



## THE BLOODWORKS INCIDENT

9 Rova, 4707 AR

Try as I might, I'm afraid I'll never get the knack of rationing water. I'm already halfway through my supply, and unless I find a creek or an oasis tomorrow, it looks like I'll be spending at least the last leg of the trip very thirsty indeed. At least Solitaire's comfortable—I left my trusty mount with the Burn Riders. They've promised to care for her until I return, but I doubt I'll ever see the horse or the Burn Riders again. I miss her, but I sure as hell wasn't going to bring her into Urglin just so some hungry orc could eat her the second I took my eyes off her.

Why would anyone want to visit Urglin if they're not an orc or some hard-case Shoanti outcast? Answer's simple—I need a guide, and I need water. I should have bought a water-creation wand while I was in Kaer Maga, but the thought never occurred to me. As for the guide, it's become more and more clear to me that my treacherous wayfinder wants to send me into the Hold of Belkzen, and despite all evidence to the contrary, I'm not crazy enough to try to navigate the Hold without the advice of an expert. Urglin's primary inhabitants are orc and half-orc outcasts from Belkzen. I suspect that I'll be able to

find plenty of knowledgeable guides there, mercenaries who can be bought and who won't balk at the prospect of leading a Pathfinder through the Hold.

So, here I am, camped out in the lee of a hopefully abandoned bulette drift, waiting out the day so I can continue journeying through the night—both tricks I learned from my friend Tomast before I took my leave of the Sklar-Quah. Traveling at night seems so obvious now—it's a wonder I didn't die from heatstroke the moment I left Kaer Maga. Fortunately, the moon is full tonight, and there's plenty of light to see as I walk.

Seeking out bulette drifts, though—I never would have thought of that. The huge predators are well feared by the Shoanti, but they aren't as common here as stories might tell. Anyway, as it works out, pretty much everything else is afraid of the landsharks as well. According to Tomast, the things have enormous hunting grounds, and maintain dozens of drifts as lairs where they sleep out the day. He told me how to identify these crater-like nests, and how to judge how long it's been since the toothy inhabitant has been out by the condition of the droppings in the lowest part of the nest. You find an empty drift with moist

droppings, the bulette's still using the area and you want to be out of sight as quickly as you can. You find a drift with droppings that are dry as the ash and sand around them, the bulette's bound to return from his hunting circuit any time. But find one like the one I'm camped in now, with the droppings dry on the outside but still moist in the center, and you can be pretty sure that the nest's owner is near the opposite side of his hunting circuit, at least two days away. Since other predators avoid bulette drifts at all times, you can apparently sleep in one without worry that something's going to grab you.

So, yeah. I'm horseless, hunkered down in a bulette's toilet, parched and hungry, planning my first visit to a city filled with orcs where I'm planning on flashing around some money to hire a mercenary to guide me into the Hold of Belkzen.

There better be something really, really incredible at the end of this journey.

## 11 Rova, 4704 AR

What is there to say of Urglin, aside from the obvious? The place is a cesspool, a breeding ground for vice and hatred, and a constant annoyance and threat to the Shoanti. Pound for pound, there are more orcs to be found squatting in these ancient ruins than anywhere else on the Storval Plateau. Ironically, that makes the place one of the safest locations to interact with the ferocious savages, since their excessive numbers here give them a sense of safety—they so obviously outnumber other races, their natural instinct to defend their territory seems to be completely absent.

Unfortunately, my first impression of Urglin (Orc, I believe, for "Second Home"—no one seems to know what the city's original name might have been) was disappointing. Not for its size or scope, but simply because the rumors of it being a Thassilonian ruin are just that—rumors. The underlying architectural style of the ruins is distinctly more recent. Yet as I explored the city and did my best to avoid attracting the attention of the Bonecarvers (more on them later), my initial disappointment gave way to curiosity, for in several places, ruined walls bear marks and carvings that have a distinctly Shoanti feel. Was the city on which Urglin was built originally of Shoanti construction? Were the nomadic tribes of the Storval Plateau not always so nomadic? And if they were the original builders of this city, why did they abandon it?

Unfortunately, I don't have much time to spend investigating these curious mysteries—I need to find myself a guide and a wand as quickly as possible so I can be on my way before sunrise. I want to put as much distance as possible between me and here before I sleep. There's not much in the way of safe places for a lone wanderer to sleep in Urglin. There are plenty of taverns

and flophouses, but most cater almost exclusively to orcs and half-orcs—humans are welcome only if their reputation precedes them. As I have no intention of staying in town long enough to garner one, for now I'm holed up beneath a partially collapsed pillar, out of sight of foot traffic after having spent the better part of the early evening exploring the city.

The city itself covers more than three hundred acres of barren land, ruined even further by decades of misuse. Not a large city at all, by Korvosa's standards, but large enough that even after several hours of exploring, I feel I've only scratched the surface of what's going on here. As noted above, the orcs didn't build Urglin. At least, not most of it. They've shored up buildings here and there with bone and leather tents, crude stone walls, and in some places even lumber—so much lumber, in fact, that this more than anything else is proof that I'm on the northernmost edge of the Cinderlands. The city is split into five neighborhoods—Warmouth, Bonerattle, Ooze-front, Scabtown, and Pinks-kin. I'm in Pinks-kin right now—easily the smallest neighborhood, and by far the friendliest to humans. The majority of the folk living in the tents and yurts that make up Pinks-kin are humans, in fact—outcast Shoanti, traveling mercenaries, and other doubtful folk who've thrown in their lot with the orcs. After spending several hours in the other neighborhoods, it's actually a relief to see so many grizzled and unfriendly, but unmistakably human, faces.

Warmouth's the largest neighborhood, and it's the first one a visitor to Urglin encounters. Comprising the southern third of the city, this is where the city's "nobility" hold court, and where you see the most of what pass for public buildings. Largest of them all is the Gray Donjon, Urglin's jail and the heart of its military. Other buildings include the seven Warlord Keeps, the War Tower, and the Rally Fields—all places I avoided.

After passing north through Warmouth, you come to a long, narrow neighborhood called Ooze-front, Urglin's primary marketplace. The district stretches the entire length of Urglin, running east-west and split down the middle by a rancid river bearing a charming moniker: Ooze. Urglin doesn't have an actual sewage system, but it does have this convenient river, and the Ooze didn't get its name accidentally. The orcs get the majority of their drinking water from where the Ooze flows into town along the western wall, and it's a wonder to me that disease isn't more rampant among them. They likely have resistances built up. In any case, I couldn't stand to remain within fifty feet of the riverbanks for the stench. Whatever the orcs don't want goes in the river, which grows more and more sluggish as it flows east, eventually miring in the stagnant reaches of Pusbubble Lake just outside the city walls. Two bridges cross the Ooze, one at the east end and one at the west. Since the eastern one goes right up over

the nearest shores of Pussbubble, I chose the western one and entered Bonerattle. That turned out to be a mistake.

Bonerattle's the religious core of Urglin. And since these orcs, like most orcs, worship the Rough Beast, Rovagug, Bonerattle's not a nice place to be. The buildings here are built entirely from bones, mostly from aurochs and other large animals, but certainly decorated with human remains. Walls consist of thick sheets of leather stretched over frames, with the notable exception of the Beast's House, the central cathedral of Rovagug. The church looks like a small hill carved to resemble an immense spider made of bones—the mouth of which, of course, serves as the building's entrance. Curious as I was, I knew better than to go inside. Yet even my brief observation attracted the attention of one of Bonerattle's guardians, a hulking orc priest of Rovagug bearing an immense axe and spiky metal armor. I found out later that these "Bonecarvers" are what passes for a city guard in Urglin. From what I've seen, though, they're really just bruisers and extortion artists dangerous enough to demand official recognition. The Bonecarver that accosted me asked my business in Bonerattle, and, thinking quickly, I responded in Orc: "I'm looking for my partner—he robbed me, left me for dead, and headed back here to sell what he stole. I'm hoping to catch him drunk so I can haul him back here for you to offer up to the Beast." (To be honest, my speech wasn't quite so eloquent, as the Bonecarver insisted on taking playful swings at me with his axe while I explained myself.) Once the message made it through, though, he seemed to like the concept of me offering up another "pinkskin" to the Beast, and said he'd accompany me into Pinkskin to collect my friend. I didn't really have a choice but to agree.

The smallest of the five neighborhoods, Pinkskin is wedged between Bonerattle and Scabtown along the northern central side of the city. Walking through its crowded lanes, I began to sweat as it became increasingly obvious to my Bonecarver escort that I didn't really know where I was going. Fortunately, my random wanderings took me by a small, rickety stall owned by a beardless dwarf. (Ever see a beardless dwarf? It's bizarre.) The dwarf panicked when he saw the Bonecarver approaching his stall, and he ran up to the orc priest babbling, "Sir! You didn't need to come down here! I'll be done by tomorrow at sunrise, I promise! Elves are delicate things—they don't take to taxidermy well, and I had to secure some special salts to preserve the color of her skin. She'll be done by dawn, I promise!" The poor idiot didn't get much more out, for whatever he was talking about enraged the Bonecarver. I was instantly forgotten, and the spectacle of the berserk orc priest hacking the unfortunate dwarf into pieces made for a convenient opportunity to slip away into the crowd.

The Bonecarver spent a few minutes looting the dwarf's stall and then headed back to Bonerattle, apparently having forgotten me altogether. Honestly, I'm not sure what was more unnerving—the speed with which he took that dwarf apart, or the speed in which things returned to normal after he was done.

In any case, breaktime is over. I'm going to finish off this entry and head into Scabtown. I've been hearing a lot of talk about the "games" starting in an hour at some place called "Ploog's Bloodworks"—might have to check that out first. Who could resist finding out what passes for a "game" in an orc city?

## 12 Rova, 4704 AR

In most cities, the marketplace is the loudest district, residential sections tend to be relatively quiet. Not so with Scabtown—the first thing I noticed about the place was the noise, a constant cacophony of crashes and screams as orcs

*The faithful of Rovagug  
have little patience  
for pinkskins.*



worked, played, and, presumably, loved (though how to tell which activity a given scream represented was beyond me). It didn't take long for me to determine that this wasn't a safe place for a human to linger, and I made up my mind to seek out my guide back in Pinktown.

But not before a visit to the Bloodworks.

The place was on everyone's lips, and the way Scabtown's set up, you can't miss it. It's easily the largest building in the district, old ruin or new orc shelter alike. It's an open-air arena, built from a combination of immense bones, logs, and hundreds of sheets of leather stretched over the ovoid outer walls. The thing looks like an enormous, bony leather egg half-buried in the stone, laying on its side and with a circular opening at the top to expose the fighting floor to the open sky. The entire structure's about two hundred feet wide and three hundred feet long, rising to a height of just over sixty feet. The circular opening in the roof is about eighty feet in diameter, surrounded by dozens of long thin banners marked with too many orc symbols to remember, although the symbol of Rovagug certainly is a common theme.

By the time I reached the Bloodworks, it was obvious that much of the district's noise was coming from within—a mix of cheers and the sound of combat. I'd been a little worried that, as a human, I wouldn't be let into the arena, but it was only a matter of a few coins paid to one of the bulky orc guards to get inside. The way he chortled at me as I entered was a little unsettling—I wasn't sure if he thought I was here to watch a match or to *be* the match.

Inside, the combined stink of sweat, blood, alcohol, and worse hit me like a hammer. A thin miasma of smoke and dirt hung in the air, but the place remained well lit by the profusion of torches burning on poles surrounding the central fighting pit. This pit was an earthen floor featuring a few odd rocky protrusions here and there. The place was a mess—it appeared I had arrived just as a previous gladiatorial match between two groups of warriors came to its gruesome, bloody end. The victors, a band of lumbering ogerkin clad in leather armor emblazoned with Rovagug's symbol, were busy pumping bloodstained weapons in the air or kicking around the remnants of their victims—a dozen freshly slain dwarves. The cheers in the place were nearly deafening—surrounding three-quarters of the fighting pit was a tiered set of scaffolding, to which hundreds of orcs clung wherever they could find space. The opposite side of the arena was more enclosed—a wooden fortress, almost. Two sweeping staircases spiraled down from the structure's roof, itself seeming to function as additional seating for important guests. Those stairs led right down to the arena floor, framing an enormous pair of doors. Orc guards dressed in spiky hide armor stood at attention on those stairs.

To my immediate left, I noticed a section of the surrounding scaffolding that seemed to be mostly taken

by half-orcs, rough-looking humans (mostly Shoanti), and a few grizzled dwarves. Assuming this must be the "Pinkskin" section of seating, I clambered up onto the lowest tier overlooking the fighting floor—no one seemed to take offense at my arrival, which I took as a good sign.

By this point, the ogerkin had quit the field, and an incredibly fat orc dressed in crimson and silver robes had finished descending the stairs and taken a position on a flat rock at the far end of the field. A three-foot-long spiny green lizard perched on his ample shoulders, and as the corpulent orc held up his bejeweled hands, the place fell silent. This, I had to assume, was none other than Ploog himself.

"And now," the orc began, his voice filling the interior of the Bloodworks with ease, "The Main Event. What you've all gathered here for! Thanks again to the Sons of Rovagug for the opening show, and proof that being a dwarf isn't all it's cut out to be!" To this, there was a short round of laughter and applause (except from the few dwarves to my left) before Ploog continued.

"My brothers, tonight I have a rare treat for you. As you're all aware, Old Vestatch woke from sleep on the point of a knife. Kurg Gutsar's got his fortress in Warmouth now, and along with Vestatch's body, he threw out quite a few slaves and servants. I had my boys gather up those who survived, and bring them before you today to die for your entertainment! BRING OUT THE MEAT, BOYS!"

Ploog spun on his heel to face his wooden castle, and a small door to the left of the larger gates opened. Out came eight men, mostly humans but two half-orcs as well. All were dressed in ratty-looking leather armor and had looks of desperation on their sooty faces. Three orc guards led them into the center of the fighting pit and lined them up on display, at which point I noticed that the half-orc closest to me, alone among his brethren, managed to look amused by the situation.

"There they are, my brothers. The last ragged remnants of House Vestatch. How are they to die?"

A ripple of murmurs and whispers shot through the crowd. A few moments later, an orc across the way cried out, "Make them spin!" Another shrieked out, "Let's have a duel!" followed by a cry of, "Let's see some pain!" The Bloodworks erupted into a cacaphony of shouting then, with various members of the audience crying out for Duels, Spins, and Pain. Ploog basked in the uproar for a few minutes until it became obvious that the crowd had settled on a choice.

"So they are to spin. Well and good," said Ploog as he turned to the guards. "Arm them and have one of them spin!" The crowd erupted into cheers again as one orc handed out rusty short swords, small hatchets, and battered wooden bucklers to the eight men. The other two orcs returned to the keep for a moment, then wheeled a large

metal device out onto the floor. It was a four-foot-diameter disk balanced upon a wooden beam—a wheel-shaped spinner with names carved into the pie-shaped wedges on its surface. As one orc led a nervous-looking slave up to the spinner, I could only make out a few of the names carved on its face: “Face-Gasher,” “Bonethunder,” “The Grinder,” and “Old Razorbite” among them. As the slave spun the wheel, the crowd fell silent. For half a minute, the only sound was the slowly decreasing “tick-tick-tick” of the spinner’s pointer glancing off the ridges that separated the various choices. When the spinner finally came to rest on a wedge, Ploog threw his hands into the air.

“Razorbite it is!” This brought a new cry of excitement up from the crowd, and I noticed how the expressions on most of the doomed slaves grew even more desperate. The slave who’d spun the wheel started pawing at his orc keeper, begging and pleading, and received a mailed fist to the jaw, knocking him out cold. One of the other slaves in the lineup, a sobbing human at the end closest to me, sank his rusty knife deep into his own neck. He was still tugging the wound open as he crumbled to his knees. The two sudden events brought an uproar of laughter from the crowd, and a smile to Ploog’s spit-flecked lips.

“Looks like it’s just going to be six against Razorbite after all. Very well! On with the game!” Moving nimbly for his size, Ploog clambered back up the stairs to take his seat of honor overlooking the battlefield below while his orcs followed. A few minutes passed, giving the audience time to jeer at the slaves on the field below. Five of them huddled together, but the sixth, that same half-orc I’d noticed earlier with the smirk, cast aside his Ploog-issued buckler, walked over to the suicide, and took up the dead man’s sword in his off-hand to compliment the hatchet he wielded in his other. Sounds of something big roaring and thrashing around inside the wooden castle

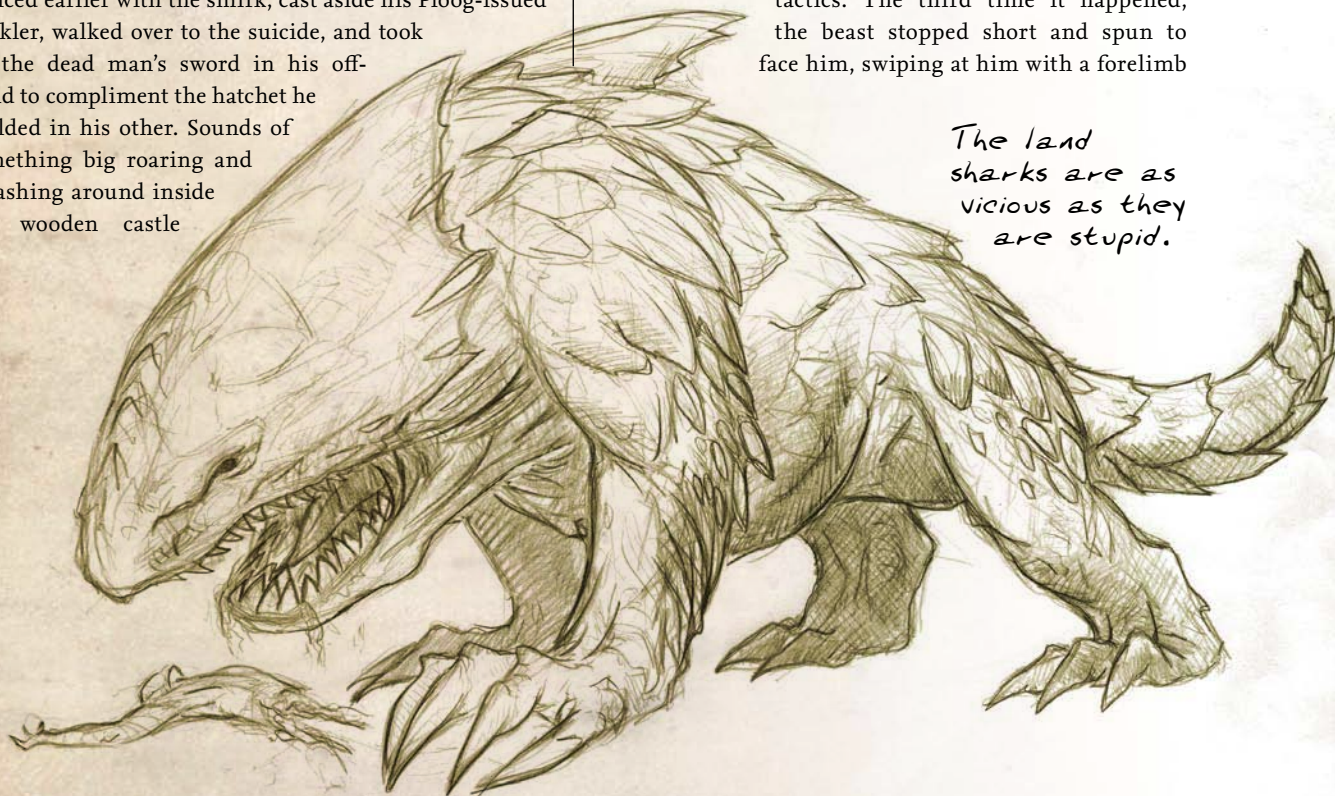
became apparent, and then Ploog’s bodyguards began turning a pair of winches to either side of the fat orc’s throne. Below, the massive doors began to open.

With a crash, the immense, battle-scarred monstrosity within threw the doors wide as it thundered onto the battleground, much to the delight of the crowd. The bulette was immense, thirty feet long if it was an inch, and combining the worst features of a shark and some horrific armored reptile.

The nature of what was to come became quickly apparent as the bulette leapt the twenty feet between the doors and the unconscious slave. It tore into him with a ravenous wrath—although it could have easily swallowed him whole, the monster seemed to take a particular delight in tearing him apart first. Its dorsal plate was standing at full height, indicating its excitement.

To their credit, the slaves held out a lot longer against the monster than I thought they would. Of course, they spent most of the battle running away from the bulette, who in turned seemed to be enjoying the chase. Now and then, its leaps would carry it close enough for its claws to lash out and maul a slave, giving the dwindling number of survivors a few moments to put some distance between themselves and the terror. Only the grinning half-orc seemed interested in fighting—his skill at dodging aside to take swipes at the monster’s flanks as it raced past him even started to garner some cheers from the audience, although they still seemed to be more interested in watching the bulette tear things up.

It didn’t take the bulette long to tire of the half-orc’s tactics. The third time it happened, the beast stopped short and spun to face him, swiping at him with a forelimb



*The land sharks are as vicious as they are stupid.*

capable of cutting a horse in half. The lucky half-orc dodged aside from the claws, but was still struck by the backswing of the creature's paw. Sent hurtling through the air, the half-orc landed with a grunt against the support pole on which I leaned, his head lolling back so that, for a moment, our eyes met.

It's impossible to say what I saw in those pain-clouded eyes—a ferocious need to survive, yes, but tempered with a calculated acceptance of the situation. Then his gaze shifted to my left. I turned to follow it and saw what he had seen: the support pillar just to my left had split at some time in the past, likely from a different titanic clash here in the Bloodworks. Ploog had apparently never bothered to have it fixed. Now it leaned outward at an angle, and its splintered tip protruded into the ring like a lance set to receive a charge.

I glanced back at the half-orc and was astonished to see him smiling through the pain. He mouthed two words to me—"Watch this!"—then sprang back to his feet to return to the fray. The bulette had pinned the last two slaves to the ground and was tearing them to ribbons, but its back was to us. The half-orc took aim, and with a single powerful throw, hurled his hatchet at the tender flesh that had been exposed by the bulette's extended dorsal plate. His aim was true; the hatchet buried itself in the monster's back, causing it to roar in pain and spin again to face him. The creature charged, a stampede of razor teeth and talons. The half-orc turned and ran directly at the leaning pole—at me—and I realized that I was sitting in the most dangerous seat in the house. So, apparently, did the other men seated in my area—with an eruption of profanity, they scrambled to the left and right, looking for cover. Not me. Maybe the half-orc and I had shared something in that brief moment, recognition of another born survivor, or maybe I'd just seen enough men torn limb from limb that day. I stood my ground and reached quickly into one of my pouches, drawing forth a handful of ground mica. Bringing it close to my mouth with both hands, I whispered an incantation, then blew.

An eruption of glittering dust exploded from my cupped hands, engulfing the charging bulette. The golden powder coated its body, causing it to glow brightly, and gathered thick in its tiny eyes, blinding the beast. Yet its momentum remained. I dove aside, down and into the pit, just as the creature made an ill-advised leap that I'm sure it thought would bring its four taloned legs down square on the fleeing half-orc. Instead, it brought its throat down on the jagged tip of the leaning scaffolding support.

What happened next is a blur. That the bulette hadn't been killed by its self-impalement—only angered—was a shock. Apparently those things are too stupid to even know when they're dead. The ensuing carnage undoubtedly saved my life, however—even though the entire audience, Ploog included, had doubtless seen me casting the spell, there wasn't time to do anything about it with a bleeding,

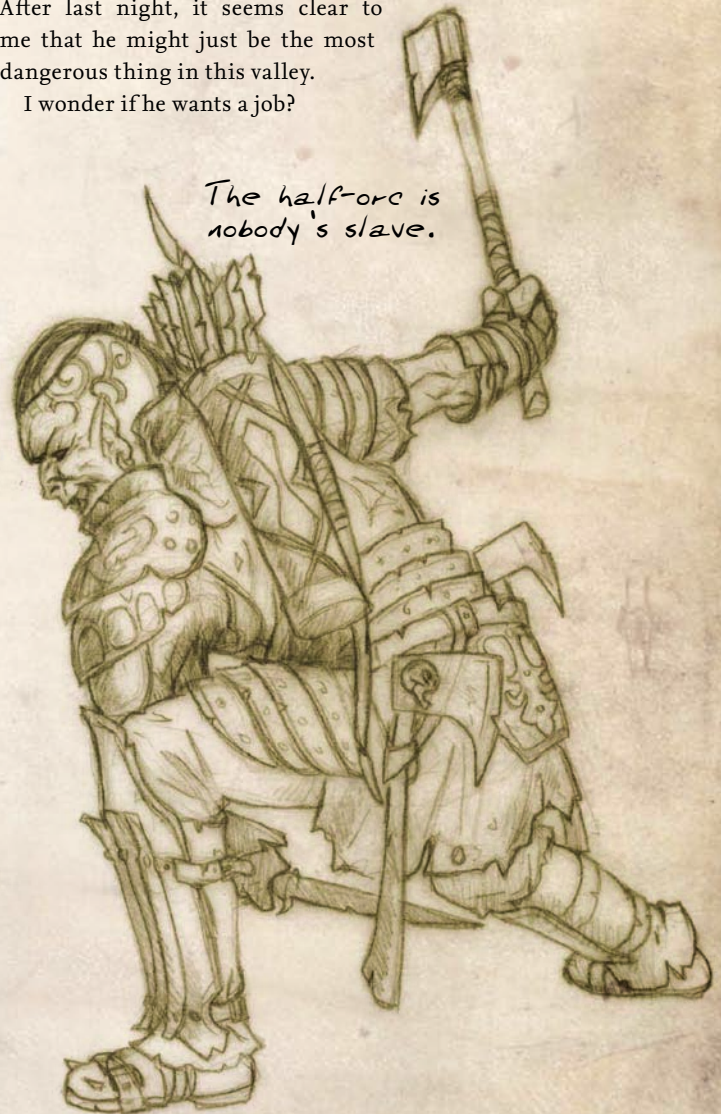
enraged, and blinded set of teeth attached to several tons of monster tearing its way through the audience. The bulette's talons allow it to burrow through the earth with shocking speed. Through crowds of orcs and wooden scaffolding, it goes even faster.

I felt a hand grab mine and tug me aside. It was the half-orc.

"Thanks for that," he said in a low, guttural voice. "But I'm afraid you just signed up for a whole lot of pain. We need to get out of the city. Come with me. I know a place we can hide in the hills east of town."

Our flight out of Scabtown and from there out of Urglin was swift, made easier by the fact that the news of the commotion at the Bloodworks was spreading fast and citizens were eager to get a free look at the carnage. By the time we made it to the gladiator's promised cave, a tiny but well-hidden nook at the edge of wide field of briars, the sun was rising, and we both collapsed into dreamless sleep. I woke often, starting at the slightest sound, but he seemed completely at peace, unconcerned with whatever dangers might threaten us. And why shouldn't he be? After last night, it seems clear to me that he might just be the most dangerous thing in this valley.

I wonder if he wants a job?



*The half-orc is nobody's slave.*