had been polished by hands unlike Ithrax claws. Grik put his ear to

it.

Someone screamed beyond the wood. Metal struck metal. A voice called words he could not understand, followed by the deep report of stone breaking.

Behind him, the overseer shouted for guards.

The Daragon stood close against Grik's side. Blood dripped from its flank and marked the floor.

Grik took the latch. Every door he remembered had been opened for him or closed against him. He entered cages when ordered and left when permitted. Even Underhill had become a door that memory could show but never open.

The latch lifted beneath his hand, and he opened the door.

An Ithrax soldier fell through it and struck the wall beside him.

The soldier's throat had been cut. He slid to the floor while Grik stared into a cavern larger than any hall in the slave works.

The place had been assembled from wounds.

A dwarf bridge ended halfway across open ground. Water poured from a broken arch into tiled darkness. Lone doors opened among the rocks onto other chambers.

Bodies fought wherever the broken places met.

Ithrax soldiers held a shield line below the bridge while Skarn struck with mining hammers. Pale creatures climbed from the water. Humans fought near a stone stair, but Grik could not tell against whom.

Goblins scattered among them. Some wore slave collars. Others carried stone knives and hide shields painted with signs Grik did not know. The Daragon passed him.

It sprang from the doorway and landed on an Ithrax shield. Metal folded beneath its weight. The soldier fell, and the animal vanished into the press of bodies.

Grik remained at the threshold because no path through the battle looked safer than another. No bell named his station. He could return to his master or follow a creature that had left him behind.

A goblin with a painted shield fell near the bridge. An Ithrax spear had entered beneath his ribs. Two others tried to pull him clear while a soldier advanced upon them.

“Left!” Grik shouted.

One goblin raised his shield to the wrong side. The soldier's spear struck wood instead of the wounded goblin's throat.

The second goblin stared at Grik.

"Pull him behind the stone." They obeyed.

Grik climbed down. No space opened for him. He crouched beside the fallen Ithrax and dragged the short sword from its hand.

The weapon was made for a longer arm. He gripped it below the guard and crossed to the painted shield.

Free goblins and slaves gathered behind a broken column. The Ithrax line pushed forward, driving a Skarn beneath their shields.

“What clan?” asked the goblin with the painted shield.

The question struck Grik harder than the clash around them. “Underhill.”

The painted goblin bared his teeth. “Never heard of it.”

“Name?”

“Grik.”

An arrow broke against the column.

“Wait until the shields pass,” Grik said.

“For what?”

Grik pointed to the low space under the dwarf bridge. The Ithrax formation had to narrow there. Broken stone lay above the approach, held by the remains of a parapet.

“There. Push it when they come below.”

The goblin looked at the stones, then at Grik. “Why?”

“Because they cannot order rock aside.”

For an instant, no one moved.

Then the painted goblin turned. “You two, with me.”

They climbed the broken stair. Grik sent the slaves to gather behind the column and shouted to a group retreating from the water. His voice crossed the cavern as if he stood beside them.

"Here! Shields to the front." They came.

Grik heard Buné's promise in their answer. It warmed the place his master's praise had once filled.

The Ithrax advanced beneath the bridge. Their officer called a halt when he saw the goblins above, but the order reached the rear too late. Bodies pressed the first rank forward.

“Now,” Grik shouted.

The painted goblin and his companions heaved against the parapet. Mortar cracked. The top course tipped and spilled across the shield line. One Ithrax disappeared beneath it. Another fell with both legs trapped, opening a gap beside the bridge.

Grik pointed with the sword. “Together. Through there.” Goblins rushed the gap.

They did not move like soldiers. One ran ahead and another stopped to strike a fallen enemy. A slave dropped his weapon at the first wound. Yet enough followed Grik's voice to break the narrowed line. The Skarn on the far side saw the opening and drove his hammer through an Ithrax shield.

The Daragon returned through the breach. Blood darkened its jaws. It struck a soldier from behind and stood over him while the goblins surged past.

For a little while, the ground belonged to them.

They pulled the wounded behind the column. One goblin carried water while another cut collars. The painted shield bearer took position beside Grik.

“Underhill,” he said. “You have a chief?”

Grik thought of a smoke blackened ceiling and an old female with a wooden spoon. He did not know who kept that hearth now.

“Not here.”

The goblin looked at the others waiting around them. “We do.”

He pointed the rim of his shield at Grik. “Chief.” The word drew no laughter.

Free clans and scarred slaves watched him because his last order had kept them alive. No one had told them to listen. Blood made the Ithrax sword slippery, but he did not want to set it down.

A report sounded beyond the water. One of the lone doors had opened upon another battle. Figures poured from it in armour the colour of old bone. The nearest carried a long spear, and Grik saw them too late.

“Shields,” he called.

The first spear passed over the painted goblin and entered Grik below the ribs.

There was no great blow. The point found him with a short pressure, and the cavern turned sideways when the shaft was torn free.

He struck the ground on his wounded shoulder. The sword left his hand.

Feet crossed before his face. The painted shield fell nearby, split through the centre. Something large roared above him.

He pressed both hands to his side. Blood ran between his fingers, warmer than the scale caught in his palm.

Someone stepped over him to meet the next attack. The battle continued.

Grik tried to call another warning. No breath came with the word. He saw the open wooden door high in the broken wall, and beyond it the passage where his master might still be waiting.

He did not wish to return.

Faces passed above him. None belonged to Underhill, but the name no longer felt like a place closed against him. These goblins had heard his name and called him chief. They had listened.

Grik's hand opened. The sliver of Daragon scale slipped between the stones.

He died before it came to rest.

Chapter IV: The Crown

Grik drew breath, and his hands closed on stone.

He expected the broken floor beneath the bridge. He expected blood between his fingers and the spear wound opening below his ribs. Instead his palms rested upon broad armrests, worn smooth at their ends. His back pressed against a high seat. Both feet touched a step cut for legs no longer than his own.

The breath left him. Another came without pain.

Grik touched his side. His fingers found unbroken hide beneath a coat of linked bronze scales. Below it, a hard seam crossed his flesh where the spear had entered. The wound was closed. The blood, the smoke and the scattered bodies were gone.

Fire burned in two iron bowls before him. Their coals gave little flame, but they warmed a hall large enough to hold the work gangs of three Ithrax galleries. Dwarf cut pillars divided its length. Goblin masonry filled gaps where some older violence had split the walls, and smoke blackened repairs that had already begun to crumble. A narrow watercourse ran between the pillars. Its fitted stones had been worn pale by many feet.

Grik looked for the open wooden door above the battle. There were nine doors in the hall. None stood alone, and none opened upon fighting. Something breathed below him.

The Daragon lay across the foot of the throne. Old wounds puckered its shoulder where the Ithrax had torn away the scales. The iron collar was gone, though a hairless ring remained around the thick neck. One horn ended in the same broken stump that had passed Grik's face in the cage.

Its yellow eye opened. Grik did not move. He remembered the animal leaping from the doorway. He remembered its jaws dark with blood when it returned through the broken Ithrax line. He had not seen it after the spear struck him.

The Daragon lifted its head. It regarded him without fear, then settled its jaw upon its forelegs again.

A second Daragon rested beyond the watercourse. It was larger, with black green scales unmarked by chains. No cage surrounded either animal. No hook hung ready on the walls.

Two goblins knelt beside the throne. They had kept so still that Grik had taken them for bundles of hide. Both wore robes sewn with bronze scales. Small metal amulets hung at their throats, each worked into three narrow heads that shared one body. The older goblin had cut away his left ear. Dark paste filled symbols drawn across the bare side of his skull.

The other raised his eyes first. “King.” The word crossed the hall.

Goblins knelt between the pillars. Some wore iron caps and carried spears. Others had come in patched hides with stone knives at their belts. Near the far wall, a female held a child against her side. An old warrior leaned upon a painted shield split through its centre and bound with two strips of metal.

Grik knew that shield. He stood too quickly. The hall tilted, but his legs held him. Metal tightened around his forearms.

Black green braces covered him from wrist to elbow. Each had been made in the form of two Daragons twisted around one another. Their tails met near his wrists. Their narrow heads rested below his elbows, teeth sunk into the coils of the opposite body. Bronze showed at the edges when he moved.

He pulled at the left brace. It did not shift. The metal was warm.

“Where is the battle?” he asked.

The younger Shaman bowed lower. “Ended.”

“The Ithrax?”

“Driven from these halls.”

Grik looked again at the shield. The goblin behind it had grey along his jaw and an empty socket beneath one brow. Grik could not make that face belong to the fighter who had called him Chief.

“Who won?”

The old warrior struck the repaired shield against the floor.

“We did.”

Others answered him. Spear butts knocked against stone. Voices filled the space beneath the dwarf roof, rough and eager. Grik heard Underhill among the clan names, though he could not see who spoke it.

He raised one hand. The braces drew tight against his skin, and silence followed before Grik had decided what to say.

In the Ithrax galleries, silence had belonged to officers. A raised claw could stop a work gang. A turn of the wrist opened gates and moved armed guards. Grik had watched his master make a room obey without touching anyone in it.

Now the whole hall watched Grik's hand.

The warmth inside him was the same warmth he had felt beneath the broken bridge, when goblins ran where his voice sent them. It had been small then, crowded by fear and the weight of a stolen sword. Nothing crowded it now.

“Stand,” he said.

The goblins rose. The Daragon with the broken horn stood with them.

It stretched its forelegs and crossed the lower step. Scars moved beneath the dark scales. Grik spoke no command, but the creature climbed until its head was level with his chest. Heat passed from its nostrils across the metal links of his coat.

He placed a hand against the mark left by the collar, and the animal allowed it.

Grik looked towards the second Daragon. “Come.”

The single word left his mouth quietly. It reached the far wall without echo.

The larger animal raised its head. Claws clicked against the watercourse as it crossed the hall. It stopped on Grik's other side and lowered its body beside the throne.

No chain born in these halls need hold you forever.

The words returned in Buné's pleasant voice. Grik searched the Daragons' eyes. The broken horn watched him with an animal's patient attention. The larger one looked towards the gathered goblins.

Neither spoke. The older shaman extended a shallow bowl. Dried mushroom, roasted beetles and strips of meat lay within it. Grik waited for an order before taking anything, but no order came.

"It is yours," the Shaman said.

Grik chose the largest beetle. Its shell cracked between his teeth. Salt and hot fat touched his tongue.

He ate the rest while the hall waited.

Beyond the throne, a passage led into a room whose door stood open. Sacks filled its shelves from floor to ceiling. Some bore Ithrax tally marks. Others had been sealed with clan signs or wax stamps Grik did not know. No guard counted the food Grik took. No hand waited to close the door.

Food stored behind a door that opened for him.

He looked at the black green metal on his arms.

"Buné," he said.

The three headed amulets touched the Shamans' chests as they bowed.

"The Great Duke heard," said the elder.

"What did he hear?"

"Your last command."

Grik remembered trying to warn the goblins after the spear entered him. No breath had come with the word.

"What did I say?"

The Shaman lowered his gaze. "Rise."

Grik could not tell whether that was an answer.

A goblin captain approached the throne and knelt on one knee. His armour had been cut down from an Ithrax breastplate. Tool marks covered the places where clawed shoulders had once fitted.

“King, the Red Knives are waiting.”

Grik looked to the Shamans. The younger one gestured towards three goblins beside the eastern pillars. “They claim the wet gardens below the copper stair. The Flint Teeth dug a second way into them.”

The Red Knives came forward first. Their speaker carried a string of pale mushrooms tied around one wrist. He laid it on the floor below Grik.

“Our mothers planted the first beds,” he said. “We kept them when the black water came. Flint Teeth broke through last dark and took six baskets.”

The Flint Teeth answered before Grik called them. Their speaker was broader and wore two iron teeth over his own.

“We broke rock. The water runs from our shaft. Nothing grows without it.”

The Red Knife reached for his blade.

Grik leaned forward. “How many beds?”

Both goblins stopped at the question.

The younger Shaman produced a clay tablet. “Twenty three fit for harvest. Seven drowned. The lower beds may recover.”

“How many mouths?”

The Red Knife counted his clan quickly. The Flint Tooth gave a number almost twice as large.

“And guards?” Grik asked.

Neither had left guards at the lower entrance. Each had gathered every fighter to make the claim before him.

Grik remembered the Ithrax officer at the open gate. The passages are changing. Stay in the marked galleries. Food and shelter are being prepared. The lie had

worked because it had been built around dangers that were true.

“Flint Teeth keep the waterway open,” Grik said. “Red Knives tend the beds. One basket in four comes here. Put six spears at both ways until the lower beds are dry.”

The broad goblin frowned. “We found the new way.”

“Then you know where to stand.”

A few goblins laughed. The Flint Tooth looked towards them, saw no support and bent his head.

“Yes, King.”

The Red Knife touched both hands to the floor. “Yes, King.”

They left together, already arguing in whispers about which clan would provide the first guards.

The captain brought the next matter. A stone door had appeared beyond an abandoned lime pit. Three scouts had entered. One returned with a burned arm and no memory of the room beyond. The other two had not returned.

“Seal it,” Grik said.

“We tried. It opens into the guard wall now.”

Grik asked for the shape of the latch, the width of the passage and whether the door changed when watched. The captain knew two answers. He sent a runner for the third.

“Build the barrier where the passage begins,” Grik said. “Leave room for spears. Send no one through until we know what comes out.”

The captain struck his fist against his breastplate.

Another report followed. Iron had been found behind a collapsed shrine, but the tunnel air killed lamps. A hunting party had lost two goblins to pale creatures near the western water. Grik measured each report by the lives and stores it might cost.

The Ithrax had arranged the slave works in the same terms. Their tablets had turned hunger and pain into quantities. Grik had feared the marks because they decided who received a blanket and which dead worker could be replaced.

The mushrooms would feed children, while iron spearheads and barriers might bring hunters home. Each petitioner left with work he understood and bowed before going. Grik counted the bow with the rest.

The old Shaman watched him. “The King remembers.”

“I remember everything.”

The Shaman smiled. The expression showed the filed points of his teeth. “That is why Buné chose well.”

Grik descended from the throne. The hall opened before him. Goblins moved aside, leaving a clear path to the western rooms. None needed to be struck. His presence travelled ahead of him, and the Daragons followed.

The first side chamber held weapons. Ithrax hooks hung beside dwarf axes recovered from old workings, and stone knives filled open crates. Grik lifted a short sword from a rack. Its grip had been wrapped for a goblin hand. The balance settled above his knuckles.

He thought of the Ithrax blade he had taken beside the broken column. It had been too long for him. Blood had made it turn in his grip.

“Who made these?” he asked.

“Smiths from the Cinder Burrow,” said the younger Shaman. “They serve the throne.”

The next chamber held wealth in clay jars and small iron boxes. Shelves bore scale cases stamped with the same Ithrax mark Grik had seen beside the Daragon cage. He touched one case and found its wood dry with age. The wax around the clasp had darkened almost to black.

At the back stood a brass handled cabinet. Grik knew the scratch beside its lower hinge. His master had made it while dragging the cabinet across the service room door. Grik opened it.

Tool cases rested inside beneath red cord and chisels stained with marking paste. Three cracked water skins occupied the highest shelf.

Grik reached for one, then stopped.

“Why is this here?”

“It belonged to the first hall,” said the elder Shaman.

“Who brought it?”

“Those who waited for you.”

“Who were they?”

The Shaman glanced at the repaired shield in the outer hall. “The first who heard.”

Grik shut the cabinet. Dust loosened from the frame.

Death should not have left enough time for the cabinet to grow old.

He looked at the Shaman's cut ear. The wound had healed long ago.

“How long?” Grik asked.

A clay cup shattered in the hall.

The sound turned every head beyond the doorway. Grik went back before the Shaman answered.

A Kobold crouched beside the throne. He was smaller than the goblin child at the far wall, though the tendons in his arms stood out from carrying loads. A wooden tray lay on the floor. Dark liquid spread across the throne step, and the fallen cup had broken against the watercourse.

An iron ring circled the Kobold's neck.

The larger Daragon stood above him. It had approached the spilled drink and frightened him against the stone. The Kobold covered his head with both hands.

“Get up,” Grik said.

The Kobold rose to his knees.

“I said get up.”

He tried. One foot slipped in the drink, and he caught himself against the throne. His hand left a dark print on the armrest.

The captain struck him across the shoulders with a spear shaft.

“King's seat,” he said.

The Kobold fell. He twisted before hitting the floor so that his body landed between the spear and the broken cup. His fingers searched for the pieces at once.

Grik watched the iron ring move around the thin neck.

“Why does he wear that?”

The captain looked uncertain. “He runs.”

“Where?”

“Away.” Several goblins laughed.

The Kobold found the largest piece of the cup and placed it on the tray. Blood ran from one knuckle where the edge had cut him.

“Stop,” Grik said. The Kobold's hands became still.

“Look at me.”

He lifted his face. A pale scar crossed his muzzle. His eyes moved once towards the nearest door, then returned to Grik.

“Who gives you food?” Grik asked.

The Kobold swallowed. “You do, Master.”

“Who put the ring on you?”

“Your guards, Master.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“The lower pens.”

The word passed through Grik like the pressure before the doors changed.

He saw the northern pens offered in a calm Ithrax voice. He saw goblins turn away from daylight because an officer promised protection. The old rules had worn his master's voice, but they had lived inside Grik's own head.

The Kobold reached for another shard.

“Why do you continue?” Grik asked.

The creature looked at the captain's spear, then at the food room beyond the throne.

“Because you are my master.”

Grik remembered his answer in the cage while Daragon blood cooled on the tongs. “They are my masters.” Buné's question returned: who had made them masters?

Grik looked around his hall. A word from him shifted water between clans or sent scouts through doors. Goblins had died at his command beneath the broken bridge. The Kobold's fear completed the answer.

“Who made me so?” he asked.

The Kobold's mouth opened. No answer came. His gaze dropped to the floor. Grik waited, but the silence did not trouble him. Ithrax officers had asked questions whose answers they already possessed. The slave's failure to speak had never weakened them. It only gave them a reason to correct him.

“Answer your King,” said the captain.

The Kobold pressed his forehead to the wet stone. “You are my master.”

Grik felt every face in the hall turn towards him. No one had told them to listen.

He reached down and took the Kobold by the jaw. The creature weighed almost nothing. Grik lifted his face until their eyes met.

“Then why did you spoil what is mine?”

“Forgive me, Master.”

The words came quickly. Grik had spoken them in the same way when hesitation became more dangerous than pain. He released the Kobold. The creature bent towards the broken cup again. One shard had slid beneath the lowest throne step. He stretched for it, but his chained collar pulled against a ring fixed to the tray harness. His fingers brushed the clay without reaching it. Grik struck him.

The back of the left brace caught the Kobold across the mouth. Metal met bone with a small sound. He dropped beside the watercourse. Blood ran over his lower lip, and one tooth lay near the cup shard.

The Daragon with the broken horn raised its head.

Grik looked at his hand. The black green bodies wound around his arm. Their metal teeth held one another fast.

The old Shaman stepped beside him. He regarded the Kobold without anger.

“They only understand pain.”

Grik watched the servant push himself upright and gather the broken cup with blood on his fingers. He did not run or protest. The method worked.

“Yes,” said the King.

The Shaman called for another drink. The captain resumed his place beside the throne, and voices returned as the next dispute came forward. Grik sat.

The Kobold wiped the dark liquid from the lowest step. Above him, Grik rested one hand upon the stone armrest. The Daragon with the broken horn lay at the foot of the throne, its scarred neck bare. The only chain within reach of the throne circled the Kobold's neck.

Chapter V: The Grey Geese

The wounded guard left blood on every third step.

Two goblins carried him between them, though his feet still dragged across the stone. A broken spearhead stood beneath his collarbone. Its socket had been cut cleanly from the shaft. Someone had struck once and left the iron where it entered.

Grik watched them cross the watercourse. The petitions before the throne ceased without command. Beyond the pillars, a smith lowered the bundle of tools he had brought for judgment. The Daragon with the broken horn lifted its head from the lowest step.

The carriers set the guard upon his knees.

“Speak,” Grik said.

The guard tried. Blood moved in his throat. One carrier held his shoulder while the other pulled the spearhead free. The guard folded, then forced himself upright before the captain could touch him.

“Humans, King.”

“Where?”

“White store passage. They came through the grain door.”

That door had opened into a bare room for twenty darks. Its plaster walls bore shelves too narrow for goblin jars, and a copper pan hung above a cold hearth. Before that, it had shown a flooded stair. Grik kept two guards there because the door changed while closed.

“How many?”

The guard looked at the blood gathering between his knees. “Six. More. I saw six.”

“Weapons?”

“Heavy blades in front. Thin ones behind. One watched the floor. One carried a glass with sand.” He swallowed. “They went back before the glass emptied.”

The captain leaned close. “You let them go?” The wounded goblin's ears flattened.

Grik raised his hand. The captain stopped.

“What did they take?”

“A knife. Fourteen silver pieces from Yekk's pot.”

“Food?”

“No, King.”

The door from the old dwarf gallery had given them three sound rooms with silver and dry timber inside. Humans usually filled their arms until they could no longer fight. These had left food beside the sleeping pallets and withdrawn at a measured time.

“Did they lose any?” Grik asked. The guard shook his head.

“Seal the grain door,” said the captain.

“No.”

Several goblins looked towards the throne.

Grik descended one step. “Empty the white passage. Put watchers in the roof breaks and behind the lime wall. Mark when the door changes. If the humans return, let them pass the first turning.”

The captain bent his head. “Then close behind them.”

“Watch them first.”

The old Shaman stood beside Grik's right arm. His cut ear exposed the dark symbols on his skull. “The King would know where they nest.”

“The King would know why they leave.”

The wounded guard sagged between his carriers. Grik sent him to the mushroom room, where the healers kept clean cloth and boiled knives. The spear wound might kill him. If it did, another guard would take the white passage.

The petitioners waited as the blood was washed from the throne step. When the smith came forward again, Grik listened to a dispute about charcoal. He divided the next burning between two forges and sent both claimants away satisfied enough to work.

Yet his eyes returned to the western doors.

The humans came back after the next long sleep.

This time they found no guard post. At the first turning, one human rubbed away the lowest scratch beside the cold lamp. Another drew a white line at ankle height where a hurried goblin would not see it.

The watcher above the roof break saw everything. He followed through a crack between the old ceiling and a later goblin wall. At the fork beyond the lime pit, the humans divided. Broad men held the centre while narrow figures searched the side ways. Two carried paired swords and wore cloaks too fine for tunnel work. They spoke to no single leader, yet moved whenever the others moved.

The watcher returned with a cut across his cheek and a strip of grey cloth clenched in one hand.

“They found you,” Grik said.

“The thin one looked up.”

“Before or after you moved?”

The scout hesitated. “Before.”

Grik took the cloth. It smelled of wet wool and lamp smoke. No dye mark showed on it.

“The broad ones strike first,” the scout continued. “The thin ones touch doors. They put wire across the Flint Teeth path. We followed the false chalk and lost Krek.”

“Did they take him?”

“No. They did not stop.”

Grik passed the cloth to the captain. “Move the watch above them. No marks where a hand can reach. Use loose grit on the ledges.”

The younger Shaman crouched over a clay route tablet. “We can hold them at the copper stair.”

“They would see us hold it.” Grik pressed one claw into the wet clay beside the stair mark. “Leave it open. Put six spears here.”

He marked a narrow turn closer to the hall.

The captain studied the tablet. “That gives them ground.”

“Ground is stone. Let them carry it.”

On their third passage the humans reached the old shrine. Goblins waited behind a cracked relief where dwarf faces had been chiselled away. They let the front fighters pass, then dropped into the rear.

The fight should have divided the humans. Instead the broadest of them turned back while the others continued towards the stair. He wore a leather coat reinforced at the shoulders and carried a short hatchet. Half of his left ear was gone. He set himself in the narrowest part of the passage and gave the wounded time to move.

A goblin spear entered a human thigh. The injured man fell. Two companions returned for him. One pulled him by the belt while the other kept a blade between his body and the spears. The broad man stayed until all three reached the changing door.

Grik heard this from a runner while the struggle still continued. He stood over the route tablet with the captain and both Shamans. Shouts travelled faintly through the western stone.

“They slow for one,” said the captain. “Send everyone.”

Grik listened. Steel struck stone twice. A voice called in the human tongue. The sounds receded.

“No,” he said. “They want the door. Let them reach it.”

The captain's jaw tightened. “We can kill the hurt one.”

“Then they learn we chase when they bleed.”

The humans withdrew. Their wounded man left a dark trail to the threshold, but no body remained when the door changed. On the other side, the bare store had become a wall of painted wood. Warm light showed beneath it. The smell that passed through the cracks was thick with cooked fat and sour drink.

One goblin put his eye to the keyhole. A metal point came through and blinded him.

After that, Grik ordered the watchers to use the roof.

The best of them was a Flint Tooth named Vrash. He could lie flat for half a dark without scraping armour on stone. When the humans returned, he waited above a broken vault while they rested below.

Their language came to him in pieces. Human words from Ithrax traders survived among the older clans, enough for Vrash to know numbers and threats. What he heard beneath the vault made little sense.

“Brand,” one man said.

The broad human with the torn ear answered.

Another voice mentioned a kitchen door. Someone laughed and spoke of Holleck's kitchen, though no word around it meant food to Vrash. Goose returned several times. So did Cael, spoken towards one of the narrow men.

A glass turned. Sand whispered against sand.

“Back to the Goose,” said a human.

Vrash followed them as far as the white passage. Near the changing door, something lay caught beneath a fallen wedge. It was a splinter of painted wood,

softened by damp. Grey feathers covered one edge. A curved neck disappeared into the break.

He brought it to the throne wrapped in his sleeve.

The younger Shaman turned the fragment beneath an oil lamp. “A bird.”

“The long water birds bite,” said the captain.

A guard beside him showed his filed teeth. “Not after you break the neck.”

“What did the humans call it?” Grik asked.

“Goose,” Vrash said. “They return there. Brand leads the heavy ones. Cael leads those who touch doors.”

The young guard tapped one grey feather with a claw. “Grey geese.”

A few goblins laughed. The words passed between them in whispers as the splinter travelled from hand to hand.

Grik took it back. The painting had once been exposed to weather. Water had entered cracks in the grey paint and lifted it from the grain. This was no clan mark cut for war. It belonged to a door or hanging sign.

“They come from a human house,” said the old Shaman. “A house of drink, perhaps. Buné sends low enemies to test a high throne.”

Grik looked at the warm metal around his arms. No pleasant voice confirmed the thought.

“The Grey Geese know the way to us now,” he said. “Prepare the hall.”

The name settled the matter for those who heard it. By the time the western guard withdrew, goblins at the weapon racks were using it as if they had always known whom they faced.

Grik emptied the chambers nearest the main passage. Kobolds carried food jars east beneath the eyes of armed guards. Their neck rings clicked against the wooden yokes. No one dropped a jar.

He placed the first spear line where the western passage narrowed between two dwarf pillars. A second waited behind the watercourse. Knife fighters filled the side bays, hidden by old Ithrax grilles hung with hides. The captain held twelve goblins near the southern door. That door usually opened into a collapsed washroom, but twice each dark it showed another corridor. If the humans entered it, the captain would close upon their rear.

The larger Daragon crouched behind the third pillar. Its black green scales disappeared where firelight failed. Grik laid his hand against its jaw.

“Wait.”

The animal's eye followed him as he returned to the throne.

The Daragon with the broken horn lay across the lower step. Its scarred neck rose and fell. Grik touched the smooth horn stump. It had carried him through the first broken door, before the throne and the Goblin King existed.

“You stay.” The Daragon closed its eye.

Both Shamans took their places beside the watercourse. The younger carried a hooked staff. The elder set a stone bowl in the running water and filled it with ash from the throne fires.

“Move the wealth,” he said.

Grik looked through the open side chamber. Coin jars stood in ordered rows. Iron boxes held cut stones. The old Ithrax cabinet waited at the back with its brass handle dark from many hands.

“No.”

“The changing door may bring them behind us.”

“Then we kill them behind us.”

The Shaman bowed. He did not ask again.

Waiting filled the hall. A child cried behind the eastern bars until a female covered its mouth. Between the motionless spear lines, water carried grey ash from the Shaman's bowl.

The first warning came as three knocks through the wall. Two followed after a pause. The western scouts had been driven from the old shrine.

The captain looked towards Grik. Grik remained seated.

A single knock followed. The Grey Geese had passed the copper stair.

Footsteps entered the approach. Human boots did not find the quiet places in the floor. Leather creaked. Someone whispered a number.

The broad man appeared first between the pillars. He carried the short hatchet and a round shield darkened by use. The damaged ear made his head look uneven beneath close cut hair. Behind him came a lean human with blades held low. Two more pressed close enough to protect each other's shoulders. A wounded man limped near the rear.

They stopped when they saw the throne. Grik let them look.

Fire shone on the braces and the spearheads behind the watercourse. The broken horn raised its head while the larger Daragon opened one yellow eye.

“Grey Geese,” Grik said.

The words carried to the western wall. The human with the blades glanced at the broad one.

“They know the tavern,” he said.

“They know a bird,” the broad man replied.

His voice gave Grik the word Vrash had heard: Brand.

“You have flown far from your warm house,” Grik said.

Brand examined the spear line and the spaces between the pillars. His gaze rested on the southern door before returning to the throne.

“We walked.”

One goblin laughed. Grik did not.

“Leave the silver. Leave your blades. The door may take you home.”

“My wounded go first,” Brand said.

“All kneel first.”

Grik placed both hands upon the armrests. The metal Daragons tightened around his forearms. He felt their teeth against his skin, though they did not pierce it.

The wounded human stood behind Brand. Sweat ran down a face emptied by pain. Grik fixed his eyes upon him.

“Kneel.” The word crossed the water.

The human's good leg folded. His sword point touched stone. The companion beside him seized his coat, but the wounded man struck the hand away and lowered his head.

Brand turned. “Jorvic.”

The name did nothing. Grik felt the human yielding as a door latch yields beneath pressure.

“Kneel before your King,” Jorvic dropped upon one knee.

The lean man stepped between them and struck Jorvic across the face.

Jorvic reeled. His sword fell. The hold broke so sharply that pain ran beneath Grik's left brace.

“Now,” Grik said, and the spear line advanced.

Brand met it behind his shield. Three spearheads struck hide and wood. He turned the shield, trapped one shaft against the pillar and cut through it with his hatchet. The lean man moved beside him. His first blade pushed a spear wide. The second entered a goblin throat. Bodies filled the passage.

Goblins pressed from both sides. The humans could not spread. One went down under a spear thrust and vanished beneath his companions' legs. Brand stepped across him and drove his shield into the front rank. Goblins struck at his knees. The hatchet rose no higher than his shoulder, yet each short blow opened room.

Grik watched the humans crowd together.

“Forward,” he said.

The second spear line crossed the watercourse.

Brand gave ground. The lean fighter shouted towards the rear. A goblin knife came through the grille and cut his sleeve. He turned too late to catch the attacker, but one of the paired swordsmen drove a blade through the hide screen without seeing what stood behind it. The hidden goblin screamed.

“Now,” Grik said to the darkness. The larger Daragon moved.

It struck the side of the human formation with its shoulder. A pillar took the weight of two bodies and cracked at the repaired joint. The Daragon's jaws closed around a sword arm. Bone broke. It shook the human once and threw him across the watercourse.

The Grey Geese split around it. One fighter climbed the low channel wall and cut at its eye. The Daragon turned, faster than the man expected, and caught his cloak between its teeth. Cloth tightened. A second human severed the cloak at the shoulder before the animal could drag its owner down.

Brand drove towards the throne. Grik stood. “Hold him.”

Four goblins left the spear line. Brand struck one aside with the shield. The hatchet entered the next below the iron cap. He kicked the body free and met the captain at the second pillar.

Their weapons crossed. The captain's Ithrax breastplate turned the first hatchet stroke. He thrust low. Brand caught the spear beneath his shield rim and pulled. The captain stumbled one step, recovered and drove his forehead into Brand's mouth.

Blood crossed Brand's teeth. He smiled without pleasure and hit the captain hard enough to dent the breastplate.

At the watercourse, the elder Shaman cut his palm and closed it over the stone bowl. Blood entered the ash. His voice sank below the clash of weapons.

A goblin with an opened belly stopped crawling. His hands flattened against the floor. He pushed himself upright with intestine showing between his fingers and

seized a human ankle.

The human looked down. That moment cost him. A spear entered beneath his ribs.

Water flowed red past the bowl. A narrow thread moved back against the current and wound around the Shaman's wrist. Grik saw it. The Shaman did not look up when the southern door opened.

Warm yellow light filled its frame. Beyond stood a timber corridor with plaster walls, too clean and narrow for any part of the old dwarf hall. A clay cup rested on the floor outside one room. Human voices sounded from a stair.

The captain turned towards it, and Grik followed his gaze.

The first newcomer came through at a run. He wore no heavy armour, only a dark coat and two short blades. Three more followed. Behind them came the two swordsmen from the earlier scouts' reports, their fine cloaks tied back from their arms.

They had found the other side of the door.

“Reserve,” Grik called. “South.”

The captain disengaged from Brand and raised his spear. His twelve goblins crossed the open floor before the newcomers cleared the threshold. The first rank collided beside the throne's third pillar.

Grik pointed at the Daragon below him. “Take them.” The broken horn rose.

For one breath it looked at Grik instead of the southern door. Its scarred shoulder shifted beneath the places where Ithrax tongs had stripped the scales.

“Go.” It leapt across the throne step.

The newcomers scattered. One failed to move far enough. The broken horn caught him in the chest and drove him against the wall. Plaster fell from the human corridor beyond the door. A blade struck the Daragon's old shoulder wounds. It twisted and crushed the wielder beneath one forefoot.

Grik descended from the throne with his short sword drawn.

The hall no longer held one battle. Goblins fought at the western mouth and around the southern door. The larger Daragon thrashed between the pillars with a length of chain caught around its lower jaw. Three humans pulled the chain from different angles. A fourth darted beneath its neck and cut behind the foreleg.

The Daragon lunged. The chain snapped tight. Its wounded leg folded.

Brand came from the western line and brought his hatchet down where the neck scales opened above the breast. The first blow lodged. The Daragon tore free and flung him into the watercourse. Another human seized the hatchet handle with both hands, forced it deeper and lost two fingers when the animal rolled.

The great body struck the floor. Its tail broke a goblin's legs against the pillar. Claws scraped pale lines into the fitted stones. The mouth opened around a sound that weakened as dark blood filled it.

Grik felt the death through both braces.

He staggered. The metal tightened until his hands went numb.

The younger Shaman reached him. "King."

"Raise them."

The Shaman lifted his hooked staff. "The King stands. Stand with him."

Goblins turned towards the throne. Some who had reached the eastern passage stopped. Grik gave them the voice that had carried beneath the broken bridge.

"Come back." They came.

A Flint Tooth with blood covering one eye charged the swordsmen. Two young guards followed. More emerged from behind the eastern bars. They struck the human flank and drove it away from the southern door.

The old Shaman remained beside his bowl. A thin blade entered his back and came out beneath the amulet on his chest. He held the bowl for a moment longer, then fell into the watercourse. The red thread broke around his wrist.

The goblin with the opened belly collapsed where he stood.

Near the southern pillar, the Daragon with the broken horn reared against a hooked spear. The human holding it let go before the claws reached him. The Daragon struck the shaft aside and turned towards another attacker. Stone cracked above it.

The repaired pillar had taken the larger Daragon's first charge. Its goblin masonry bulged now beneath the weight of the fighting. A swordsman braced one foot against it to avoid the broken horn's jaws. The patch gave way. Blocks fell across the Daragon's back. It vanished beneath stone, timber and the collapsing weapon rack. A claw struck once through the dust. More masonry covered it.

Grik called to the animal. The braces gave no answer.

The younger Shaman ran towards the fall. A human blade struck his staff from his hand. The next blow opened his brow. He dropped beside the dead captain and did not rise. Grik reached the western fighters.

His sword entered below a human's coat and caught on a rib. He tore it free. A second blade struck his left brace. Steel broke at the middle. Grik seized the wielder by the throat and threw him into the water.

The strength in his arms drew a cry from those who saw it.

"King," a goblin shouted, and others answered.

Grik advanced through them. Each step gathered survivors behind him. The Grey Geese had reached his throne over the Daragons and shattered spear lines. They still moved aside when he came.

"Hold," he commanded. The goblins held.

Brand climbed from the watercourse. Blood covered his mouth. One arm hung close to his body, but the hatchet remained in his right hand.

"Brand," someone called from the southern fight. He did not turn.

Grik pointed his sword at him. "Kneel."

Brand's step shortened. His shoulders pulled down as if a hand had settled upon them. The hatchet dipped.

Grik pressed the word into him.

“Kneel before the King,” Brand bent.

A call came from behind Grik. “Holleck!” A human struck the flat of a sword against the stone. The sound broke across the hall.

Brand drew one breath. His eyes cleared, and he came forward low.

Grik's sword had reach. Brand removed it. His shield hit Grik's wrist before the point could descend. The braces caught the blow, but the impact drove Grik's arm against his chest. Brand stepped inside the blade and struck with the hatchet.

Grik turned. The edge glanced from bronze scales below his ribs. He brought his forehead into Brand's face and felt cartilage break.

Brand did not give ground. He caught Grik around the body.

Grik hammered the left brace twice against his spine. Brand's grip loosened.

A narrow human seized Grik's sword arm from behind. Grik twisted and threw him over one hip, but the delay gave Brand room for the hatchet.

The blade entered below Grik's breastplate and found the old spear scar.

Grik struck Brand across the jaw. The human stayed close and tore the hatchet sideways. Heat opened through Grik's body. His legs failed.

The stone met one knee, then both hands. Water passed beneath his fingers.

Around him, goblins still fought. A young guard stepped over Grik and took a sword through the neck. His blood entered the channel and touched Grik's wrists.

Brand pulled the hatchet free. Grik tried to command him again. Breath moved in his throat. No word came.

The iron bowls blurred. Their coals softened into a low orange fire beneath a roof blackened by smoke. Warm stone pressed against Grik's knees.

He was in Underhill. His family crowded around the hearth while beetles cracked upon a flat pan. The old female stirred mushroom soup with a wooden spoon. Smoke made her eyes water, and she wiped them with the back of her wrist.

A small goblin reached past Grik for the fattest beetle. Grik reached too. The old female caught his wrist. Her grip was firm and warm. She pressed the beetle into the smaller hand.

Beyond the fire, young goblins squeezed through a split in the rock. They returned laughing, covered in pale dust. Someone shifted to make room for them near the soup.

The old female released Grik's wrist. No iron remained there.

He watched the smaller child bite through the beetle shell. The fire held steady.

In the throne hall, Grik's body lay beside the watercourse.

The fighting ended around him. Steel fell quiet. The living called names, and the wounded answered when they could.

A human knelt beside the body and touched one of the black green braces. The metal Daragons loosened their teeth. He drew the first brace over the still hand, then removed the second. Grik did not feel him.

The humans left the dead where they had fallen. They lifted their own wounded near the southern door and gathered what they could carry. No eye beneath the broken horn watched them go.

Before the damaged throne lay the Goblin King, bare from wrist to elbow. Beyond the old Shaman, the larger Daragon's blood darkened the pale stones.

Dust settled over the broken weapon rack.

Epilogue: Death Is a Door

The fires had gone out. Cold grease gathered along the edges of the watercourse. Blood dried in the fitted joints between its pale stones. A goblin spear lay across the channel with its head beneath the body of the old Shaman. His three headed amulet rested against the wound that had opened his chest.

The younger Shaman had fallen beside the captain near the broken pillar. Dried blood covered his eyes. Around them lay the goblins who had answered their King's last command. Some still faced the western passage. Others had died looking towards the throne.

The larger Daragon lay between the pillars. Its jaw rested in the water, and the wound above its breast had stopped spilling blood. Rubble buried the second Daragon beneath the collapsed weapon rack. One scarred foreclaw remained visible between two blocks of goblin masonry.

The treasure room stood open. Empty spaces divided the jars that remained. A small iron box had been dropped in the doorway, its lid bent beneath a boot. No one had returned for the coins scattered around it.

Before the throne, the Goblin King lay within a dark outline of his own blood. His arms were bare from wrist to elbow.

Dust settled through the hall. Water moved. Nothing else did.

A pleasant voice spoke his name. "Grik." Grik opened his eyes.

His hands closed upon stone armrests. His back pressed against the throne. Both feet rested upon the upper step, clear of the blood below.

He drew breath and waited for the pain beneath his ribs. None came. The blade of Brand's hatchet had entered through the old spear scar. Grik remembered the iron edge turning inside him. He remembered the stone against his knees and the taste of blood behind his teeth.

Beyond those things waited the Underhill fire. The old female still held his wrist. The smaller child still bit through the beetle shell.

Grik touched his side. The coat of bronze scales had no cut in it. Beneath the links, his fingers found the hard seam left by the Ithrax spear.

Black green metal enclosed both forearms. Twisted Daragons wound from his wrists to his elbows, their teeth set into one another. The braces warmed beneath his hands. Grik looked down.

His blood remained before the throne. Its edges had dried around the shape of his legs and one outstretched arm. No body lay within it.

Water splashed between the pillars as the old Shaman rolled onto his side and coughed. Red water came from his mouth. He gripped the edge of the channel, but his arm failed and his face struck stone. Grik descended one step.

The Shaman's chest moved. The opening beneath his amulet narrowed with each breath. Torn flesh drew together around a dark line. When he lifted his head again, blood covered his filed teeth, but the wound was closed. His left ear was still gone.

He found Grik upon the throne and lowered his forehead to the floor. "King."

A scraping sound came from the broken pillar. The younger Shaman pushed the captain's arm from his chest and sat up. He wiped at the blood over his eyes. Beneath it, the split across his brow had become a thin ridge of new skin.

He stared at the dead captain, then at his own hands.

"Come here," Grik said. The command steadied him. He rose and crossed the hall, stepping around goblins who did not move. When he reached the watercourse, he knelt beside the old Shaman. Neither asked what had happened.

The larger Daragon's claws closed against the floor. Its throat swelled. A wet breath passed through the half open jaws and stirred the water below them. The wound above its breast tightened beneath the scales. Dark edges met. The animal pulled one foreleg under its body, tried to rise and struck its shoulder against the pillar. Grik watched until it stood.

Blood marked the stones beneath it, but none ran from its body. The Daragon shook its head. Water and black clots struck the nearest shield. Its yellow eyes settled upon the throne.

The braces drew close around Grik's arms. "Come," he said.

The Daragon crossed the channel. Its first steps dragged. By the time it reached the throne, its weight fell evenly upon all four feet. It lowered its body beside the lowest step.

Stone shifted beneath the broken weapon rack. The visible claw withdrew. A timber rose, rolled from the heap and broke against the floor. The Daragon with the missing horn forced its head between two blocks. Dust covered the scars where the Ithrax had torn scales from its shoulder.

It freed one foreleg and pulled. The weapon rack caught behind its neck. Iron hooks scraped across the bare ring left by the old collar. The animal stopped. Grik spoke its command again.

The Daragon looked at him through the settling dust.

For a moment it remained beneath the weight. Then it twisted its shoulder. The rack broke apart, and the Daragon climbed from the rubble. The horn that had broken in the Ithrax cage had not returned. Its old wounds crossed the hide as they had before the battle. No fresh wound remained.

It came as far as the watercourse and halted across from Grik. The larger Daragon raised its head. Neither animal threatened the other. Grik turned towards the hall.

The young guard lay where a human sword had entered his neck. One hand remained closed around the shaft of a broken spear. Near the western pillars, a Flint Tooth rested face down beside the swordsman he had killed. The captain's breastplate still held the deep mark from Brand's hatchet.

Grik raised his hand. The hall had obeyed that movement before his first judgment. It obeyed now only through the two kneeling Shamans and the watching Daragons. "Stand," he said. The word reached every door.

The dead goblins remained upon the stones. Grik waited. The young guard's fingers did not tighten. No spear butt struck the floor. Water carried a strip of cloth past the old Shaman's knees and left it against the greater Daragon's claw.

The younger Shaman looked from one body to the next. “Great Duke,” he whispered.

The old Shaman seized his wrist before he could say more. Grik lowered his hand.

The western defence had been broken. The southern door stood open upon a windowless room he did not know. One iron bowl had cracked in the fighting, and the other held only grey coals. Through the treasure room doorway, Grik could see where hands had removed the largest jars.

The dead captain would need replacing. The Flint Teeth had warriors, but they would demand the wet gardens in return. Cinder Burrow could repair the weapon racks if its smiths still answered the throne. The western clans would have heard of the human attack by now. Some would come to offer spears. Others would wait to learn whether the King still lived.

Grik rested his hands upon the warm metal around his arms. “How much must I rebuild?” Neither Shaman answered.

The larger Daragon lowered its head. Across the watercourse, the broken horn remained standing among the dead.

Buné’s voice came from no mouth in the hall.

“Did you think I made you king for only one lifetime?”