



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING



GAME

EXCERPT

THE WARLOCK SAGAS



VOLUME TWO

MUTAGENESIS

BY ORRIN GREY





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CHAPTER 1

Thagrosh

Thagrosh dreamed of darkness. The mine he traveled in the dream was much deeper and darker than the one in which he toiled while awake. It was a tunnel made for giants, bored through the solid earth as though by some great serpent, maybe even the Devourer Wurm himself or one of his progeny. Thagrosh's people had given up Devourer worship long before he was born, but he knew the stories. He knew the tug of that faith, the rightness of it in his blood. Knew this world was not a gentle mother but a ravenous beast stalking him relentlessly through the dark.

The tunnel of his dream was occasionally lit by a smoky, spitting light whose source he never saw. Its flickering fingers reached up the sides of the vast space through which he stumbled, but they never touched the top. Other times he marched in the foxfire glow of cave fungus. Most often, though, he moved in complete darkness, blind, putting one foot in front of the other with nothing but faith to tell him the ground was there at all.

Always he was driven forward, though in the dreams he never turned back to see his tormenters. The lash with which they harried him touched his flesh almost gently, but it burned and ate away at him like a thousand tiny embers, leaving his back stripped bare, his muscles and bones exposed. With each strike he lost a bit of himself—not unlike the lashes of his waking masters.

Sometimes the antagonists of his dreams fell back for a time, and

the lashing ceased. But he never stopped his march through the bowels of the world. In his dreams, he never questioned the reason. He felt pulled forward. He could no more stop walking than he could stop his heart from beating. But when he was awake, he sometimes wondered what it was that drove his sleeping self through the dark. It wasn't the fear of the lash; his fear had long since died. It was something else, a pull he felt deep in the core of his being, like a lodestone in his chest that was drawn to the magnetic center of the world. He would march on until he found it or until he awoke. Then, when his daily sufferings ceased and he fell again into restless slumber, he would resume the pilgrimage once more.



Thagrosh's dreams were seldom pleasant, but when he woke it was always to a nightmare. Though never as deep or as dark as the tunnel of his dreams, the mine was deep and dark enough, and it grew deeper every day. The ogrun slaves burrowed ever down, digging into the soil in pursuit of each new vein of silver.

Most mornings Thagrosh and his fellow prisoners woke in the mine's depths. Sometimes days passed before they saw the sky or tasted fresh air. At night they often slept in chains, huddled on the tunnel floor or in niches carved into the rock. If they were lucky they got to sleep on the surface in barracks that were little more than hastily constructed lean-tos, poorly insulated against the biting cold that cut through everything this far north.

Some of the prisoners worked at the rock with picks and hammers, while others carted broken stones to the surface. All the while the guards watched and the overseers cracked their cruel whips and barked orders, though orders were hardly necessary. The ogrun worked half in a trance, their minds dulled and their spirits broken by the same harsh drudgery day after day, year after year.

Thagrosh was a child when the slavers took his village. He remembered it only dimly, like scenes glimpsed in flashes of light. He remembered the sounds the guns had made. It was the first time he had ever heard such weapons, and they had thundered at each other like great beasts. That's how he had thought of it—the guns were calling out to one another, and each time they called, one of his kinsmen fell to the ground.

He remembered the houses burning, remembered the heat and the smell of the smoke. It was morning, and he was still half-asleep when his mother pulled him from his bed and thrust his small brother Vargal toward him. His father had already gone to find his *korune*, to fight at his side or to die there, whichever was required of him. Even as a child, Thagrosh already understood the drive to serve, to follow in the wake of something greater than yourself.

Thagrosh's mother told him to take Vargal and hide, pushing him hurriedly out into the cold behind their house. The noise and chaos of the attack made it seem to Thagrosh that the world was coming to an end. He held onto Vargal's hand and pulled him behind a woodpile. Their mother had told him to keep his brother safe, keep him quiet, but it was cold, and the guns were loud, and all around there was screaming and running and the smell of smoke. Vargal began to cry.

That's when the shadow fell over them both. The man, though smaller than any adult ogrun, seemed huge to Thagrosh in that moment. A calloused hand snatched Vargal away, and Thagrosh growled, not even thinking to try to speak, and launched himself at the man in spite of his fear. He was prepared to die in defense of his brother, but something cracked against the back of his head and the world faded into darkness and silence.



That was fifteen long years ago, though Thagrosh remembered it more keenly, more immediately than he remembered what he had done yesterday. Each day of those years felt the same to him, with nothing to make one stand out from the other. Each was just an endless march, like the endless march of his dreams, down deeper into the earth, questing after something that would never be found. Since that moment of pain and darkness, pain and darkness were all that he had ever known.

His father had died in the battle, though his mother and brother survived. They were reunited when Thagrosh awoke, but all in chains. The Khadorans didn't call it slavery. Though he was still young, it hadn't taken Thagrosh long to understand their predicament. The Khadorans needed their land for the mine that they wanted to dig, and they needed laborers to dig it, and so suddenly the ogrun's land had belonged to them, and the ogrun were trespassers in their own village. It was for these and other trumped-up crimes that they were imprisoned, pressed into forced labor as punishment for their imaginary transgression. Thagrosh recognized the taste of slavery, no matter what words were used to render it more palatable.

Most of the ogrun didn't last long. Year after year, Thagrosh watched the mine take its toll on his family and his kin, watched them perish one by one from cave-ins, from overwork, from sickness, from heartbreak. There were other dangers in the mines, as well. Occasionally they would breach a wall and find something that wasn't meant to be found, strange creatures that lurked in the depths. The ogrun were always on the front lines when that happened, the first to be torn and mutilated, the first to suffer, the first to die.

The strongest and surest among the ogrun, those who would have been leaders back in the village, were given the hardest and most dangerous jobs. Those who didn't perish in the mines were often

culled, accused of insurrection or other crimes, and dispatched to other camps, to toil away from those they knew, so they might never become *korune* and give the other prisoners something to unite behind.

Still, there had been attempts at revolts in the years Thagrosh had served in the mines. Ogrun whose wills could not be broken by the lash. There had been violence, but it never lasted long, and the aftermath was always bloody, always brutal. The guards carried heavy guns that could take down warjacks, and there were two laborjacks, old and rusted, but effective in quelling a mob.

The ogrun wore shackles night and day, even when working, and the guards held long sticks with choking collars on the ends that could be used to help bring down enraged ogrun. Weakened by hunger and overwork, none were a match for the number of armed humans. Thagrosh had seen enough of his fellows fall in their anger to prove the truth of it.

However, the years had been, if not exactly *kind* to Thagrosh, then at least generous to him in certain ways. Over the course of them, he had grown and grown. He was now much taller than the tallest man at the mine, taller even than the tallest of the other ogrun. He was much bigger than the man who had taken his younger brother from him all those years ago, though not yet bigger than his memory of him.

Thagrosh was well-regarded by most of the guards and overseers. He kept to himself, worked hard, and never complained. He could push himself past his limits, past when others would drop from exhaustion. He was among the first to rise for work each morning, the last to lay his pick down for the night. He pushed himself without external reward or punishment. He pushed himself because he had learned early on that if he didn't push himself, then he would be pushed, and it hurt less if he beat them to it.

There was more to it than strength or fortitude though. Thagrosh

was lucky. When cave-ins happened in the deep parts of the mine, he was always in some other shaft. When a fight broke out in the great mess hall where the prisoners ate, he was sitting at the farthest table.

His luck was noticed, along with his size, his strength, his hard work. The attention got him special favors, extra rations of food, a new blanket when others went without. It meant he spent most nights on the surface, rather than in the depths of the mine, and bit by bit it gained him greater freedoms among the prisoners. He was watched less, bound less. It would probably have gotten him killed or sent away, sooner or later, except that the years had done something else to him. Besides making him big, hard, and strong, they had made him withdrawn, quiet, but not sullen, as many of the other prisoners became. These things kept him safe, as surely as his fortitude or his luck. The men who held the whips saw him as a tool, not a threat.

They thought him simple because he spoke seldom and submitted soundlessly to the lash when it came. But Thagrosh watched everything around him with a keen eye. He watched as other villages were taken, used to swell the ranks of the mine's laborers. He watched as everyone he had ever known perished under the yoke that bound them all. He watched the overseers and the bosses, the guards who stood around the mining camp with guns and cigars and bottles of *uiske*. He saw their patterns, their habits, their arguments and their alliances. He learned their secrets, learned the chain of command, both obvious and subtle. He learned what it took to be rewarded, and what it took to be underestimated.

He learned to sever his attachments. *Do not become too fond of a particular tool, or it will be taken from you. Do not think of any place as your home, or you will be moved. Do not care too deeply for any other soul, because they will soon perish. Watch out only for yourself. You cannot help the others, and trying will only see you punished alongside*

them. These were the rules he lived by, with one exception: Vargal.

Vargal had been put to work alongside the others as soon as he was old enough to hold a pick. He had worked the mines his entire life, growing up with Thagrosh, who watched over him year after year. When they woke one morning to find their mother dead from a fever, Vargal had taken up a sharpened stone to avenge her, to fight the guards who had ignored her illness until they shot him down. It was Thagrosh who stayed his hand. Vargal was fire where Thagrosh was ashes, and time and again the older brother had held the younger back from some rash action that would have seen them both dead. Without him, Vargal would have been one of the ogrun who tried to violently throw off his bonds, only to fall to the bullets of heavy guns, or be brought down under the combined strength of the guards. Vargal was the last thing that Thagrosh cared for in all of Caen, and if he knew that his younger brother's anger and lack of restraint would someday kill them both, he never admitted it, not even to himself.